



THE PERFECT INSIDER

MORI Hiroshi

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First published in 1996 in Japan by Kodansha Ltd., Tokyo.

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Originally written in Japanese by MORI Hiroshi

Translated into English by Ryusui Seiryoin

Cover illustration and cover design by mm

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ISBN: 9781312903418

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Why, then, do humans make exchanges? The reason lies in the brain. The brain is an organ that exchanges information. It has analogies that allow it to exchange and equate completely different things. It can see and hear symbols and language. In other words, electromagnetic and sound waves are equivalently converted in the brain to generate our symbolic activity. The “smell of money” would not be possible if food and money could not be exchanged and substituted. The use of analogy to simulate the target world is, in fact, derived from the human brain, which has become large and redundant. The extra circuitry of one response to one signal creates a subject of likening and an object to be likened, substitutions occur, and simulations are attempted. Thus, this surplus became a metaphor, gave rise to abstraction, and became the object-oriented way of thinking.

This excerpt is from *Introduction to Object-Oriented System Analysis and Design* (written by Atsushi Aoki)

List of characters

[The Magata family]

Sachiro Magata: Doctor of Engineering **Michiyo Magata:** Linguist, Sachiro’s wife **Shiki Magata:** a genius programmer, Sachiro’s daughter **Kishio Kurimoto:** a roommate of Shiki’s **Suma Sasaki:** a roommate of Shiki’s **Michiru Magata:** a

roommate of Shiki's **Miki Magata:** Shiki's younger sister **Seiji Shindo:** Director of the Magata Research Institute, Sachiro's younger brother [The Magata Research Institute]

Yumiko Shindo: Seiji's wife **Tomihiko Yuminaga:** a doctor **Sumie Yuminaga:** a nurse, Tomihiko's wife **Yukihiro Yamane:** Deputy Director of the Magata Research Institute **Chikara Mizutani:** the chief programmer **Ayako Shimada:** a programmer **Toshiki Mochizuki:** a guard **Satoshi Hasebe:** a guard
Deborah: Institute Management System **Michiru:** a robot

P1: a wagon-type robot

[Other persons]

Setsuko Gido: a magazine journalist **Sohei Saikawa:** Associate Professor, Department of Architecture, Faculty of Engineering, N University **Momoko Kunieda:** Research Associate, Department of Architecture, Faculty of Engineering, N University **Fukashi Hamanaka:** a graduate student, Department of Architecture, Faculty of Engineering, N University **Moe Nishinosono:** a freshperson, Department of Architecture, Faculty of Engineering, N University

Chapter 1: The White Interview

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It is summer now. She remembered that.

Surrounded by faceless concrete, no sign of the season reached the room. Nowhere in the building was a window to look into the outside world. History and time were artificially inscribed here. It was neither cold nor hot.

Perhaps, there are no non-human creatures, animals, or plants, in this place, she thought.

There was really nothing in that small room, which was so pure white that it was too bright. The air was purified and less dusty. She could find nothing but an artificial silence. One inorganic chair made of aluminum was placed there, and she sat down on it.

Ahead of her, a large display was embedded in the wall. The screen showed some pure white space, similar to the room she was currently in. When she looked up, a small camera was staring at her like an owl.

The images on the screen were not that of this room. She could say because she was not in the picture.

She waited for a while, doing nothing.

She left her bag outside the room. It contained a notebook computer and a camera, but the man outside told her that it was a rule that anyone could not bring anything into this room. The man was the boss of the building. He was friendly, and she felt kindly toward him.

The image on the display changed. A woman dressed in white entered the room shown on the screen. The figure's outline was vague, partly due to the whiteness of the room. As the camera's iris adjusted automatically, the figure was soon clearly visible.

The woman in the display sat down in the chair and turned to her. The figure looked much younger than she had imagined.

"Hello," the woman's voice came over the speakers. "What is your name, young

lady?’

“My name is Nishinosono.” She answered. “Nice to meet you. Umm, I’m ...”

“Ah, I know your family name. What is your first name?”

“Moe.”

“Moe-san? What kanji characters is the name written with?”

“It consists of the letters indicating ‘budding’ and ‘painting,’ respectively.”

“How old are you?”

“I’m almost twenty years old,” Moe replied. She had many questions prepared, but the woman on the screen was unexpectedly leading the conversation.

“How did you get here?” The woman asked.

“I came by helicopter.”

“The director’s helicopter, wasn’t it?”

“No, it was not.” Moe shook her head. “Well, Dr. Magata ... you know my father, don’t you?”

“What do you get when you multiply 165 by 3,367?” The woman asked abruptly.

“It’s 555 thousand and ... 555. Six 5’s in a row.” Moe answered quickly. Then she was a little surprised. “Why did you make me do those calculations?”

“I have tried you. I guess you are good at calculations.” The woman smiled a little. “But it seems that your multiplication by seven is not your strong point. It took you a while to get the last digit. Why?”

“I’m not bad at it. Seven is my favorite number.” Moe crossed her legs to calm herself.

“No, you seem not aware of it yourself. When you first learned the multiplication tables, you must have had difficulty with the column of seven. Was that when in kindergarten? Or was it when you were younger? Of course, seven is a unique number. You don’t have any siblings, do you? Of all the numbers, only seven is lonely.”

Moe was indeed an only child.

“Umm ..., may I ask about your story?” Moe tried to pick up her pace. “I mean, about my father ...”

“You have a quick mind. You’re also decisive. And ...” The woman said, staring at Moe. “You have the trait of leaps in thinking. That is your greatest talent. So ..., I met Dr. Kyosuke Nishinosono four times sixteen years ago, once in the United States ... You were there with us then. I asked the doctor your name, but he did not answer because you started crying. You were wearing a red dress and a ribbon on your head. It was sixteen years ago on March ... 16th. The place was Champaign.”

“Do you remember that? Or ...” Moe asked in surprise.

“Or since you come here today, I could do my research in advance ... You think so, right?” The woman answered quickly. “That is a meaningless question.”

“How many years have you been here?” Moe forced herself to ask another question.

“Do not ask questions about what you know.” The woman smiled again. “Such an introduction is useless in a conversation with me. You need not use conjunctions. I am not interested in context.” Saying so, the woman combed her long hair back with one hand.

“Is it true that you killed your parents?” Moe immediately asked another question.

“So, you are quick to address. You are also very insightful and observant.” The woman said in a slow tone. It was a low voice without inflection but crisp. “How about your parents? What were they like?”

Moe instantly tried to hide her expression.

“I know that your parents both passed away.” The woman continued indifferently. “You believe yourself that you have come to see me about it. But I have no information about your parents that would satisfy you if I were to tell you about them. Dr. Nishinosono was gentle. I never met his wife. I am asking what your parents were like to you. You saw that plane crash, didn’t you?”

“You seem to be able to read my mind.” Moe chose her words with increasing caution toward the opponent.

“There is no such thing as a mind.” The woman smiled again. “You are now

trying to talk about the human psyche. Very well, let's have a little talk about it ..."

"May I ask who you are?" Moe said honestly the question that suddenly came to her mind.

"Ah ... this is a surprise. You really do have a brilliant mind." Saying so, the woman widened her eyes a little and was silent for a moment. "That is what we call the sharpness of human thought. You must have just now suddenly thought of it, right? It's wonderful ... That is something a machine cannot do. No artificial intelligence could ever come up with a question like who I am. But you met and talked to me, and in just a few dozen seconds, you intuited the gap between me and the woman named Shiki Magata you had constructed in advance, and you unconsciously uttered that question. That quickness of access cannot be imitated by a machine. That is important. I am Shiki Magata. I am not another personality that you may find suspicious."

"Dr. Magata, why did you murder your parents?" Moe asked the same question again.

"I cannot answer the question of why." Ms. Magata answered with a smile. "I can tell you how they were killed, though. I mean, because I witnessed it ..."

"Why is it that you cannot answer that?"

"Because I don't know it. I can imagine it, but none of the answers seem appropriate. I would like you to ask the person who killed them."

"Doctor, are you saying that you did not kill them?" Moe leaned forward.

"No, I didn't. At least, in my consciousness, that is the truth. When your parents died in the accident, were you interested in why it happened? Were you then ..."

"I was sixteen years old." Moe calmly mentioned it. "I am not interested in the cause of that accident. My father and mother would not come back even if I came to know it."

"My parents died when I was fourteen years old." There was not the slightest shade on Ms. Magata's face. "People seem to think that I killed my parents. But, surely, that was not impossible. I was covered in blood with the murder weapon that had taken my parents' lives ... As you said, nothing is created, even if one investigates the cause."

“Don’t you remember it?” Moe squinted one eye.

“It is not accurate. I do remember it. I remember everything about how the one killed them.” Ms. Magata replied with a gentle expression. “The doll did it. You know, I saw it.”

“The doll did it?” Moe repeated. “What kind of doll was that? Did that doll commit the murder?”

“I don’t know. It went away.” Ms. Magata combed her hair back again. “I understand that people do not believe this story. But truth has nothing to do with other people’s understanding.”

Ms. Shiki Magata was supposed to be much older than Moe. However, the woman on the display in front of her looked like a teenage girl. Her skinny chin, chiseled features, and fair skin gave her an uniquely Japanese appearance. Her long black hair was straight and tidy, partially concealing both of her slender shoulders. The screen only showed so much.

“Well, does that mean, in short ... Doctor, did your other personality commit the murder?” Moe questioned.

“That’s probably a wrong idea, too.” Ms. Magata quickly replied. “There are indeed other personalities in me. But Nishinosono-san, you know what? The other personalities in me do not know my parents.”

“How do you know that?”

“Because I am talking to them all the time. Literally, all the time. I know that much. Divide the numbers from one to ten into two groups. And multiply all the numbers in both groups. Can the two products be equal?”

“That is not possible,” Moe answered immediately. “One group contains seven, so the product is a multiple of seven. But the other group does not have seven, so they are not equal.”

“See, only seven is lonely, right?” Ms. Shiki Magata said. “Of all my personalities, only I, Shiki Magata, have a motive to kill my parents. Therefore, if my physical body killed my parents, how can I not remember? Only I am the being like seven ... And, so are B and D.”

B and D ...? Moe did not understand the meaning of the doctor's words.

"Umm, what is your motive?" Moe asked.

"Perhaps, I might have wanted to play outside ..." Ms. Shiki Magata on the screen answered. "From the various evidence left, I would say that such a motive is reasonable. Do you really think that such things as motives have any meaning? Do you come all the way here to ask me that?"

"No, I don't."

"Now, let's go on to the main subject." Ms. Magata said and looked away once for the first time. "You have seventeen minutes and forty seconds left."

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It is summer now. Moe remembered that.

The girl on the screen (*Yes, she deserved to be called that*), when Moe looked closely, was wearing a white sweater and thin gloves on her sometimes visible hands. Maybe she might have been in the middle of some work. No, there is no season in this place, to begin with. Surely, like a Tupperware lunch box, this place must be hermetically sealed.

"Doctor, you have yourself shut in the room for fifteen years, haven't you?" Moe remembered the questions she had stored away in her head. "What changes have you seen in your fifteen years of being in a place with no seasons, no night and day? What changes have occurred to you because of the death of your parents all at once?"

"First of all, let me assure you at the outset that I am not in this room of my own free will from the beginning. Therefore, any change in my thinking about my current particular environment cannot be a positive one. However, many things have become independent in me. It has, in a way, stabilized me and anchored me in reality." Ms. Magata answered. "I wonder how that question relates to your life?"

"I'm not sure. I ... stayed in bed for a while after my father and mother passed away. Everything seemed pointless, and I lost interest in human society. Doctor, your opinion can be a sample data for me to create an elemental model in my

simulation for living.” Moe answered, choosing her words carefully.

“You have an interesting point.”

“Doctor, is it your ability that makes many things independent?” Moe continued her question.

“I already experienced the outside world for fourteen years before I was confined here. Thus, nostalgia for the outside world controls me. This is not a natural ability. The data you get from me is too specific to suit your model. Nishinosono-san. Your question is not accurate. I guess Saikawa-sensei must have told you to meet with me, right?”

“No, I came here at my own discretion,” Moe answered, looking down. “I came here because I was interested in you, Doctor. It was a lie that I wanted to hear an episode about my father.”

“You are an honest person.” Ms. Magata smiled. “You grew up in a wealthy family. Was your father strict? Then, so, you have a liking for Saikawa-sensei, right?”

“My answer is yes to both.” Moe nodded. “Doctor ... How can one of your studies, virtual reality technology, be useful?”

“Your topics change one after another. Virtual reality will eventually become just reality.” Ms. Magata answered. “If you think about what reality does for humans, that answers your question now.”

“What exactly does that mean?”

“Reality interferes with us whether it is useful or not. We do laundry because of the reality that our clothes get dirty. Whether this is useful or not is subjective. At least, it is helpful to the cleaner’s. That is reality. In other words, it is an illusion that is perceived later. This conversation sounds like an interview for a magazine. Do you not have to take notes?”

“I am fine. I have a good memory. Don’t worry.” Moe smiled. “What are the problems with virtual reality technology?”

“Currently, there are three main obstacles. The first is a lack of hardware power in the processing system. The second is the moral question of the readiness of humans

to accept it. And the third is the unknown biological effects that will emerge after the human accepts it. The first problem is being steadily resolved. It has already been ten years since I became involved in this technology, and the hardware capacity of computers is dramatically approaching the goal. The second problem is more serious but still acceptable to a generation that, like the one just mentioned, is born and raised in a virtual reality environment. Humans are more flexible than programs. The problem of human reactions will also be solved when the generation changes. The third problem is the mental and physical syndromes that always appear in any reformation. This is not my field, and I am not interested in that aspect. To put it bluntly, it is a trivial issue.”

“I enrolled in the Department of Architecture at my university. In such a future, how will architecture and cities be transformed? How would you define them in the future?” Moe asked the following question.

“Architecture can be a protector on a network, and a city is a system. Both are concepts that transform from hardware to software.” Ms. Magata answered without hesitation. “Architecture and cities are no more than programs. Only the collective will and the path of information are the concepts of the city, or in other words, approaching the concept of the network itself. Saikawa-sensei wrote the same thing. You have read it, right? When I mentioned Saikawa-sensei’s name, you suddenly asked about virtual reality. And when I asked you if you had a liking for Saikawa-sensei, you modestly answered yes.”

“Will material access be eliminated?” Moe asked, ignoring the latter half of Ms. Magata’s explanation.

“Yes, it will. Probably, it will be a jewel-like luxury item. Even actually shaking hands with another person would be special. Any opportunity that brings people into contact with each other is a luxury item. It has to be because of energy issues. The energy left for the future of humanity is very limited. Humans will have to enter the electronic world. If you want to protect the global environment, people should not move. They should stay in their rooms as I do. Why don’t you want to talk about Saikawa-sensei? Are you shy?”

“Then they won’t be able to kill people, right?” Moe said what came to her mind.

“Excellent insight.” Ms. Magata smiled elegantly. “You are right, Moe

Nishinosono-san. What have you come to love Saikawa-sensei so much?"

This question was her counterattack, Moe thought. She hurriedly rebuilt her theoretical armament. She had a feeling that her bulwark might not be able to prevent Ms. Magata's tidal wave.

"Saikawa-sensei was a student in my father's office." Moe took a breath and answered. "He was my father's last student. Therefore ..., I have watched Saikawa-sensei since I was a small child. He is a very smart person, and his ideas are flexible. He is a person worthy of respect."

"That is not an answer, Nishinosono-san." Ms. Magata stared into Moe's eyes. "When did you first meet Saikawa-sensei? Do you remember that?"

"I do. It was when I was in the fifth grade." Moe answered honestly.

"Back then, what did you think of Saikawa-sensei?" Ms. Magata asked in a low voice.

"I was surprised that there was an adult smarter than me," Moe answered. "I had never met an adult, including my father, who was smarter than me."

"I never had an opportunity like that. You were lucky. And? Did you fall in love with Saikawa-sensei? Did you dislike him?"

"I cannot say a sure thing." Moe looked down.

"What happened? At the time."

"I performed a card trick. I was good at magic tricks." Moe looked at her shoes but then raised her head and began to speak. "The trick was praised by everyone I showed it to, and no one could spot it, but Saikawa-sensei was not surprised by the trick. I ... asked him why he was not surprised. Sensei did not answer. But Sensei spotted my trick."

"Then, what did you think?"

"I was so frustrated that I came up with a new trick," Moe answered. As she was talking, she recalled the moment vividly.

"No, I am asking what you thought of Saikawa-sensei." Ms. Magata was staring at Moe. Her eyes were pale and brown.

“I think I probably disliked him.”

“But you like him now, don’t you? At what point did your emotions change?” Ms. Magata asked the following question.

“Well ...” Moe saw downward and looked at her shoes again. “Well, I can’t remember that. Such a thing. Doctor, why do you ask me so many questions?”

“Do you remember the day your parents died?” Ms. Magata continued her question.

“Yes, I remember it well.”

“Did you cry?”

“I did.”

“The accident happened at night, right?”

“Right. I went to the airport to meet my parents. The accident happened just before landing.”

“Saikawa-sensei was also there, wasn’t he?”

“He was.”

“Nishinosono-san. What were you wearing that day?”

“I don’t remember.” After answering that, Moe tried to recall it.

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It looked hot outside the window. The eight-story research building across the street had ugly outside units of air conditioners sticking out of every window, clearly shadowed by the uneven walls. About a third of the windows were closed off by bookshelves or steel racks filled with lab equipment. At least the Faculty of Engineering at a national university did not seem to care about appearances.

Sohei Saikawa gazed absentmindedly outdoors. Inside the conference room, the last afternoon committee meeting was taking place, and about twenty committee members had gathered from each department in the Faculty of Engineering. Saikawa was a representative of the Department of Architecture.

The discussion was related to the budget request to the Ministry of Education for the next fiscal year, which discussed the establishment of a state-of-the-art educational facility in the Faculty of Engineering. Overused words such as “network” and “multimedia” were thrown around, but Saikawa barely heard them. About two months ago, several university committee members visited MIT in the United States for a visit. *Why is a visit necessary in an age when networks connect the world?* Saikawa could not understand it at all. In short, it seemed that the Ministry of Education would not approve it unless they showed in physical form the attitude that they were diligently investigating and examining the matter. *I’m sorry for their trouble. I’m sure that another thick report will be produced. How many reports are there in the world that were really meaningful?* He thought.

That means, in other words, that the top is behind the times.

Thinking so, Saikawa nodded to himself.

If there is a budget to build classrooms with computers, air conditioners should be installed in all classrooms before that, and in the first place, there are not enough classrooms. First of all, they should increase classrooms. I wonder if such basic demands are not being approved by the Ministry of Education ...?

The ridiculous discussions went on and on. *How many of the faculty here are utilizing the network? If they can use e-mail, there would be no need for this meeting. There would be no need for minutes or copies of thick documents. Finite resources, brilliant minds, and most of all, precious time, are being wasted in this way.*

“How about you, Saikawa-sensei of the Department of Architecture? Do you have any opinions?” The chairperson suddenly asked Saikawa a question.

“Well, I have no objection in general,” Saikawa answered blankly. “It is important to give students as much exposure to this stuff as possible. However, I am not sure about the idea of creating a new subject for information education. I would rather think that we need to incorporate information education into the current subjects ...”

As soon as Saikawa expressed his opinion, he immediately forgot about it. Only recently, he could speak out such a content-free opinion with a serious face wrapped in words that seemed to make sense. He had also gradually come to understand, though instinctively, that the way to live is never to speak his true

feelings. It was like trying to trick a car into running in bad shape. As long as he got to his destination, that was all that mattered.

The meeting ended after two hours, and Saikawa trudged back to the research building through the corridor of the classroom building.

He did not lock his room. When he opened the door, a cold air enveloped him.

Only one houseplant was in Saikawa's room. It reached the low ceiling of the room. He had no interest in plants at all. If anything, he preferred leaves to flowers. The plant, called Pachira, was not something he had brought here.

Saikawa used two desks side by side, one of which had a 21-inch display on it. Now, a psychedelic pattern like an ameba was moving on that screen. It appeared automatically to prevent the display from burning out, and a program called a screen saver was displaying it.

Saikawa put the committee's files back on a steel shelf. Then he took a can of cola from the small refrigerator in the corner of the room and sat down in a chair. Before opening the can, he lit a cigarette.

If the committee were not at the university, perhaps their research would proceed at twice its rate.

Saikawa sighed.

He heard someone talking from the room next door. Next door was the room of Momoko Kunieda, an research associate of Saikawa's course. Research Associate Kunieda did not speak in a voice that could be heard in the next room. She was probably in the middle of teaching a student.

Saikawa decided to drink the cola while smoking a cigarette. Strangely enough, the two seemed to naturally separate from each other, even though they entered through the same mouth.

There was a knock at the door, and he answered it.

"Excuse me." Moe Nishinosono came into the room.

As usual, she was prominently dressed. She wore a bright pink tank top, light gray jeans, and a white sheer vest. She carried a large yellow shoulder bag. Her hair was short and straight, and she wore one pink earring that matched her shirt. Upon closer inspection, the earring was made of glass and shaped like an elephant.

This April, she had just entered the Department of Architecture, to which Saikawa belonged. Usually, first-year undergraduate students rarely came to the professor's office. It was not until the fourth year that they were supervised for their thesis, and most of the staff in the office were graduate students. But, Moe Nishinosono was the daughter of Dr. Kyosuke Nishinosono, Saikawa's mentor and the former president of N University. Dr. Nishinosono and his wife died in a plane crash three years before. Saikawa had often had the opportunity to visit Dr. Nishinosono's home before the accident and had known Moe well since she was a small child. She had visited Saikawa's office again and again since she entered N University.

"Sensei, you look tired." Moe looked into Saikawa's face and said. "Did you have another committee meeting?"

Saikawa nodded. He had no energy to reply.

"Would you like some coffee?" Moe asked as she set down her large bag.

"No, thanks, I'm drinking the cola ... Nishinosono-kun, if you want some coffee, prepare yourself." Saikawa said. He once used to call her "Moe-chan," but he thought it was inappropriate to call a student in his department that way, so he called her this way lately.

"I want coffee, so I'll brew it."

Moe placed the filter on the pot and set the coffee maker. She liked black coffee as much as Saikawa did, but he had never seen Moe drinking coffee, at least not at the Nishinosono family's house. She must have dabbled in adult tastes as a university student. After her parents died in an accident, her change was remarkable. Until high school, Moe had long hair, always wore skirts, and, like Mrs. Nishinosono, spoke in a hushed, quiet voice. Nowadays, she always wore jeans and sometimes a baseball cap. Her way of speaking had also changed a lot.

Saikawa watched Moe's back for a few moments.

Everyone changes that much once they become a university student, he thought. As for women's appearance, Saikawa had no experience speaking out about what he felt about them. However, even if one were to deduct patronizing remarks, Moe could be considered a beautiful woman. More precisely, she had become much more beautiful in the past three years.

“What’s wrong with you? You’re really down, Sensei.” Moe said while looking in the other direction.

“Well, these things happen,” Saikawa replied with a sigh. “How do you know I’m not well?”

“Oh, you didn’t notice it yourself?” Moe looked back and smiled. “Sensei, you just returned to this room, didn’t you? Because the display shows a screen saver and nothing on your desk. You are not working. The uninteresting committee files will be put away on the shelf as soon as you return here. Besides, when you return to this office and are in a good mood, you will make coffee first. You drink a cola straight from a can when you are tired and don’t want to do anything.”

“I see ... You are observing me very well.” Saikawa smiled.

Moe sat down in the chair next to the desk and crossed her legs.

“More than anything ..., you don’t even ask about my visit to see Dr. Magata.”

“Ah, that rings my bell ...” Saikawa closed his eyes and turned his face upward. “I have forgotten about that. Can you tell me? About that time ... I’ll have a cup of coffee, after all.”

“I’ve already made enough for both of us.” Saying so, Moe smiled happily.

While seeing her lovely mouth, Saikawa was in a somewhat better mood.

“So, did you get to meet Dr. Shiki Magata?” Saikawa asked.

“Of course,” Moe nodded joyfully as she tilted her head at an angle and combed her hair back.

“Oh, that’s great,” Saikawa leaned back in his chair. “That’s great,” he repeated the same phrase.

Saikawa had wondered how many people in Japan would be allowed to meet with Dr. Shiki Magata.

He could not imagine what political power of the prestigious Nishinosono family Moe Nishinosono had used. He knew well that her uncle was the head of the Aichi Prefectural Police Headquarters, and her aunt was the wife of the prefectural governor. Her late father was the former president of N University, one of the former Imperial Universities. Other relatives of the Nishinosono family, scattered in

different parts of the country, were at the pinnacle of status and wealth in their respective fields. Moe Nishinosono herself had inherited her parents' vast estate and paid taxes many times Saikawa's salary.

With the help of the Nishinosono family, she perhaps could ... He had actually guessed so.

Still, meeting Dr. Shiki Magata was that difficult. Since her teenage years, Shiki Magata had been a genius programmer at the pinnacle of computer science. She was the daughter of Dr. Sachiro Magata, a leading expert in information engineering, and Dr. Michiyo Magata, one of the greatest authorities in linguistics. She was a mythical figure in her field, and her name was still well known in a wide range of fields, from a computer program called Interpreter and operating system development to game software. She received a master's degree from Princeton University at age nine and a Ph.D. from MIT at age eleven. She also became a chief engineer at MF company, where she was in full swing at age twelve. It was impossible for such a career not to be considered a myth. They were her stories that Saikawa had learned when he was in high school. Shiki Magata's maternal grandfather was German, so she was not purely Japanese. But then, she was the first Japanese person to be called a "genius" and was featured in the media. The phrase "girl prodigy" was an expression that had been carefully frozen to describe her. In fact, when she was in kindergarten, she could answer 10-digit multiplications immediately and instantly do mental arithmetic of cubic roots. Her talents were mostly limited to the field of mathematics, but even ordinary people could understand that her abilities were off the charts. Not to mention that her parents were leading researchers in the academic world. Her abilities were to be increasingly stretched in an environment that was appropriate for them.

More than that, however, a sensational event made her even more famous worldwide.

What other way could she have been more famous?

The whole world was astonished.

When she was fourteen, Shiki Magata was arrested on suspicion of murdering her parents, Dr. Sachiro Magata and Dr. Michiyo Magata.

"What did you talk about with her? What was she like?" Saikawa's exhaustion was blown away.

“Well, I was able to talk with her for about thirty minutes, but it was kind of ...” Moe seemed to be reminiscing about the time they talked. “She had a little scary air. But I had no idea she was so interested in people. Yes, she was incredibly beautiful ...”

Moe told Saikawa in detail about her visiting Ms. Magata.

One of Saikawa’s graduate students under his supervision was working on his master’s thesis research on the influence of virtual reality on the future of architecture. While visiting Saikawa’s office, Moe became friends with the graduate student and learned that Dr. Shiki Magata was a pioneer in this field in Japan. She remembered that her father had been friends with Dr. Shiki Magata. In July, Moe suddenly announced that she would see her. At first, the graduate student talking with Moe did not take her seriously, thinking it was just a whim of hers. But when she actually started to make plans, he reported it to Saikawa.

Shiki Magata was acquitted at her trial for the murder of her parents. This was because she was considered clearly insane. Since then, Shiki Magata had disappeared from the public eye. No one in public knew where she was. And she was forgotten by the public.

In fact, however, Saikawa knew the whereabouts of Shiki Magata. It was what he had heard from a friend in the Department of Information Engineering, and it was well known in the field that she was at a certain research institute in their area, that is, Aichi Prefecture. Shiki Magata was at a private research institute on Himaka Island in Mikawa Bay. The research institute was built with her parents’ assets and a grant from a related foundation, and Shiki Magata had been conducting research there ever since the incident. Dr. Magata still continued to publish two papers a year under her own name in American peer-reviewed journals.

Saikawa had to take his hat off to Moe for her energy. One university student had met the world-famous Dr. Shiki Magata. On the other hand, he still did not know why Moe had decided to meet Dr. Magata. Perhaps it was not a logical reason that Saikawa could understand.

“I see. It seems you were interviewed more than you did. Maybe that doctor is finally dumb enough to be interested in other people. I guess so ...” Saikawa said. Moe’s account of her meeting with Dr. Shiki Magata gave him the greatest

excitement of the year. “Anyway, it was amazing. That sounds great. I envy you ... I wish I could have met her too.”

“She knew you, Sensei,” Moe added.

“That’s because Nishinosno-kun was going to visit, so she must have been her preliminary research.” Saikawa smiled bitterly. “She said it just to be polite.”

“Do you think she is the kind of person who would do such a thing?” Moe said, holding her coffee cup with both hands.

Indeed, he could not believe that a genius like her would care about such a thing. Saikawa was suddenly glad that his paper had been read by her.

“What a place that research institute was?” Saikawa asked.

“Well, it was a huge research institute. It was the only building on that island. Seen from above, it is a regular square building with a simple design. I don’t know much about the inside. You know, I did not see the whole thing ...”

“Seen from above?”

“Yes, I went there by helicopter,” Moe replied as a matter of course. “There’s a helipad on that rooftop.”

“Oh, by helicopter ... Sounds nice.” Saikawa nodded. The Nishinosono family had their own private helicopter. *Rich people don’t seem to take ships.* “I wonder why Dr. Magata doesn’t meet people in person?”

“She seems to be allergic to humans,” Moe said, looking up at the ceiling. It was a habit she often did. “That was the most disappointing thing. I could only see her on TV. I went all the way to ... I heard that she had never met anyone.”

“I wish I could at least e-mail her.” Saikawa folded his arms over his head and leaned back in his chair.

“She doesn’t seem to communicate with the outside world,” Moe added.

“What do you mean by that ... doll?” Saikawa asked another question.

“Umm, I don’t know that either,” Moe answered. “Indeed, she said that it was a doll that killed her parents. And the doll went somewhere ...”

There was a knock on the door, and Fukashi Hamanaka, a graduate student Moe knew well, entered the professor's office. He was a first-year master's student working on virtual reality research. He was a small, feminine-looking young man.

"Umm, Saikawa-sensei, there is something wrong with my computer. Could you please come and take a look?" Hamanaka said in a high voice. "Oh, Nishinosono-san, you're back?"

Moe smiled happily.

Saikawa extinguished his cigarette in an ashtray and stood up. "Kunieda-kun is absent?"

"Kunieda-sensei is in the middle of a seminar." Hamanaka turned to the side and said. They could not see inside the adjacent room, but it was in the direction where Research Associate Kunieda's office was. "It's a little difficult for me to ask her."

Hamanaka, a timid person, always tried to stay away from Momoko Kunieda. Research Associate Kunieda was feared by students.

"Nishinosono-kun, wait here for a moment."

Saikawa left the office with Hamanaka. The graduate students' room was on the floor below Saikawa's office. Moe had entered there several times. She had the impression that it was a very messy and lawless place.

Moe drank cold coffee alone in Saikawa's office, which smelled of cigarettes. She liked black coffee at that temperature because her tongue couldn't take anything hot.

Associate Professor Saikawa's room was about thirty square meters, almost a regular square. The room was originally for a research associate and was only about half the area of the room usually used by a professor and an associate professor. Moe had heard that when Saikawa was promoted to associate professor the year before last, he stayed here because he had trouble moving his books and furniture. The large room for an associate professor that Saikawa was supposed to use was on the same fourth floor. It was now occupied by a few students preparing for their graduation theses in Saikawa's course. Moe had never been in that room.

Saikawa's office, with ungainly steel shelves covering all the walls, was lined with technical books and files in tight rows. There were two desks, one with two Macintoshes on it. There was no printer in this room. Saikawa rarely printed anything out; when he had to, he used the printer in the students' room via the network. One oddity in the room was a single houseplant that Moe had brought in. The walls were barely visible, but there were several pictures of aircraft flying acrobatically applied to the inside of the entrance door. Moe had never heard Saikawa talk about airplanes but guessed he liked them.

Behind the glass of the steel shelves, in the small space in front of the lined books, were all sorts of things. They were truly disorganized and also outlandish. A fruit parfait imitation, a model stealth fighter, an Australian boomerang, an old IBM typewriter font head, a Chinese mud doll, a character called Kyoro-chan for chocolate candy Choco Ball, an old-fashioned ampere meter, and a twin-lens reflex camera. They had two things in common. One was that none of them had anything to do with Saikawa's research or architecture. The other was that they were all things that Moe liked.

"Sohei-kun." The door opened quietly without a knock, and Moe heard a woman's voice. Moe was startled and stood up. A woman with long hair entered the room with a smile on her face.

"Oh ... I'm sorry," the woman said in a small, sticky voice. "Are you a student, young lady?"

"Yes, madam. Saikawa-sensei will be back soon." Moe replied.

The woman came into the room and looked around curiously. Her long wavy hair swayed, and she smelled of perfume. By all appearances, she was not a student. Her tight short skirt was navy blue. She had freckles under her eyes, and her lipstick was a dark red. She was a little taller than Moe, perhaps because of her heels. She was slender and fair-skinned beauty, but Moe could not tell how old she was, maybe in her late twenties.

"Well then, can you give this to him for me?" The woman handed a paper bag to Moe.

"Umm, madam, may I have your name, please?" Moe asked politely.

"Are you ... perhaps ... Nishinosono-san?" The woman spoke softly and with a

lisp. Moe imagined that she spoke that way on purpose to make herself sound incompetent. The paper bag she received contained a wrapped box. When Moe did not answer, the woman seemed convinced that her speculation was correct. She started to chuckle.

“I’m Nishinosono. Excuse me, may I ask who you are?” Moe got a little angry, and her voice got louder.

“I’m ... humph ... Setsuko Gido.” Then the woman’s eyes became crescent with laughter.

“Ms. Gido ... are you?”

“I am ..., by the way ..., do you read books like the Man’yoshu?” Setsuko Gido asked.

“I don’t ...” Moe shook her head horizontally. She was not comfortable with the tempo of the other’s conversation. “Is something wrong with the Man’yoshu?”

“You are ... that Nishinosono-san ... heh-heh ...” Gido did not answer Moe’s question. She stared at Moe. “Why don’t you ... grow your hair longer? I bet it would look good on you.”

“Well, how did you know about me?” Moe was beginning to get quite irritated.

“Huh, because Sohei-kun talks about you all the time ...” Gido laughed again.

Moe was most annoyed that she called Associate Professor Saikawa by his first name. Saikawa was from a boys’ school, and Moe had heard that all his high school classmates called him Sohei ...

What is your relationship with Sensei?

Moe was about to ask but could not think of a softer way to put it. Moe fell silent.

“I’m sorry to bother you. I have a cab waiting outside.” Setsuko Gido said with a smile and put her hand on the doorknob. “Nishinosono-san, do you like puzzles?”

“No ...” Moe responded. “Puzzles ... Do you mean jigsaw puzzles or something like that?”

“Yes, those things are a kind of thing. You know, I love it ... I’ll be sure to join you again sometime. Then, please give my regards to Sohei-kun and tell him

Setsuko came here.”

Setsuko Gido left the room.

Moe stood for a moment, looking at the closed door. *In the end, I was out of tune with Setsuko Gido's frequency*, she felt.

Why did she talk about puzzles ...?

Moe washed her and Saikawa's coffee cups and put them away in the cupboard. Saikawa's cup still had half a cup of coffee left, but she threw it away. From this action, she could tell she was apparently in a bad mood.

She left the office to go to the graduate students' room on the third floor where Saikawa was staying. Saikawa was just downstairs, and she should have told Setsuko Gido about it. *Why couldn't I do such an obvious thing?* Thinking of this, Moe went down the stairs.

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“The most important thing is to avoid putting floppies of unknown origin into the Macintosh.” Saikawa explained it to Hamanaka. “You shouldn't get floppies of games or anything like that from anyone.”

Four of the six Macintoshes in the graduate students' room were infected with a computer virus. A virus checker revealed that it was a French-born virus that had taken the world by storm five years earlier. However, the number of files that had been severely damaged was too small to count. It was fortunate that Hamanaka realized early on that something was wrong with his computer. Saikawa was able to finish most of the work on the virus.

“Also, you must be careful when you bring some software from the network to your computer.” Saikawa turned to Hamanaka as he pulled out a floppy disk. “If possible, you should bring nothing there. It is better to buy software only for what you really need.”

“I'm sorry, Sensei,” Hamanaka said with an apologetic look. He told Saikawa that he had copied a game from another course about three days before.

Moe Nishinosono entered the graduate students' room. In the messy room, only

Saikawa and Hamanaka were present.

“Sensei, you had a visitor,” Moe said as she walked up to the other two.

“Who was it?” Saikawa asked her, looking at the display. He was settled at Hamanaka’s desk with a cigarette in his mouth. Hamanaka was standing behind Saikawa.

“It was a person named Setsuko Gido,” Moe reported in a clerical tone. “But She has already left. She brought Sensei a small souvenir ... I guess it must be some cheap box of cake ...”

“Oh, really ...” Saikawa did not change his expression at all. “Hamanaka-kun. Didn’t you recently move some files on a floppy from the graduate students’ room to the Macintosh in the fourth-year students’ room? You should check for viruses over there too.”

“Well ... With FTP (File Transfer Protocol) in UNIX, we don’t need floppies. So, I believe that should be okay ...” Hamanaka replied.

“You’ve figured out how to get rid of viruses, haven’t you?” Saikawa asked, and Hamanaka nodded.

“Excuse me ...” Moe asked. “Specifically, what is a virus? Have you gotten rid of it already? I wish I could have seen it ... If possible.”

“That’s not something you can see.” Saikawa looked at Moe. “With the right software, you could discover it. It’s not made visible in the usual way and is secretly attached to some software or data. Sometimes a virus is hidden from the beginning inside a properly functioning program. It’s what we call a Trojan horse ...”

“How do you get rid of it?” Moe asked.

“There’s a program for anti-viruses called a vaccine. The one we just found was an older type of virus. So, it was within the vaccine’s protection.” Saikawa said as he stood up. “But if it’s a newer virus than the vaccine software, it won’t work well like this.”

“What does a virus actually do?” Hamanaka asked.

“Various things. Some don’t do anything, just take up the computer’s memory, while others can corrupt all the files on your hard drive. The viruses that don’t do

anything noteworthy are the ones that are discovered more slowly. So yes ... it's called an incubation period, and most of the time, it doesn't do anything for a while. So the fewer immediate symptoms you have, the safer the virus looks to you. During the incubation period, it infects other machines. It's just like a human disease. If the symptoms were severe right away, the patient would be quarantined. That way, there is less chance for it to spread to other humans."

"Does the virus even think about such things in its incubation?" Hamanaka wondered.

"I have no idea ... I don't know about real viruses, but at least computer viruses are designed by humans. In the case of UNIX, the file structure is complex, and the network is always connected worldwide, so it is a heaven for viruses. In the past, computer viruses were not a big deal. All you had to do was turn off the switch and the computer was dead. Once it was dead, the virus was out. But nowadays, computers have large hard disk capacity and are fully networked."

"Why would those people create viruses?" Hamanaka asked, putting his hand over his mouth.

"Hackers create them, right?" Moe pointed out.

"Hacker is not a word with a bad image. Mass media is misusing the term. Programmers who create viruses are called crackers. But I think it must be interesting to create a life form that multiplies itself using a computer. I bet it is ..."

Saikawa lit a cigarette. Then he exhaled the smoke slowly. "If a program you created is multiplying all over the world, well, it's certainly amusing in a way, isn't it?"

"The general public seems to think computer viruses are really living viruses," Moe said. "When I was a kid, I thought so too. I didn't think it was just a program. I believed that computers could get sick just like people ..."

"No, that's not necessarily a false perception." Saikawa exhaled another puff of smoke. "I mean, even technology invented in the 19th century must have seemed like an extension of magic to the masses. By the way, how do you think life, that is, being alive, is defined?"

"Something that will one day die is alive?" Hamanaka offered his opinion with a serious look.

“That’s not good enough, Hamanaka-san.” Moe looked at Hamanaka, her senpai (or senior), and immediately said. “Before we define dying, we must first define living. My opinion is ... you know, I think that to live is to reproduce itself.”

“If so, computer viruses are living organisms.” Saikawa raised the edge of his lips. “Although rare, some life forms are incapable of reproducing offspring.”

“It has to be made of organic matter. Yes, all living things are organic, right?”

“The definitions of organic and inorganic are already very vague today.” Saikawa replied. “Originally, we named the substances that make up living organisms as organic ... So, that can’t be used as a definition, just like the death of a living organism.”

After thinking for a moment, Moe asked. “Sensei, is there such a thing as an answer to that question?”

Fukashi Hamanaka also nodded silently.

“So, my perception is ... the definition of an organism is still vague.” Saikawa held the cigarette in his right hand and turned the tip of it. “The ability to defend itself, reproduce itself, and, I think, energy conversion, that’s about it ... But imagine, for example, a lovely roly-poly toy made of wood?”

“Roly-poly toy?” Hamanaka repeated. If someone repeated his opponent’s words, you could almost always assume that he needed time to recognize what was said and his thinking had stopped.

“Listen. It’s organic. You know, it’s made of wood. Then it has the ability to defend itself. It will get up even if knocked down ... And it converts potential energy into kinetic energy.”

“It does not self-reproduce ...” Moe pointed out.

“However, the roly-poly toy is incredibly cute. So, people who take one look at it want it. Therefore, more and more of them are produced. In other words, they are self-propagating with their own ability to be cute.”

“But it’s people who make them, right? It is not self-reproduction.”

“There are many organisms in the world that cannot reproduce without the help of other organisms. Flowers bloom because they make themselves look pretty to

insects and need help to reproduce themselves, right?”

“So then, Sensei, you are saying that the roly-poly toy is a living organism?” Moe asked.

“That’s the answer I’d give if I were to follow the definition you proposed,” Saikawa replied. “That’s why I said it’s ambiguous. Of course, if you define it strictly in terms of DNA, etc., my answer would be different ... So, I personally think that computer viruses are life forms.”

“Hmm ...” Moe pouted. “I’m somehow not convinced.”

“Well then, let’s return to my office and eat the cake together.” Saikawa said.

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The souvenir brought by Setsuko Gido was a pastry called mooncake sold in Yokohama. It was not the cheap stuff that Moe had determined it to be. But as soon as Saikawa saw it, he became grumpy.

Two male graduate students, who had had a seminar in Research Associate Momoko Kunieda’s office next door, came into the room, got mooncakes, and left with Hamanaka. Only Research Associate Kunieda remained in the room, silently took a mooncake. Momoko Kunieda was a tall woman, but her hair was almost cropped, and her clothes were masculine. She was the quietest woman among those Saikawa knew.

“Sensei, would you like me to make you coffee again?” Moe asked.

Saikawa nodded. “She is totally uncaring. She should at least know I don’t like *anko* (sweet bean paste) ...”

There were three things in this world that Saikawa never wanted to eat: watermelon, *anko*, and *kinako* (roasted soybean flour).

“How is your seminar going?” Saikawa asked Research Associate Kunieda, who was silently eating the mooncake.

“Not good. They are not using their brains at all.” Kunieda replied with a blank expression.

She would say so, Saikawa expected. She did not often speak favorably of her students. No, her attitude was the same toward everyone. Saikawa told Kunieda about the virus infiltrating the computer in the graduate students' room.

"Maybe the virus has spread to quite a few computers in our department, so can you send out an e-mail alert to those concerned ...?" Saikawa instructed, and Kunieda nodded lightly.

"I got a weird e-mail through UNIX as well," Kunieda said after finishing the mooncake. "It is an e-mail from the United States. It says you might receive an e-mail with a virus that destroys files in your directory just by reading it, so be careful."

"How can you be careful of it?" Moe, who had not yet eaten half of the mooncake, asked from next to her.

"According to the warning e-mail, the e-mail in question has the subject line GODLESS." Kunieda replied. "So, if you see GODLESS in the subject line, never read it and delete it immediately. The virus, it said, when it invades someone's directory, first consults the address list and then sends the e-mail to the person's relations without permission. That's how it spreads, it said."

"Is that such an obvious subject line on purpose?" Saikawa said as he lit a cigarette. "How ridiculous the story is ... First of all, is such a thing even possible?"

"Such a thing? What do you mean?" Moe asked as she set the coffeemaker.

"I wonder if it is possible to write a script that would corrupt files just by reading the e-mail. I'm impressed that there can be some clever guys in this world. But ... if I were the guy, I would make that warning e-mail itself a virus."

"Perhaps it is just a hoax," Kunieda said so curtly. "I don't see how that is possible. I think some other script is essential beforehand. Perhaps the person who is sending out the warning e-mail is the one who is planting the virus."

"Are you saying that the person is sending e-mails warning that a virus that never existed is coming?" Moe asked.

"Yes, you know, the e-mail will be spread worldwide. It's like a chain letter. To the ringleader, it's amusing." Saikawa said. "I think it's a hoax, too. Or should we believe the warning and put up a line of defense by writing a script that

automatically deletes any e-mail with the subject line GODLESS that reaches our users?”

“I don’t think we need to do that,” Kunieda said and approached the door. “I am still in the middle of my work ...”

Kunieda walked out of the room. She hardly greeted anyone. She seemed to think that greetings were useless.

“Oh, well. I made enough coffee for three people, though ...” Moe whispered. “By the way, this pastry is sweet.”

“Let’s continue where we left off earlier, Nishinosono-kun.” Saikawa got up and went to pour coffee into a cup. “It was about Dr. Shiki Magata. Do you remember what we were talking about ...?”

“I have told you most of what happened,” Moe responded.

“Don’t you have any chance of seeing her again? You know, I really want to meet her too ...”

“I know how you feel ... Would you like me to ask again? That’s a connection I cannot ask too much, though ...”

“What connections did you use?”

“Umm, I asked my aunt, but I don’t know what route she took to make that happen.”

“I can’t ask you to push yourself.” Saikawa sighed along with the smoke. “The doctor and I are not even close in our specialties. Well, I wouldn’t be able to have a good talk with her even if I were to appear in front of her ... Still, speaking of Dr. Shiki Magata, I want to meet and talk with her in person at least once in my lifetime.”

“Well, more than that ..., I would like to ask you something, Sensei.” Moe sat down on a chair.

“Oh, what is it?”

“What does Ms. Setsuko Gido do for a living?” Moe looked at Saikawa with a serious face.

“Oh, you mean her. Nishinosono-kun, did you talk to her?” Saikawa smiled slightly. “She’s an interesting person, wasn’t she?”

“I did ... we talked a little bit. She said she likes puzzles.” Saying this, Moe looked up at the ceiling.

“Ah, yes, she is a puzzle fanatic.”

“What kind of work does she do?” Moe asked the same question again.

“Well, let’s see ...” Saikawa tilted his head. “I wonder what kind of work she does now ...”

It was beginning to get dark outside. Saikawa looked vaguely at the window.

“What was the name of that island again? The island of Dr. Magata’s research institute.”

“Himaka Island,” Moe answered quickly.

“I once went camping on that island in high school,” Saikawa said as he looked at the window.

“Oh? But that island is the private property of the Magata family ... isn’t it?”

“I think it’s only recently that they did. The campsite was still available for a few years after the research institute was built.”

“Sensei, those of your course are camping as a seminar trip, aren’t you? Why don’t you go to Himaka Island this year?” Moe said as if it had just occurred to her. “That’s it! Can I go with you? See, that’s a great idea! Hamanaka-san is the organizer of this year’s seminar trip, right?”

The seminar trip is a semi-annual event in which course staff camps together and conducts seminars. In Saikawa’s course, the “seminar” was in name only and was actually just a recreation. During the year, they would go out for two or three nights each in summer and winter. Recently, some of the more affluent courses have gone abroad. Still, Saikawa’s study group usually went camping in Nagano or Yamanashi Prefectures in summer and to a nearby hot spring in winter. The participants were the professor, graduate students, and university seniors.

“But you know, there is no campground now, Nishinosono-kun. That island is private property.” Saikawa said.

“I’ll do something I can do,” Moe said happily.

“Do something ...? You said earlier that it would be impossible.”

“I thought it was impossible to see Dr. Magata again, but we can just enter the island. I’ll ask for it.” Moe was confident.

Chapter 2: The Blue Revisit

-1-

“It’s hot,” Saikawa muttered as he exited the car. “It’s scorching ...”

“Even if you say it is hot, you cannot make it cool.” Kunieda said as she approached Saikawa. She wore a large straw hat, a T-shirt, and short pants that reached her knees. From a distance, she looked like a man, and even up close, she probably didn’t look like a woman.

They crossed a small bridge on a narrow national highway in a rural area. A little further along the embankment was a landing place. The river was no more than ten meters wide. They were told that the only boat service to their destination, Himaka Island, was from this Port of Issiki. Although it was called a port, it was on the riverbank near the mouth of the river. An unpaved parking lot was beyond the embankment as seen from the river, and Saikawa had just parked his car there.

Research Associate Momoko Kunieda seemed to have arrived a little before Saikawa. She, too, had come here by car. Kunieda had quit the research institute where she had been working about two years before and became a research associate in Saikawa’s course. She was twenty-eight years old, four years younger than Saikawa, and single. Rather, it was safe to say that her getting married was an unimaginable situation.

Saikawa was dressed as usual in a shirt and blue jeans, but his bag was not his everyday one, but a Boston bag. As Saikawa turned around while walking up the embankment, Kunieda had her backpack out of the trunk of her car.

It was a Tuesday in the first week of August. The sun was so intense that it could be described as murderous. Within seconds of getting out of the car, Saikawa began to sweat. He waited for Kunieda to come up the embankment, and the two of them went down side by side on the other side. They saw a few students at the landing.

The seminar trip was to take place on Himaka Island, as Moe had promised. Saikawa did not ask what route she had taken to make it real. The island had originally had a campground, and fortunately, the facilities from that time were still

there, with tents, camping equipment, and even running water available. Saikawa was told that the current director of the Magata Research Institute had personally given Moe permission to use it.

This year, only Saikawa and Kunieda could participate in the seminar trip as instructors. The professor, Saikawa's boss, could not make it due to personal reasons. There were six graduate students, two fourth-year university students, Moe Nishinosono, and two instructors for a total of eleven participants.

There were no boats at the landing now. They could see many small fishing boats lined up a short distance away.

When Saikawa and Kunieda walked up to the students, they all bowed lightly. At the landing, there was a tattered waiting room with only a roof, and most of them were sitting on the benches. Two old-fashioned vending machines were placed there. There were only eight students.

"Hasn't Nishinosono-kun arrived yet?" Saikawa said, looking around at everyone. He checked his watch and knew that they had about fifteen minutes left before the boat left.

"I guess she might be going by helicopter, isn't she?" Fuchida, a graduate student, said as he sipped his juice. "A young lady like her wouldn't come to such a run-down place."

The luggage for the camp was substantial: three days' worth of drinks and food.

"Oh, here she comes," Hamanaka said, looking upstream toward the embankment.

A black car crossed the bridge and entered the levee road. The car came down the landing ramp, not the parking lot side. As it came closer, they realized it was a dark brown Jaguar. Moe's usual car was a bright red 4000 cc sports car, but Saikawa had seen that Jaguar sedan in the underground parking lot of the Nishinosono family before.

The luxury car stopped in front of everyone with a quiet roar of its engine. The rear door opened, and Moe stepped out. In the driver's seat, they could see an old man with gray hair, wearing white gloves and holding the steering wheel.

Moe Nishinosono wore large pink sunglasses. She was dressed in white slacks like

a sailor and a small cream and white striped T-shirt. When she got out of the vehicle, she first unfolded a bright white parasol. It was so elegant yet ridiculously out of place that it drew a resigned sigh from the other students.

“Well, I’d like to ask you a favor.” The trunk of the Jaguar swooshed open, and she stood behind the car. “The luggage was too heavy to lift. Can someone please help me?”

“What are you bringing?” Kawabata, the oldest of the students, said. “Nishinosono-san, you should not bring something you can’t carry by yourself. You will be in trouble there ...”

“But this is for all of you.” Moe smiled. “Even you all want a cold one, don’t you?”

Inside that trunk were two large iceboxes.

“Oh, is that beer? You’re a caring person.” Fuchida approached.

“One box contains beer,” Moe said to Kawabata and Fuchida, who took the iceboxes out of the trunk. “This one contains ice cream.”

“Ice cream?” Fuchida exclaimed. Another loud sigh came from the students.

Saikawa walked to the driver’s seat and greeted old man Suwano in the car. Suwano took the trouble to get out of the car and bowed deeply to Saikawa. He was a butler who had served the Nishinosono family for more than thirty years. Even though it was summer, he was dressed in a black suit and bow tie.

“Please take good care of the young lady, Saikawa-sensei,” Suwano said in a worried whisper. Even in such a desolate place under the blazing sun, a cool elegance seeped into his voice.

“Yes, that’s okay. Don’t worry.” Saikawa also whispered. He somehow did not want the students to hear his conversation with the butler. “By the way, has she ever camped before?”

“No, this will be her first time. She is, you know, looking forward to it ...” Suwano said so, smiling.

“Yeah, right. I can tell she’s happy about it, though ...” Saikawa winked at Suwano.

The boat came up the river with a flapping sound and stopped well at the pier. It was a small boat, about five meters long, with a roof over only the wheelhouse and a tent attached to the rear. Saikawa had seen similar open-deck boats in Hanoi and Istanbul. Several passengers disembarked, and the last one approached Saikawa.

“Are you Saikawa-sensei?” The man came up to Saikawa and said with an amiable smile.

“Yes, I am.”

“I’m Yamane of the Magata Research Institute.” The man bowed lightly. “Umm, is she Nishinosono-san?”

“I am not.” Wu, an international student, standing beside Saikawa, answered.

“Nishinosono-kun is ...” Saikawa pointed at Moe, who was buying juice from a vending machine. “That woman with the parasol. I’m sorry we are bothering you, aren’t we?”

“No, not at all.” Yamane shook his head. “The director asked me to show you around, so here I am. I have never seen so many visitors on that island before. We are planning to hold a small welcome party for you tomorrow night. If it is all right with you, Sensei ...”

“Is the campground close to the research institute?” Saikawa asked him as he began walking. The students had already boarded the boat.

“That is a small island. The research institute and campground are on both sides of the island, but well ..., it’s a ten-minute walk or so. Of course, we have a car, so ...” Yamane answered.

Yamane looked older than Saikawa. He did not look like a salaried worker. He was dressed in a T-shirt and jeans, and his hair was messy. And it looked like he had not shaved for days. Once aboard, Yamane presented Saikawa with his business card. Yukihiro Yamane. His title was deputy director of the Magata Research Institute. Saikawa was a little surprised.

“How many staff members does Magata Research Institute have?” Saikawa did not have his business card.

“About fifty people. They are the ones who work there at all times.” Yamane sat on a bench on the boat.

Finally, Moe Nishinosono was getting onto the deck. She put away her parasol and came near Saikawa.

“Nishinosono-kun, this is Yamane-san, the deputy director of the research institute.” Saikawa introduced him to Moe.

“Hi.” She dropped her head in a bow.

“You came here once about a month ago.” Yamane smiled and said to Moe. “I was on a business trip at the time, so I couldn’t see you. I heard you are an acquaintance of the director ...”

“We are like ... the fourth root of acquaintances.” Moe smiled and tilted her head slightly. “I had the pleasure of interviewing Dr. Shiki Magata.”

“Yes, that was unusual, too. I saw the video of the lady talking with Nishinosono-san. It was quite an interesting talk.” Yamane said.

“I thought that was a private interview.” Moe turned her head down in embarrassment.

“No, not at all ...” Yamane took out a handkerchief and wiped the sweat from his forehead. “I’ve been working at the research institute for fifteen years now, and I’ve never had the chance to meet her in person. Conversations are always conducted through microphones and displays, and all conversations are public within the research institute. We are not allowed to talk privately.”

“The doctor never meets with anyone?” Moe asked. “Doesn’t she?”

“She doesn’t see anyone.”

An iron rod was hung over the boarding gate, and the engine noise became louder. In the end, only the eleven persons of Saikawa’s group and Yamane boarded the boat. There were only two sailors on board. The small boat slowly backed up and turned downstream. Then it began to move forward at a surprisingly slow speed. It was so slow that it seemed like the boat was being swept down the river. The concrete embankments on both sides of the river were so high that nothing could be seen in the surrounding landscape. There were two bridges in their

direction, and they had to pass under them before reaching the sea. Their heat was better as the boat began to move and they were more or less exposed to the wind.

They heard the voyage to Himaka Island would take forty minutes. They had imagined that it was a long way, but apparently, it was due to the slowness of the boat.

“How many boats leave per day?” Saikawa asked.

“No, there are no scheduled services. This boat does not go to Himaka Island but to Shino Island beyond that. There are eight round trips a day there. We just have that regular boat stop by on the way. When you take the boat from the island, you have to call in advance to stop by.”

The boat was still going down the river. The river widened a bit when they finally passed under the concrete bridge. The students were leaning against the railing, looking ahead of the boat. Saikawa and Yamane were the only two sitting down. Moe had entered the wheelhouse through a door that had been open at some point and was talking with the crews about something.

“Perhaps I shouldn’t say so, but you look very young as a deputy director,” Saikawa questioned him about the curious point.

“Ah, I might be. I became deputy director last year. Our facility has a retirement age of forty. I’m the oldest staff member at the research institute, except for the director ...”

“Oh ... You retire at forty? What happens after that?” Saikawa had not known that.

“I will receive retirement money. That is, well, it’s quite an amount of money. So I should be able to live comfortably for a while. Then, when I feel up to it again, I can work. Anyone from our research institute will be hired anywhere.” Saying this, Yamane shrugged his shoulders. “I will be retiring in three years. To begin with, we can only do that kind of work until forty.”

“That is quite impressive.” Saikawa nodded broadly. “That alone is a good indication of the high level of the organization. It would be good if universities could do that as well ...”

The slow boat with Saikawa and others finally traversed the harbor at the mouth

of the river and out of the breakwater. The sea swell was somewhat larger, but it was a clear day with no wind, and the sea was flat and quiet. A few small fishing boats were afloat. A young man playing on a one-person jet boat could be seen in the distance. Their boat was heading almost due south toward the high sun.

Moe came out of the wheelhouse and walked toward Saikawa and Yamane. She sat in front of the bench where Saikawa and Yamane were sitting and twisted her body around to look back.

“May I ask you about Dr. Shiki Magata?” Moe looked at Yamane and said. “That is, I mean, about the incident in which the doctor is said to have murdered her parents ...”

“Nishinosono-kun, it is rude to talk about that,” Saikawa said.

“No, I don’t mind at all. It’s nothing to hide.” Yamane smiled awkwardly. “Please feel free to say ... You know, we have no common manners ... I guess you can tell by my appearance.”

Indeed, he is right. The deputy director comes to meet us without a tie and shaving. The staff of the research institute on the isolated island must be a very superhuman group, Saikawa thought.

“Um, did you yourself experience the incident fifteen years ago?” Moe questioned.

“No, I didn’t. I started working there after the incident.” Yamane answered. “Therefore, I have never met Dr. Sachiro Magata and Dr. Michiyo Magata.”

“What kind of incident was it?” Moe had her slender arm on the back of the bench.

“What kind?” Yamane looked troubled.

“She likes that kind of story. I think it’s not good taste, though.” Saikawa said as he lit a cigarette. “She reads a lot of books on murder cases.”

“Mystery novels.” Moe corrected.

“As far as I know ... that incident happened in the research institute, right?” Saikawa confirmed to Yamane.

“Right. It was when that research institute was about half built. At that time, the island was not yet private property. Ms. Shiki Magata was fourteen years old back

then. But as a girl prodigy, she was already a national celebrity, even outside the computer field. I admired her so much that I started working at the research institute. She stabbed her parents ... Dr. Sachiro and Dr. Michiyo to death with a knife in her room.” Yamane spoke without changing his expression.

“Were there any witnesses?” Moe asked immediately.

“Yes, it was a man who is an uncle of Ms. Magata’s current director he subdued her at the murder scene. The director’s wife also saw it happen. I have heard that story in person from the director.”

“Couldn’t they have stopped a fourteen-year-old girl while she killed two people with a knife?” Moe asked.

“Well, I have no idea.” Yamane shook his head.

“She explained to me that ... the doll killed her parents. What did that mean?” Moe brought up the story she had heard from Ms. Magata.

“Yes, I know that story too. Ms. Magata has multiple personalities.” Yamane answered indifferently.

“I heard a glimpse of that story, too.” Saikawa chimed in.

“Well, I don’t really understand it ...” Yamane continued. “Anyway, that’s what her doctor at the time said, and that’s why she was found not guilty at the trial. In fact, I can see that when I talk to her. At first, I thought she was joking with me.”

“How could you see that?” Moe asked, straightening her posture.

“When she met Nishinosono-san, her personality was that of Ms. Shiki Magata ...” Yamane said, wiping the sweat off his face. “You know, I mean ...”

“Yes, she said so herself,” Moe responded.

“The lady sometimes speaks in a manly tone,” Yamane explained. “If you ask her on such occasions, she will tell you that her name is Kurimoto. Everyone in our facility knows that. I also saw your conversation in the video, and she said the murderer was a doll. I guess ... she might have meant some personality inside her.”

“Why is it a doll?” Moe asked. “Does she also have the personality of a doll?”

“Umm, I just sort of imagined it that way.” Yamane smiled. “In any case, any of

her personalities are top-notch at their jobs. As a programmer, she is truly a genius. Her talent is still completely intact. It is Dr. Shiki Magata who is behind the current level of the Magata Research Institute. We seek her advice in everything we do. If we ask one thing, she will give us ten answers.”

“By the way ... where is Dr. Shiki Magata at the research institute? Is she really somewhere on that island?” Moe asked a strange question.

“Aha, yes, she is. But no wonder you think so.” Yamane replied with a laugh. “It’s true; we only see her on the TV screen. But there is no doubt that the lady is in the underground block of the research institute. Her living quarters are on the west side of the second basement floor, and she occupies almost a quarter of that floor. Well, I heard that’s about six rooms ... After an incident like that, it might be more accurate to say she is quarantined. There is only one way in and out, and it is closely monitored at all times. Ms. Magata hasn’t stepped out of there for fifteen years. After all, the institute itself is a bit unique ... without a single window. So, it’s like we are all working in a closed room environment just like her.”

Words such as “closed room” were new to Saikawa.

“Who is allowed to enter Dr. Magata’s living quarters?” Moe asked.

“No one enters there. Since the murder case, outsiders and even those inside the research institute are not allowed to see her in person. Besides, Ms. Magata herself adamantly refuses to allow anyone to meet her. As far as I know ..., no one has entered that residential area. The place is completely cut off from the outside world. The network is also protected. This means you cannot even exchange e-mails with her privately on your computer. You cannot give her anything personally.”

“Is that a way to prevent some secret information from leaking?” Saikawa asked as he exhaled smoke.

“Of course, that is one reason,” Yamane answered. “The meeting with Ms. Magata cannot be held in private. No one can communicate with her except under the condition that it is always monitored by several people and also recorded. This means that the talent of Shiki Magata is an asset to the entire research institute.”

“She herself is the primary system?” Saikawa pointed out.

“Yes ... that is correct. So far, it has worked out well for us.” Yamane also took

out a cigarette and lit it. “I guess she wants to live like a machine herself. Ah ... it’s kind of serious, isn’t it? My apologies.”

“What are Dr. Magata’s current research interests?” Saikawa asked as he extinguished his cigarette in an ashtray.

“I cannot comment on the matter.” Yamane smiled. “I’m afraid but I cannot talk about it. You know, that is a top secret even within the research institute.”

“I see ...” Saikawa smiled, too. “Even though you can disclose the story of the murder case, that information is not open to the public?”

“Heh-heh ... are we insane?” Yamane said, his mouth loosening. “Well, we have a bunch of insane people at our workplace All of our staff members are unmarried, except for the director and the attending physician. We live in the research institute and always work if we are awake. Regardless of day or night ... there are no working hours. Our salary is more than three times that of an ordinary salaried worker ..., yet we have no opportunity to spend our money. It just accumulates in our bank accounts. All of us work almost alone. We rarely meet other people. Meetings are held electronically, and we talk on computers. We speak ill of others without hesitation. There are no manners or ceremonies. We don’t greet each other; we don’t eat together. There are no welcome and farewell parties. There are no company trips. There is only one rule. Keep quiet until it’s done.”

“It is an ideal workplace.” Saikawa smiled amusingly.

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The color of the sea was between green and blue. A concrete pier floated in the island’s small harbor. There was not any other boat within its breakwater. Once all the passengers had disembarked, the boat quickly backed up and turned around. By the time Saikawa and the others reached land, the boat was slowly making its way out through a breakwater into the open sea.

There was nothing else at the landing except an unmanned waiting shack. A faded tourist sign stood, but they could no longer read it. Next to the sign, a four-wheel-drive vehicle was parked in a weedy clearing.

“It is about a fifteen-minute walk from here to the campground. I will carry your

heavy luggage by car, so please load it up. I'm sorry, but only four people can ride in the car besides me. Saikawa-sensei and ... well, there are two women ... I will drive them with priority given to women." Yamane said, looking over at the students. The two women seemed to be Moe Nishinosono and Wu, an international student.

"Another woman." Saikawa pointed to Kunieda. "I forgot to introduce her to you. She is my research associate, Kunieda-kun. She is the best hacker in our office. I guess I might be number two ..."

Momoko Kunieda, a tall woman wearing a straw hat, approached them. She wore no makeup, and her hair was cropped. She did not look like a woman, even from her height.

"I will walk, no thanks," Kunieda said in a bad mood. But she was always in a bad mood, so she didn't seem particularly offended.

"Well, let's put as much luggage as possible in the car," Saikawa said to the students.

The time was shortly before 3:00 p.m. All of them were hydroponics-like people working at their desks in air-conditioned rooms. It must have been quite hard to walk for fifteen minutes carrying their luggage under this blazing sun.

"Anyway, please take only Nishinosono-san for a ride, at least." One of the graduate students said. "We will go on foot at a leisurely pace."

"The campground is up that hill and at the first fork on the left. It's a straight road beyond that, and there are signs along the way, so I don't think you will get lost." Yamane said as he opened the driver's door.

"I feel like walking too," Moe said as she twirled her parasol.

"Please, you get in the car," Saikawa said, so Moe reluctantly got into the car.

The road was paved. The campsite was only three minutes away. A two-story reinforced concrete building that looked as if it would collapse at any moment stood on the slope, and a small sign reading "Campsite" pointed to a narrow path. The car could not enter there.

"This is the building that used to be the campground center. It has a cafeteria, restrooms, and shower facilities but is now unoccupied. There are tents and

equipment in the warehouse there. We brought propane to the site this morning and inspected it, so the showers are working fine. The electricity here is also on. Sometimes we also put up tents and play. We often come here to play when we want to get out of the research institute. If you go all the way down this road, you can get out to the research institute. There is no other way ... You know, it just goes around the island.”

“It looks like we gave you a lot of trouble. I am really sorry.” Saikawa said as he got out of the back seat. Moe and Wu were also unloading their luggage. Yamane helped them.

“You don’t have a phone here, you know. If you need anything, please come to the research institute and call me. I have some work to do, so I’m going to go back once, and I’ll revisit you in the evening ...” Yamane got into the driver’s seat.

A four-wheel-drive vehicle drove gently downhill, and once it was out of sight, the area suddenly became quiet. They could not see the ocean, but they could hear the sound of the waves.

It seemed to be a little distance from the beach into the woods. It was pretty cool in the shade of the trees, and the sound of cicadas was as constant as white noise if they were conscious enough to listen. The path to the campsite was a gravel road. It was impossible for the three of them to carry all the luggage they had just unloaded from the car, so they had to wait for the students to arrive.

“This has been the toughest seminar trip since the Saikawa Study Group began.” Saikawa lit a cigarette.

“What do you mean by toughest? Why?” Moe asked with a cool face. She was holding a parasol again.

“Nishinosono-kun, no one comes to the campground with a parasol,” Saikawa said. “Camping is a tough business. There might be centipedes around here.”

“I brought insect repellent spray, so I’ll be fine.” Moe nodded. “Besides, it might rain, so I brought an umbrella. You know, this can be a rain umbrella ...”

“Ah, you’re right. You’re probably the only one who’s going to be okay. I’m sure ...” Saikawa said. “You must be surprised at her, Wu-san.”

“No, she’s funny.” Wu, a Chinese, smiled. “How do we cook here? I am most

interested in that. Do we have a bonfire?”

Wu was an international student who had just arrived from China in April this year and was a graduate research student in Saikawa's course. A native of Nanjing, she always told them that she did not mind the heat at all. Even now, she was dressed for camping, at least more so than Moe Nishinosono. Apparently, Saikawa was the only one sweating. He kept his cigarette in his mouth and pulled a towel and a fan out of his bag.

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It became much cooler by the evening. After all, the heat capacity here must be different from that of urban areas. The tents were large and magnificent, and it took them about two hours to pitch three of them. While half of the team was preparing the tents, the other half lit the firewood they had brought from the warehouse and began preparing the meal. It was better to be ready before dark. The first day was a barbecue feast.

Moe Nishinosono was assigned by her seniors to be in charge of cutting vegetables. But when she said she had never held a knife outside of home economics class in elementary school, a male student took her place. By the time the tents were ready and the oil began to make noise on the iron plates, all the students except Moe had gathered around the fire.

“Oh? Where is Nishinosono-kun?” Saikawa looked around while placing bean sprouts on the griddle. “It seems she is the only one who is not here ...”

“She said she would go for a walk earlier and went that way ...” A male student replied. “She could do nothing for preparing meal, you know.”

The icebox Moe had brought was opened, and beer was handed out. The beer was colder than it needed to because the dry ice was included. Depending on the direction of the wind, students in the direction the smoke was flowing were rubbing their eyes. Because of the dense trees, it was pretty dim, even though it was only six o'clock.

“Is she okay ...?” Saikawa let one of the students hold the long chopsticks and moved away from the fire.

“You mean Nishinosono-san?” Hamanaka looked into the distance with a can of beer in one hand. “She will be back soon.”

“Everyone said too much that she was useless, so she might have been offended ...” Saikawa said.

When Saikawa had drunk half a can of beer and turned bright red, Moe returned smiling.

“Nishinosono-san, it’s almost all gone. Here.” Fuchida handed her a can of beer. “Chopsticks and plates are over there.”

Moe accepted the can of beer and smiled but said nothing.

“What’s wrong with you?” Saikawa asked, looking at Moe’s face.

She indicated her lips and said with indistinct pronunciation, “I’m eating chocolate right now.”

‘Uh-oh,’ Kawabata said loudly as he sipped his beer. “I bet a young lady doesn’t chew chocolate anyway, right?”

Moe nodded, her eyes narrowing. “Because if you do that, you’ll get cavities. I never chew chocolate ... There is no such word as chewing chocolate in my dictionary.”

“There’s no such word in any dictionary.” Saikawa stepped closer to Moe. “You’ve just been to the research institute, haven’t you?”

Moe sat on a stump. “Yes, I didn’t recognize the fact because the last time I was in a helicopter and landed on the rooftop. But now that I’ve seen it, there really are no windows. I went around the perimeter of the building, but there was no sign of people at all. The building looked like a substation ...”

Saikawa sat down beside Moe and lit the cigarette he was holding in his mouth. One of the students was taking snaps of everyone with his camera.

“That building has been in a magazine before. I think it was poured concrete ... There is a slope to the entrance ...” Saikawa said.

“Yes, there is,” Moe responded. The chocolate in her mouth was apparently gone. She asked the student next to her to open the can of beer and began to drink. “Oh, it’s delicious ... Camping is good. It’s relaxing ...”

“How can you say that?” Fuchida said while avoiding the smoke. “You are just an eater! Come and get it yourself.”

“Sensei, I was thinking ... about that doll ...” Moe whispered to Saikawa. “Do you know the novel titled ‘Dogra Magra’?”

“No, I’ve only heard the name. Is that a mystery novel?” Saikawa drank some beer. He could already feel himself fading in and out of consciousness. He was extremely fuel-efficient concerning alcohol.

“Yes, it is the best mystery novel. It was written long ago by a man named Kyusaku Yumeno ...” Moe explained. “In it, there is a story about a fox possession. A dead person goes on a rampage, running around the yard on the night of the wake because the person sleeping with the body is unconsciously moving the corpse like a puppet. In other words, he thinks he sees only the corpse moving, even though he is moving it himself.”

“Can you give me a minute? I don’t quite understand what you’re talking about.” Saikawa asked with a bright red face. “Why does a living person move a dead person? Why does he need to do that?”

“Well, is it due to fatigue or extreme conditions ...? It’s like sleepwalking.” Moe tilted her head. “I don’t remember much either, and I don’t believe in such things, but ... Anyway, the person moved the corpse by himself, and the only memory that remains is that the corpse went out of control. That’s ... just like when a child plays with a doll by moving it, and the child has no awareness that he is moving it with his own hands, right? They are observing the doll as if it were alive ... Umm, do you see what I mean?”

“Oh ..., that sounds not very logical, but I get it. And?” Saikawa urged her to continue.

“I associated that story with Dr. Magata when she spoke about the murderer being a puppet,” Moe said and then put the can to her mouth and tilted it once in a big way. “Dr. Magata said she was watching the doll kill her parents. In reality, I guess she herself was the doll, and her consciousness was probably watching it from a distance ...”

“That’s an interesting story, but ... it doesn’t change the facts.” Saikawa drank some more beer. One beer was usually his limit. “Regardless of her consciousness,

the fact remains that Dr. Magata killed her parents. There were witnesses, and the trial was over. That was fifteen years ago. I'm not really interested in that. I'm more interested in her life afterward. It was fifteen years of total isolation from society. Definitely, I want to meet her ...”

Hamanaka, a graduate student, approached with a plate of meat and vegetables and chopsticks. “Here, Nishinosono-san.”

“Oh, thank you, Hamanaka-san.” Moe put her beer on the ground and accepted the plate with both hands.

“Hamanaka! Don't spoil her!” Fuchida said with a laugh from afar.

Moe took a bite, holding the chopsticks with her left hand. “Delicious! Who seasoned it?”

“No one seasoned it. It's just covered with *yakiniku* (grilled meat) sauce.” Hamanaka responded.

“Who made the sauce?” Moe asked again. “This is not just soy sauce, is it ...?”

“Who would make the sauce? I just bought it.” Fuchida said as he placed the *yakisoba* (fried noodles) on the griddle. Over the fire, Wu, an international student, was chopping cabbage.

“Oh ..., do they sell the sauce ...?” Moe stood up and walked over to the iron plate. “Wow! It's *yakisoba*, isn't it? I've always wanted to try *yakisoba* once ...”

“Gee! You've never had *yakisoba*!” Kawabata exclaimed.

Again everyone sighed.

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Under the moonlight, Saikawa smoked a cigarette contentedly. For these three days, Saikawa had prepared a carton of cigarettes. He was a chain smoker.

The students were talking in three groups, sipping a little of the whiskey they had brought. It was cool, like when the air conditioner was working a little, and fortunately, there seemed to be no mosquitoes. No one entered the tent, and everyone was outside enjoying this comfort.

Except for the sky, the surroundings were pitch black. Saikawa had stopped drinking alcohol and was drinking a can of not-so-cold cola. Yamane, the deputy director of the research institute, had not yet arrived. All were looking forward to the ice cream Moe had brought with dry ice, but they decided to wait until Yamane arrived.

Shortly after 8 p.m., helicopter rotors could be heard in the sky above. It was quite close, but they could not see it. The sound moved away from the island to the north.

“It’s the research institute’s helicopter,” Moe said, looking up. “That’s the sound of a jet helicopter.”

Moe was familiar with the sounds of different engines. She often said she loved the sound of car and motorcycle engines. To enjoy the sound of the engine, she had neither a car stereo nor a radio in her car.

As night fell, they naturally, or perhaps intentionally, began telling ghost stories.

Graduate student Fuchida took the lead in presenting a series of short stories. However, all of the people gathered here were science-oriented students. This kind of entertainment was not very exciting to them. The most frightened was graduate student Fukashi Hamanaka, while the three women were unconcerned. However, Wu, an international student, did not understand Japanese well, and they did not expect the slightest reaction from Research Associate Kunieda. The male students seemed to be talking to Moe in the hope that she would be scared, but they failed to meet that expectation as well. None of them had ever seen a ghost or UFO, and none seemed to believe in them. Moe made them all laugh by saying that difficult kanji characters were much scarier than ghosts. “I’m most afraid of the kanji that means ‘disgusting’ in the world,” Moe said.

Still, the unchallenged tried to continue making up stories. But when Momoko Kunieda’s saying, “You idiot, what’s so funny about that?” ended their ghost stories.

At almost 10 p.m., they gave up waiting for Yamane and decided to have ice cream all together. Then, the three women (Moe, Wu, and Kunieda) went out to the campground building to take a shower, and when they returned, most of the students were in their tents.

He wasn't sleepy yet, but Saikawa also decided to take his last cigarette and get into the tent.

Research Associate Kunieda and Wu entered the women's tent. Moe left her belongings in the tent, came out again, and walked over to Saikawa. When they came to, somehow there was no one there but the two of them.

"They all seem to have taken in our situation." Moe sat on a stump next to Saikawa.

"I'll pretend I didn't hear that funny expression of yours. Everyone must be tired from their hard work today." Saikawa looked upward as he exhaled smoke. "We can see a lot of stars. I can't believe she has lived for no less than fifteen years without seeing such a beautiful sky."

Apparently, he could not stop thinking about Shiki Magata, a person he had not yet met. Saikawa was surprised at his own statement.

"It is not only Dr. Magata, is it? Everyone at the research institute seems to be like that. I am sure they are still staring at the display." Moe also looked at the sky.

"But maybe that way of life is beautiful," Saikawa said. "To look at nature and think it is beautiful is unnatural. It is proof that we are usually living a dirty life. The fact that they can live without windows, blocking nature, means that they have that much beauty inside them, doesn't it? Because we have a boring job and a dirty life, we want something like a reward, just like we want nature."

"This kind of outdoor life will one day become virtual reality and be enjoyed in the privacy of our own room," Moe said. "I'm sure the average person is not comfortable with that ..."

"Most people would think such a pretense of nature has no value." Saikawa lit another cigarette. "But generally, nature is just for show, you know. Computer-generated nature will definitely be accepted. It's just a trick, though ... People should realize that there is no such thing as the real thing in the first place ... All the accusations of dehumanization and other fancy words are nonsense. Of all the tools created by humans, computers are the most human and closest to nature."

"Sensei, could I have a cigarette?" Moe smiled. "In short, is that nice to people?"

"I don't like that expression, but yes," Saikawa responded. "You should not

smoke. You are still a minor, right?”

Moe looked a little puffed up. “I’m almost twenty.”

“When pliers were invented, I’m sure there were those who were adamant that it wasn’t human to use pliers. Using such a tool was a sign of depravity. When humans started to use fire, there must have been tribes that rejected it. But we are tool-using creatures, to begin with. There is no going back. Those who condemn such things by using words like ‘lonely’ and ‘vain’ are the ones who have lost sight of humanity.”

“But isn’t there a problem with nuclear energy, for example?” Moe asked, holding her knees.

“Nuclear is a little too much energy. That’s for sure a problem.” Saikawa said. “But fire is just as dangerous and pollutes the environment. Hydroelectric power, wind power, and solar cells all destroy the environment. Human life cannot be clean. We are, by nature, environmentally destructive organisms. Tens of thousands of years ago, we were the chosen species of our ability to destroy nature. It’s just a matter of the speed at which we do it. The only way to keep us from destroying the environment too quickly is to conserve energy. The only way to do that is ... to install computers in all fields and control the energy. The only way to satisfy the desire to ensure humanity in those situations is through virtual reality technology. Such a trick is the pursuit of humanity. Ideally, everyone should not step out of their own home. In other words, to keep things from being moved ...”

“Dr. Magata mentioned the same thing.”

“That’s self-evident.” Saikawa nodded. “Now I’ve chosen some simple words for you, with close nuances, and I’ve made a polemic, but ... it’s an unmistakable perception. The only advantage we researchers have is our irresponsibility to produce nothing. But we are the only ones who can think 100 or 200 years ahead.”

They heard some laughter from inside a tent. The students must have been playing cards with their flashlights on.

“Well ... Sensei, do you think it would be ideal for working in a place like the research institute over there?”

“Yes, I do. I think so.” Saikawa replied. “If possible, I prefer not to meet people

too.”

“But please don’t get a job at that place,” Moe said. “Sensei, you are likely to do anything that comes to your mind, and you will do it immediately ...”

“Not as quickly as you do. That’s an unnecessary worry. I don’t think I could do that job.” Saikawa smiled slightly. “I have an aspect for being more mundane than you think ... I’m just relieved that I’ve recently realized that. For example, I like to smoke. I like coffee. I can’t say I live a rational life.”

“Sensei, you don’t watch TV or read newspapers, do you?” Moe looked concerned. “You seem to think only of your research.”

“That’s not true. Like this, I am spending my time with you ...” Saikawa stood up.

“I think you might be staying with me even if you don’t want to. Because I am Kyosuke Nishinosono’s daughter ...”

“You know, Nishinosono-kun,” Saikawa said slowly. “I never do anything I don’t want to do when it’s not my working hours. And right now, it’s not my working hours.”

Although he said so, Saikawa himself thought those words were a lie. There were too many things in his recent work that could not be divided by likes and dislikes. Since becoming an associate professor, a mountain of noncreative work had been thrust upon him. They rubbed against each other, and the disgusting political values were building up in his body like static electricity. Saikawa felt sparks would fly if he touched an innocent and pure spirit like Moe Nishinosono.

“I’m going to the research institute from now. Sensei, could you please come with me?” Moe said suddenly.

“What? From now?” Saikawa was surprised. He looked at his watch. “Oh, but it’s only 10 ...”

10 p.m. was late enough, but Saikawa was a night owl. *Perhaps even at the Magata Research Institute, a common-sense concept of time would not exist*, Saikawa thought. Besides, he liked the transparency of Moe’s outlandish proposal more than anything else.

“When I went to the research institute in the evening, I promised them.” Moe stood up. “We might be able to meet Dr. Shiki Magata.”

Saikawa explained to Research Associate Kunieda, who only showed her face from inside the tent, that he was going to the research institute. Kunieda just nodded and said nothing. *At times like this*, Saikawa thought, *I am more relieved if I am not asked anything.*

Saikawa and Moe walked with flashlights, illuminating the pitch-black road. They barely spoke to each other along the way, but Moe was excited, saying she had never experienced such a thrilling experience in her life. Saikawa had never experienced walking alone with a woman at night. He had never had such a romance in his life. No, perhaps he had eliminated it for a more trivial reason. *What was the trivial reason ...?* Saikawa thought.

The full moon was high in the sky. The sky was so bright that it seemed miraculous.

The research institute was on top of a hill; only the area around it was devoid of trees. There were few, if any, traces of man-made alterations to its sizeable flat land. The building was about two stories high, but the lack of windows made it impossible to determine the number of floors. The building itself was a pitch-black silhouette, blending into the surrounding hazy darkness, with only a few lights around the entrance. After walking up a gentle slope, a large bright red door could be seen at a slightly secluded spot. Saikawa felt as if he had forgotten his sense of color until he saw the color of that door. It was a beautiful vermilion color that did not exist in nature. The color was a radio wave of the longest wavelength that the antennae of the human eye can tune into.

The area around the entrance was tiled in white, and a button on the wall appeared to be an intercom. Above the vermilion door, a television camera pointed toward the visitors. There was no indication of the name of the research institute or anything else. It was probably because outsiders did not come to such a place. Or perhaps the facility denied physical access from humans.

Moe pushed the button.

“Are you a staff member of this facility?” Suddenly, an articulate female voice said. It was an inflectionless tone, clearly an electronically synthesized voice.

“No,” Moe answered.

“Please wait a moment.” They heard the crisp voice again.

Moe turned around and said, “It’s voice recognition,” to Saikawa.

“It doesn’t seem to ask even what our business is,” Saikawa responded, looking around. He was very interested in this fortress-like building. The building itself, Saikawa remembered wrongly, was not made of poured concrete but sprayed with the same color finish. Perhaps because of the quality of the construction, there was almost no deterioration due to the fifteen years of age. Saikawa tried to imagine why they did not put a window outside the building but could not understand it.

They waited a minute or so, and then a young man’s voice came on. “Yes, who is it?”

“Excuse me, my name is Nishinosono from N University.” Somehow, Moe suddenly spoke in a hushed voice. “Umm, could you please put me in touch with Yamane-san? I’m not feeling well and come here to get some medicine.”

“Oh, you’re the one who’s camping. Call the deputy director? Okay, hold on a second ...”

After hearing his voice, Moe turned to Saikawa and showed him her tongue mischievously.

“Was it a lie that you promised them ...?” Saikawa sighed. “I was a fool for not noticing.”

“I’m sorry, Sensei.” Moe put her hands together and winked. “Please tell the same story, okay?”

“I don’t have a choice ...” Saikawa clicked his tongue.

Considering it, if she had promised to go to the research institute at night, she would have told Saikawa about it immediately upon her return. *She must have had a sudden idea for it*, Saikawa thought. Moe must have wanted to bring Saikawa here. He realized that he was unexpectedly vulnerable to her.

The vermilion door went up like a shutter. A dazzling light leaked from within, revealing a silhouetted figure. The scene gave them the impression as if the research institute building itself were a giant spaceship and an alien had just descended.

“What’s wrong with you?” Yamane asked. They couldn’t see his expression clearly because of the backlighting.

“Sorry, at this late hour ... Nishinosono-kun has a terrible headache. Could you please give her some medicine?” Saikawa lied. Moe, too, made a pained expression and bowed her head, saying, “I’m sorry.”

Saikawa thought about using a stomachache as the reason, but he decided that no one with a stomachache would be able to walk this far. He had come this far, and there was no turning back now.

“Oh, anyway, come on in ...” Yamane said and invited them in.

When Saikawa and Moe went inside, the vermilion door slowly descended. There was another aluminum door a few meters away from there. The place was air-conditioned, and the cool, dry air was pleasant for them.

Yamane was wearing a white coat. He placed his hand on a piece of glass about thirty centimeters square on the wall and pronounced his name slowly, “Yukihiro Yamane.”

“Put your right hands here and say your names,” Yamane said, turning around and pointing to the glass section on the wall.

Saikawa did as instructed first. The TV camera above the door was aimed at Saikawa. Moe then put her hand on it and said her name.

“Two people have been registered as guests,” a female synthesized voice said, and the aluminum door slid silently open.

A passage extended straight ahead from the door. To the left was a sizeable lobby-like space, and another corridor extended to the rear on that side. The lights were off at the end of both passages, and it was too dark to see the back of the corridor. The lighting in the lobby was also dimly lit.

“Deborah.” Suddenly, Yamane looked upward and said. “Call everyone who still stays up.”

“Acknowledged the command.” The same alto female voice as before.

“Whoever has headache medicine, send it to the lobby with water ... Deborah, that’s all.” Yamane then looked at Saikawa and Moe and said, “This way, please.”

“Who is Deborah?” Moe asked.

“It’s the name of the subsystem,” Yamane answered. “It’s a computer.”

“It’s the name of an Israeli prophet, right?” Saikawa said.

“Oh, really?” Yamane didn’t seem to know that.

As the three of them headed into the lobby, the lights around the perimeter slowly brightened; conversely, the lights around the entrance they had been at dimmed.

As Moe looked up at the ceiling light fixtures, Yamane explained. “This, too, is operated by Deborah.”

Saikawa looked around as he sat on a sofa. “Amazing ... Yamane-san, may I smoke a cigarette?”

“You can. There are very few places here where you are not allowed to smoke, and Deborah will tell you if you smoke in a non-smoking area.” Yamane remained standing. “Are you all right? Nishinosono-san, have you caught a cold?”

“Well, it is a usual symptom. I forgot to bring my medication ...” Moe continued her masterful performance while sitting on a sofa.

“I told you that I would visit you guys at night, and I could not go. I am sorry.” Yamane said, sitting across from Saikawa. “Actually ... I had a little trouble ...”

“Trouble?” Saikawa asked as he lit a cigarette. He glanced at Moe and saw her leaning back on the sofa, closing her eyes, but listening.

“Yes ... The director went out suddenly, and I couldn’t leave here. You know, I have the position of deputy director ...” Yamane explained.

“He went out by helicopter?” Saikawa asked, and Yamane nodded. That was the sound they had heard a few hours earlier.

Saikawa heard a strange little noise coming from the direction of the corridor, and when he looked in that direction, he saw a box-shaped cart about eighty centimeters high coming around the corner of the corridor. He wondered at first if someone was pushing it, but it was not. Moe turned and looked that way, too. It was an aluminum box with four small tires. It was about the size of a slightly smaller baby carriage.

As it neared Yamane, the automatically moving box came to a quiet stop. Yamane stood up and picked up a glass of water and a small bottle on its wagon. Moe stood up, received it, and watched the automated machine.

“This is a robot,” Yamane explained. “This is a very old model. There are more amazing ones in this facility.”

Moe took medicine out of the bottle and drank a glass of water. No, Saikawa did not know if she had actually taken medication.

“Thank you so much.” Moe returned the cup and the medicine bottle to Yamane.

Yamane placed a cup and a bottle on that wagon-shaped robot and said, “Deborah, have P1 return.” It began to move slowly in the direction it had come, eventually turning the corner of the corridor and disappearing.

“That one is just for carrying things,” Yamane explained. “It is the same one used in factories, but a different computer controls that one.”

“Does that fetch water by itself?” Moe asked, looking toward the passage.

“No, the one cannot be that advanced. Someone in this building heard my message, placed the glass of water on that thing, and just sent it over here.” Yamane smiled a little. “It’s easier since you don’t have to see other people, isn’t it?”

“Excuse me ...” Moe put her hands to her temples and frowned. “Could I have a cup of hot coffee, please?”

Good grief ... Her daring impresses me. Saikawa clicked his tongue in his mind.

“Okay, you should do that. Now then, let me show you two to my room.” Yamane sat up.

Saikawa also put out his cigarette in a stylish ashtray in the lobby, stood up, and looked at the ceiling once. He had a vague feeling that someone was watching him.

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As they made their way down the corridors, only their surroundings were always illuminated in a light gradient. Their front became brighter one after the other, and as they turned around, their rear became darker. The corridors were all white, as

were the floors, ceilings, and walls, with occasional doors in primary colors of yellow and orange lining the slightly recessed walls. None of the doors had windows, and there were no signboards at all. Once, they passed a wagon robot carrying several files. The robot stopped at the side of the corridor as Saikawa and the others approached.

“The atmosphere is completely different from when I was here before,” Moe said from behind Yamane.

“Nishinosono-san, you entered this building from the rooftop, didn’t you?” Yamane said. “The rooftop is the helipad. An elevator that goes directly from the heliport to the director’s office. Next to the director’s office, there is a special room where you can talk with Ms. Magata. It was as if Nishinosono-san had never been inside the research institute.”

“How many floors does this building have?” Saikawa asked. “From the outside, I can’t tell at all ...”

“There are three floors, one above ground and two below. My room is on the first basement floor.” Yamane explained. “There are no stairs. All transportation is by elevator or slope. This facility is convenient for wheelchair staff and robots.”

They descended a long gentle slope on the way. The door to Yamane’s room was green. There was a small glass panel on the wall next to the door, and when Yamane put his hand on it, the door opened.

“Has such a system been in place for fifteen years?” Moe asked as she looked into that glass.

“No, there was a plan, but it was not realized until six or seven years ago. Before that, we used magnetic cards and passwords. I used to lose my card and not be able to get into my room.” When Yamane entered the room, the lights in the room brightened. “Please come in.”

It was a spacious room. There were several short partitions, and two large displays were there. The walls were decorated with Japanese kites. The room was surrounded by short furniture. On top of that, there were several bonsai trees. There were no bookshelves or files of any kind. The room was very bright.

“Please have a seat there.” Yamane pointed to a large gourd-shaped table in the

center.

Pulling out light aluminum chairs, Saikawa and Moe sat down. They could not see the computer display due to the partitions. On the table was a small racing car track with two model F1 cars, one yellow and one red.

“Please wait for a while.” Yamane opened the door on the left and walked out of the room.

“Aren’t you being a little pushy?” Saikawa said to Moe in a whisper.

Moe winked and smiled. “But it is nice to see the research institute, isn’t it? Sensei ...”

“Yes, it is.” Saikawa nodded honestly and looked around the room.

Several sprinklers were on the ceiling. They were about three times more than usual. Fluorescent lights were tucked into recessed grooves in the ceiling. Besides the entrance door from the corridor, there was only the door that Yamane had just left. No windows, but there were long, narrow ventilation openings at the intersection of the ceiling and wall and the junction of the floor and wall.

When Moe was touching the racing car, she heard some sound and hastily put it back together.

Three coffee cups were placed on a tray, and Yamane came in, pushing the door behind him. That door did not seem to be automatic.

“How’s it going, Nishinosono-san? I mean your condition ...” Yamane handed the cup to Moe first and asked her.

“Yes, I’m getting much better. Thank you so much.” Moe smiled. “Having a cup of coffee will make it perfect.”

“This is her first camp in her life.” Saikawa followed up with her. “She has never slept in a place without air conditioning.”

“Oh, I see ... That must be an ordeal for her.” Yamane put his coffee down last and sat down on his chair.

“Do you work in this room?” Saikawa asked over coffee.

“Yes, I do. I’m here all the time. Over there is the living space. There is a

bedroom, kitchen, living room, and a unit bath ... It is not spacious enough, but well, I have no complaints.” Yamane explained, looking toward the door. “Sometimes, I don’t even step out of here into the corridor for days.”

“There are several kites on display. Is this your hobby?” Moe asked him while seeing Japanese kites hanging on the wall.

“Yes, those are the ones I made. They do not perform very well. They seem to be heavy.” Yamane responded. He had four kites in all, three square kites and one kite shaped like a footman. The largest was about half the size of a tatami mat.

“Why did the director leave so suddenly?” Moe asked a different question.

“Umm, we had a bit of situation ...” Yamane trailed off. “He’ll be right back.”

“Too bad. I want to thank him for the other day, though ...” Moe was holding a coffee cup with both hands. She didn’t seem to be able to drink coffee at this temperature yet.

Yamane took out a long, thin cigarette and lit it. He took one look at Saikawa, then at Moe.

“You two have come to see Ms. Shiki Magata, haven’t you?” Yamane said as he exhaled the smoke.

Moe’s eyes widened slightly, and with a troubled look on her face, she looked sideways at Saikawa.

“I’m sorry.” Saikawa straightened his posture and decided to apologize honestly.

“Umm, I tricked Sensei into bringing me here.” Moe stood up and bowed to him. “I’m so sorry. I lied about my headache.”

“Aha ... I knew it ...” Yamane laughed. “Nishinosono-san, you acted quite well. You know, I was a little bored myself, so I am not bothered. I have just finished a project and been relaxing. But since the director went out, I can’t leave this building. Thank God you two have come here. I thought about sending someone to the campground on my behalf, but they are all too difficult to ask for that kind of thing ... I don’t have any way to contact you either ... Did you take the pill you were given?”

“No, I have not taken it.” Moe smiled bitterly and sat down. “Truly, I’m sorry for

deceiving you. But ... I really want Saikawa-sensei to meet Dr. Magata.”

“Can I see her?” Saikawa asked Yamane.

“In fact ...” Yamane’s expression clouded. “I was supposed to discuss with Ms. Magata about my next project this evening ... But actually, I can’t reach her.”

“Can’t you reach her ...?” Saikawa asked. “Is she unavailable on the videophone?”

“Right. I called her, and she didn’t answer.” Yamane replied. “This situation has never happened before. She is very punctual with her promises. I am a little concerned.”

“But the doctor has multiple personalities, doesn’t she?” Moe asked. *The “have a personality” collocation sounds strange in Japanese*, Saikawa felt.

“Yes, that is true.” Yamane nodded as he sipped his coffee. “I am not sure, but her multiple personalities seem to talk to each other, so we have never had that kind of trouble before. It seems that they all get the message no matter which of her personalities we talk to. I personally don’t really believe in multiple personalities. I think it is simply a quirk of the lady.”

“Could her lack of response be an illness or something else? She is too sick to get up, or something like that ...” Moe gave her opinion.

“Well, there is an intercom in her bed. Besides, I have consulted with her doctor just in case.” Yamane looked troubled. “In any case, there was no response at all ... Should I go into her room or not ...? You know, the director is now absent ...”

“In such a case ...” Moe became serious. “You should definitely go in there. What could have happened to her? You should not be hesitant to do that ...”

“But ... I can’t go into her room.” Yamane smiled awkwardly. “The door won’t open.”

“What do you mean?” Moe asked.

“The door to enter Ms. Magata’s room is locked.” Yamane sighed and then answered. “Well ..., that’s right ... Shall I explain it to you? There’s nothing secret about it ...”

Yukihiro Yamane let out a puff of cigarette smoke. Saikawa and Moe put down their coffee cups and waited for his explanation.

“I noticed that I couldn’t reach Ms. Magata this evening, though ... In fact, the lady has been on vacation for the past week and has completely cut off access, so we have not been able to reach her all week. Well, these vacations of hers are quite common. But, strangely, the door would not open. Our maintenance people are currently inspecting the door to the lady’s room, but apparently it is not a hardware problem. It seems to be a software problem.”

“Wouldn’t you be better off going into her room, even if it means breaking down her door?” Saikawa gave his opinion.

“Right, I thought about doing that ...” Yamane looked down a little. “But that’s a big deal, you know. If I were to do that, I thought I would do it after the director returned ... I’m just waiting for that now. You know, I don’t want to break the equipment for nothing ...”

“Where did the director go when something might have happened to Dr. Magata?” Moe asked. Saikawa wondered about that too.

“He had gone to pick up the lady’s younger sister,” Yamane answered.

“Dr. Magata has a younger sister?” Saikawa was surprised.

“Yes, I am not acquainted with her, though.” Yamane nodded. “She was still in elementary school when her parents died and was left with relatives in the United States. It seems that she suddenly informed us that she was coming here, and the director is now going out to pick her up.”

They heard an electronic beep beyond the partition.

“Excuse me for a moment ...” Saying so, Yamane got up and walked away.

Moe also stood up and looked in the direction.

“What’s wrong?” Yamane said to the display.

“Yamane-san, it’s back up.” A young man’s voice came over the speakers.

“Good, but what went wrong?” Yamane inquired.

“I have no idea. Suddenly, everything was back to normal. There is nothing unusual at all now.”

“Okay,” Yamane said, then turned his head toward Saikawa and Moe. “It appears

that the door to the lady's room is about to open. Sensei, would you two like to come with me?"

"Yes, by all means ..." Saikawa stood up.

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Saikawa looked at his watch. It was a little before 11 p.m. His watch was set precisely even to the second hand every morning. However, he felt that time was meaningless in this building. Perhaps mornings and afternoons would be the same here.

Following Yamane, Saikawa and Moe walked down the white corridor. Once along the way, they descended to the second basement floor via a slope, but the atmosphere remained the same. No matter where they looked, no numbers or letters were displayed.

Yamane opened the black door at the end of a long corridor by giving his name there, and they stepped into a large rectangular room. Inside were a man and a woman, both in white coats. To the right of the room, they could see the elevator door. To the left was a room with a colored glass top half, in which the two other men could also be seen. The room had two computer terminals, a table, and a few simple round chairs.

"They are Saikawa-sensei and Nishinosono-san from N University. They are my friends." After saying this to the man and woman in white coats, Yamane looked at Saikawa and introduced them. "They are Mizutani-kun and Shimada-san."

Saikawa shook hands with them. The man called Mizutani was of the same generation as Yamane, and his belly protruded from the front of his white coat. He had a large face and narrow eyes; his round glasses looked small. The woman, Shimada, was of a contrasting build to Mizutani and thin. She still looked young. She, too, wore round rimless glasses and had long hair tied back.

"Still no response from inside. Would you like to open the door?" Shimada asked Yamane in a nervous voice.

"How is Dr. Yuminaga doing?" Yamane asked.

“We contacted him, and he will be here soon,” Mizutani answered breathlessly. Maybe that was his usual way of speaking.

In front of them was a yellow door. Apparently, it led to Shiki Magata’s room.

A tall, middle-aged man emerged from a glass-walled room on the left. He wore a black T-shirt and a baseball cap, not a white coat.

“What should we do? Are we going to open that door?” The man in the baseball cap said in a loud voice. “In fifteen years, we’ve never opened that door without the lady’s permission. Are we okay with that?”

“We don’t have a choice. If something goes wrong, we’ll be in trouble. If nothing happens, I’ll apologize to the lady.” Yamane responded.

“But she’s a murderer, you know.” The man in the baseball cap said in a blunt tone.

“Don’t worry.” Yamane smiled. “That was a long time ago. She’s all right now.”

Saikawa and Moe stepped back a little and looked at each other.

At that moment, something unusual happened.

“What’s wrong!” Yamane shouted.

“H-how can I know?!” Mizutani said under his breath.

The lights in the room were dimming and brightening. The cycle was just like a heartbeat. Along with it, a buzzing electronic noise came out of nowhere.

“Hey! The door’s opening!” The man in the baseball cap shouted.

Another man, sturdy like a judo player, jumped out from the room on the left, holding a cigarette in his mouth.

The yellow door at the front of the room slowly rose. Everyone in the room gathered at an angle where they could see beyond the door.

Moe approached Saikawa, and her shoulder lightly touched Saikawa’s right arm.

The lights were flickering in a constant cycle. The jarring noise did not seem to stop.

“Deborah!” Yamane said, looking at the door. “Check the lights.”

“Recognized anomalies.” A synthetic voice came from the ceiling. However, the lights did not stop flickering.

The yellow doors went up completely.

Behind it was another aluminum door, and a glass window on it could be seen.

It was pitch-black beyond the window.

“Has someone opened the door?” Yamane asked, turning around.

“We haven’t opened it yet ... We haven’t done anything. It opened by itself.” The judo guy who came out later responded in a thin voice that didn’t match his body.

“The lady has opened it from the inside?”

“She should not be able to do that.” Yamane shook his head.

“Ah!” Mizutani exclaimed, stepping back.

The aluminum door in the back slid open.

“Doctor!” Yamane shouted. He was the closest to the door. “Dr. Magata! It’s Yamane!”

Something white moved in the darkness.

It was moving slowly.

It was rotating.

All eyes were drawn to that white thing in that darkness beyond the door.

Saikawa at first thought it was a mannequin doll.

A few meters further into the room from the back door stood a doll dressed in white clothes, voluminous like a wedding dress.

“He-hey, what the heck is ...?” It was Mizutani’s voice.

It had turned its back on them at first. They could see the white hair ornament in its long black hair.

It was turning slowly and about to face them.

No one could enter the room.

The lights kept breathing like a heartbeat.

Shimada gave a short scream and knelt on the floor.

The doll was indeed wearing a wedding dress. And now it stopped, facing them.

“Doctor!” Yamane gave a convulsed voice and stepped forward.

Moe put her hands over her mouth and stepped back behind Saikawa.

That's not a doll.

It was, however, slowly advancing toward them.

It was not a doll.

“Hee!” Someone choked up the voice.

“Unexpected error detected.” Deborah’s voice echoed throughout the room.

The doll was coming toward them.

Yamane, who was at the door, jumped back. He slammed into Mizutani’s belly, and they both fell on their butts as their legs tangled.

“Whoa!” The man in the baseball cap also fell back.

Shimada was running away on all fours.

Saikawa and Moe also backed away. They stood against the wall and watched the bizarre scene.

The doll gradually emerged into the light, and its faces became identifiable.

Its face had an expression that was not of this world.

It was not a doll.

Nor was it a living person.

Only the wedding dress was pure white.

“Unexpected error detected.” Deborah’s monotonous voice echoed.

Moe’s hands clutched Saikawa’s right arm.

Chapter 3: The Red Magic

-1-

Ayako Shimada screamed and fainted in the corner of the room. The men in the room were also frozen in place, unable to move. Yukihiro Yamane and Chikara Mizutani were still on their butts on the floor. The tall man in the baseball cap and the stout judo guy were useless. Saikawa and Moe were barely standing against the wall.

The pure white bride finally came out into the room where they were.

The beating of the lights made the bride's expression look even eerier.

Her eyes were sunken but white as shells.

Her skin had been coated with face powder, but it was about to come off.

Her cheeks were hollow, and her open mouth revealed white teeth.

Her lipstick was as red as blood, and only there seemed to be wet.

The bride turned slowly.

Then she was moving toward the black door.

"She is dead!" Suddenly, Moe shouted in a trembling voice. "She must be on the wagon!"

I see, Saikawa thought so weirdly. His thoughts had stopped for a while. But no further thoughts came to his mind.

"Somebody, stop that!" Moe said, crying out again. "She's on a robot!"

Although she calmly observed, Moe had moved to the opposite side of the monster, using Saikawa as a shield.

The black door leading to the corridor opened.

The bride left the room through it.

With a sound like white noise, they could hear everyone breathing. No one tried to move.

The lights in the room suddenly, still dimly, stopped their breathing. For a moment, it was as if time had stopped.

The dreaded bride disappeared from their sight.

Moe brought her face close to Saikawa's shoulder.

"Guys! She's right." Yamane stood up and said. "We must stop that."

Soon everyone was running for the door that was left open. Saikawa and Moe also ran toward it.

Now the lights in the corridor were repeatedly flickering. The end of the straight corridor was sucked into the darkness. The bride's back was visible a few meters away from the door. It kept moving straight to the back, down the center of the tunnel-like corridor. It was as if she was going to disappear into the darkness, but as she moved, the lights flickered toward the back.

"Deborah!" Yamane exclaimed.

"Acknowledged the command." Electronic sounds were heard from the ceiling. The bright voice was so out of place.

"Deborah! Stop all P1s!"

"Unexpected error detected." The electronic voice quickly answered. "The command cannot be executed at this time."

"Reset now!" Yamane said loudly.

"Normal reset cannot be performed at this time," Deborah responded calmly. "Do you want to do an emergency reset?"

"Reset!" Yamane shouted.

"Acknowledged the command," Deborah said. "All systems reset. All functions will stop for one minute. Is that okay?"

"Okay!" Yamane approved.

The lighting stopped beating in the corridor.

The bride also stopped.

The white noise did not stop. It was a flat sound, as if a living thing had died.

All six of them fearfully stepped out into the corridor, leaving Ayako Shimada lying in the corner of the room.

The monster in the wedding dress stopped about a dozen meters from the door.

Saikawa and Moe approached it but stopped about three meters before it. They did not want to get any closer. Suddenly, they sensed a strange smell, as if something had gone wrong.

“Heeey.” They heard a man’s voice. They saw someone running down the dark corridor toward them. “What’s wrong with you?! The whole corridor is dark! Is it a power outage?”

“Yuminaga-sensei!” Yamane ran toward him. He carefully passed by the bride and met the man from the other side.

The man who came to the bright light was a tall, middle-aged man in a white coat. He had a mustache and romance gray hair. *He must be the attending physician Yamane mentioned*, Saikawa thought.

Dr. Yuminaga stared at the bride doll in the middle of the corridor and stopped walking.

“What the What the hell ... What happened?”

Mizutani approached the doll and observed it, holding a handkerchief to his mouth. The man in the baseball cap and the judo guy also approached it.

“Is she Dr. Shiki Magata?” Saikawa asked the question from a few meters away from them, but no one answered.

“She is, Sensei. No doubt. Dr. Magata must have committed ... suicide.” Moe said behind Saikawa. “She put on a dress, killed herself, and programmed the robot to do it ...”

Dr. Yuminaga approached the bride doll as if he had made up his mind. He reached out his hand and began to examine the corpse. Then, peering into the dress’s billowing skirt, he looked at the others and said. “Was she being carried on the P1 ...?”

Other men also knelt down, lifted the hem of the wedding dress, and looked inside the skirt. From Saikawa’s position, it was a truly bizarre sight.

“It was fixed on the angle,” Yuminaga said as he touched the back of the corpse. “It’s been days since she died ... How did this happen ...?”

“She is dead ... I don’t believe that,” Yamane muttered to himself. “Ms. Magata is dead?”

“What are we going to do?” Mizutani asked Yamane, shaking his belly. “It’s a big problem ... I never thought she would commit suicide.”

At that moment, the lights in the corridor suddenly brightened. At the same time, the noise that had been in their ears all along disappeared.

“All functions are intact.” Deborah’s voice reported indifferently. “Reset completed successfully.”

The staff members seemed to have calmed down a bit with that much change.

“Let’s call the police anyway,” Yamane said. “Please.”

The guy in the baseball cap nodded, and he and the judo guy returned to their room. Saikawa and the others turned around to see Ayako Shimada standing at the door, which was left open. She looked at them with a dazed expression. Moe walked over to her and asked, “You okay?”

Yamane and Mizutani also left the body and returned near Saikawa. Only Dr. Yuminaga continued to observe the corpse.

“This is ...” Yuminaga sounded surprised. “No way ... What the ...”

He was grasping the long-sleeved part of the wedding dress.

“What’s wrong?” Yamane asked, turning around.

“This is ... not suicide.” Yuminaga put his hand on his glasses and stared at them. His voice was hollow.

“Sorry?” Mizutani spoke out.

Dr. Yuminaga knelt down and stuck his head inside the skirt of the dress.

“This corpse is ... not to be touched ... I mean, Ms. Magata was murdered.” Yuminaga took his head out of the skirt and stood up. “Let’s leave it to the police. This is a big mess ... Did the P1 carry this so far? Why is she wearing this dress?”

“Sensei, please don’t be ridiculous,” Yamane said, forcing a smile. “There was no

way she was killed. This body is that of Dr. Shiki Magata, remember?”

“That’s true, but ...” Yuminaga nodded.

“She was the only one in that room, you know.” Yamane supplemented.

“I am aware of that as well.” Yuminaga walked toward Saikawa and the others.
“Who are these people?”

“They are Saikawa-sensei and Nishinosono-san from N University.” Yamane turned around and said. “They are my friends.”

Yuminaga took one look at Saikawa, passed by, and looked beyond the door.

“Hey, close the door there!”

As Saikawa watched from the corridor, the yellow door through which the bride’s corpse had emerged, leading to Ms. Shiki Magata’s room, eventually closed. The man in the baseball cap at the back of the room seemed to have closed the door. Yuminaga checked it and walked back to Saikawa.

“Why did you have the door closed?” Moe came back and asked Dr. Yuminaga.

“Young lady, you shouldn’t ask that ... Please go that way and stay with Shimada-san.” Yuminaga stopped, turned around, looked downward at Moe, and said.

“I’m fine.” Moe tightened her mouth. “Are you sure it wasn’t a suicide?”

“Ms. Shiki Magata was killed. Or, it may be suicide ...” Yuminaga had his hands in the pockets of his white coat.

“This is definitely a suicide, isn’t it?” Yamane said. “She programmed the robot before she died. Deborah’s disorder is probably a hardware problem. That’s what we can find out.”

“Umm ... So ... Sure, it could be suicide, though ... Anyway, there is someone in that room.” Dr. Yuminaga pulled his hand out of his pocket and pointed to the yellow door. “Or did you guys see a bloody man come out?”

“Someone is there. You mean, in Dr. Magata’s room?” Moe asked.

“Yes. So don’t open that door until the police arrive.” Yuminaga shoved his hands in his pockets again. When he spoke, only one side of his mustache moved.

“Yuminaga-sensei ...” Yamane smiled bitterly. “Who on earth do you say is in

there? You know, don't you? That room is ...”

“She’s missing both arms and both legs.” Dr. Yuminaga answered. “Yamane-kun ...”

“Sorry?” Yamane spoke out.

“If you think I’m lying, you should see that yourself.” Yuminaga held out one hand and lifted his glasses. “The lady’s body has both arms and both legs severed.” Then he turned back to Moe and said gently. “Are you still fine, young lady?”

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Saikawa lit a cigarette and inhaled deeply as if taking a deep breath. The time was already past midnight.

The dead body in the center of the corridor was still there. In the meantime, the wagon-shaped robot, entirely hidden by the skirt of her dress, was examined again, and the main switch was turned off. Someone suggested that the corpse be covered with a sheet, but no suitable one could be found close at hand.

They could not contact the police.

For some reason, the phone was not working. They also tried to send an e-mail from the terminals in their rooms to the outside of the island but found that they could not do that either.

In addition to Saikawa and Moe Nishinosono, Deputy Director Yamane, Chief Chikara Mizutani, and Dr. Tomihiko Yuminaga were standing in front of the yellow door leading to Ms. Shiki Magata’s room, consulting with each other. Engineer Ayako Shimada was sitting in front of the terminal display, tapping away at the keyboard at great speed. In the adjacent room, visible through the glass, the man in the baseball cap and the judo guy were working on something together. The tall man in the baseball cap was called Mochizuki, and the big judo-type guy was Hasebe.

Saikawa and Moe were sitting on round chairs.

“That doesn’t work, We got e-mails from outside, but we cannot send it out.” Ayako Shimada, looking at the terminal screen, said with a sigh. “I have no idea

what the problem is.”

“Does a phone work?” Yamane called out to the adjacent room.

Through the glass, Mochizuki in the baseball cap shook his head. “It’s not due to a broken wire. It’s probably a software problem. You know, everything is fine in this facility.”

“It is Deborah who connects the calls.” Ayako Shimada said. “So I believe that if the calls are not being made, it is because the system is partially out of control.”

“How is such a convenient runaway possible?” Yamane said. “Even if someone did it intentionally, how is that possible?”

“Impossible. No, I cannot say a sure thing.” Shimada shook her head. “But ... there might have been some way to ...”

“Is it like a virus?” Saikawa asked as he exhaled smoke.

“It might be. Or ...” Ayako Shimada looked at Saikawa and answered. “But there’s no pathway for the virus to enter. Every device is fully protected. Ms. Magata designed the system here, you know.”

“Anyway, let’s wait for the director. When he returns by helicopter, we can contact the outside world via the helicopter’s radio.” Yamane said, looking at his watch. “He should be back by now.”

“Should we let everyone know about this?” Dr. Yuminaga asked.

“We’d better keep quiet. Letting the rest of us know won’t make things better.” Mizutani said and sat down on a nearby chair. He was sweating and had now taken off his white coat. “If the murderer is behind this door, we are safe as long as we keep watch here. With this many people, we should be okay.”

“I think we should let the rest of us know, though ...” Yamane responded. “Anyway, let’s wait for the director to return.”

“Who do you think can be behind this door?” The door to the adjacent room was opened, and out stepped Mochizuki, wearing the baseball cap. “That’s not possible. I assure you guys.”

“No one is doubting you,” Yamane said. “If we check the records, we will find the facts.”

“If no one was there, how could Ms. Magata be in such a state?” Mizutani spat out with trembling his belly. “Still, maybe there’s no one inside anymore. I guess the killer might have already gotten away ...”

“That was never going to happen,” Mochizuki said, putting the brim of his baseball cap behind his head. “No one was going in or out of that room. We were here the whole time. You know, we had been here before you came along.”

“If so, what happened? Can you explain it to us? A ghost did it?” Mizutani said with a laugh.

“Hey! Look at me and repeat it.” Mochizuki walked up to him.

“Okay, okay. You guys, calm down.” Yamane stopped the two guys. “This is not the time for this.”

Saikawa put out his cigarette, then got up and went to look down the corridor. The doorway to the corridor was left open, and the gruesome sight was still there. The bride doll was facing the other way, standing in a dark corridor lit only there.

“Well ...” Saikawa said.

“Well ...” Moe voiced it at the same time as him in the back of the room.

Saikawa looked at Moe and raised one hand slightly to urge her to go ahead.

“If we look inside this room, we will know the facts, won’t we?” Moe pointed to the yellow door and said to the rest of them. “We will know if someone is in the room or not when we actually check it.”

“That’s dangerous,” Mizutani said immediately. “There could be a killer lurking inside. There is a possibility that the guy is still there.”

“I’m telling you, no one inside! If you want, I’ll go check it out alone.” Mochizuki stepped forward.

“Instead of rushing to check there, we should just keep the murderer inside and let the police handle it.” Mizutani countered. “It’s better not to disturb the murder scene. Don’t you agree?”

“There are no other entrances or exits besides this one?” Saikawa asked.

“Right. There is no other way in or out.” Yamane assured him. He, too, was

smoking a cigarette.

“Is there a secret entrance/exit somewhere?” Saikawa pointed out. “In other words, if this were a completely locked room, there was no way she could have been killed. We don’t know where the guy came from, but we are sure someone entered this room. If it was ... not through this door, there must be another way in or out. As long as that person came inside, the one should have been able to exit from the same place.”

“If that is the case, I can’t afford to linger here.” Dr. Yuminaga said. “That would mean that a killer is roaming around the place. Oh ... I am worried about my wife. May I go back to my room?”

“Of course,” Yamane responded. “But, Sensei, please come back here again. I mean, we can’t leave the corpse where it is ...”

“Okay ... I will bring my wife here.” Saying so, Dr. Yuminaga trotted off the room.

Saikawa watched Yuminaga all the way down the corridor as he moved away. He walked straight to the back, past the dead body. The area where Yuminaga was walking was always brightly lit. Deborah seemed to have regained complete control of the lighting in the corridor.

“Deborah,” Yamane said to the ceiling.

“Acknowledged the command,” Deborah responded with an electronic voice.

“How many people are walking down the corridors right now?”

“Two people,” Deborah answered. “One P1 is stopped on the second basement floor. It is not responding.”

P1 seemed to be the name of the wagon-shaped robot. It was unresponsive because its main switch had just been turned off.

“Two people?” Moe stood up.

“They are Yuminaga-sensei and Ms. Magata,” Yamane answered. “I mean, Deborah doesn’t know if they are alive or dead ...”

“How does it recognize humans? With infrared rays?”

“You know, humans are a kind of capacitor. It can tell by their capacitance.” Yamane looked at Moe. “Nishinosono-san, are you okay?”

“Yes, but I’m getting a bit of a headache.” Moe smiled. “But don’t worry. I’m fine.”

Ayako Shimada, who had been staring at the display and tapping on the keyboard, stood up. “I can’t. It’s beyond my control. Chief, will you take over?”

“Okay.” Mizutani came toward the terminal. “How far did you get?”

While Mizutani and Shimada were having a technical talk, Moe walked toward Saikawa, who was standing near the door.

She glanced down the corridor and immediately looked at Saikawa.

“Sensei, because of me, you’re involved in the case,” Moe whispered. “For some reason, I’m *ame-onna* (or a female rain bringer) ...”

“What do you mean?” Saikawa asked. “If you’re talking about the weather, I’m *hare-otoko* (or a male sun bringer), by the way.”

“I’m *ame-onna*. So, I always carry an umbrella.” Moe smiled and tied her little mouth shut.

“There’s no umbrella to prevent murders.” Saying so, Saikawa took out a cigarette. Then he lit it with a hundred-yen lighter and smiled. “I wonder why I can smile now. Maybe my nerves are numb, and I’m on a high. At least ... I got to meet Dr. Shiki Magata in person ...”

“I can’t believe it ...” Moe was about to look back toward the corridor but stopped in the middle. “Sensei, did you see the severed part of the corpse?”

“Unwillingly, though ...” Saikawa nodded.

“Amazing ... You’re okay with that sort of thing, aren’t you?”

“I have low blood pressure, to begin with. It just got better.”

“Her arms and legs are ... still in that room, right?” Moe said. “Assuming the killer didn’t take them out ...”

“What do you think the killer is doing now?” Saikawa said.

“As Sensei said, there must be another way in and out,” Moe said readily. “So I

think this is the safest place.”

“I see, that’s logical.” Saikawa appreciated it. “Then, why did the murderer cut off the corpse’s limbs?”

“Maybe to put a bridal gown on the body ...” Moe replied.

“No way ...” Saikawa said as he exhaled smoke.

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Mizutani, the chief engineer, sweated and struggled with the keyboard but could find nothing unusual in the research institute’s system. All outside calls were canceled, and e-mails were sent back. No other means of contacting outside the island, let alone the police, could be found.

Dr. Yuminaga returned with his wife. Mrs. Yuminaga was a nurse. The body in the bridal gown, which had been left on the corridor, was pulled to the edge and covered with a sheet that Mrs. Yuminaga had brought. This made it easier to walk down the corridor.

Communication within the research institute was uninterrupted. An emergency announcement was made to notify all researchers not to leave their rooms for a while, with a time limit of two hours. The engineers in the other rooms were informed of the system anomalies, and all were asked to temporarily step away from their work to determine the cause of the current troubles. All of these communications were made via two terminals and Deborah’s announcement system.

Hasebe, the judo-type guy, brewed coffee and served everyone in the meantime. His physique was totally unsuited to the task.

“We got an e-mail from the director.” Ayako Shimada, who was at the terminal, shouted. “It is addressed to the deputy director. After all, it seems to arrive normally from the outside.”

By then, both Saikawa and Moe had brought chairs to sit behind Ayako Shimada, so they watched Deputy Director Yamane coming over to the display and reading the e-mail.

Yamane kept the director's e-mail on the screen window for everyone to see.

This is Shindo.

What's going on. The phone is disconnected.

All the phones are busy.

I had no choice but to send an e-mail.

I'm about to fly there.

I'll be there in about thirty minutes.

Our guest is Miss Miki Magata.

She is a well-behaved, good-natured young lady.

I'm relieved. (She's not a genius, though ...)

Did you get in touch with Ms. Shiki?

If so, please let her know about her younger sister.

Ah, then ... tell my wife to cook.

Miss Miki hasn't had dinner yet.

That's all.

Although the e-mail from Director Shindo was addressed to Yamane, a copy was also sent to the director's wife. So, Yamane did not need to contact her.

"Is the director's wife up at this hour?" Saikawa asked, thinking it was none of his business.

“She is probably up,” Yamane responded. “This is the time of day when most people are awake.”

“The time was already past 1:00 a.m. Moe was yawning next to Saikawa.

“Is the director’s name Shindo-san?” Saikawa confirmed. “If I remember right, I heard he is the younger brother of Dr. Sachiro Magata ...”

“He was adopted. Our director is from the Faculty of Medicine. The Shindo family is a prestigious family who runs several large hospitals. But now, you know, he has been at this facility for a long time. We cannot call him a doctor anymore.” Dr. Yuminaga responded while moving his mustache. “I am the director’s kohai (or junior) in university. That is why I am working on such an isolated island. Well, it suits my nature, though.”

Dr. Yuminaga’s wife, Sumie Yuminaga, was a small, plain woman who rarely spoke to anyone. Even though she had heard the explanation from her husband, Saikawa thought she was indeed a nurse who did not change color even when she saw that bride doll. She was sitting in a chair on the other side of the room, drinking coffee. Dr. Yuminaga returned to his wife’s side and leaned against the wall.

Mochizuki put his baseball cap back in its normal orientation and left the room, saying he was going on patrol. When he was putting on the hat again, Saikawa could see Mochizuki’s head, almost entirely devoid of hair. Hasebe was doing something behind the glass.

Mizutani and Ayako Shimada were still working on the terminals. Mizutani was mumbling something and tapping on the keyboard, while Shimada had a habit of tapping her shoulder from time to time. Yamane stood silently behind Shimada, watching the display.

Indeed, the staff members of this research institute were all a bit eccentric. They all had disparate personalities, yet they all shared some common traits. Saikawa thought about this while observing everyone for a period of time and then noticed something. All of them were younger in speech and gestures than they appeared, and their innocence was childlike. Perhaps this type of person would fit in well in such an ideal environment. He could have predicted that most people in the world would describe this environment as dull, but to Saikawa, this still seemed like a reasonable place to work.

“I can’t ... I find nothing wrong.” Ayako Shimada sighed again. She turned and looked at Moe, who was watching from behind her. “This is unthinkable. Why can’t we send an e-mail ...?”

“Are you guys looking into mail systems?” Moe asked, peering into the screen.

“Yes, I am ... As for the phone, I think Chief Mizutani is looking into it. It’s probably the same cause, but I wonder what kind of script the person who set this up wrote. I can’t believe I can’t just send a message ...” Shimada went back to the screen.

“What is the ‘red magic’ that has been shown many times?” Moe asked. “You see it in the window to your left, don’t you? Isn’t this UNIX?”

“This system is the original version.” Shimada took her round glasses and closed her eyes once. “Oh, my eyes are tired. I will take a short rest ... Well, what was that about?”

“About the red magic.” Moe was apologetic and repeated it.

“Oh ... That is the name of this system.” Shimada put her glasses back on. “Its development environment is enriched. This system is used only in this facility. Once you experience this, you can’t work at any other place. You are, err ...?”

“I’m Nishinosono,” Moe said her name.

“Hey, that sounds like a happy name,” Shimada said. “Do you use a computer?”

“No, I can’t program yet,” Moe replied. “I love it, though ... I only use UNIX for e-mail at the university and usually use a computer. I still use a Macintosh SE. It’s a one-box type ... because it looks adorable ...”

“Wow, you think so too? I use a Macintosh PLUS. So, we are kindred spirits.” Shimada narrowed her eyes. “That, you know, is a German design.”

Saikawa listened silently to the conversation between the two women and tried to think about the murder case.

Red magic ...

Saikawa muttered to himself in his mind. The things he associated with “red” are the color red, communism, and blood ...

Moe Nishinosono got up as Ayako Shimada began working again. Saikawa was smoking a cigarette in silence. She decided to look inside the glass room next door.

“May I come in?” Moe asked Hasebe, the stout man in the room. His partner, Mochizuki, had not yet returned from his patrol.

“Be my guest.” He replied with a pleasant expression. “I was out of things to do. You know, we still couldn’t make a phone call ...”

This place was about half the size of the adjacent room, and the instrument panel fitted with the display was tilted under a glass window. It was just like a studio mixing room. One of the displays showed a panoramic view of the room with Saikawa and the others behind the glass and the corridor outside, bisecting the screen. Some of the displays were now turned off. There were few switches, only two sets of keyboards. In addition, a three-button mouse was placed in a small space.

“What is this room for?” Moe asked as she looked around.

“It’s the room to keep an eye on Ms. Shiki Magata,” Hasebe answered. His physique would make him suitable for judo, but his voice was soft and gentle. Moe noticed that Hasebe was still young. He could have been in his 20s.

“Keeping an eye on her, though, isn’t much of a job. Our job is to check the goods delivered into her room.”

“Goods? How do you get it into Dr. Magata’s room?” Since Moe had recognized how young Hasebe was, she tried to stop her polite tone. “Through that yellow door over there?”

“For larger items, yes. They can only be let in through that door. We put them inside the yellow door and call Ms. Magata to come and get them. For smaller items, we can put them in the mailbox there.” Hasebe pointed to a wall of the room. There was a small stainless steel hatch about 30 centimeters square.

Moe approached it to see it closely. “May I open this?”

“It won’t open.” Hasebe shook his head. “Unless we enter the password over here, it will not open. I don’t know why, but it’s very strict at this facility. Even if

you open it, it's just a box. Just like a regular mailbox.”

“So, you put the goods in it, and Dr. Magata received them inside.” Moe walked back, sat beside Hasebe, and crossed her legs. “How big an item can you put in there, up to what size?”

“Multiply 250 and 250 and 350,” Hasebe answered.

“That's 21875 cc. Hmm ... Then a human can't fit in here.” Moe joked.

“Oh, did you calculate it now?” Hasebe was surprised.

“Have you recently brought a large package inside through that door over there? I mean, something large enough for a person to get inside.” Moe asked the next question.

“We let it in,” Hasebe answered quickly. “Because Ms. Magata bought a new microwave oven about a month ago. That cardboard box was a little big. If you tried, you could have hidden in it.”

“Did you check inside it?” Moe asked.

“Of course, we did. It's what we do. Shall I show you that?” Hasebe turned his chair and touched the keyboard. The previously dark display instantly brightened. A window appeared on the screen, and Hasebe's right hand moved the mouse.

“Hasebe-san. You must be from the Faculty of Engineering, right?” Moe told him from behind.

“Oh, you guessed well. I'm from the Department of Mechanical Engineering.” Hasebe smiled while looking at the screen. “How did you know that?”

“Because you said length in millimeters.” Moe pointed that out.

“Keen insight,” Hasebe said, selecting buttons in the windows one after another with the mouse.

“Is this computer system also Red Magic?” Moe asked.

“No, although we have the terminal using that, this system here is run on a computer. This is completely independent of the research institute's system. So it cannot be infected by viruses. Even now, this should be fine. Let's see ..., here it is.”

One window in the display showed a scene from the adjacent room. The date was

displayed as July 2nd. The time was fast-forwarded, and an hour had passed in the blink of an eye. Soon, there was a change in the image, and the flow of time suddenly slowed down. One P1 robot carrying a large cardboard box on it entered through the door leading to the corridor and stopped in front of the yellow door. Then, a figure that looked to be Hasebe appeared from the closer side.

“Is all this footage stored digitally?” Moe asked as she looked at the screen.

“Yes, I think it was eight years ago that they went digital. When I started working here, it was already digital. The footage from even earlier than that is still on tape in analog form.”

He clicked the mouse, and the screen went fast forward. It showed Hasebe in front of the yellow door, checking the contents of the cardboard box.

“You mean, all of the footage from the last fifteen years?” Moe asked.

“Yes,” Hasebe answered. “That doesn’t amount to much data since a second of an image older than two years is compressed into two frames, and the compression cuts off images that haven’t changed.”

“Really ...” Moe was impressed. “Hasebe-san, has anyone entered Dr. Magata’s room since you started working here?”

“No, there must have been none. Let’s see, it’s been six years now ...”

“Did Dr. Shiki Magata ever get sick?” Moe asked curiously. “Didn’t she have the flu, measles, mumps, or any other illness that required her to call a doctor?”

“You know, she didn’t see anyone. So, she didn’t contract any contagious disease.” Hasebe replied. “We disinfected everything we get into her room, whether through the mailbox or the yellow door, with ultraviolet light. Of course, it was not perfect. When she was not feeling well, Dr. Yuminaga gave her instructions via videophone, and we just give her medicine.”

“Dr. Magata didn’t open that yellow door by herself, did she?” Moe confirmed.

“That’s right. That door can only be opened from this side. The aluminum door at the back can be opened from both sides, though.”

“Did she really never go outside for fifteen years?”

“I’m not sure. Ask Big Bro ... I mean, Mochizuki-san. He’s been working here

since this facility was built.”

Mochizuki, in his baseball cap, had not yet returned.

“Hey, can you tell me how to get the video to show up?” Moe pulled up a chair and approached next to Hasebe.

“Oh ..., err ...” Hasebe began to explain.

Its operation was simple, and Moe could figure it out in a few minutes. Various methods to display were possible, and there was a second-by-second record of the images captured by the cameras in the adjacent room and the corridor. As Hasebe had said, the digital recordings that could be viewed were up to eight years old. The tapes of analog video footage prior to that seemed to be stored on shelves. Moe switched screens one after another. The time when no one was around, and no changes were automatically skipped.

She suddenly noticed a strange object placed at her hand. On the border between the small table on which the mouse rested and the sloping display, there were two things that looked like xylophone mallets.

“Hasebe-san, what are these?” Moe asked, pointing to them. “Do you play music?”

“I enjoy playing the marimba. I practice on these.” Hasebe smiled.

Moe almost chuckled at Hasebe’s delicate hobby, which did not match his fine physique.

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Moe was startled as the building vibrated slightly with a dull thud.

“The director has arrived.” Yamane was yelling in the adjacent room. Moe did not hear the sound of the helicopter’s engine, but the vibration seemed to be from the helicopter’s arrival on the rooftop. Hearing Yamane’s voice, Moe ran out of Hasebe’s room. Saikawa also got up from his chair.

Yamane was walking to the elevator on the other side of the room. Moe ran up to him and said to Yamane. “I’ll come with you. I have a favor to ask on the helicopter radio.”

“Then, let’s come together.” Yamane pressed the elevator button.

Moe looked up at the lamp above the doors. The orange <R> indicator eventually changed to <1>, then to <B2>, and the doors opened without a sound. Yamane and Moe both got inside. The elevator was small, and as the doors closed, Yamane pressed the <R> button. There were only three buttons: <R>, <1>, and <B2>.

“Does this elevator not stop at the first basement floor?” Moe asked.

“Right, because this is an elevator solely for the director’s office,” Yamane explained. “It connects the rooftop, the director’s office, and the anteroom of the lady’s room where we were earlier. Nishinosono-san, you have taken this elevator before, haven’t you?”

The elevator soon arrived at the rooftop. As the doors opened, the low roar of a helicopter engine could be heard up close.

Just outside the elevator was a white door. Yamane put his hand on the glass panel next to the door and said his name. Indeed, Moe remembered that she had been in this place a month before. She had taken this elevator to the director’s office on the first floor, and from the small room next to it, she had talked with Ms. Magata through the television.

The white door slid to the side, and the damp, warm air of a midsummer night that Moe had utterly forgotten about entered. Following Yamane, Moe went out onto the rooftop. The helicopter’s rotors were still spinning, making a wind whistling sound. The fuselage was right next to the exit of the elevator house. The lights on the front of the cockpit were dazzling, and Moe held up her hand as she walked. In contrast to the area around the helicopter, the rest of the rooftop was covered in darkness, but even so, she managed to see the entire site by moonlight. Moe could feel that this research institute was a regular square, flat shape. She could see another elevator house protruding from the opposite side of the diagonal of the rooftop.

Yamane bowed his head and approached the fuselage.

“Director!” Yamane shouted.

The cockpit window opened, and a man wearing a hat emerged. It was the face

Moe had seen a month earlier. It was Director Shindo himself who was piloting the helicopter.

“Radio the police! Ms. Magata has been murdered!” Yamane roared.

The door on the side of the fuselage opened, and a woman in a white one-piece dress got out. Moe looked at her for a moment but then looked again at the director’s face. His eyes were wide open, and his expression was distorted.

“Director!” Yamane shouted once more.

“She was murdered?” The director finally said.

“We don’t know who killed her. We locked her room.” Yamane continued loudly. “Hurry up and radio the police! Our phones and e-mails aren’t working!”

“Why aren’t they working?”

“That is also under investigation.”

“Got it. Take care of her.” The director looked sideways at the woman who got out of the back seat. “I’ll contact the police. If I can’t get a signal, I’ll fly the chopper again. Take her down with you first.” Saying so, the director pulled his face back into the helicopter.

Yamane walked back toward Moe while pulling the woman’s hand.

Just then, Moe saw a figure behind the helicopter. A man walked slowly toward them, taking a detour. He was wearing a baseball cap backward.

“Mochizuki-san,” Yamane said to him. “Why are you here?”

“You know, I heard a noise and took the elevator up over there.” Mochizuki walked over to them and stared at the guest, the young woman.

“Can you wait for a moment ...?” Moe said to Yamane, bowed her head, and ran to the helicopter. She then tapped her hand around the front of the fuselage. The cockpit window opened again.

“Excuse me!” Moe exclaimed. “It’s Nishinosono! Director, please inform the police that I am in this research institute! Just tell them my name, and they will understand it.”

In the window, the director made an OK gesture.

Moe returned to where Yamane and the others were waiting. Yamane put his hand on the glass plate, opened the door, and the four of them entered the room. The cold air welcomed them gently.

“You must be Miki Magata, right?” Yamane said with a troubled look. “What you have just heard has happened.”

“Good evening.” The woman spoke broken Japanese and smiled. “My name is Miki Magata.” She held out her hand and asked the three of them to shake her hand. She had short-cut black hair and was a little taller than Moe. Her skin was uniquely white for Japanese. She looked somewhat like Ms. Shiki Magata, but Moe’s impression was that she was much older than Ms. Shiki, her elder sister, whom she had seen on the screen a month earlier.

“She didn’t seem to understand our conversation,” Moe told Yamane. “Do you explain in English?”

“Do you speak English, Nishinosono-san?” Yamane asked.

“I can, but do you want me to speak it to her?” Moe narrowed one eye. “I don’t want to do it even in Japanese.”

“Anyway, let’s go downstairs,” Yamane suggested.

“I want to go down there too,” Mochizuki said from beside him.

The four took the elevator down to the second basement floor in silence. Standing beside Moe, Miss Magata apologized in nicely accented English for her very limited Japanese vocabulary.

“No problem.” Moe smiled at her. But in reality, there were plenty of problems.

When they returned to the second basement floor, a middle-aged, elegant woman stood by the elevator. Dressed in a summer sweater and long skirt, she greeted the guest in English and shook hands with her. There was supposed to be only one woman of that age in this research institute. Moe immediately guessed that she must be the director’s wife.

She took one look at Moe and said, her expression hardening. “You must be Nishinosono-san. Nice to meet you. I am Shindo.”

“I’m sorry to bother you at this difficult time.” Moe bowed to Mrs. Shindo, the

director's wife.

"I know you well." Mrs. Shindo forced a smile. "Let's talk later, at your leisure ... It's a tough situation, and I just heard about it."

"The director is still on the rooftop." Yamane reported to Mrs. Shindo. "Umm, madam ... Could you please take care of Miki-san? You know, this place is not good for her. We haven't told her about Ms. Shiki yet. She doesn't seem to understand Japanese ..."

"Okay. I will take her to my room ... Once that man returns, tell him to come to my room."

Moe realized a little later that when Mrs. Shindo said "that man," she meant the director. Mrs. Shindo took Miss Magata by the hand, looking around with a puzzled look on her face, and they got into the elevator, and the doors closed. Moe watched as the display above the doors stopped at <1>.

"Now, all we must do is wait for the police," Yamane said with a relieved expression. "Nishinosono-san, do you know anyone in the police?"

"Yes, my uncle works for the prefectural police," Moe answered modestly. Her uncle, the young brother of her late father, was the man who sat in the chair of the Aichi Prefectural Police Chief. He was now Moe's closest blood relative and protector. "How soon can the police get here?"

"A helicopter will get them here in no time, but ... I guess they will come by boat, which will take an hour," Yamane replied, smoking a cigarette.

Moe looked around the room. Ayako Shimada was tapping herself on the shoulder in front of the terminal display. Associate Professor Saikawa was sitting behind Shimada, idly looking at the display. Chief Engineer Mizutani, who had been sitting in front of the other terminal earlier, was now gone. Dr. and Mrs. Yuminaga were seated in chairs in the corner of the room, looking sleepy. On the other side, Hasebe and the face of Mochizuki, who had just returned, could be seen through the glass of the adjacent room. In the corridor still stood a dead body covered with a sheet. *It was fortunate*, Moe thought, *that Miss Magata did not have to pass through the corridor.*

Moe walked toward Saikawa and sat in a chair near him.

“That person I just saw is Dr. Shiki Magata’s younger sister, right?” Saikawa asked Moe in a whisper. “She only speaks English?”

“Yes, it seems so.” Moe nodded. “She has come all the way to Japan to meet her elder sister, though ...”

“Were they able to contact the police?” Saikawa asked.

“The director tried to contact police via helicopter radio,” Moe replied, pointing to the ceiling.

“Why did Mochizuki-san come down in that elevator?” Saikawa asked as he took out his cigarette. “In short, there are other routes out to the rooftop ...”

“So ... He was on the rooftop,” Moe answered.

“Hey, Nishinosono-kun ...” Saikawa said seriously as he exhaled the smoke. “I thought about it for a minute. When Dr. Magata’s body emerged from there and went out into the corridor..., we all left this room, didn’t we?”

“Shimada-san was here.” Moe leaned forward and asked. “Sensei, did you come up with anything?”

“Shimada-san had fallen unconscious,” Saikawa spoke in a whisper so that Shimada, who was nearby, could not hear him. “Everyone was out in the corridor looking at that bride doll. The yellow door was open at that time, wasn’t it?”

“Yes, that door was left open.” Moe nodded.

“So, the killer could have come out of there and gotten into the elevator.” Saikawa pointed that out. “I saw the elevator doors open earlier but could hardly hear the sound. Besides, the noise was loud at that time, right? We were out in the corridor, and our attention was on Ms. Magata’s corpse, even if someone had gotten on the elevator during that time ...”

“Sensei, that is not possible,” Moe said triumphantly. “I just watched a video in the adjacent room. Everything that goes on in this room is recorded. Would you like to see it too?”

“I see ...” Saikawa exhaled smoke. “Then let’s obliterate that approach.”

“More importantly, where did the culprit break in from?” Moe said.

“That’s what we can find out by analyzing the VTR, right?” Saikawa pointed out. “If the only access route is that door there, though. At the moment, that boundary condition is really hard to believe.”

“I can’t wait to see the inside of Ms. Magata’s room,” Moe said in a tone as if she wanted to eat cake. “If so ..., what should I say? Maybe this hazy feeling will clear up.”

“Indeed, yes.” Saikawa nodded. “I can’t even sleep without getting more information. It’s too mysterious and uncomfortable.”

“How long did Dr. Yuminaga say it had been since her death?” Moe asked.

“No, I have not heard anything specific about that. He just said it must have been a few days ago.” Saikawa avoided the smoke from his cigarette like it was smoky even for him. “At least she was not killed today. So it’s hard to imagine the killer lurking in the room all this time ...”

“It might have something to do with the incident fifteen years ago,” Moe whispered.

“I think you might be thinking too much ...” Saikawa smiled bitterly.

“But this case means that three people from the Magata family are now dead,” Moe muttered. “And isn’t the story too ready that the heir to the Magata family has come from the United States at the right time?”

“Umm ... the phrase ‘too ready’ is that I don’t really know how to define,” Saikawa said. “However, I agree that this situation is not normal. Nishinosono-kun. To be frank, this is beyond my imagination. What if there is no other way in or out but that door? Do you think you could believe that? First of all, why is this anomaly in the system? They can’t use phones or e-mails. Moreover, there is no cause for any of this.”

“But I think it’s like a computer virus, right?” Moe said in a clear voice. “Since this facility is full of experts in the field, it should be easy. Am I wrong? Even from Dr. Magata’s room, it could be possible to manipulate the system in the research institute, right? The culprit must have been in that room for hours.”

“The computer system in Dr. Magata’s room doesn’t allow anyone to get into the research institute’s system. The main network is not connected. They can only

exchange text files via e-mail. And it's a local network of computers. It is impossible to send any scripts to the main system. I was just asking Shimada-san about the structure of this system earlier ..."

"I can assure you that." Apparently hearing what they were saying, Ayako Shimada, who was facing the display, spun around in her chair, turned toward them, and said, "Anyway, there is no evidence of applying a patch on Red Magic."

"Patch?" Moe asked.

"Yes, it means partially changing the program. I'm looking into it, but I don't see any evidence of rewriting at all. So ... we can't even repair it. You know, there is nothing wrong with it ... Either way, no one could pull off a trick like this from Ms. Magata's room."

"Then, did someone of the research institute's staff do it?" Moe said flatly something that was usually difficult to say.

"Yes, that's right. That is the only possibility." Ayako Shimada readily admitted. "At least, it is still possible."

"Dr. Magata's murderer was also an insider in this research institute, right?" Moe continued. "In the first place, outsiders do not have access to this research institute ..."

"Right." Shimada nodded. "When the police come, they will have to suspect all of us."

-6-

Saikawa looked at his watch. It was 2:00 a.m. Moe was sitting on a chair with a sleepy look on her face.

Director Shindo did not come down to the second basement floor quickly. Twenty minutes had already passed since the director's helicopter arrived.

"I wonder if the director has contacted the police?" Saikawa asked, looking at his watch in concern.

"Well, I think he has," Yamane responded over coffee. "If he couldn't contact them for some reason, he would have come down here and reported something."

The director must be taking care of Miss Miki Magata. I believe so.”

Saikawa looked at the digital display above the elevator doors. It showed <1> as before.

“If you want, shall I confirm it ...?” Yamane approached the vacant terminal and moved the mouse.

After a few moments, a small window appeared on display, showing the face of Mrs. Shindo, the director’s wife.

“Madam, is the director back there?” Yamane spoke into the screen.

“No, Isn’t he in the room where you are?” On display, Mrs. Shindo shook her head. “That man hasn’t come at all ... I just told Miki-san about the incident. She seems quite shocked ... I’m going to ask her to go to bed now. Can you tell Sumie-san come over here? She may need sleeping pills.”

Yamane saw Dr. and Mrs. Yuminaga in the corner of the room. Sumie Yuminaga, who had heard the conversation, nodded lightly.

“Understood. I will ask Yuminaga-san to come over there immediately.” Yamane responded. “Where did the director go? He has not come down to this room.”

“Isn’t he in his office?” Mrs. Shindo said. Saikawa saw Miss Magata’s face blurred behind Mrs. Shindo on the small screen. The screen was small and not focused backward, so her expression was unclear.

“No, I’ve already called to the terminal in his office,” Yamane said.

“He must be doing something else. Okay, I’ll look in his office later. He called the police, didn’t he?”

“Umm, I am trying to make sure the very thing.”

“Oh, so he never came down?” Mrs. Shindo on the screen looked surprised. “Got it. When Sumie-san comes here, I will check his office.”

After exchanging a few words with Dr. Yuminaga, Mrs. Yuminaga stood up with her small bag and took the elevator to the first floor.

Dr. Yuminaga, now alone, wandered toward Saikawa, who was smoking a cigarette, and sat down on a nearby chair. Moe, who had been dozing off, seemed

to wake up.

“Sensei, do you know the cause of Dr. Shiki Magata’s death?” Saikawa asked in a whisper.

“No, I would have to look into it in detail,” Yuminaga replied, stroking his mustache. “Sensei, what is your major?”

“Architecture. I am in the Faculty of Engineering.” Saikawa answered.

“Oh ... I thought you were in the same trade. I mean, you were the calmest in front of the corpse ...” Dr. Yuminaga’s mouth slanted as he said this. “Err, may I have your name again? I heard it earlier but forgot.”

“Saikawa. The animal Sai (or rhinoceros) and Kawa (or river). No one could hear it under those circumstances and remember it.”

“Saikawa-sensei, is it? Are you from Kanazawa City?”

“No, I don’t know much about my ancestors, though ...” Saikawa exhaled smoke. At this time of night, cigarettes got worse and worse.

“And this young lady is, err ...” Dr. Yuminaga looked at Moe and asked.

“I’m Nishinosono.” Moe identified herself.

“Earlier, I said something rude to you,” Yuminaga said as he lifted his glasses. “I guess I was upset too.”

“But I don’t remember anything rude from you.” Moe tilted her head smiling. “Umm, Yuminaga-sensei. I have one question for you.”

“I have never been in the room of Ms. Magata, by the way.” Dr. Yuminaga said immediately. “Isn’t that what your question is about?”

“Yes, it is.” Moe shrugged. “Did you notice anything unusual about Dr. Magata recently?”

“Nothing,” the doctor shook his head. “Since I started working at this research institute, Dr. Magata has had no major illnesses. I have only given her medicine on a few occasions.”

“What illness did she have?” Moe asked.

“Cold and ... She had a weak throat ... Well, in short, it is just a fever reducer.”

Yuminaga answered. “Some years ago, she got sick because she was on too much diet, and I gave her an IV drip.”

“Huh?” Moe voiced. “Then you entered her room, didn’t you?”

“That time, for about a week, my wife went into her room. But I did not.”

“Was Dr. Shiki Magata on a diet?” Saikawa interrupted from the side. “That’s kind of interesting.”

“What is your opinion, Yuminaga-sensei?” Moe asked the next question. “Um, I mean, how do you think the murderer killed the doctor?”

“You are an unusual young lady.” Dr. Yuminaga looked at Moe and said. His mouth seemed to be smiling, but his eyes were serious. “It’s hard to say ... So, well ... let’s be honest, shall we?”

“Yes, please.”

“I did not see Ms. Magata come out of the door there,” Yuminaga said indifferently. I have a character of not believing what I have not seen myself ... Is this the kind of opinion you want me to give?”

“Do you suspect anyone?” Moe became serious when she heard Dr. Yuminaga’s opinion.

“I don’t have anything specific in mind.” Yuminaga gave another twitched look. “The lady was killed by someone. We are sure about that, aren’t we? If so, someone entered that room and then left. Isn’t it reasonable to think so? Am I wrong?”

Moe remained silent as she stared at Yuminaga.

“This murder did not happen today or yesterday.” Yuminaga continued. “It happened a few days ago.”

“But this entrance is being monitored by video. And anyone can’t open the door there from inside the room, right?” Moe pointed out.

“Well, I don’t know because I am not an expert,” Yuminaga said. “But I think it might not be impossible to erase the traces of the comings and goings. Besides, there is not only one culprit.”

I see, Saikawa nodded in his mind. Indeed, it is possible that the security personnel and

several researchers conspired to kill Ms. Magata. Physically, it could be possible. For example, they could all be lying. The video footage could be doctored. Someone could have entered the room, and someone outside could have opened the door. The logic of Dr. Yuminaga's opinion deserves recognition. Perhaps, when the police arrive, they will support Yuminaga's hypothesis.

But one big mystery remained.

“Why did the killer sever the limbs of the corpse?” Saikawa put the question to Yuminaga.

“Maybe because there is a limit to the load capacity of P1 ...” Yuminaga said with a smile.

“Huh? Is that true?” Moe looked surprised and uncrossed her legs, which had been crossed.

“It's true, though.” Yuminaga looked at Moe and said. “But as a reason to mutilate a corpse, that might be a bit insufficient.”

“That is not true.” Moe blushed a little. “That can be a fine reason. Hey, Saikawa-sensei, don't you think so too?”

“I don't,” Saikawa answered immediately. “If that's the answer, it only raises the next question. Why did the murderer have to put the body on P1 ...? First of all, I think it could work, even if it exceeds the load capacity by a small amount ...”

“Yamane-kun.” Dr. Yuminaga called Deputy Director Yamane, who was standing leaning against the wall. “What is the load capacity of P1?”

“Thirty kilograms,” Yamane said and walked toward them.

“What happens if we put a load heavier than thirty kilograms?” Dr. Yuminaga asked.

“An overweight warning is issued. It will not move if it is overweight.” Yamane answered. “I was just thinking about that myself. That robot is designed to detect the weight of the load and move according to it. When it accelerates or decelerates, it also controls the servos according to the weight of the load. It is constantly detecting where and how much load is on the cargo bed. To be able to carry a glass of water without spilling it or stop safely when carrying a heavy load, we need to know the weight of the load and the position of the center of gravity.”

“Then, after all, the reason for mutilating the body is ...” Moe turned her eyes to the ceiling once and then said.

“Probably, it is.” Yamane nodded. “The killer really wanted to put it on P1.”

“I, too, think that is the only possibility.” Dr. Yuminaga nodded. “Ms. Magata might have weighed forty-one or forty-two kilograms. If her arms and legs had been severed, she would have weighed less than thirty kilograms, even with the addition of her wedding dress.”

Moe looked at Saikawa with a smile. The fact that she could discuss such content simply as a matter of physics showed that she was an utterly science-oriented person.

Saikawa refrained from expressing his opinion.

Did someone with the intelligence to hijack the research institute's systems would sever the limbs of the corpse to protect the loading capacity? Such a thing would be a matter of modifying the robot's programming ...

Fortunately, Saikawa had brought a pack of spare cigarettes with him when he left the campground. So, he still had some to spare. Saikawa slowly lit the cigarette, which no longer tasted very good.

Chapter 4: The Brown Past

-1-

“He is not in his office.” They heard the voice of Mrs. Shindo, the director’s wife, from the terminal.

“Thank you, madam. So, he is probably still in the helicopter. I’ll go take a look.” Yamane responded. Everyone else in the room was looking at him.

“I will come with you.” Dr. Yuminaga stood up beside Saikawa. Moe also stood up silently.

“I wonder if the director is having trouble communicating with the police,” Moe said in Saikawa’s ear. “I’ll come with them.”

“I will not move from this place until the police arrive,” Saikawa said expressionlessly.

Leaving Saikawa and Ayako Shimada alone in the room, the three of them got on the elevator.

As before, Yamane pressed the <R> button indicating the rooftop.

“Did the director go somewhere by helicopter?” Dr. Yuminaga wondered.

Yamane placed his right hand on the glass and opened the white door to the rooftop. The helicopter was in the same location as earlier. Its lights were off, and its rotors had stopped. The three stepped slowly out into the damp air.

“This is weird ...” Yamane looked around the rooftop. “The director isn’t in the helicopter. Given that the director was not in his office, this must be the only place we could think of, though ...”

“Didn’t he enter the research institute through that entrance?” Moe pointed to the elevator house on the other side of the rooftop. That one seemed to be the public entrance to the rooftop. By the moonlight, they could see immediately that the rooftop was empty. The light was not sufficient, but no obstacles were blocking their view.

“The director would never use that entrance. It’s more convenient to use this way

...” Yamane said.

The three walked up to the helicopter and circled it.

Dr. Yuminaga stopped suddenly, and Moe, who had been walking with her eyes looking to the side, bumped into him. When Moe looked up at Yuminaga’s face to apologize, he stared at the helicopter’s cockpit, wide-open eyes.

“Yamane-kun!” Yuminaga called him without making any move.

Yamane, too, seemed to have noticed something. Moe could not see it clearly.

Yuminaga and Yamane ran to the other side of the helicopter and opened the side door of the fuselage with great force. The cabin was pitch black. Yuminaga boarded first, followed by Yamane.

Moe was a little behind them, putting her foot on the step and grabbing the handle on the side of the fuselage to climb up.

Director Shindo’s cap had fallen to the cockpit floor.

There was the smell of blood.

It was dark and hard to tell, but some liquid seemed to be running on the floor.

Yuminaga came to the front and touched the body of Director Shindo, sitting in the pilot’s seat. Yamane let out a long, deep breath. Moe stepped forward and tried to get a better look at Director Shindo.

The little light through the front window revealed an odd object stuck in the back of the director’s neck.

That part of his white shirt was completely black. *No, it might actually be red.*

For a few moments, Moe held her breath. “It’s a knife, isn’t it?”

“He is still warm.” Yuminaga touched the director’s hand lightly and then shook his head. “What a mess ...”

“Is he dead?” Yamane asked.

“Yeah ...” Yuminaga answered.

Director Shindo was sitting in the pilot’s seat, bent forward. He was slumped at an angle against the instrument panel at the armrest position right next to him. They

could see his face turned to the side and his eyes closed as if he were asleep.

Moe turned away from his dead face.

For a moment, the horrible night her parents died flashed through her mind, but she quickly brushed the thought away.

She focused her nerves on her vision and tried not to look at the corpse.

She took a breath and observed her surroundings in the cockpit.

“That’s where it’s broken.” Moe pointed to a console on the cockpit ceiling.

Yamane reached for it. The panel in that section of the ceiling was dented, and several cords hung from it. The dials were also broken.

“This is radio,” Yamane said. “I wonder if the killer has a hammer or pliers ...”

“The killer destroyed the radio, right?” Moe confirmed it.

Yamane suddenly looked surprised. “Right ...”

“In short, the police have not yet been notified,” Yuminaga said instead with a calm expression. “This is a troublesome situation. Let’s go back now. We should gather everyone. Yamane-kun.”

“Who did this?!” Yamane exclaimed.

Moe moved back toward the rear seat of the helicopter. She felt a little sick and observed the seats around her to drown it out. There was one map book on a seat. The fuselage had seats for five passengers in addition to the pilot’s seat. As her eyes adjusted, she could see blood on the floor.

Moe jumped out of the helicopter. When she landed on the ground, she had a headache.

Yuminaga and Yamane also got out of the helicopter.

“Is there anyone in this facility who can pilot a helicopter?” Moe asked Yamane.

“No, the director is the only one. This helicopter is his personal property.”

Yamane answered. “As long as the radio is broken, this helicopter is useless now.”

“Um, maybe someone can fix the radio.” Moe gave her opinion.

“Ah, I will have someone look into that,” Yamane said weakly. “Nishinosono-

san, I respect you. How can you make such a calm decision?”

“Sorry. I didn’t mean it ...” Moe apologized.

“No, this is not the time for us to be depressed.” Dr. Yuminaga tapped Yamane on the shoulder. “Deputy Director Yamane. There is a murderer in this facility. Two people have already been killed.”

The three closed the helicopter door and got on the elevator, leaving the dead body of Director Shindo behind.

It must have been impossible for him to stab the knife into that part of the body himself. Director Shindo has been killed by someone just now, Moe thought. And the killer was someone he knew. Perhaps the director was adjusting the radio or communicating with someone else. Even so, there was no way he could have failed to notice the person who opened the door and climbed in. The director definitely saw that person. Yet he had turned his back on the person. Moe’s head was spinning at full speed. After killing the director, the murderer must not have used this elevator to escape. The person used the doorway on the other side. The murderer is inside this facility.

Could this killer be the same person who killed Dr. Magata?

I’m sure it is, Moe intuitively thought.

Then, is the murderer no longer in that Dr. Shiki Magata’s room ...?

“Well ..., Could I have some headache medicine?” Moe asked Dr. Yuminaga in the elevator.

-2-

Deputy Director Yamane, Dr. Yuminaga, and Moe Nishinosono returned to the second basement floor.

The only persons in that room were Ayako Shimada and Saikawa. In the adjacent room, Mochizuki and Hasebe were talking in boredom. Yamane did not say anything, but it was obvious to the others from his expression that something serious had happened.

“What’s going on?” Saikawa stood up and approached Moe.

“Director Shindo was killed on the rooftop,” Moe reported. “Inside a helicopter, that is. The radio was also destroyed.”

Saikawa just nodded and said nothing. Yamane also stared at Saikawa’s face and nodded. There was a loud noise behind him, and Saikawa turned around to see Ayako Shimada, who was sitting in front of the terminal, standing up. A chair was lying on the floor at her feet.

“He may not have been able to contact the police yet.” Yamane finally spoke up. “Indeed ... I wonder what we should do ...”

“Anyway, we should go inform the director’s wife,” Yuminaga said in a low voice. “I’ll go ...”

Dr. Yuminaga got on the elevator again.

“Shimada-kun,” Yamane said in a shouting voice and approached Ayako Shimada, standing by the terminal. “Find out who opened the door on the rooftop.”

Shimada hurriedly got her collapsed chair back and moved the mouse while looking at the display. Saikawa and Moe stood behind her.

“How had he been killed?” Saikawa lit a cigarette.

“A knife to the back of his neck ...” Moe answered. “He remained seated at the pilot’s seat of the helicopter.”

The word “knife” made Ayako Shimada’s shoulders jolt.

“Was there anyone? On the rooftop?” Saikawa immediately asked the next question.

Moe shook her head.

“No one on top of the elevator house?” Saikawa asked.

“Well ...” Moe thought for a moment and then shook her head again. “Did you look there, Yamane-san?”

“No ... No one can climb up there,” Yamane said. “It doesn’t matter. The question is, who went out on the rooftop ...”

Ayako Shimada displayed several windows and was busy tapping on the keyboard.

A list appeared in the upper right window of the screen. Shimada scrolled through it.

“Well, the last person is Yamane-san,” Shimada said in a trembling voice. “It’s 02:14 a.m. ... just a few minutes ago.”

“Who was before that?” Yamane asked.

“That is also Yamane-san. It’s 01:43 a.m. ...” Ayako Shimada answered in a voice that sounded like she was about to cry.

“The door was not used ...” Yamane said immediately. “Check the other exit.”

Shimada moved the window back and clicked the mouse. A new window appeared in the same position, instantly displaying the list.

“It’s Mochizuki-san. Umm, at 01:44 a.m.” Shimada read the list aloud. “The record before that is ... yesterday morning, though ...”

Yamane clicked his tongue. “Weird ... It can’t be. Absolutely not.”

“There is no guarantee that Deborah is perfect.” Ayako Shimada turned and looked at Yamane. “I mean, many strange things are going on ...”

“Don’t say such an illogical thing,” Yamane said in a firm tone. “How can the system run wild so conveniently?”

Tears were streaking from Ayako Shimada’s eyes. Yamane seemed to have finally noticed them. “I’m sorry, I seem to be in a temper ... I apologize ... Call Mizutani, please.”

Shimada nodded and tapped on the keyboard. This time, a small window appeared in the upper left corner of the screen, showing a close-up of Chief Engineer Mizutani’s fat face.

“Where are you now?” Yamane spoke into the screen. Ayako Shimada gave up her seat to Yamane and stood up.

“In my room. I’m having a drink and struggling with the system.” Mizutani said with a laugh on the screen. “You know, it’s safest to stay in my room ... So far, I haven’t found anything wrong with any of the systems. I’m starting to think maybe it’s a hardware problem preventing phone calls and e-mails from working. I doubt that can actually be possible, though. Have you guys contacted the police?”

“I’m not sure,” Yamane replied.

“Not sure? What do you mean? Can’t get a radio signal?” Mizutani shouted so loudly that the sound from the speaker crackled a little.

“The director was murdered,” Yamane said.

“Murdered?” Mizutani’s mouth dropped open. “The director was murdered ... What are you talking about?”

“It means we have two dead bodies now,” Yamane explained. “Anyway, I’d like to talk to you about what we should do. Can you come to this room?”

“But, earlier ... Sorry? The director was ... murdered? By who?” Mizutani’s face became grim. “Where was he killed?”

“On the rooftop. We don’t know who the culprit is.” Yamane said.

Mizutani on the screen stared at them for a while, but eventually he looked away. Then he took the glass in his right hand and drank it all in one gulp. “Okay. I’m coming there after I finish my current work.”

The window showing Mizutani disappeared.

Ayako Shimada was sitting in a chair by the window, her hands over her face, nodding. Before they knew it, Mochizuki and Hasebe had emerged from the adjacent room. They stood silently behind Saikawa and Moe.

“Yamane-san. I think we should check out Ms. Magata’s room.” Mochizuki said as he put his baseball cap back on.

Yamane turned around and glared at Mochizuki with sharp eyes. Then he looked at Saikawa.

“I agree with him.” Saikawa nodded. “We may learn something by doing so. If the police don’t come, we should gather accurate information ourselves as soon as possible. Let’s go inside, being careful not to touch anything.”

“Okay ...” Yamane said. “Let’s go inside.”

Everyone looked at the yellow door in front of them.

Dr. Yuminaga and his wife returned by the elevator.

“Yamane-kun.” Dr. Yuminaga approached Yamane while touching his mustache. “We should not leave Ms. Magata and Director Shindo like that. We have to move them somewhere else.”

“What makes you think so?” Yamane asked.

“It’s an emotional issue,” Yuminaga explained. “It’s common sense to do so, in my opinion ...”

“There is nothing we can do for the dead,” Yamane said. “It’s better to save the wasted effort.”

“Understood. If you say so, I won’t object.” Dr. Yuminaga raised his mouth slightly and smiled. Then he took out pills in a plastic bag from the pocket of his white coat and offered it to Moe. “Here you go, Nishinosono-san.”

“Thank you.” Moe received the pills. It was two pills connected.

“One pill is enough to help,” Yuminaga advised Moe. “If you take two at once, you will be sleepy.”

“I want to be sleepy.” Moe joked.

“How were the people up there?” Yamane asked. “Was Mrs. Shindo doing okay? How was Miss Magata?”

“Ah, they were fine.” Yuminaga nodded. “I briefed them about the director. Mrs. Shindo calmly accepted the situation. Miss Miki Magata was already asleep in the guest room.”

Mrs. Yuminaga nodded beside her husband and added. “We had Miki take a tranquilizer.”

“Yuminaga-sensei, we are going to enter that room,” Yamane explained. “That is, Ms. Magata’s room. Would you come with us?”

“Oh, I see. So that’s the decision you guys came to ...” Yuminaga raised his glasses a little. “Alright. We’re going to find the limbs of Ms. Magata ... It would be better if the ladies don’t follow us.”

Mrs. Yuminaga walked over to Ayako Shimada, sitting in the corner of the room.

“Now, let’s go into that room with me, Yuminaga-sensei, and ... Mochizuki-san,” Yamane said, looking around at everyone. “Hasebe-kun, keep watch at the door. This room will be full of women. Someone might be in the room and come running out.”

“What should I do?” Saikawa asked in a subdued tone.

“Saikawa-sensei, you are ... Let’s see ... What would you like to do?” Yamane asked conversely.

“If I am not intruding, I too would like to see Dr. Shiki Magata’s room,” Saikawa answered immediately. “It may be inappropriate, but I am interested in what kind of life she had for fifteen years.”

No one seemed to have heard the latter half of Saikawa’s words. Moe stood silently near Ayako Shimada, and it seemed somewhat strange to Saikawa that Moe did not offer to go with him. She may have indeed been in a state of mental shock.

In the end, Deputy Director Yamane, Dr. Yuminaga, Mochizuki, and Saikawa opened the yellow door and entered the room.

The aluminum door on the inside opened quietly as Yamane held up his right hand in front of it and said his name.

“How do you open this door from the inside?” Saikawa questioned.

“She does the same. I mean, Ms. Magata does.” Yamane answered.

The room was pitch black, but with Mochizuki’s flashlight, they first discovered the light switch at the back of the room.

Mochizuki walked over to it and pressed the switch with the end of his pen. Once the light was on, they ordered Deborah to leave the aluminum door open, and the four proceeded to the center of the room.

It was a large room with a reception set, and bookcases occupied one wall. Near the door through which they entered was a black wooden object with only a human face, like a part out of a totem pole. *This object must be a folk art from around Africa,* Saikawa thought. *What were the small sofa and the glass and aluminum table for? This room must have never been used for serving guests.* Surprisingly, the bookshelves were lined with encyclopedias, complete works of literature, or illustrated books on art and history

rather than books on information technology.

There was nothing unusual in this reception room. It was a standard reception room, a little spacious. It would not have been surprising if this were in a private residence. The only distinctive feature was that no windows were on any of the four sides of the room. Saikawa had already gotten used to the lack of windows since entering this research institute.

The reception room had two doors. One was an aluminum door, left open, which was the entrance to this super-private residence and the only access route to the outside world. The other door was on the opposite wall. It was a wooden door of sturdy, traditional design.

It was obvious at first glance that there was no space for someone to hide in this reception room. Yamane was about to put his hand on the wooden door. But Yuminaga stopped him, took a handkerchief from his pocket, and turned the door knob.

Outside the reception room was a long, narrow lobby-like space. This time, Yuminaga turned on a light with his handkerchief. There were three doors in addition to the one they had just passed through, and large paintings decorated the rest of the walls. The floors were finished with wood flooring.

They opened the nearest door and turned on the light. It was a large room with pure white walls. At first glance, it looked like a workshop. In the center of the room were three PCs, two workstations, and five displays arranged in a fan shape around a chair. Cords had disappeared into holes in the floor. Another separate, smaller display was in the corner of the room. Upon closer inspection, it was an older television set in design. Three large work desks were lined up against the wall, and on top of them were many pieces of mechanical junk that Saikawa couldn't tell whether they were in the process of being assembled or dismantled. A vise was attached to one of the work desks, and tools such as electric drills, thread saws, screwdrivers, wrenches, and soldering irons were crammed along the walls. Underneath the desk were several large cardboard boxes. A large vacuum cleaner was seen abandoned by the desk.

"Is this the doctor's workroom?" Saikawa asked.

"I guess so ..." Yamane answered.

The security room where Hasebe and Mochizuki were on duty seemed to be just on the other side of the wall of this room. They saw the collection slot of the mailbox on the wall.

There were two small rooms in the back. One was a storage room, the other a white-walled communication room with a videophone attached. The conversation between Dr. Magata and the outside world seemed to have taken place in this small room. In both chambers, they opened the doors and checked. There was no sign of anyone anywhere. After a quick check, the four returned to the lobby.

Moe Nishinosono appeared through the reception room door, which had been left open. When she saw Saikawa's face, Moe smiled and said. "My headache seems to have gone away ..."

Moe then entered the workroom where the men had just walked out. The door to the workroom was also left open.

Yamane then used a handkerchief to open the door on the left at the back of the lobby and immediately turned on the light.

"All the lights are off," Yamane said to himself. 'This room is ... her study ...'"

The room was relatively small, with three walls of bookshelves reaching to the ceiling. A light-looking aluminum ladder was propped up against the bookshelf. In the center was a single, sturdy desk. There was nothing on it. Instead, a Z-light was attached to the end of it, and a blue glass wind chime hung from the middle of its arm. The room was neat and tidy. The bookshelves were nearly full of books. More than half were Western books, and from what Saikawa could see, most of them were technical books. *What was she going to do with even more books?* Saikawa worried needlessly.

"Find anything?" Moe asked.

"No, nothing," Saikawa replied.

Yamane opened the last door facing the lobby.

The room was also dark. When Yamane turned on the light, they saw that it was a dining room and kitchen, the size of a typical apartment building. There was a small table and two chairs. They saw nothing on the table. Beyond the cupboards was a small kitchen. It was lined with a stainless steel sink, oven, microwave, refrigerator,

stove, and dishwasher. The sink was clean and tidy, and no single dish was out of place. On top of the stove was a single, stylishly designed kelt.

Moe came into the room later and was looking around.

There were two doors in the dining room opposite the door through which they had entered.

Yamane carefully opened the door on the right. There was a washstand and a washing machine with a dryer, and behind it was a bathroom. There was also one small storage room, but nothing unusual. The bathroom was old and somewhat dirty but had been neatly cleaned.

“Dr. Magata seemed to like to clean,” Moe said, looking at the bathroom. “She did all the housework by herself, didn’t she?”

“Of course, no butler.” Saikawa joked as he looked at the washstand.

They all returned to the dining room again and decided to open the other door.

“That is the bedroom ...” Moe said from the very back.

Both Dr. Yuminaga and the baseball-cap-wearing Mochizuki waited silently for Yamane to open the door. The only part of Ms. Magata’s residence they had not already seen was beyond that door.

Yamane wrapped the door knob in a handkerchief and was about to turn it. After a moment, he turned around, looked at the others, and said, “It’s locked ...”

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“Is there a lock on the door?” Saikawa mumbled. “What for?”

“This room was not built to confine Ms. Magata from the beginning,” Yamane explained. “It was originally intended to house her parents.”

“Did she lock the door from the outside?” Dr. Yuminaga put his face close to the doorknob. “No ..., this is not the case.”

There was no keyhole on that doorknob.

“I guess it is supposed to be locked from inside the room,” Yamane said.

“Are you saying there is someone inside the room?” Mochizuki said, putting his baseball cap back on. Saikawa felt he understood a little about when Mochizuki put his cap back on backward.

“Should we break it open?” Dr. Yuminaga suggested.

Yamane beat the door repeatedly to see what was going on. It did not seem to be a very sturdy door.

“Wait!” Moe spoke. “Be quiet ...”

They heard a noise from inside the room.

Everyone held their breath.

It was a tiny human voice from inside the room.

“Who is it?” Someone said. It was a woman’s voice.

“That’s Dr. Magata’s voice ...” Moe whispered. Her voice was trembling.

“It’s Yamane! Please unlock the door!” Yamane shouted.

There was the sound of someone touching the door inside the room.

Yamane stepped back a bit. Dr. Yuminaga had his hand over his mustache.

There was a light click near the door.

But the door did not open.

A tense moment passed.

“Are you Dr. Magata?” Yamane asked.

“Who are you?” They heard the same tiny voice as before from inside the room.

Yamane gripped the doorknob again with the handkerchief in his hand.

The doorknob was turned, and the door was slowly pushed toward the interior.

The room was lit.

No one came out of the room.

They all held their breath for a while and waited, but nothing happened.

It quickly appeared from behind the door that was opened toward the interior.

“Who are you?” It asked the same question again. It was exactly the same intonation.

“A robot ...” Yamane sighed.

It was a cylinder-shaped robot about a meter tall. It had two large tires. It had no head, and two small camera-like objects moved above its neck. It had only one arm, but it was very long, bent into three pieces, and protruding from its back.

“Who are you?” Yamane asked the robot.

“I am Michiru.” The robot replied. Its voice was much closer to a human voice than an electronic voice like Deborah’s.

They all entered that spacious room. There was a short-haired carpet all around, one large sofa, and one low table. There were a few small, deflated balloons lying on the floor. A large stuffed bear was sitting on the couch with its legs outstretched.

“Wow, this is Lego ... Nostalgic,” Moe said, peering into a plastic container next to the sofa. The container was full of small toy blocks: red, white, yellow, and blue. Also standing nearby was a doll assembled from thousands or tens of thousands of those blocks. It was a British Kingsguard in a high hat, literally a toy soldier.

“This toy was purchased by the lady some years ago,” Mochizuki said. “I remember I put it in the mailbox several times.” His cap had somehow returned to its usual orientation.

The bed was at the back of the room. It was covered with a patchwork cover and had a small stuffed polar bear on it. Right next to the bed was an antique wooden table with a sewing machine on it. She must have sit on the bed when she used the sewing machine.

“The lady was doing patchwork, right?” Moe said, looking around the sewing machine. One rattan chest of drawers was next to the sewing machine.

Yamane went to open the closet door at the back of the room. Moe followed him and looked in it but soon returned.

“Not a lot of clothes for a woman,” Moe commented.

“That should be so ...” Saikawa nodded. “She did not go out, and there’s no season here. It’s probably about one-tenth of what Nishinosono-kun has in

clothing.”

“That’s less than one-thirtieth,” Moe replied matter-of-factly.

Yamane went back to the robot, which had stopped near the door.

“Michiru,” Yamane spoke to it.

“Yes, I am Michiru.”

“That robot’s voice is Dr. Magata’s, right?” Moe said as she lifted the bear doll from the sofa.

“Where is Dr. Magata?” Yamane asked the robot.

“Dr. Magata?” The robot asked conversely.

“What happened to Dr. Shiki Magata?” Yamane asked again.

“What happened?” The robot asked with the same intonation.

“This guy is useless ...” Yamane seemed to have given up. “Did this robot lock the door?”

Yamane was observing the magic hand-like arm extending from the robot’s back.

“Since it could open the door, it could close it as well,” Yuminaga said.

The inside knob of the bedroom door had a key that could be turned to the side and locked.

“There is nowhere for someone to hide, isn’t there?” Saikawa said.

“What about the cardboard boxes under the desk in that room?” Moe asked as she put the stuffed bear back on the sofa.

“I’ll go take a look at that.” Mochizuki, who was standing near the door, said and walked back through the lobby.

“This room is too clean.” Saikawa gave his opinion. “Everything is neat and tidy. It doesn’t look like there was a sudden mishap. Dr. Magata may have always been like this, though ...”

Everyone returned to the lobby.

They peeked into the workroom and found Mochizuki moving cardboard boxes under the work desk to examine them.

“It was completely empty.” Mochizuki stood up and shook his head. “After all, there is no one here, is there? There shouldn’t be, from the very beginning ...”

“Is it possible that the lady had to go through that when no one else was there?” Dr. Yuminaga told Mochizuki.

The same argument had happened before, but the belligerent Mochizuki was not about to go against Dr. Yuminaga.

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Mizutani came into the lobby from the reception room, shaking his fat belly.

“Wasn’t anyone inside?” Mizutani asked breathlessly.

“Yeah ... there was no one inside,” Yamane answered. Mochizuki also looked at Mizutani and smiled happily.

“We can’t find her arms or legs ...” Dr. Yuminaga added. “Well, I can’t say for sure until we do a better search ...”

Saikawa had been wondering about that for a long time. Moe, too, looked at Saikawa’s face and wanted to say something.

Mizutani looked into Ms. Magata’s workroom and then walked into it.

He brought his face close to the five computers in the middle of the room, then looked at the others and said, “These are all shut down ... Not even the hard drives are working.”

“Try booting them up.” Yamane asked Mizutani.

Computers are usually turned off when not in use. Therefore, it was not unnatural that the three computers used by Ms. Magata were turned off. The two workstations, however, were not. Computers in this class are usually rarely turned off. It takes time to get the system up and running, and both machines and systems are designed to run 24 hours a day.

Mizutani touched the switches on the two workstations. Then he also turned on the computers. Saikawa saw that one of the workstations was from HP company, and the other was from a Japanese company. Both were quite old models, 4-5 years

old, but when they were released, they cost more than 10 million yen each. Two computers were Macintosh, and the other was an unmarked one that Saikawa had never seen before. They were probably machines that Dr. Magata bought the units separately and assembled herself.

Workstations took a long time to boot up. Green English letters and numbers streamed from bottom to top on the screen. The red words “Red Magic” appeared several times during the process.

All the computers were up and running within a minute or so. The display on the unmarked one went to a black terminal mode screen and stopped. A schedule calendar filled the screen on one Mac while the other waited in its usual Finder.

“Should we be allowed to touch it?” Saikawa pointed out. “I mean, our fingerprints will be on the keyboard, though ...”

“Ah, indeed it is ..., I have already touched that one,” Mizutani said, looking at the workstation display. “I’ll leave the computer over there to you. Yamane-san. You don’t mind if we touch it again, do you?”

“I have to admit that.” Yamane nodded.

Moe also came next to Saikawa and touched the computer. The computers were arranged in radial rows so that Ms. Magata could operate them alone, so they had to work in cramped quarters.

“Seriously?!” Mizutani shouted. “This one is amazing. This is ... Version 6 of Red Magic.”

“Version 6?” Moe looked back and asked.

“Right, this research institute’s system is still on Version 4.” Mizutani explained. “I heard that the lady was making the next version, though ... I was surprised that there is a Version 6. So I guess that means Version 5 is already completed ...”

Saikawa first looked at the computer screen showing the schedule. Although it was a schedule, almost nothing was written on the calendar. It was already past midnight, so the date had already changed. When he opened the part of yesterday’s date, he found a single line of a message written there.

Everything turns to F.

“Everything turns to F?” When Saikawa said, Yamane peeked at the screen.

“What is this ‘F’ about?” Dr. Yuminaga, standing behind him, questioned.

“F of finish ...?” Moe gave her opinion.

They looked everywhere randomly but could find no other writing on the calendar.

Saikawa then looked for a file of writings. The hard disk had a capacity of one gigabyte, but it was only half used.

A folder on the desktop named “Document” contained only one text named “Read Me.”

Saikawa double-clicked it and displayed its contents on the screen.

“What the!” Deputy Director Yamane exclaimed. All eyes turned to the display in front of Saikawa.

I left no trace of my life on my Mac. No need to waste your time, so I hereby warn you. The same is true for WS. However, I will not erase only the new compiler and Red Magic Ver. 6 as my last present to you.

Shiki Magata

I disagreed, but I had no choice. I couldn’t bear to leave Michiru, who most wanted to go. That is my only concern. But I have something to do.

Kishio Kurimoto

I did all the room cleaning. I also removed mold in the bathroom. I want to see the ocean for the first time in a long time. Don’t get the wedding dress dirty.

Suma Sasaki

“What the hell is this?” Dr. Yuminaga said as he stroked his beard. “Is this some kind of a joke?”

“Kishio Kurimoto and Suma Sasaki ... Who are they?” Saikawa asked.

After a moment of silence, Yamane answered. “They are different personalities in Ms. Magata ... They are characters she created herself.”

“Why are their last names different?” Moe questioned.

“I don’t know such a thing,” Yamane said. “I suspect they come from different places, too ...”

“Perhaps you are right,” Yuminaga responded. “They are self-formed because of their different personalities. Because different personalities need different environments, they inevitably form personalities with different origins, ages, *etc.* This is a generalization, though ...”

“Apparently, as Dr. Magata warned, there are no other text files left,” Saikawa said, staring at the screen. “It seems that the files were all organized the same way the room was organized.”

The other Macintosh also had only one <Read Me> file with the same contents in the documents folder.

“There is nothing left on this one either.” Mizutani, who examined the workstation a bit, said. “Did she erase everything except Red Magic and the compiler, or did she take it out on a cartridge hard drive?”

Saikawa was reading the messages left by Ms. Magatas (plural would be appropriate in this sense) on the screen again. Moe put her finger on the screen and said, “We can read these kanji characters as Michiru, right?” Her finger was pointing to the kanji characters for Michiru in the text.

“Ah, I see ...” Saikawa nodded. “That is the robot we just met ...”

“I wonder if that’s the doll?” Moe mumbled to herself.

“What do you mean? The doll?” Mochizuki asked.

Moe did not answer.

For some time afterward, Mizutani tapped on the keyboard to examine the

computer's contents. As for the computer, Yamane faced the screen instead of Saikawa. However, neither of them could find anything, just as Shiki Magata's message had said.

They all decided to leave the room, go through the reception room and out.

"How did she deal with the garbage?" Saikawa asked Yamane as they walked through the reception room. "During her time here, garbage came out every day, right?"

"The dust chute has to be somewhere in this residence," Yamane answered.

"I saw it in the kitchen," Moe said.

"The waste from there is transported by conveyor belts to an electric furnace in the processing room at the north end of the institute. It is not just this room but all rooms. There the garbage is incinerated. It is fully automatic."

"I'll go take a look at that in a moment." Saikawa stopped. "You all go ahead."

They all left that room through the aluminum door. Saikawa caught a glimpse of Hasebe and Ayako Shimada's faces outside. Saikawa returned to the lobby and headed for the dining kitchen. All the doors were left open, so he could pass through without touching any of them. Moe was following behind him.

There was an iron lid on the wall next to the refrigerator at the end of the kitchen with a handle. Saikawa took out a handkerchief and pulled the handle. The mouth of the dust chute, which opened at the top, was about 30 centimeters wide. Even with the lid fully open, the depth of the opening was less than 20 centimeters. *It is not possible to throw away anything too large from here.*

"You can cut them into small pieces and throw them away if they are about the size of a human arm and leg." Moe suddenly said from behind him, which made Saikawa startle.

"Nishinosono-kun. Do you know the word delicacy?" Saikawa said to Moe.

"That means an unusual taste, right?" Moe answered. The speed of her mind in these situations was astounding.

Saikawa looked at his watch. It was about 15 minutes past 4:00 a.m.

"Already ... It will be brightening up the outdoors by now," Saikawa said. "We've

been up all night.”

“I wonder what those guys at the campsite will think when they wake up?” Moe said, smiling.

“I knew ... that Dr. Magata’s killer left this room the day before yesterday or even earlier.” Saikawa went on as he returned to the lobby. “Let’s hold off for a while on how the murderer got into the room and how he got out. At least for now, I cannot think about it.”

“I agree.” Moe nodded. The two of them stopped in the lobby. “Sensei, isn’t this kind of exciting?”

“Did you ever have a hobby like that?” Saikawa smiled slightly.

“You know, isn’t it mysterious?” Moe looked at Saikawa upward.

“I’m just shaking off the fire that’s coming down on me. It’s as if I were Nemuri Kyoshiro (a famous hero of Japanese *jidaigeiki* drama).”

“Nemuri Kyoshiro? Who is that?”

“However, the murderer is ...” Saikawa said thoughtfully. “The murderer killed Dr. Magata and cut off her limbs. Then ... the guy cleared her room, erased the evidence, and deleted all the computer data. As you guessed, the killer probably dumped the severed limb down the dust chute. I’m guessing the bathroom is where the guy did the mutilations. It couldn’t have been anywhere else. Then the guy cleaned up and ...”

“So, the perpetrator was at this residence for quite a long time.” Moe had her arms crossed.

“But the culprit was on the rooftop earlier.” Saikawa quickly pointed this out. “You went to the rooftop with Yamane-san both times, didn’t you? When Miki Magata-san came here, the director was still alive. But when you returned to the rooftop again, he was killed. It was only within about 30 minutes. How did the murderer get to the rooftop ...? Or maybe the murderer was on the rooftop from the beginning and is still there.”

“Do you think it is the same killer for the murder of Ms. Magata and this time as well?”

“I don’t know.” Saikawa shook his head. “There’s just so much I don’t know ... It’s a topsy-turvy thing, isn’t it? It pains me to play my trump card at a time like this.”

“What is it? A trump card?”

“I mean ... This is not my specialty.”

The two walked through the reception room and exited the aluminum and yellow doors.

Yamane, Mizutani, and Yuminaga were standing in the corner of the room, whispering to each other. Ayako Shimada and Mrs. Yuminaga were sitting in chairs by the opposite wall.

When Saikawa thought he couldn’t find Mochizuki and Hasebe, those two appeared from the corridor. To Saikawa’s surprise, they entered, pushing the object covered with a sheet. It was the dead body of Ms. Magata on the wagon-shaped robot P1. Moe turned away and looked the other way. Ayako Shimada also covered her eyes.

“We decided to put it back in the room.” Yamane explained to Saikawa.

Mochizuki and Hasebe carefully carried the object inside the open yellow door. They had apparently left it in the reception room. Eventually, when the two guys emerged from the room, the yellow door was closed by Yamane.

“Let’s keep it that way until the police arrive,” Yamane mumbled in a whisper. “Now ... tell everyone in this facility to join the electronic meeting at 5:00 a.m. That’s 40 minutes from now. Shimada-kun, please contact them. I felt like taking a shower.”

“Mochizuki-kun, Hasebe-kun, and Mizutani-kun. Can you guys help me carry the director’s body on the rooftop into the room?” When Yuminaga said this, his wife also got up and walked toward them. “We can’t leave his body in the helicopter. You know, the temperature would get hotter as the sun rises.”

Dr. Yuminaga and his wife, Mochizuki, Hasebe, and Mizutani took the elevator up.

Ayako Shimada said she would return to her room and went out into the hallway.

Only Yamane, Saikawa, and Moe were left in the room.

“Sensei, will you two come to my room? You guys must be exhausted.” Yamane said as he walked out into the hallway. “Or are you two going back to the campsite from now?”

“We can’t go back to the campground,” Saikawa said. “You know, we are also witnesses to the incident ... When the police come, we will have a lot to talk about.”

“When do you say the police will be here?” Yamane said, forcing a smile, but he too seemed quite tired. “In the worst-case scenario, Sensei, your students might have to come here, too. The boat won’t come, so you guys won’t be able to return home. You guys only have enough food for three days, don’t you?”

“Does this facility have enough food?” Moe asked.

“Yes, of course, we have enough food for several weeks. If they lose contact with this research institute, someone will notice maybe in three or four days ...” Yamane said weakly.

“You go ahead.” Saikawa said to Yamane. “We are waiting here for Yuminaga-san and others to come down. It would be bad to leave no one here, would it? We will visit Yamane-san’s room later.”

“Do you guys find where my room is?” Yamane asked.

“Even if I don’t find it, she will,” Saikawa replied. Moe nodded beside him.

Yamane went out into the hallway. Saikawa lit a cigarette and watched his back.

“They all look exhausted,” Moe whispered.

They walked to where the chairs were. Saikawa brought an ashtray nearby.

“This situation is kind of like ‘Star Trek,’ don’t you think?” Saikawa said as he sat down in his chair and exhaled smoke. “I mean the atmosphere here ... Is it because that Dr. Yuminaga looks like Dr. McCoy?”

“Yuminaga-sensei is not that old, I think,” Moe said with a laugh.

“I’m talking about a version of ‘Star Trek’ from a different era than the one you know.” Saikawa smiled. “Are you okay, Nishinosono-kun? You must be exhausted. This has become a really tough seminar trip, right?”

“I am fine. Sensei ... I’m sure you’re the tired one, aren’t you?” Moe said as she crossed her legs.

“Yes, but it might be a little better than macadamia nuts ...” Saikawa said seriously.

After thinking for a moment, Moe asked. “Macadamia nuts? What does that mean?”

“Haha, it doesn’t mean anything.” Saikawa laughed. “Meaningless jokes are the best.”

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Moe sat in a chair, her arms crossed, silent and thoughtful. Saikawa was slowly smoking a cigarette and unconsciously counting the number of sprinklers on the ceiling.

Saikawa tried to sort out in his mind the incredible reality of what had happened in the past few hours, but he had difficulty focusing his thoughts. It was only the second time in his life that he had experienced such a dramatic night. The first, of course, had been the night the plane carrying his mentor, Dr. and Mrs. Nishinosono, had failed to land and burst into flames. That was also in the summer. Saikawa had come to the airport with Moe, a high school student, to pick up the husband and wife. At that time, Moe cried aloud. The devil’s flash rose in the distance and the sound of the explosion ... Both were sights he did not want to remember. Since then, Saikawa had never talked with Moe about that night.

Saikawa lightly shook his head and switched his thoughts.

Two people were killed. One was killed in a completely locked room ... Yes, a locked room ... If I remember right, there is a term like that. The other, by contrast, was murdered outdoors. But both victims had in common that they were members of the Magata family, the biological daughter and brother of Dr. Sachiro Magata, who died 15 years earlier. Who stands to gain from this case ...?

Shiki Magata’s room was the perfectly locked room on top of all this. No one could have had access to that room. Also, access to the rooftop where Director Shindo was killed is seemingly impossible.

“Who wrote those messages?” Suddenly, Moe opened her mouth. “I mean those three messages that were left on the computer.”

“At least, I don’t think the person who wrote that was Dr. Shiki Magata,” Saikawa responded immediately.

“Why?” Moe looked surprised. “Are you saying that the murderer wrote those messages?”

“Maybe so.” Saikawa nodded. “If Dr. Magata left those messages, she must not have needed to leave her name there.”

“But Sensei,” Moe countered. “Since the three of them needed to leave those messages, it could be that she wanted to distinguish whose words they were, right?”

“No, that idea is somewhat unnatural,” Saikawa said. “First of all, if it was the doctor herself who wrote that message, it’s as if she expected to be killed herself. And ... if Dr. Magata really had multiple personalities and each personality left a message, they would have written a longer one. I don’t think it’s natural for them to write one word at a time in such a short period of time. The message was left by a murderer. It was too well done.”

Saikawa said so himself, and then the words “too well done” still stuck with him.

“Hmm ... So what does that ‘Everything turns to F’ phrase mean?” Moe tilted her head. That was the words that were written on that computer calendar.

“Who knows ... I don’t think that meant the finish as you guessed ...” Saikawa responded. “The fact that the F was capitalized bothers me. The caps key on the keyboard wasn’t locked, so the person would have to press shift when typing uppercase letters. So the fact that the person took the trouble to capitalize F may mean something. Is it a proper noun?”

“Proper noun?” Moe repeated the word. “I wonder what the ‘everything’ means ...”

They heard a slight noise from the elevator, and soon Dr. Yuminaga and others emerged from its doors.

“Oh, Sensei and young lady, you two are still here?” Yuminaga said. “Would you like to have a drink in my room?”

“Ah, no, thank you.” Saikawa stood up and said. “We are going to Yamane-san’s room.”

“I see ...” Yuminaga raised his hand lightly as he said so and went out into the hallway with his wife.

Mizutani, together with Mochizuki and Hasebe, walked toward the room next door.

“Well, we’re leaving now.” Saikawa said to Mizutani. “Will you stay here, Mizutani-san?”

“Haha, I just thought I would have a drink here.” Mizutani said amiably. “I got thirsty doing all the hard work. I’m so tired. You know, I’ve never carried a dead body before.”

Saikawa and Moe went out into the hallway. The hallway lights were working properly as they moved.

“Could someone hide inside that P1 robot?” Moe asked while walking.

“Impossible. If the robot is empty, you might be able to get inside, but you would have to be as soft as a Chinese acrobatic troupe.”

“Then no one can hide inside the robot named Michiru that we met earlier,” Moe mumbled.

“Your idea is quite interesting.” Saikawa appreciated Moe’s opinion. “You considered the possibility that the murderer hid in the robot and got out, didn’t you? Hmm, that might make sense ...”

“What makes sense?”

“I mean, that hypothesis would explain why the killer put the wedding dress on Dr. Magata’s corpse and put it on the robot to scare everyone.”

“How did she procure that wedding dress?” Moe said as she recalled. “Did Dr. Magata make that one herself? I found a sewing machine in her room ...”

“Well ... While you were on the rooftop, Hasebe-san told me that the doctor bought it three years ago. I heard she had ordered it from a catalog.” Saikawa said.

“How come?” Moe looked incredulous.

“How can I know that? Perhaps she wanted to try it on once ...”

“I can’t believe she wanted to wear something so ostentatious,” Moe said.

“Oh? But you were always dressed like a doll in elementary school.”

“Sensei!” Moe suddenly stopped. Her face had turned red. “Do you remember such things? How rude!”

“About what?” Saikawa was surprised. He didn’t know why she was in a bad mood. “Did something offend you?”

Moe said nothing more. Saikawa, too, decided not to think about it.

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They knocked on the door of Yamane’s room on the basement floor.

“Who is it?” As he heard Yamane’s voice, Saikawa said his name, and the door slid quietly open.

Yamane was sitting behind the large table, holding a cup of coffee in his hand. The person sitting on the front side of the table looked at Saikawa and Moe. It was the wife of Director Shindo.

Yumiko Shindo held her mouth with a handkerchief. Her eyes were bloodshot, and she was pale.

“Oh, we’re going to ... wander around the area for a bit,” Saikawa said quickly.

“No, don’t do that.” Mrs. Shindo said. “There is no need for you to be concerned about me. The more lively, the better.”

Saikawa and Moe entered the room apologetically. Yamane asked them what they wanted to drink and disappeared toward the kitchen.

“What should we say to you ...?” Saikawa said as he sat down.

“Sensei, your group came here at a terrible time, right?” Mrs. Shindo was trying to smile bravely. “Oh, my, how did this happen ...? So ... but I wonder if I could give up if I just assumed my husband died in a helicopter accident ...? You know, that was his only hobby ... I had always thought that he would die in an accident at some point ... He died in his favorite helicopter ... He might have been happy ... I want to

think so.”

Would he have been happy even though he had been killed ...?

Saikawa thought so but could not say so out loud. He nodded to Mrs. Shindo.

“Madam, may I ask you about an incident that happened fifteen years ago?” Moe said.

Saikawa glared at Moe and tried to stop her, but Moe did not look at him.

“Sure, Nishinosono-san. I would feel better if we were talking about something else.” Mrs. Shindo nodded.

Yamane returned with two steaming cups of coffee in both hands.

“Madam, did you see the scene where Dr. Shiki Magata murdered her parents?” Moe asked a straightforward question.

“Yes, I did.” Mrs. Shindo answered. “When I went there, my husband was ... he was just about to stop her.”

“So, you did not see the murder taking place?” Moe asked.

“Yes, Dr. Magata was ... I mean, Dr. Sachiro Magata, Shiki-san’s father, was stabbed and about to fall. Shiki-san was covered in blood and holding a knife. She was covered in returned blood ... Oh ...” Mrs. Shindo looked down but quickly regained her composure and sighed. “My husband jumped on Shiki-san from behind and stopped her.”

“At that time, Mrs. Magata was already ...?”

“Yes, Mrs. Magata was already on the floor. She was stabbed first.” Mrs. Shindo explained.

“Were they both killed instantly?” Moe questioned again. Saikawa felt this was not a question that should be asked under such circumstances. *But, is it a case of “fight fire with fire”? It might have an unexpected effect.*

“No, Mrs. Magata died that night and Dr. Magata the next day.” Mrs. Shindo said.

“What was Dr. Shiki like at that time?” Moe asked, holding her coffee cup in both hands.

“She had an unfocused look in her eyes and was in a state of abandonment. I

remember well that when he collapsed, Dr. Sachiro shouted to her, 'I will never forgive you.' At the sound of his voice, Shiki-san suddenly looked as if she was possessed by something, screamed once, and then laughed hysterically. It was a very frightening look. Even now, I am horrified."

"In which room did the incident take place?" Saikawa asked this time. He was halfway through a cup of hot coffee.

"It's the residence on that second basement floor." Mrs. Shindo looked at Saikawa and answered.

"No, I mean, which room in that residence," Saikawa asked again.

"Ah, you have seen the inside of that residence, haven't you? So ..., that was ... at the first room in residence." Mrs. Shindo replied. "That was when they were only halfway through the move. My husband and I had just come to visit this facility for pleasure. We were working at the hospital in Tokyo at the time."

"Where was Miki Magata-san? I mean, at the time when the incident happened." Saikawa asked the next question.

"She was not at this facility." Mrs. Shindo said and brought the cup to her mouth. "Miki-san was at Dr. Magata's parents' home ... That was in Yamanashi Prefecture. She stayed there all the time. Because she was still very young. I only met her a couple of times when they all came to Tokyo."

"Madam, please allow me to ask a very rude question ..." Moe said indifferently. "Now that the director is dead, what will happen to this research institute, the Magata family property, etc.?"

"I am not interested in those issues, so there is no need for your concern." Surprisingly, Mrs. Shindo's tone was calm, and she even smiled. "The property of the Magata family belonged to Shiki-san, so now that she has passed away, it belongs to her sister Miki-san. The same goes for this research institute. My husband's property was only that helicopter. But it will be mine. I will have to take care of that one from now on ... It was so like him to die in the cockpit of a helicopter ..."

Dr. Yuminaga had just told Saikawa that Director Shindo had been adopted by the Shindo family. Perhaps the Shindos are more wealthy than the Magatas, Saikawa

imagined.

“The word cockpit means coffin,” Saikawa said. But he quickly reflected that it was an inappropriate remark.

“What did Miki-san say? What will happen to this research institute in the future?” Yamane said worriedly. “Of course, Ms. Shiki’s death is fatal damage to this research institute ...”

“Well ...” Mrs. Shindo replied calmly. “Let us all think about that from now on. Miki-san said she intended to return to the US immediately. She has no intention of living in Japan. Oh, that reminded me of something ...”

“Did she say something important?” Yamane asked.

“Miki-san’s bag is still on the helicopter.” Mrs. Shindo explained. “I forgot that she asked me to retrieve it. Yamane-san, can you do that later ...? She said she had an important souvenir for Shiki-san.”

“Where could she place her luggage on the helicopter?” Moe asked Yamane.

“Umm, on the back seat,” Yamane responded.

“It wasn’t there.” Moe shook her head. “I looked carefully at the cabin earlier. If there were a bag there, I would have noticed it.”

“Well, I will look for that later.” Yamane nodded.

Saikawa looked at the racing cars on the table. There were also children’s toys in Ms. Shiki Magata’s bedroom.

“Did Dr. Shiki like playing with blocks as a child?” Saikawa asked Mrs. Shindo. “I saw many blocks in her bedroom.”

“I’m not sure ... That lady had the same, no, more abilities than an adult since she was a child.” Mrs. Shindo sighed again. “She wouldn’t have had time to play. She was locked up for a long time after that incident, and I might have felt sorry for her.”

“Did she not play with dolls or something?” Moe asked this time.

“No, she did not. When she was a little girl, I rarely saw her with such things.” Mrs. Shindo answered. “She bought them after she became an adult, all of them ... I

know what Shiki-san bought because I saw the reports about everything she bought. There was a stuffed bear, wasn't there?"

"Do you know the names Kishio Kurimoto and Suma Sasaki?" Moe mentioned the names that were left on the computer.

"Yes, of course. Everyone else should know that." Mrs. Shindo smiled. "The other one would be Michiru-san, right? The name Michiru is written with two kanji characters indicating "road" and "flow," respectively. Shiki-san sometimes pretended to be those three people. I heard she has been doing so since she was a little girl. It has been her habit since she was about five years old."

"Has she?" Moe looked a little surprised. "All three personalities?"

"No, only the personality of Kishio Kurimoto-san." Mrs. Shindo said. "Kishio-san was the name of Shiki-san's deceased elder brother."

Saikawa was surprised by these words. "Did Dr. Shiki Magata have an elder brother?"

"Um, he died soon after he was born. He and Shiki-san were twins ... So, she started pretending to be her deceased twin brother as soon as she could remember. You know, she was a genius girl. She thought it would make her parents happy. But ... why was his last name not Magata ...? I don't know the reason. I just heard it all from my husband ..."

"So, what is the origin of the personality of Suma Sasaki-san?" Moe leaned forward and asked the question.

"That personality, too, had a ... model." Mrs. Shindo chuckled. She had calmed down a lot already. "It was the one who had taken care of Shiki-san when she had gone to college and work in the US. Even though she was working for a company, Shiki-san was still at the age of a junior high school student. Her parents had been in Japan, so they had lived in the US for five to six years, just the two of them. The woman was, well, a hired housekeeper. Her name was Suma Morikawa-san. The kanji characters for her name Suma were different, though. The last name is completely different, right?"

"What happened to Morikawa-san after that?" Moe asked.

"She was killed in a traffic accident there." Mrs. Shindo answered immediately.

“The shock caused Shiki-san to quit her job in the US and return here.”

“From then on, she began to imitate her?” Moe said.

“Umm ... It is a little different from imitating. She creates the personality within herself. It is not a superficial level of imitation. I think Shiki-san’s brain is too huge for one personality ...”

“So, then, who is Michiru Magata-san?” Moe mentioned the third name.

“That’s the name of her doll. As I recall, it is ...” Mrs. Shindo thought for a moment and then said. “When she moved here, she brought one big doll with her. She didn’t seem to love it that much, though. Right, it was about fifty centimeters big ... The doll’s name was Michiru.”

“What happened to it? I mean, the doll.” Moe asked.

“It was in that room.”

“That room?”

“Right ..., it was the room where she stabbed her parents with a knife. It’s the first room of her residence. When Dr. Sachiro Magata was stabbed and fell, it fell from the top of the bookcase. So ..., that doll fell right next to where the doctor collapsed.”

Saikawa also leaned forward. All three listened to Mrs. Shindo’s story. He replayed in his mind the tragedy that had occurred fifteen years earlier in that reception room.

“So the doll is ... no longer here?” Moe asked.

“It got so bloody we threw it away.” When Mrs. Shindo said this, she suddenly remembered reality, looked down, and closed her eyes.

Chapter 5: The Gray Boundary

-1-

Yumiko Shindo left Yamane's room. It was a few minutes before 5 a.m. Yamane seemed to have given up on taking a shower.

Yamane went to the terminal display and kept typing on the keyboard, sending messages to the staff in the building. The contents of the messages were extremely rough: that there had been an accident in the research institute, that there had been a fatality, and that the facility was currently unable to make contact with the outside world due to unexplained problems.

Yamane typed on the keyboard that he would take questions except about the dead. Then, sentences appeared on display one after another.

> Are the police coming here?

So far, we have not been able to contact the police, but they will come eventually.

> What about food and energy?

For the time being, yes. The institute's operation and its staff lives will not be affected.

> I received external e-mails here. Why can't I send an e-mail from here?

It seems to be a software problem, but the cause is unknown. We are currently investigating.

> How long will this last?

We expect it to last at most three days.

> Does anyone in the research institute have a radio?

If anyone does, please contact Yamane.

> There should be a radio in the director's helicopter.

That radio is out of order. If anyone has the skills to fix it, please let Yamane

know.

> Why is Deputy Director Yamane in charge? Is the director absent?

The director is not here. So, we cannot use the director's helicopter.

> May I step out of the research institute?

You may, but you should stay in your room as long as possible.

> Is there any danger? Is the cause of the trouble artificial?

It is man-made. I cannot say there is no danger.

> What should I do about ongoing work?

If possible, I would like you to continue.

The words on the screen were still flowing. It seemed that Yamane was not the only one answering. Perhaps Chief Mizutani and Dr. Yuminaga were also supporting Yamane.

In another window, a roll call of the staff in the research institute was conducted and all were identified. It turned out that everyone who should be in this facility was. It was also confirmed that no one other than Yamane had entered or left the entrance of the research institute between yesterday and this morning.

“How many people are on staff at this research institute in total?” Saikawa asked Yamane.

“Well, fifty-two of us,” Yamane answered while tapping his keyboard. “This number excludes Saikawa-sensei, Nishinosono-san, and Miki Magata-san. Fifty-two include Director Shindo and Ms. Shiki Magata, so exactly fifty people are alive. All fifty of them could be confirmed.”

The similar questions continued for about an hour until there was an electronic beep, and the text suddenly appeared in another window on display.

This is Ayako Shimada.

Deputy Director, I just remembered that I have an appointment to meet someone tomorrow at 1:00 p.m.

She is a reporter from a women's magazine, and she is coming to this island to do an interview.

So, a boat will come to the island at that time tomorrow.

"We seem to be saved." Saikawa saw this and said from behind Yamane.

Yamane looked back at Saikawa. "Yes, that's right. Suppose we send someone to the port then. We can contact the outside world."

"So, no boats are coming in for the day?" Moe confirmed. "Shouldn't someone be at the port?"

"It would be useless. The probability of someone coming to this island by chance and without notice is close to zero. We have to be patient for one more day ..."
Yamane responded. "Which means the police won't come until tomorrow afternoon."

Saying so, Yamane simply replied to Ayako Shimada's e-mail that he understood.

Yamane notified that another electronic meeting for all staff members in the office would be held in four hours, and the early morning meeting ended at nearly 7:00 a.m.

"In this electronic meeting, you don't know who is speaking, do you?" Moe said to Yamane, who was lighting a cigarette.

"Yes, everything is recorded. It was just in a mode that did not show the speaker earlier." Yamane stood up and walked over to the table. "The time required is shorter than a verbal meeting. And we don't have to say anything unnecessary ... Besides, we don't have a room in this research institute to accommodate all fifty staff members."

"It seems that the loss of the director was conveyed to them in a nuanced way," Saikawa said.

"Perhaps it will be conveyed soon. I don't intend to keep it a secret." Yamane responded.

“The murderer may have just overheard the meeting.” Moe expressed her opinion.

“Well, I cannot say a sure thing ...” Yamane shrugged. “I feel like eating something. Sensei ... if you don’t mind toast, I can prepare it ...”

“Thank you.” Saikawa bowed lightly.

“Would you like some, Nishinosono-san?” Yamane looked at Moe and asked.

Moe did not answer but stared at the racing cars on the table.

“Nishinosono-kun,” Saikawa, beside her, lightly touched her shoulder.

“That door ...” Moe had a vacant expression on her face. “The inner door of Dr. Magata’s residence ... I mean, the aluminum door inside the yellow door ... That was left open all the time ... Where is that door controlled?”

“Oh, that door ...” Yamane smiled. “That’s Deborah’s jurisdiction. Only authorized personnel are allowed to open it from outside the residence. It can also be opened from inside Ms. Magata’s room. However, it cannot be opened by anyone other than her. She can put her hand there ...”

Having said that much, Yamane cut off his words. Then his expression suddenly froze.

“I thought so,” Saikawa said to Moe in a slow tone.

“Oh? Sensei, did you realize it?” Moe exclaimed.

“It was the reason why I rejected the hypothesis that the killer cut off the limbs of the corpse due to the load capacity of the P1 robot,” Saikawa said in a calm tone. “I just thought it made the most sense.”

“So the killer needed Dr. Magata’s right hand to open that door. Is it camouflage to have both hands cut off?” Moe questioned.

“Did the killer use Ms. Magata’s severed right hand to open that door?” Yamane finally spoke up. “I can’t believe it. No way ... for something like that?”

“No, I don’t think it is not only for that door,” Saikawa said.

“Are you saying the murderer is wandering the premises with the woman’s right hand?”

“Maybe so ...” Saikawa nodded.

Moe rolled her eyes and kept her little mouth slightly open. “I can’t believe it ...”

“It’s unbelievable all the things that are happening.” Saikawa said plainly.

“Did the killer use Dr. Magata’s right hand to open the door? Why would the guy need to do that? I think the staff here can open any door, can’t they?” Moe pointed out.

“No ..., we can’t open every door,” Yamane explained. “First, the door to a private room like this one can only be opened by its occupant. Other doors can only be opened by people who are authorized to use them, in short, pre-registered. For example, the exit on the rooftop, accessed by the elevator reserved for the director, can only be opened by the director, the director’s wife, and me. The anteroom in front of Ms. Magata’s room, where you were earlier, can only be accessed by a limited number of people.”

“Which room can be opened by Dr. Shiki Magata’s right hand?” Moe asked a strange question.

“I don’t know. She shouldn’t be registered in any of the rooms, though.” Yamane gave his opinion. “But at least she should be the only one who can open the aluminum door at the exit of the lady’s room.”

“What about the entrance to this research institute?”

“The entrance is accessible to all those concerned. But as far as we checked earlier, no one has left from it.”

“I’m puzzled ...” Moe stared at the ceiling and murmured. “Why did the killer have to cut off her legs too?”

“Right, there are many strange things,” Saikawa said. “How did the killer get into that locked room in the first place? And how did the person come out of the room? And when was that? There are guards outside the room twenty-four hours a day, in shifts, and it is recorded on video the whole time. And the video system is completely independent of Red Magic. Even if a virus causes something to go wrong with the system, that surveillance system is unaffected. It’s all very puzzling when we think about it, isn’t it?”

“Sensei is right.” Yamane nodded. “To me, the strangest thing is the Red Magic anomaly. We are now unable to send out e-mails. We can no longer use the phone. And ... it was Deborah who opened the yellow door of Ms. Magata’s room. It was also Deborah who flicked on the light. No other oddities so far. It seems to me that they are programmed for this murder. It is not a virus. If someone can do this particular thing, why is there no evidence of rewriting the program? No idea ... To begin with, only a few people in this facility can do such a trick. Only a limited number of people can touch the system. Mizutani-kun, Shimada-kun, and me are the only ones. Even Ms. Magata could not have done it. She couldn’t touch our system from her room.”

“We also lost the traces of the killer’s passage through the rooftop door,” Moe added. “When the director was killed, someone must have opened one of the doors on the rooftop, right? And yet, there was no record of it. Couldn’t the murderer have erased the record?”

“No ... That is not possible. You could change the program so that only certain data is not written, but then there would be a trace of the program being rewritten.” Yamane said, crossing his arms.

“Why can’t you rewrite the data in the record? Besides, the trace of a rewritten program is also data, so shouldn’t it be possible to rewrite the data itself?” Moe questioned.

“That is virtually impossible, Nishinosono-san. With ordinary UNIX, it is possible. But with Red Magic, security is much, much tighter. Such files that do not need to be rewritten can never be fixed. Even super users cannot do so. In Red Magic, an attribute of a file is absolutely impossible to rewrite. It is called Record, a distinct entity from ordinary data files. All files for recording have this Record attribute.”

“Then ... the data was not erased, but perhaps never recorded.” Saikawa pointed out. “It’s programmed not to record only certain people.”

“No, that would require a rewrite of the program,” Yamane explained.

Moe sighed. “Oh, I’m totally confused ...”

“Anyway, let’s eat first.” Yamane smiled and walked into the kitchen.

Saikawa looked at his watch. It was already past 7:00 a.m. He yawned loudly. Moe leaned back in her chair and closed her eyes.

-2-

The breakfast Yamane made for Saikawa and Moe was more delicious than expected. The research institute did not have a cafeteria. It seemed that all the staff members ate their meals in their rooms. Yamane was very skillful in preparing the food.

Yamane, Mizutani, Yuminaga, and Mrs. Shindo were about to hold their meeting at 8:00 a.m. Saikawa and Moe had decided to return to the campsite once, and Yamane walked them to the entrance of the research institute.

“I would really like to lend you our vehicle ..., but I think I should keep it here in case some new incidents happen.” Deputy Director Yamane said as he left the entrance of the building. “We only have one big truck here besides that jeep. My apologies.”

“Oh, no, that’s fine,” Saikawa said. “Instead, we would like to visit here again. What time should we come back?”

“I will pick you up in my car in the afternoon.” Yamane looked at his watch. “Let’s see, how about around 2:00 p.m.?”

“Sounds good.” Saikawa bowed his head.

The vermilion door of the research institute came down from above and closed. Saikawa and Moe descended the concrete ramp.

The natural world was covered in its usual murderous sunshine, but the temperature was not yet uncomfortable for the time of day. They heard the sound of cicadas, and the smell of the nostalgic summer air was in the area.

“Ah, I’m going to get a sunburn,” Moe said, holding one hand to her forehead. “You know, I didn’t bring my parasol ...”

The two trudged down the road to the campground. Last night they could not see anything because of pitch black. The road was almost straight and gently descending, bordered on both sides by forest. The ground was paved with asphalt,

and telegraph poles stood beside the road. Of course, there was not a single house in sight. Near the harbor, there used to be a few houses on the south side of the island. But now, the entire island was privately owned by the Magata family.

The two arrived at the campground about 15 minutes later. Research Associate Momoko Kunieda, international student Wu, and graduate student Hamanaka were sitting on a stump talking.

“Where have you two been?” Hamanaka asked in a high voice as Saikawa and Moe approached them.

“Morning,” Saikawa responded. “You know, the only place we could visit would be the research institute ... How is everyone else doing?”

“They have gone to the beach to play,” Kunieda replied.

“Did you two stay at the research institute?” Hamanaka stood up. “Everyone was worried about you two. What happened?”

“Worried? Buy, they have gone to the beach, have they?” Saikawa raised the edge of his mouth.

“I ..., I stayed here because I was worried about Sensei and Nishinosono-san,” Hamanaka said a little angrily.

“We stayed up all night.” Moe looked tired indeed. “We had a little trouble there ...”

“Anyway, I’ll take a nap around there,” Saikawa said.

Moe went into the tent at the far end.

Saikawa spread a plastic sheet under a large tree next to a tent and lay down on it. He decided to sleep on his face with a straw hat, which he did not know whose it was. There was a slight breeze, so it was not too hot. He thought he would be able to sleep comfortably.

In fact, however, he could not sleep very well.

His consciousness replayed the events of last night. Sometimes he needed to pause, then frame, and then rewind.

Is someone lying ...? That’s the only possibility I can think of.

The image of the dead body of Ms. Magata was burned into his eyes. The corpse, dressed in a wedding dress, was missing both arms and legs.

So ... that was an image he did not want to see.

Saikawa did not see the dead body of the director. But surely, compared to the mutilated corpse of Ms. Magata, it must have been much more sensible in appearance.

The lights kept flickering.

The bride's doll stopped halfway down the hallway.

The knife was stuck in the back of his neck.

The lady's right hand was missing.

Someone was hiding her right hand.

No, the most mysterious factor was the room of Ms. Magata ...

The locked room had been closed for fifteen years. Her living space had been neatly organized.

No one could not enter or leave ... No one did not enter. No one did not leave the room.

And no one was in the room. Only the robot was confined inside the room.

The Soldier, made of toy blocks.

The deflated balloon.

The stuffed bear.

The sewing machines and patchwork.

The strange messages from the three personalities left on computers.

The anecdote about persons who died close to Ms. Magata but was reborn inside her.

She had a twin brother. The woman who died in the US. The doll that was covered in blood and discarded.

Everything turns to F ...?

Saikawa fell asleep before he knew it.

Moe Nishinosono woke up.

Unusually, she was sweating. It was pretty hot in the tent, but she knew right away that it was the dream that had made her sweat. A doll with a knife was walking down a long hallway. Its white dress was stained with blood. The doll had a severed right arm. The doll's eyes were two lenses ... She could remember these fragments but had forgotten the story of the dream.

Moe got up and looked at her watch. It was 0:30 p.m. That meant she had slept for about four hours. Her headache had utterly disappeared, and she no longer felt bad. She tried to remember the doll dream again, but it did not frighten her in the slightest. She could not remember what had frightened her at all.

Moe crawled to the tent's exit, unzipped it, and peeked out to see the others gathered a short distance away, eating something. She decided to put on her shoes and go outside.

"Hey, morning, young lady." Fuchida, a graduate student, said to her. He was naked in the top half of his body. "I heard you had talked with Saikawa-sensei last night. Even we have never had Sensei do such a thing for us, though."

"Yeah, right," Moe responded. "Have you guys made curry?"

They were eating curry and rice on plastic plates.

"It's a retort. We only cooked the rice." Another graduate student said.

Moe wondered what a retort was but decided not to ask because she did not want others to make fun of her.

"Where is Saikawa-sensei?" She asked. Everyone was there except Saikawa.

Moe looked in the direction Hamanaka pointed and saw Saikawa sleeping in the shade of a tree a short distance away.

"You were confessing your love to him, right?" Kawabata said with a laugh, waving his spoon. "You needed a whole night to do it. I think you should be a little more honest in what you say."

"Nishinosono-san, would you like some too?" The international student Wu

asked.

“No, thank you.” Moe shook her head.

“What happened?” Research Associate Momoko Kunieda asked. “After you and Sensei went out, let’s see ... what time was that? I saw a helicopter coming back to the island.”

Moe sat on a stump and decided to tell everyone about her experience last night.

Everyone became more and more serious and listened to her story in silence. They were still holding their empty curry plates. Kawabata and Fuchida, the graduate students who had been joking around, were smoking cigarettes and listening with blank expressions on their faces.

“Unbelievable ...” When Moe finished her story, Hamanaka murmured. “It sounds like a suspense drama.”

“We currently cannot contact the police ...” Fuchida said. “We might find the way ... I mean, cell phone or something like that.”

“Maybe we could go to the harbor and try to flag signal to the ships passing nearby ...?” Hamanaka suggested.

“How about using a mirror to reflect the sun’s rays?” Kawabata said with a serious look. “Is that impossible?”

“Can’t we just swim over?” Fuchida said. “How many kilometers is it to the other side of the sea?”

“I don’t know, maybe 10 kilometers.” Someone said.

“It’s much further.” Hamanaka laughed. “I think it would be better to signal fire than that.”

Before Moe knew it, Saikawa was standing behind her, looking sleepy.

“Sensei, good morning,” Kawabata said in a cheerful voice.

“Is there any food left for me?” Saikawa asked, scratching his head. “Yawn, I’m so sleepy ... You guys have any coffee? Someone, make a thick one, please.”

“I will brew it for you.” Moe stood up and said. “Oops ... Umm, we don’t have a coffee maker here.”

“No worries, I’ll do it.” Hamanaka got up and walked away.

“We have just heard the story from Nishinosono-san.” Kawabata said to Saikawa. “It is about the murder case.”

“Oh, really.” Saikawa felt for a cigarette and took it out. “Come to think of it, something like that happened.”

“Saikawa-sensei is not fully awake,” Kawabata whispered.

“It’s a locked-room murder, isn’t it?” Fuchida said to Moe, who was standing beside him. “Nishinosono-san, you are a member of the mystery novel study group, right?”

Moe nodded. “That was a real locked room ... not in a fiction.”

Saikawa smoked his cigarette deliciously, but he looked half-asleep. Other students told Moe they would never go to Saikawa’s room in the morning to ask him questions because he was always like this for the first few hours after waking up.

“Sensei, did you come up with anything?” Moe asked Saikawa, sitting beside him.

“No, nothing ...” Saikawa answered without expression. “Can you wait a minute? I need coffee first.”

“Now I’m boiling water,” Hamanaka shouted from afar. “It will take a little time.”

Hamanaka hung a kettle instead of a pot and was in the process of starting a fire. Wu brought curry and rice to Saikawa.

“Oh, thank you, Wu-san.” Saikawa accepted the plate and spoon. Then, after taking a bite, he seemed to notice that everyone was paying attention to him and started talking. “Umm, since Nishinosono-kun told you what had happened, you all understand that there is a murderer on this island. Maybe we won’t be in danger. But just in case, everyone, be careful.”

“Right. we should not act alone as much as possible.” Kunieda said plainly.

“It’s thrilling, isn’t it?” One of the male students said.

“I hope it’s as safe as bungee jumping,” Saikawa said.

“So there won’t be a party at the research institute tonight? I was looking forward

to that, though ...”

“Yes, of course, it is,” Saikawa said. “Nishinosono-kun and I will return to the research institute once again.”

“Why are you two going back to such a dangerous place?” Hamanaka asked, stoking the fire with an *uchinwa* (a round paper fan).

“This is how it happened, and we have no choice. She and I are related to the case. If the police come, we have a lot to talk about. We probably won’t be able to go home with you all.” Saikawa said as if it were someone else’s business while eating his curry. “Well ... Yes ... I’ve never experienced anything like this before, so I want to look at things for future reference.”

“How can we go home?” Hamanaka questioned. “If we can’t use the phone, how can the boats come here?”

“They have a visitor coming to this island at around 1:00 p.m. tomorrow.” Saikawa said. “You can wait in the harbor in the afternoon and get on that boat. I will also ask you guys there to contact the police.”

“Sensei, are you okay with your ongoing work?” Moe asked.

“I’ll miss the tiresome committee meetings and the boring classroom meetings,” Saikawa replied while eating. “I have an urgent manuscript I’ve been asked to write, but I can work on that if I borrow a computer at the research institute. If the e-mail system at the facility recovers, I won’t have to go home for a while.”

-4-

At exactly 2:00 p.m., Yamane came to the campsite.

He walked up the gravel road with a box of cold canned beer. The students were scattered and napping, probably tired from swimming in the morning. Momoko Kunieda was sitting in the shade of a tree, reading an academic paperback.

Yamane said as he approached Saikawa, holding a can of beer from a box in both hands. “It’s hot over here, isn’t it?”

“No, thank you.” Saikawa declined the beer. “Have you made any progress?”

“Well, we spent the entire morning in meetings about the future,” Yamane said as he opened a can of beer. “Still, I took a shower and got some sleep. We’ve been doing much research, but I’m ashamed of us. We don’t know the cause at all. I had no idea that our system was so fragile. We had expected all kinds of trouble, such as fire, natural disasters, terrorism, *etc.* But I never thought this form of accident would happen ...”

“You guys are receiving outside e-mail?” Saikawa asked while smoking a cigarette.

“We are. More and more e-mails say why we don’t reply to them.” Yamane took a sip of his beer. “Perhaps the outsiders have noticed some trouble at our research institute. If we keep waiting, relief will soon come. We might depend on others too much, but it’s the only way. So, I am going to take it easy.”

“As for the system problems, that would be fine, but ...” Saikawa exhaled smoke. “As for the murder case, we can’t say such a leisurely thing. At least there is a murderer on this island.”

“It is possible that the murderer has fled the island.” Yamane pointed out. “So, for example, a motorboat or a one-person jet ski would be all that was needed for the perpetrator to escape from here. A rubber boat would also be possible. You know, the sea has not been rough recently.”

“The murderer will not escape from here, I suppose.” Saikawa twirled the tip of his cigarette. “The murderer killed Dr. Magata and then Director Shindo. No matter how I look at it, I cannot tell who did it. Or rather, I sense the murderer’s intention of having us not know it. In other words, this is not an unplanned, impulsive murder. Do you think the Red Magic anomaly was a coincidence? Isn’t it more convenient for someone to be unable to contact the outside world? If so ..., the observation that the killer has already fled the island is a bit optimistic. There is something about the actual situation that doesn’t feel right.”

“It was probably a good thing for us that the police would arrive late ...” Yamane whispered as he looked around.

Saikawa looked into Yamane’s eyes as he exhaled smoke. “What does that mean?”

“Actually, I have a favor to ask Saikawa-sensei.” Yamane’s voice grew quieter and quieter. “I am very much aware that this is very selfish of me, but ...”

“Wait, please ...” Saikawa held up one hand to stop Yamane. “That’s not the kind of request that, once I hear it, I can’t refuse anymore, is it?”

“Well ...” Yamane smiled bitterly. “You may be right. But I can’t help but tell you that ... We have decided at the morning meeting. It is not my personal intention. It is no use if Sensei does not agree to our request after hearing it.”

Saikawa stood up and brought an empty beer can that was lying around. Then he extinguished the cigarette he was smoking and threw it into it. “Yamane-san. I really sympathize with the advanced design of that research institute and your lifestyle. Had I seen that facility when I was in high school, I am sure I would have decided to spend the next twenty years of my life in that building. Now, what you are about to say is probably far from those ideals of mine, isn’t it?”

“You are right, Sensei.” Yamane frowned and nodded slowly.

“Are you guys going to cover up the fact that Dr. Shiki Magata is dead?” Saikawa said as he sat down.

Yamane remained motionless for a moment, then looked away once, looked at Saikawa again, and nodded.

“I decline the request.” Saikawa said immediately.

“Please just listen to me, Sensei.” Yamane put the beer can on the ground and clasped his hands in his lap. “Actually, our research institute is supposed to sign a contract for a huge project next week. Something NASA-related. We have been preparing for it for over a year already. The fact that Ms. Magata passed away, I mean ... I’m sure you can understand ...”

“I understand your situation, but I cannot agree to that,” Saikawa said once and for all.

“Just one week is all it takes,” Yamane said. “If Ms. Magata’s body is found next week ..., I am not saying all will be well, but we will get through it. Saikawa-sensei will not be inconvenienced. If you can pretend that Saikawa-sensei and Nishinosono-san did not come to the research institute last night, you two will have nothing to do with the case at all. All we ask is that you return on tomorrow’s ship.”

“What are your plans for Director Shindo’s case?” Saikawa took out a new cigarette and lit it.

“We will leave Director Shindo’s case to the police. The director was killed on the rooftop by someone. We will have them investigate this.”

“Wait a minute.” Saikawa raised one hand again. “If the murderer of Director Shindo is caught, Dr. Magata’s case will also become public, right?”

“Saikawa-sensei. This is ... the result of our discussions, including with Mrs. Shindo. Saikawa-sensei and Nishinosono-san were at this campground last night. Due to a system malfunction, phone and e-mail suddenly became unavailable at the research institute. Director Shindo was stabbed and killed by someone when he went to the rooftop to make contact with the helicopter radio. This is such a simple story. The bet is on whether the police will be able to find the murderer of Director Shindo within a week. If the killer is found quickly, we will have no choice. But we have something worth taking that gamble on.”

“How will you hide the fact that Dr. Shiki Magata is not here once the police investigation begins?”

“Instead, Miki Magata-san is here.”

“That’s ridiculous ...” Saikawa slammed his cigarette on the ground.

His voice was so loud that nearby students turned to them. Saikawa noticed that Moe Nishinosono was walking toward them from a distance.

“No one is familiar with Ms. Shiki Magata’s face,” Yamane whispered. “Besides, Miki-san is her younger sister ... No one would suspect it. It is no wonder that the lady speaks English, and besides, no one knows that Miki-san is visiting Japan from the US.”

“I wonder if anyone witnessed the director’s helicopter outing last night?” Saikawa confirmed.

“The helicopter did not fly last night.” Yamane lowered the tone of his voice again. “The director did not go anywhere. Then the police will not investigate. The investigation should only be on this island.”

“Did Miki-san agree to that plan?” Saikawa asked.

“Of course. She is the official successor to the research institute.” Yamane answered. “Eventually, she will be the director.”

“Or will she live on as Dr. Shiki Magata forever?” Saikawa said sarcastically.

“We are not asking Sensei to give false testimony. We are simply asking you all to return on tomorrow’s boat. The police will come to this island afterward.”

“But they will surely come to us to find out what actually happened.” Saikawa took out another cigarette. “We were on the island the night the director was killed ...”

“If the police should come to your place, you are welcome to tell the truth. However, we will do our best to manipulate the situation accordingly. The police will not go to you.”

“Manipulate?” Saikawa was caught up in the word. “I don’t quite understand what you are talking about. What is this manipulation that you are talking about? Is that what kept Dr. Shiki Magata there in the first place? It is a force without personality, created by money.”

The conversation was interrupted when Moe came up to them. Saikawa lit a new cigarette in his hand and avoided Moe’s gaze.

“Hello,” Moe said to Yamane. “After that, how is the research institute ...?”

“Right, Nishinosono-san. Don’t worry. It is normal for now.” Yamane fudged it. “We haven’t been able to contact the outside world yet, but there has been no panic and no trouble since then.”

“Excuse us, Nishinosono-kun ... Could you give us a minute?” Saikawa said to Moe.

“Sorry?” Moe stopped and was surprised.

“Please,” Saikawa said clerically.

“Ah, yes ... I understand.” Moe looked at Saikawa with a troubled face, then walked away quickly.

“Sensei, I thank you for your help,” Yamane said. “Umm ..., this is a token of our gratitude ...”

Yamane pulled a bulging envelope from his pants pocket.

“Yamane-san, could you please not give me any more bad impressions?” Saikawa

stood up. “I don’t remember doing anything thanked by you. Please leave now. I will leave this island on tomorrow’s boat. That is all. If the police ask me, I will say you requested me to do so. I will tell them everything they ask. I will tell them everything I saw there, including the murder of Dr. Shiki Magata. Still ...”

“That’s fine.” Yamane stood up and bowed his head. “However, Saikawa-sensei, please do not make any approach to the police from you. That is all I ask. I am sorry. Now that it has come to this, this is the best we can do.”

Yamane put the envelope he was about to hand to Saikawa back into his pocket. He left the campsite, bowing his head repeatedly. Yamane was dressed in a T-shirt and jeans and had a stubble beard. Even so, to Saikawa’s eyes, he did not look like the free spirit he appeared to be.

-5-

Saikawa then took another nap. It was evening when he awoke, and the sky directly above him had turned purple. He raised his head and looked around. A group of students had gathered by the fire.

When Saikawa got up and approached them, they were all eating different food. Ramen was the most common, but some were eating curry. Some were eating cookies and potato chips. It seemed that they had already run out of beer.

“You know, these are surplus food.” Hamanaka noticed Saikawa and said. “What would you like to eat, Sensei? Shall I make cup noodles for you?”

“No, I’ll pass. My stomach is not feeling well.”

Saikawa opened a nearby plastic bottle and filled a paper cup with tea. It was lukewarm tea, but Saikawa felt it tasted good because he was very thirsty.

“Where is Nishinosono-kun?” Saikawa noticed that Moe was not around there.

“She is sleeping in the tent.” Hamanaka responded. “It was a hard time ... She drank half of the beer that the one from the research institute brought. Then all hell broke loose.”

“Then the whiskey too.” Fuchida, who was sitting nearby, looked up and laughed. “She was getting rough. Out of our control ... She’s a bad drunk.”

“Oh ...” Saikawa was a little surprised.

“We carried her into the tent about two hours ago,” Hamanaka said while eating potato chips. “It was probably the first time she had ever had a drink.”

“It can’t be,” Saikawa said. But he had yet to learn if Moe was tolerant of alcohol. “Hope she’s okay ... Did she look like she wasn’t feeling well?”

“It’s not a big amount she drank, so I’m sure she’s okay.” Kawabata, the elder student, said as he slurped his ramen.

Then Saikawa ate a few snacks. Their conversation was much more lively, although it was all about trivial topics. One of the students imitated the instructor of the same department, which amused those around them. Halfway through the conversation, while listening to Wu, an international student, the topic turned to Chinese history, and Momoko Kunieda showed off her knowledge about the field.

After about two hours, when it was completely dark, they decided to go to the nearby beach for the fireworks they had prepared. It was an unnatural event considering the gruesome incident that occurred last night. But since they had brought their fireworks, no one objected. The students went out with flashlights. Saikawa and Kunieda decided to stay there, partly because Moe was sleeping in a tent.

“Sensei, want me to go check on Nishinosono-san?” Kunieda said something unusually considerate.

“Yes, please,” Saikawa responded while looking up.

The stars in the sky were magnificent. He felt as if the universe were expanding in the shape of an inverted cone with him at its center. Looking at the light delivered from far away, today and tomorrow really did not seem to matter.

Kunieda returned and sat on a stump a short distance away from Saikawa. “She seems to be okay. She said she would get up because she wanted to see the fireworks.”

A short time later, Moe staggered over from the dark tent.

“What time is it?” Moe asked. “That’s weird ... I wonder when it became night.”

“How are you feeling?” Saikawa asked.

“Well ... I feel as if I were flying a bit,” Moe said and took a deep breath. “Let’s go watch the fireworks, Sensei.”

Saikawa, Kunieda, and Moe headed down the gravel road to the beach. No one spoke on the way.

The beach was dark, but it was easy to find the spot where the students were displaying fireworks. It seemed that they had brought quite a lot of fireworks with them. Toward the sea, they were launching fireballs in rapid succession.

Saikawa decided to sit on the concrete of the breakwater and smoke a cigarette. Kunieda and Moe went down the stairs. Rocket fireworks made a whistle-like sound and were sucked into the pitch-black sea. Firecrackers went off with momentary assertiveness. The women had a less flashy firework display just below the breakwater.

Fireworks with parachutes went up, and students fought like children to take them as they were landing gently. The sound of laughter and crashing waves drifted over the smell of gunpowder and the scent of the tide. Saikawa chuckled to himself, making the sudden association that they would eventually be surprised at the ugliness of adult society.

Large rocks have been crushed over the years and thus spit out of the sea and gathered on the beach.

It becomes smaller as it learns to suck in water, flow, and change.

What about myself? Saikawa thought.

I have been in the free and unproductive environment of the university for more than a decade. Have I become an adult? If I have become an adult, what kind of change has it been? Am I looking back on the past like this because I have changed?

He never once thought that life could not be redone. It seemed to him that this was proof that he had not yet become an adult. The trivial friction around him daily may be a necessary exercise to maintain his body temperature. There were still many things that he disliked, but the number of things he could not stand was decreasing as he got older. But with it, the object of his dislike was moving away from others and toward his inner self. He was going to hate himself more and more for avoiding and faking friction with those around him.

In his twenties, he was studying relentlessly. Only in research had he spent his time. His own personal problems in front of him excited him, and he believed that his own personal conquests were the best. *Pure academia has no end. The sense of unattainable futility is what is precious*, he also thought.

He still believed that.

But Saikawa knew he had changed. He was no longer a free vagrant. His words were restricted, and his actions were constrained. But he could never say that it was all for the sake of survival.

“Sensei?”

Saikawa suddenly realized that Moe was standing next to Saikawa.

“Wanna do sparklers?” Moe held out a bundle of thin sparklers to Saikawa.

“Yeah, I will.” Saikawa took it and untied the bundle. Then, he lit one of them with a lighter. When a bolt of lovely small lightning started, Saikawa murmured.

“When I was little, I was afraid of fireworks ... I couldn’t hold these.”

“Were you afraid of sparklers?”

“I was ... I wondered why people were so willing to do such dangerous things.”

By the light of the fireworks, he could see Moe’s smile.

“What were you talking about with him?” Moe brought it close to Saikawa’s fireworks to light her own.

“You would not approve of that ...” Saikawa said.

Saikawa then told Moe everything he had discussed with Yamane during the day. Sparklers end their short lives one after another, relaying the fire with great care. Moe just listened to Saikawa’s story and said nothing.

As the last sparklers fell onto the asphalt, it suddenly became dark, and Moe’s expression disappeared. Saikawa took out a cigarette and lit it, peering into her face.

Moe looked like she was about to cry.

“If Sensei says we should do so, I can ...” Moe whispered.

“No, I still can’t do that.” Saikawa shook his head. That was the decision he had just made after seeing her face. “I can’t ... I don’t think I can do such a thing. So

now, I will go to the research institute again. I will stay on this island ...”

“Yes,” Moe replied cheerfully. “I’ll stay too.”

“We’ll see how we come to terms with it ...” Saikawa exhaled smoke into the darkness.

-6-

“Whaaat?!” Hamanaka shouted as he came up the steps of the breakwater. “Are you two going back to the research institute from now?”

Kunieda standing on the beach looked back at them.

“There’s something ... fishy about you two,” Hamanaka said jokingly.

“Well, whatever you say.” Saikawa stood up. “We may not be able to come back for a while.”

Momoko Kunieda came up the stairs.

“You all should be at the port before noon tomorrow,” Saikawa said. “Take care of everyone. Nishinosono-kun and I will be at the research institute for a while ...”

“Understood,” Kunieda replied expressionlessly. “Please be careful.”

Saikawa had never heard Momoko Kunieda say such an emotional thing before.

Borrowing Hamanaka’s flashlight, Saikawa and Moe began walking. The path along the beach was relatively bright by moonlight.

“All we have to do is find the culprit before the police arrive,” Moe said as she walked quickly. “Isn’t that right? If we find out who the murderer is, we will feel better.”

“I wonder if it would be that easy ...” Saikawa was a little out of breath. “There is no evidence. We don’t have the technology to check fingerprints or find bloodstains.”

“Such evidence would probably be not helpful.” Moe’s voice was full of excitement. “When I saw that room, I thought the murderer would not have left any fingerprints. The murderer had plenty of time, and the data had been erased. The guy would have wiped the fingerprints clean or been wearing gloves from the

get-go.”

“What is the motive of the killer?” Saikawa mumbled as if asking himself. “The guy couldn’t have done all those things for no reason.”

“Someone might have had a grudge against the director, is that right?”

“Or did the one resent the director’s policy?” Saikawa pointed out. “But as for Dr. Shiki Magata, that seems unlikely. I mean, the doctor had no personal contact with anyone.”

“All the information we have obtained is from others.” Moe was talking fast. “I guess we need to look at what we can actually see and reexamine them to see which is true and which is false, right?”

“That’s right.” Saikawa nodded. “First, let’s go through Dr. Magata’s room again. And we need to hear the same story from more than one person.”

“We are detectives, aren’t we?” Moe said in a cheerful voice.

“Hope the truth is detectable ...” Saikawa said as he wiped his sweat with his handkerchief.

They had walked the same way last night, so they didn’t feel it that far to the research institute. As he walked up the entrance ramp, Saikawa checked the time. It was still before 9:00 p.m.

When Saikawa pressed the intercom button, Deborah’s voice asked, “Are you a staff?” and Saikawa answered, “Yes.” Deborah then asked his name.

“Sohei Saikawa,” Saikawa responded.

The vermilion door slowly rose and opened. Then the two entered. As they watched the door close behind them, Saikawa put his right hand on the glass panel on the wall.

“Sohei Saikawa,” Saikawa said his name once again.

“The other one, please,” Deborah said in an articulate female voice.

Moe held out her right hand and said her name.

The aluminum door slid sideways. The two entered the empty lobby. Walking down a hallway that stretched straight ahead, they descended a ramp in the middle.

Saikawa remembered that route.

Saikawa knocked on the green door of Yamane's room.

The door opened, and Yamane appeared smiling. "Come on in, Saikawa-sensei, Nishinosono-san."

"Good evening," Saikawa greeted in his usual tone.

"You are so careless to open the door just by knocking," Moe said as she entered the room.

"Deborah contacted me when you two walked through the entrance of the building. It was because you two are registered as my guests." Yamane smiled and replied. "Would you like something to drink?"

"If you have a soft drink, please," Saikawa said. "Nishinosono-kun, you should do the same."

Yamane returned from the kitchen with tall glasses of grape juice, and the three of them sat facing each other at the gourd-shaped table.

"Yamane-san, I have a request." Saikawa quickly cut to the chase. "I would like to look into many things about this case. As Yamane-san said, if we decide to hide Dr. Magata's case from the police, the police will miss more than half of the evidence needed to find the culprit. Instead, can't you let us look into it?"

"What do you mean?" Yamane lit a cigarette and stared into Saikawa's face.

"Specifically, starting at this very moment ..., we would like you to allow us to wander around this building and do some investigation. If possible, we would like to solve the case until the police arrive ..."

"But how?" Yamane looked dumbfounded and chuckled a little. "How are you two going to find the culprit? Do you go around asking them one by one? Do you ask them if the person is the culprit?"

"I'm thinking something close to that." Saikawa nodded. "Then, Nishinosono-kun and I would like to stay at this research institute for some time to come. Instead ..."

"Instead?" Yamane asked back.

“Instead ...” Saikawa said slowly. “I will give you tacit permission to cover up the fact for one week that Dr. Magata is dead. Last night, Nishinosono-kun and I were not at this facility. We don’t know anything. If the police come, I will testify as much. But only for one week.”

“Bravo, Sensei.” Yamane held out his hand to shake Saikawa’s hand.
“Understood. We shall make such a contract.”

Saikawa reluctantly shook hands with him.

“So, Sensei and Nishinosono-san are friends of mine now. For my personal research, you will stay here starting tonight ... It starts tonight, okay? That is ostensibly it.” Yamane said as he stood up and walked around. “Within the facility, Nishinosono-san should be considered Sensei’s secretary. I will send an e-mail to all concerned. You two are free to investigate anything you wish. Since you are an instructor in the Department of Architecture, I will announce that you are here to conduct an environmental survey of the building.”

“It would be helpful. What about the people we met yesterday?” Saikawa questioned.

“I will tell the truth to Mrs. Shindo, Dr. Yuminaga, and then ... to Chief Mizutani from me. Also, to Mochizuki-san, Hasebe-kun and Shimada-san. I will explain it to them. However, only those who were there yesterday know that Ms. Magata passed away. It is a top secret even within the research institute. Please be careful about that.”

“Understood,” Saikawa took out a cigarette and lit it.

“Then I will contact them immediately.” Saying so, Yamane walked toward the terminal.

“Yamane-san,” Saikawa said as he put the lighter back in his pocket. “Did you find Miki-san’s bag?”

“Yeah, that is a strange thing,” Yamane replied as he sat down in front of a terminal in a partition. “She claims to have had her bag on the helicopter, but there is no such thing anywhere.”

“It was stolen when Director Shindo was killed, wasn’t it?” Moe said.

“That is what happened.”

-7-

Saikawa and Moe first went to Shiki Magata’s room on the second basement floor. More precisely, they wanted to ask Hasebe and Mochizuki for more information before taking another look at the lady’s room.

The black door at the end of the corridor opened with Saikawa’s right hand and name. As the two entered the room, Mochizuki came out smiling from the adjacent room, where they could see inside through the glass.

“Hi, Sensei, Nishinosono-san.” He was wearing a different colored baseball cap than yesterday. “The deputy director contacted me. I heard that you two would be investigating the case of Ms. Magata confidentially. I expect you two to get results.”

Mochizuki was much older than Saikawa, but his bare arms were solid and youthful. Except for his thin hair, which was hidden by the cap, he looked around 30 years old. From behind the glass, Hasebe looked at Moe and waved.

Saikawa and Moe, along with Mochizuki, entered their control-room-like place.

“Was Nishinosono-san Sensei’s secretary?” Hasebe asked with a sly grin.

“Well, something like that.” Moe smiled.

“Are you two always in this room?” Saikawa questioned.

“No, we work 12-hour shifts. So from 6:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m., there are other people in this room. During that time, we are off duty. But we exchange information with each other, so there is nothing I don’t know.”

“Could you print out a list of the packages you guys put into Dr. Magata’s room?” Saikawa asked.

“Yes, I can do that right away,” Hasebe responded. “From when to when?”

“In the past year or so, please ...” Saikawa specified.

“Okay.” Hasebe nodded.

“Was anything large brought into the room?”

“It is a lot,” Mochizuki said, shaking his body. “But, Sensei, we are checking everything, you know. It is not possible for someone to hide in them and enter the room.”

“We also disinfect them,” Hasebe added. “The space between the yellow door over there and the aluminum door inside is the disinfection room. Everything brought into the lady’s room is placed there for two hours to be sterilized. It is not perfect, though. But people can’t get through there.”

“Is there any way someone could somehow sneak inside?” Saikawa asked.

“There is no way. Even if someone passes by while we are napping, it will be recorded on video. In the first place, only the guards like us, the director, and the deputy director can open that yellow door.”

“Who can open the aluminum door on the inside?” Moe questioned.

“Only the director and deputy director can open that from this side,” Mochizuki answered.

“Dr. Magata can’t even get out of the room by herself?” Saikawa took out a cigarette and started smoking.

“It’s obvious.” Mochizuki laughed. “The doctor can open the aluminum door inside. But the yellow door leading outside cannot be opened from the inside. That room is a prison, you know.”

“But that door opened last night.” Saikawa pointed out.

“That was Deborah’s system going haywire, wasn’t it?” Hasebe said, turning his chair this way.

“Once again, I want to see all the footage from last week ...” Saikawa requested.

Hasebe handed Saikawa several sheets of paper from the printer, then moved the mouse to show the images on display with a practiced hand.

For the last week, no one stood in front of the yellow door. The video footage recorded several people coming and going each day, which Mochizuki explained were those in this security office during the day. Saikawa’s familiar faces also appeared several times. Dr. Yuminaga had come once four days earlier, and Chief Mizutani had come the day before.

“Did they come to deliver something to Dr. Magata?” Moe questioned.

“Right, Yuminaga-sensei came to return a book he had borrowed from the lady last Saturday.” Hasebe explained. “Of course, we put the book in the mailbox. Then ... Mizutani just came to talk with us.”

There were few people in the video. Many of the items were brought in by P1 robots. The time when nothing was shown was automatically fast-forwarded, so a week’s worth of footage was over in a flash. Yesterday morning, no one was standing in front of the yellow door. Yesterday evening, Yamane and Mizutani appeared and were discussing something. Then came Ayako Shimada. After that, those three were in that room for a long time.

“Since about 7:00 p.m.?” Saikawa confirmed. “They have been in this room the whole time?”

“Yamane-san did leave the room a few times, though,” Mochizuki explained. “It seemed that Yamane-san and Mizutani-san had an appointment to have a meeting with the lady at 7:00 p.m. But since the lady did not show up ..., they came here. At the time, that yellow door was stuck open ... I mean, Deborah had stopped accepting commands.”

The video recording was also in line with Mochizuki’s testimony. Even after Yamane left the room, Mizutani and Ayako Shimada were still hanging around near the terminal. Eventually, around 11:00 p.m., Yamane appeared with Saikawa and Moe. Mochizuki’s back was also shown. Slowing down the flow of time, they decided to take a closer look at the scene in question, where the yellow door opened.

The lights in the room began to flicker, showing everyone in a state of panic. The yellow door rose, and the figure of that bride emerged from the room.

When they saw it thus as a silent image, Saikawa felt the bride’s movements were jerky and mechanical. However, he recalled that at the time, he felt as if the bride had really walked out of the room. The bride doll had corrected its direction and was heading toward the black door leading to the hallway. Ayako Shimada fell to the floor, cowering. As the bride disappeared from sight, those in the room shouted something to each other.

“Wait!” Moe shouted. “Stop right there!”

Hasebe stopped the movement of the image. The bride was already gone, and standing in the room were six people: Yamane, Mizutani, Mochizuki, Hasebe, Saikawa, and Moe. Shimada was lying on the floor.

“See here.” Moe pointed to the display. “It’s above the elevator doors ...”

“What’s wrong?” Hasebe looked back at Moe.

“This is <B2>.” Moe pointed out. “The elevator floor number indicator is <B2>.”

“No, it doesn’t look good. It’s too small.” Hasebe growled. “It’s the limit of resolution.”

“I can’t see clearly, but this is two letters, right?” Moe pointed out. “Except for <B2>, it’s <R> and <1>, so it’s one letter. This is definitely <B2>.”

“So let’s assume it is. What does that mean?” Hasebe asked, smiling. Mallets for the marimba were near him.

“When the director’s helicopter arrived, I took the elevator. I remember the elevator came down from <R>, that is, from the rooftop.”

“So, let’s watch the video ahead ...” Hasebe shook his head and operated the mouse joyfully.

Once again, time on the screen began to flow.

Everyone ran out into the hallway one by one. The lights had stopped pulsating, and the room was dim. Ayako Shimada was left alone in the room. She was lying on the floor near the wall. Time had been fast-forwarded slightly, as there was absolutely no change in the image. The elevator display that Moe had pointed out was now not clearly visible.

“I see that Yuminaga-sensei has just arrived in the hallway.”

The room on the VTR (videotape recorder) screen brightened instantly.

“Was it such a short time?” Hasebe said to himself. “At that time, it felt like a very long time to me. It was only this much time ...”

Ayako Shimada, who had fallen, moved her arm to stand up.

“Look there!” Moe shouted again. “The elevator number has changed.”

The room became brighter so that they could see the indications. It was more blurred than before, but still, the digital display above the elevator now appeared to be a single letter.

“Someone moved the elevator from the floor above,” Moe said.

On the screen, Ayako Shimada stood up and walked to a position where she could see the hallway. Mochizuki and Hasebe appeared from the hallway, followed by Moe entering.

“I can’t tell if that display is on the first floor or the rooftop.” Hasebe gave his opinion. “It appears to be <R>, though ...”

“This was before the helicopter had yet to arrive, so ...” Moe said as she was recalling.

The video footage continued to fast-forward. Everyone returned to that room. Because time was being fast-forwarded, everyone appeared to be moving at a dizzying pace. They were busy sitting and standing up in their chairs. Mochizuki went out into the hallway. Hasebe had not been seen for a long time. Furthermore, Moe disappeared to the front side of the room. It was because those two had entered the security room where they were now.

Once again, Moe appeared and rushed to the elevator. Yamane and Moe stood in front of the elevator doors.

“Oh, now the letter has changed a little.” Moe pointed at the elevator display again. “Rewind it again and show me.”

Hasebe did as requested. The digital display above the elevator first changed slightly and darkened, then apparently widened to the side. That meant it was now two letters <B2>.

“I knew the first display was <R>. It changed once and became <1>.” Moe said happily. “Just as I thought ...”

They then continued to watch the video for another hour or so but found nothing particularly interesting. The final scene in the video recording was the transfer of the bride doll, covered with the sheet, into the yellow door.

“I’ll check the records before this one too,” Hasebe said to Moe.

Saikawa and Moe thanked Mochizuki and Hasebe and left the room. Then they stood in front of the yellow door.

Saikawa looked at his watch. It was 10:30 p.m.

“We’ll discuss this later.” Saikawa waved the list that Hasebe had printed out for him.

“It was a bit of an outcome to find out about the elevator, wasn’t it?” Moe whispered to Saikawa as if she were talking privately. “The display, which was <B2>, had changed to <R> during that dark period. That means someone had moved the elevator from the rooftop then.”

“That’s not true, Nishinosono-kun.” Saikawa shook his head lightly. “Someone moved the elevator from the first floor and went up to the rooftop. Elevators are not just for moving to someone’s place. You also take it to go to other floors.”

“Oh, yeah ...” Moe said and broke into a big smile. “That’s what I would expect from you, Sensei!”

“We can’t be too happy about it.” Saikawa showed a serious face. “It seems clear to us that no one has been in or out of Dr. Magata’s room. A week ago, Dr. Magata was alive. After that, no one entered her room. No one has gone out, either ...”

“Would you like to check the room again?” Moe said, suddenly anxious.

“Right ...” Saikawa nodded. “But first, would you let me smoke a cigarette?”

“Would you prefer that I don’t smoke?”

“You shouldn’t smoke.” Saikawa smiled. “Neither Hasebe nor Mochizuki looked like they were lying.”

“It is not logical, but I think so too.” Moe nodded. “You know, Hasebe’s hobby is the marimba.”

Saikawa put a lit cigarette in his mouth, put his hands in the air as if holding something, and made a gesture of waving them.

Moe burst into laughter. “Sensei ... Those are maracas.”

Chapter 6: Rainbow Sighting

-1-

Saikawa and Moe opened the yellow door and entered the room. Thanks to Yamane's setting, that door could be opened by Saikawa's right hand. Saikawa took one look at Moe and then opened the aluminum door at the back.

There was a nose-tingling, unpleasant smell. Saikawa put his hand once again on the inside of the aluminum door and closed it. The reception room was still lit, and a sheet-covered corpse stood in the center. Under the sheet, the hem of the pure white wedding dress could be seen. Moe pulled out a handkerchief and held it to her nose.

"If possible, would you check that corpse again?" Saikawa said to Moe.

"I can." Moe blinked once deeply and answered.

Saikawa turned up the sheet. There was no change in the bridal gown, but the face of the corpse looked much darker, perhaps due to the lighting. The terrible smell became stronger and stronger. The horrifying expression he had seen last night was now somewhat sad.

Moe looked at it for a few seconds, then looked away.

The two left the reception room and entered the lobby in the back. Then they hurriedly closed the wooden door of the reception room. Moe took a deep breath, as if she had been holding her breath for a long time.

"There is no doubt about it. That corpse is Dr. Shiki Magata." Moe finally spoke.

"Looks like she was a beautiful person." After saying that, Saikawa thought to himself that it was an incredible statement.

Saikawa walked into Ms. Magata's workroom.

"I will go look in the back bedroom," Moe said and walked to the back of the lobby.

Saikawa decided to look carefully at the work desk in the workroom.

First, there were lots of tools. Screwdrivers, wrenches, monkey wrenches, needle-nose pliers, and diagonal pliers were arranged in order of size and hung on nails driven into the wall. The thread saw, metal saw, file, and metal shears all had fine metal dust on them and showed signs of having been used for crafting. Perhaps it was aluminum or brass. Electric tools included screwdrivers, drills, jigsaws, sanders, and grinders. Some larger machine tools were table thread saws, drilling machines with still-attached drills, table-top lathes, and even milling machines. Under the worktable was a compressor with a die grinder powered by compressed air attached to the end of a hose.

In addition, three small cartridge burners were placed.

Under the desk at the far end was a simple shelf with various metal materials arranged haphazardly. *Aluminum, brass, and stainless steel*, Saikawa guessed. There were square bars, angles, pipes, and plates.

With all these things in place, Dr. Magata would have been able to build most of the mechanical parts of the robot herself. On the desk were motors, gears, and bearings of various sizes, sorted into plastic containers.

On a desk in the back was a transparent shelf filled with electronic components, and the etching solution for fabricating printed circuit boards was also in a plastic container. There were four soldering irons of different sizes. Aluminum chassis with holes were placed, and about half of the components were installed.

In the center of the room were five computers. *It is not advisable to do metalwork in the same room. There is a risk of fine metal powder floating in the air and entering the computers. Ms. Shiki Magata did not seem to mind this.*

Saikawa thought he had already examined the computers well, so he just checked quickly and went into the warehouse at the back of the residence. Three steel shelves there, lined with paints, thinners, and other items in plastic, glass, or metal containers. All of them were about 4 liters in size at most. He picked them up one by one and examined them. He found cleaning supplies. Then, consumable items such as light bulbs and fluorescent tubes. There were also various types of cords wound around drums.

Saikawa left the warehouse and looked into the other room. That room was called the Communication Room. The walls were pure white, and only one chair was

placed there. In this room, Ms. Magata was talking with an outsider via video phone. He could say that this was the only “window” to her residence for the past fifteen years.

Moe came back toward him.

“Sensei, did you find anything?” Moe came into the room.

“No ... How was the back room?” Saikawa asked.

“Yes, I found something kind of interesting.” Moe smiled.

Saikawa followed Moe out of the lobby and into the dining room and kitchen. There was no change anywhere from the last time. The door at the back of the dining room and kitchen was open, and they stepped onto the carpet in the bedroom.

Moe used a handkerchief to close and lock the door.

“Watch this.” Moe looked at Saikawa.

The room was dimly lit. The large stuffed bear was sitting on the sofa. Next to it stood the toy soldier made of blocks.

“Unlock the door,” Moe said in a clear voice.

At first, Saikawa mistakenly thought he was being ordered to do so, but the sound of a motor from near the bed convinced him immediately. Michiru spun its big tires and slid out toward them. The robot came near the door with a light thump and began to slowly extend its arms from behind its back. Eventually, the arm reached the knob of the door that Moe had closed and repositioned itself slightly up, down, left, and right. Finally, it hooked two fingernails onto the lever and unlocked it with a 90-degree turn of its wrist.

“Impressively skillful.” Saikawa made a gesture of applause. “Can it also lock the door?”

“Lock the door,” Moe whispered near the robot.

Michiru rotated its wrist the other way and locked the door.

“How does it confirm the location of the lock?” Moe asked as she approached Saikawa.

“I’m not sure ... I don’t think the robot identifies it by the head camera images, though.” Saikawa walked over to the robot, knelt down, and observed it. “Ah, it has an infrared sensor on this hand. It measures the distance to the door with this. Then ... it seems to measure its own position by emitting a laser from here. It emits lasers in all directions and looks at the reflections from the walls. The phase difference gives the distance in millimeters.”

“It can lock and unlock the door, but doesn’t seem to open or close the door itself ... Not a very capable robot.”

“Of course, it cannot do that. Dr. Magata probably built this for fun ... probably.”

Moe sat down in front of the robot.

“Hey, Michiru.” She called the robot’s name.

“Yes, I am Michiru.” The robot reacted, and its head camera moved slightly.

“I am Moe.”

“You are Moe.” The robot said.

“Who am I?” Moe questioned.

“You are Moe.” It said the same thing.

“Who are you?”

“I am Michiru.”

“Are you alone?”

“Being alone is lonely,” Michiru said. Moe looked at Saikawa with a surprised face.

“Lonely?” Moe asked.

“The lonely one is seven.”

“Seven?”

“Seven is a number,” Michiru answered.

“One plus one is?” Moe posed the question while looking at Saikawa.

“One plus one is two,” Michiru said the correct answer.

“756 multiplied by 134 is?” Moe suddenly asked a difficult question.

“756 multiplied by 134 is?” Michiru just repeated the question.

“You can’t solve it, can you?”

“I can’t solve it because I am not smart,” Michiru said.

Moe stood up. Then she walked over to Saikawa, who was folding his arms, and whispered in his ear. “How does it work? That is ...”

“Ah, it’s a simple program. It doesn’t understand what the words mean.” Saikawa explained. “It recognizes speech and performs simple sentence analysis. It then stores the words as data as they are. It then links the words that appear near the conversation or in the same sentence and records the data near the memory. When it responds, the words in such proximity happened to be selected from the memory in relation to the conversation it has experienced in the past. Still, the phrase that the number seven is lonely sounds philosophical, right?”

“The same thing was mentioned in the past by Dr. Shiki Magata.” Moe nodded her head and said. “I guess Michiru had talked about it with Dr. Magata before.”

Saikawa looked around the room again. “Did you check the wardrobe there?”

It was the rattan chest of drawers next to the sewing machine.

“Yes, that inside was full of all kinds of cloth.” Moe shrugged lightly. “I think those are patchwork materials. But the work of the bedspreads does not look very good.”

“I agree. I guess even the doctor was a novice in this area.” Saikawa also looked at the patchwork bedspread.

“That bed has no space for a person to hide,” Moe muttered. “And ... it doesn’t seem like there’s a secret door anywhere.”

“We’ll ask them to see the floor plan of this research institute later,” Saikawa said. “Well, if this place is built like a ninja house, the problem would be quite simple, though ...”

“In mystery fiction, such a trick is forbidden.” Moe tilted her head and said.

“So ... Hmm ...” Saikawa responded and reached for the container holding the toy

blocks. They were small pieces of colorful plastic called Legos. Saikawa picked one of the yellow blocks and put it in his pocket.

Saikawa also checked the clothes in the doctor's closet, which Moe said had only one-thirtieth of the clothes she owned. Only three pairs of shoes. There was not a single winter coat of any kind.

After leaving the bedroom, Saikawa decided to look in the bathroom. He was no longer sure what he was looking for. The bathroom was immaculately cleaned, not a hair out of place.

A single white toothbrush stood in a cup on the washstand outside the bathroom. Nothing was in the washing machine or dryer. No clothes were in the middle of laundry, meaning everything was put away.

After the bathroom, Saikawa decided to look at the kitchen. Moe said she would look in the study and left for the lobby.

The kitchen was no different than the last time Saikawa saw it. It was uncommonly clean and tidy there. There was not even water in the kettle. The dish dryer was empty, too. Saikawa looked for a kitchen knife and found two inside the door under the sink. They were relatively small knives.

The refrigerator contained a quantity of food that might still be enough to live on for another week. It was a large three-door one, and the bottom shelf was full of vegetables. He carefully examined the top freezer as well. There was absolutely no ice cream or any other kind of food. It seemed that the inhabitant of this place did not like sweets. Even inside the largest door, there was butter but no jam.

Saikawa left the kitchen and headed for the study where Moe was. She was looking at a sizeable book-like object spread out on a desk. She looked up as Saikawa entered the room. "I found her album. There are not many photos in it, though ..."

The pictures were all from when Shiki Magata was very young. She was a slender little girl and was almost always pictured wearing a white dress. The dates on the photos showed that they were taken twenty years before the present.

"Her appearance has hardly changed since then," Moe commented.

"Did you find any pictures with dolls in them?" Saikawa asked.

“No, there are not. All of them were taken at parties or somewhere official. And some of the pictures were missing. They had been removed.” Saying so, Moe showed Saikawa some pages with marks where the photos had been removed. About five photos were missing in all.

“Such a case ... I think that’s about common.” Saikawa expressed his opinion. “A photo in an album is something that tends to be peeled off by the owner.”

Moe used a handkerchief to put the album away on the bookshelf to avoid fingerprints. “It seems there have been no photos since she was locked in this residence.”

“To begin with ... I don’t think she had any cameras at this residence.” Saikawa pointed out. “I don’t see any audio equipment either. It seems the doctor wasn’t in the habit of listening to music. Then there is no video camera either. No newspapers. It’s just like me. If she had a newspaper, she didn’t have thrown it away that day, did she?”

“But I saw a TV. In the doctor’s workroom ...” Moe said. “She is more human than you, Sensei. Without a TV in such a living space, I would not even know what kind of time period I am living in.”

“I think it is a trivial thing to know what kind of time period we are living in ...” Saikawa murmured.

It was depressing to them that they had to pass through the reception room with the dead body one last time. Moe took a deep breath in the lobby and prepared for it. Saikawa also held his breath and tried to walk through there. Opening the aluminum door, Saikawa let Moe go first. Saikawa was about to follow her, when his eyes suddenly fell on the bookshelf in the room. There was a complete collection of world literature, a complete collection of Japanese literature, a complete collection of art, a primary color encyclopedia, and a number of other series. But for some reason, they were all up to the middle of the series. Saikawa first noticed that the encyclopedia was incomplete, but when he checked it out, he found that many of the other series had ended in the middle, and all were only up to volume fifteen at most. The series, which was less than fifteen volumes, was complete. However, there was not a single volume sixteen or seventeen on this bookshelf.

“Sensei, is something wrong?” Moe called out from behind Saikawa. She had gone outside once and then returned.

Saikawa went outside and closed the aluminum door, followed by the yellow door. Then he took a deep breath and lit a cigarette. Mochizuki and Hasebe, in the adjacent room, were watching him. Saikawa greeted them with one hand raised in the air, exhaled a large puff of smoke, and said to himself.

“Dr. Magata lived here for fifteen years.”

-2-

Saikawa once again looked into the room where Mochizuki and Hasebe were.

“How is your investigation going? Did you find out anything, Sensei?” Mochizuki asked in a bright voice.

“Mochizuki-san, I have something to ask you ...” Saikawa did not enter the room but stood at the door. “When did you purchase the encyclopedia or the complete collection of literature in Dr. Magata’s room?”

“That was a long time ago,” Mochizuki replied. “I think the encyclopedia has been around since the beginning. I mean, it was already there when Ms. Magata came into this facility. The other ones were not purchased recently, either.”

“Why are many series only available up to the middle volume?” Saikawa asked. “There aren’t all the volumes.”

“Umm, I don’t remember it well ... We just bought what the lady ordered. Shall we check it out?”

“Please. Many of the series are only up to fifteen volumes.” Saikawa said, looking at his watch. It was already past 11 at night. “Then, one more question for you. Who has been at this research institute for the past fifteen years?”

“I have.” Mochizuki puffed out one cheek with a perplexed look. “I’ve been here since the incident happened. I wasn’t in this department at the time, though ...”

“Which department?” Saikawa asked.

“I was the driver for Dr. Magata,” Mochizuki answered. “I mean, it was Dr.

Sachiro Magata, who died fifteen years ago ... That's why when this research institute was built, I was helping him move in. And then that incident happened. Well, I had a lot of skills, like boiler maintenance, so they hired me here."

"I see. Who else has been here?"

"Yamane-kun came here after the incident ..." Mochizuki responded as he recalled. "Yes, Mizutani-kun was here from the beginning. He was just a part-time student. There would have been no one else ... Mizutani-kun has been here the longest. The next would be Yamane-kun, I think."

"So, have only three people been here since the incident happened fifteen years ago? That is ... The director's wife, Mochizuki-san, and Mizutani-san, right?" Saikawa confirmed.

"That would be the case. Since two of the five people who were here are dead." Mochizuki nodded. "Before I knew it, I was getting old."

-3-

Moe and Saikawa were told by Mochizuki the location of Chief Mizutani's room.

As they were walking down the hallway, they were stopped from behind by Ayako Shimada halfway up the long ramp to the basement floor. She wore the same white coat as last night, but today she had untied her hair. Coming up the ramp, she was carrying three thick files in her hands.

"Nishinosono-san, if you want, you can come to my room for a minute." Shimada smiled and said.

Moe looked at Saikawa.

"Just as well. I'm going to Mizutani-san's room. I'll join you later."

"Chief Mizutani's room is very close to mine." Shimada told Saikawa.

The two walked with Shimada for a while.

"I have almost given up." Ayako Shimada said as she was walking. "Because I really can't believe it ... I can't figure out the cause at all. I'm being told to check the source file now. So I just went to the library to get some old files. Some are more

than ten years old now, so they are on magnetic tape. First, I have to input these. Otherwise I can't search them digitally. I hate it ... Oh, that blue door there is Mizutani-san's room." Shimada pointed that way to Saikawa at the T-junction of the passageway.

Saikawa raised one hand and walked to that room.

Moe followed Shimada down the passageway to the other side.

As Shimada opened the door to the room, she handed Moe the files she was holding and placed her right hand against the glass. "See, this system is inconvenient when you have belongings."

Ayako Shimada's room was about the same size as Yamane's. It had a similar gourd-shaped table and a single terminal display, though in a slightly different position.

But that was the only thing they had in common; the rest was a stark contrast. The walls were covered all over with animation posters. On the table stood twice as many plastic model robots as chess pieces, all colorfully painted. The flashy coloring of those robots reminded Moe of the Neputa Festival in Hirosaki City, although it was completely unrelated. There were also several figures of animated characters. There was also a large plastic robot lying on the floor. Also, a sixty-centimeter-tall Godzilla and a vinyl monster doll. In short, her room could not have been more cluttered.

"A little messy, isn't it?" Shimada looked back with a clear face. "Well, sit over there ..."

Moe pondered which route to take to get to that table. Walking straight through was likely to destroy some of her collection. Shimada was used to it and walked swiftly around the room like a ski racer, placing the files on the display with a loud thud and returning.

Finally arriving at the table, Moe sat down in a chair. "You like robots, don't you?"

She noticed that on the table, buried in the horde of robots, was a one-box dingy Macintosh with a mouse on top of it. It was the same shape as Moe's Mac but slightly yellowish.

“Yes, I like robots, more correctly, Gundam-related ones.” Shimada was now about to head toward the kitchen. “Nishinosono-san, you drink coffee, right?”

“Yes, please,” Moe responded.

The term “Gundam-related” was new to Moe. *Would it be the same “related” as science-related? I wonder what other “related” can be?*

“I like Char. Do you know of him?” Ayako Shimada said before disappearing at the kitchen door. Casval Rem Deikun.”

“No, I don’t.” Moe replied honestly. “Char? That’s an India-related name, right?”

“Oh, really, that’s too bad. Nishinosono-san ..., how old are you?”

“I’m almost twenty-year-old,” Moe answered. Although she said “almost,” it was still four months away. *I answered this way because I might want to grow old as soon as possible*, Moe analyzed herself.

“No wonder. You are ten years younger than me ...” After saying so, Ayako took off her white coat, hung it on a chair, and disappeared through the door. Moe had no idea that Shimada Ayako was that old.

Moe looked around the room once more. *This place looks like a boy’s room*, she thought. It was cluttered as if an elementary school boy would be scolded by his mother. Something was placed on all planes parallel to the floor and ceiling. In the far corner of the room was a large box-shaped object covered with a black sheet. The box was about the size of a refrigerator turned on its side ... or maybe a little larger. Moe couldn’t take her eyes off it for a while, wondering what it was. *If it was a toy box, I could put all this junk away*, Moe thought.

Ayako Shimada soon returned. The coffee seemed to have been kept warm.

“What’s that? That black ... box?” Moe asked, pointing at it.

“It is top secret.” Ayako put her cup on the table and sat down right next to Moe. “Later, I’ll show that one to you. Nishinosono-san, look ... let me see your hand for a minute.”

“Are you palm-reading?” Moe asked as she held out her left hand.

“No, I just want to see your hand ...” Ayako took Moe’s hand and brought her glasses-clad face close to it. “You have a beautiful hand ... You have never had any

trouble at all. Oh, you're left-handed ... And what's this?"

"I do kyudo (Japanese archery). I'm in the kyudo club." Moe asked.

"Oh, I did too. That was when I was in high school, though ..." Ayako looked up in surprise.

"Umm, Shimada-san, what do you think?" Moe tried to switch the subject in an instant. "I mean, about this case. Do you have any thoughts on it?"

"Yes, that's the story. I got an e-mail about it. You and Saikawa-sensei are looking into the case ..." Shimada let go of Moe's left hand, which she had been holding.

"Well, that's right. First, I can say that the trouble with that system is the biggest mystery. That was absolutely impossible. An error like that can't happen ..."

"Wasn't it a computer virus or something?" Moe asked.

"Virus or no virus, you can't patch it like that in any way." Shimada brought her glasses-clad face close to Moe's. "To me, a freak system error is much more frightening than a murder."

"Are you not wondering about the case?" Moe stepped back a little. She thought about having a cup of coffee, but it was still too hot for her.

"Right, I was surprised by Ms. Shiki Magata's outfit," Shimada said. "I don't remember much about it because I passed out ... I wonder if she wanted to wear a wedding dress ..."

"Shimada-san, you are single, right?" Moe asked fearfully. Yamane told her that the rest of the staff at the research institute were single except for Director Shindo and Dr. Yuminaga.

"Yes, I have never been married," Ayako said with a laugh. "I am not interested in men at all."

"Eh?" Moe felt a little chill. "You mean?"

"I much prefer to watch the animation." Ayako continued. "Someday in the future, a computer will create a boyfriend. Animation characters are much less data-intensive ... Hey, is Saikawa-sensei your boyfriend? You're not his secretary, are you?"

"I am a university student," Moe answered.

“Saikawa-sensei is an attractive person, isn’t he? Is he single?” Ayako Shimada smiled with narrowed eyes.

“Shimada-san, doesn’t that opinion contradict what you just said ...?” Moe smiled bitterly.

“No, not really.” Shimada leaned back in her chair, raised her arms, and yawned. “What can I say? Saikawa-sensei doesn’t look like he’s alive ... His heart doesn’t seem to be beating. That kind of thing about him attracts me ... Do you understand?”

“I don’t,” Moe answered immediately. Really, Moe did not agree with her at all and was a little angry with her.

“Well, okay. I’m the odd one out ...” Shimada put her hands to her cheeks and sighed.

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“No, I really don’t know anything about that incident,” Mizutani said, turning his palms toward the ceiling. “Surely, I was here, but I only heard about what happened later. Before that incident, I was able to see Ms. Shiki several times. I had passed her in the hallway and met her in the director’s office. She had just returned from the US. She was beautiful, like an angel ... Let’s see, she was fourteen years old back then ...? She’s a girl prodigy ... There were always people from TV networks and magazines coming to interview her. That never happened after the incident happened ... I never saw Ms. Shiki again. All the time ... Even though we were in the same building, though.”

“Did she not leave this building even at the time of the trial?” Saikawa asked.

“Yes, I think she left here twice ... If I remember right ... Uh, I think it was more than one year ... after the incident. It took a long time for the trial to be held, you know. But I didn’t see her back then.”

“You had never even been in that room, had you?” Saikawa asked, touching a model giraffe on the table. There were many other miniature animals in the room.

“No, I haven’t. Yesterday was the first time.” Mizutani put his fat arm on the

table.

“Was there really no one who entered that room?”

“As far as I know, no. The director may have entered that room on occasion, though ...”

“Did she hate humans ...? Was she allergic to humans ...?”

“Yes, the lady was the one who rejected others.”

“When you first saw the inside of Dr. Magata’s room, what did you think?”
Saikawa asked Mizutani what he thought.

“That was amazing. It was neat and tidy. Someone must have put it away, right?”

“Who, in your opinion, did it?”

“That would be the meticulous guy.” Mizutani flipped his hands again. “But I wanted the guy to refrain from deleting the data. The loss of her data was serious damage. It was a great loss.”

“Was there any data of value?” Saikawa was looking at Mizutani, but Mizutani was not looking at Saikawa. “Was there any data worth taking a person’s life?”

“There was no such thing.” Mizutani said simply. He glanced at Saikawa and looked away again. “Surely, there was something worth tens of millions of yen, maybe even more. But you can’t trade that for human life, can you? For that matter, how did the murderer kill the lady? How could the guy have done that?”

“Do you have any ideas about that?” Saikawa questioned.

“I don’t. None at all.” Mizutani said in a breathless tone. “There is no secret door. Absolutely not. I’ve been coming here frequently since this building was being constructed. It’s impossible. It’s not humanly possible.”

“Not humanly possible?” Saikawa repeated Mizutani’s words. “Why do you think so?”

“Umm, I don’t mean anything,” Mizutani spoke ambiguously.

“How long have you been using the current version of Red Magic?” Saikawa changed the question.

“That was, uh ...” Mizutani answered thoughtfully. “It must be seven or eight

years ago ... Before that, it was version 3.”

“Dr. Magata created it, right?” Saikawa asked.

“Yes, originally, she did ... Version 3 was designed entirely by the lady. But for version 4, we were very much involved. We took her design and made significant improvements to it. At that time, she was also making compilers. Well ... in any case, Red Magic has perfect security. It can handle any human manipulation. That was designed as a system to be used where that kind of risk is expected. It can handle any software sabotage. That’s why this trouble is astounding and truly troubling. It shouldn’t happen ... cannot happen.”

“Have you guys put in any new programs lately?”

“We did many such things ... We are looking into all of them. You mean a Trojan horse, right? That’s what I thought. Yeah, we are checking that possibility as well. But it is still inconceivable.”

Chief Mizutani’s room had somewhat more stuff than Yamane’s room. There were countless miniatures of animals, and a savanna was developing everywhere in the room. Miniature cars lined the steel shelves by the wall. However, the room was relatively organized and clean. Mizutani had not spoken a word about his hobbies.

“Was there anyone who had a grudge against the director?” Saikawa hated himself for his asking such a commonplace question.

“How could I know such a thing?” Mizutani spat the words out. “Anyway, we’re in trouble. The loss of Ms. Magata is a hard hit for us, and so is the director’s death. I don’t know who killed them, but this is a crisis for the research institute. I’m sure none of our staff had any complaints about this place. It is ideal for people like us to work in a facility like this. There is no way that any of us would want to destroy this environment.”

“So is the culprit an outsider?”

“No ... That is less and less unlikely.” All of a sudden, Mizutani spoke slowly. He must have realized the contradiction in his statement. “Certainly, so ... it is. It is impossible for an outsider to commit the murders. I cannot understand it. Why did the culprit do that ...? What on earth is the purpose of the guy?”

The town was beautiful, glowing in rainbow colors.

Moe was riding a small go-cart. It was a skeletal cart, and the engine noise was high. She could feel the slow acceleration from the seat on the back. Only the road surface was black and looked a little wet. When she looked up and saw the sky, it was clear, and cottony clouds were flowing. The same go-cart Moe was driving was flying through the sky. Moe could also hear what sounded like a jet plane. She could also see three go-carts hovering and gathering in the sky above her. As Moe moved the steering wheel right and left, the cart snaked around, and her body swayed sideways. She felt good.

How can I fly with this cart ...?

Moe thought as she looked overhead.

Then she lowered her gaze and looked at the panel in front of her. There was a speedometer and a couple of buttons, but she couldn't tell which switch was for flying. She saw a sign on the road every once in a while, but she wasn't sure what it meant either. Not a single person was walking around the town.

As Moe approached the intersection, she slowed down slightly and turned left.

A blue go-cart was driving at high speed in the opposite lane. When Moe turned around after passing it, it braked hard and then made a sharp U-turn behind Moe.

Probably Moe's cart was slow. The blue cart soon caught her up. It came up just to Moe's right and sidled beside her. Only the face of the man riding it was realistic, but it was somehow flat and unreliable. He wore a white glove on his right hand like her.

"Hi." Waving his right hand while running parallel, the man said. "Let's see ..., you are Nishinosono-san, right?"

"Yeah, hello," Moe responded. As she stared at the man's face, a sign suddenly appeared in the space, and the characters "Eiji Hatanaka" flashed. The sign quickly disappeared. "You must be Hatanaka-san, right?"

"We've never met before, have we?" The man said without changing his expression. "Are you one of our guests?"

“Yes, I am.”

“Would you like to race with me?”

“Hey, how ... can I get this cart to fly?” Moe asked. “I saw the carts flying in the sky. I want to fly too.”

“Ah, you’re a beginner. You shouldn’t fly. You know, it’s scary.” Hatanaka said. “Unless you have a destination ...”

“Destination?”

“I mean, is there someone you want to meet?”

“Who can I meet?”

“Press the yellow round button there.” The man raised his white right hand.

Moe looked at the yellow button next to the steering wheel. A sign appeared in space again and displayed “Autopilot.” Moe pressed that button with her right hand. Her right hand was large and looked like a white glove.

From that button appeared what looked like a whiteboard with letters lined up. They were some people’s names. When she tried to look at the bottom, the characters on the board automatically scrolled upward.

“The people in green letters are in this city, and you’ll see them soon. The people in red characters need to be called.” Hatanaka, who was driving next to her, told her kindly. “Well, I’ll see you later ...”

Hatanaka accelerated, and his figure became smaller and smaller.

Moe looked at the whiteboard again. Written on it were all names she did not recognize. Few of the names were in the green display. She was apparently too concerned about what was ahead to take her time looking at the list. She pulled her cart over to the side of the road and stopped.

At the very end of the list, the name Michiru written in *katakana* (a Japanese syllabary) was displayed in green.

Moe touched it with her right hand.

Suddenly, the cart Moe was on started to accelerate and drive away. Moreover, it was out of control. She could feel the centrifugal force as it rounded a curve. The

speed was getting faster and faster, and the view of the city seemed to melt away. She remembered the tiger that had run too fast and turned to butter. Come to think of it, Moe loved the scene in that story where he painted a picture on the wall of one of the buildings and turned it into a jungle.

Soon, she found herself flying. She didn't really feel like she was flying, but looking down, she could see the townscape. Several other carts were moving along the road and looked like rats lost in a maze.

The cart on which Moe rode rose higher and higher and entered the clouds. She seemed to be passing through a white tunnel. Soon the rise calmed, and she was above the clouds. Moe's cart came to a stop in mid-air. She looked around, but all around her was a carpet of clouds. It was dazzling.

Something slowly emerged from the clouds. It was a cart the same color as Moe's cart. It stopped just in front of her, with it facing her.

"Did you call me?" The woman in the cart spoke.

Moe got goosebumps.

She had never forgotten the voice. She had heard it a month earlier, that of Ms. Magata.

The face of the person in the cart was vague and out of focus. Moe stared there and paid attention, but no help sign appeared.

"Who are you?" Moe asked.

"I am Michiru." The woman said in the voice of Ms. Magata.

"Who are you? Stop joking, please ... I don't really understand this system."

"Joking?" The woman in front of her asked back. "But you called me. If you have no use for me, I will leave."

"Wait, I'm sorry." Moe unconsciously put her left hand forward, but her left hand did not exist in this world. "Where are you? I want to see you in person."

"I am right in front of you, right? I am seeing you right now."

"I want to see you in the real world, not in this place," Moe repeated her words in her head.

“To me, this place is real.” The woman said. “Wait a minute ...”

The woman was looking down and doing something. It looked like she had taken out a compact and applied makeup. After a while, the woman’s face became clearer and clearer.

“Dr. Shiki Magata ...” Moe held her breath when she saw the woman’s face. “That’s Dr. Shiki’s data, isn’t it?”

“You are much easier to talk to in this form, aren’t you?” The woman said without changing her expression.

“Wait. Why are you using Dr. Shiki’s face and voice?” Moe questioned. “Are you trying to scare me?”

“Why should you be afraid of me?” Only the woman’s voice laughed.

“Okay ...” Moe thought for a moment. “Multiply 333,667 by 2,331, and you get?”

“I see nine 7’s in a row.” The woman quickly replied.

Moe leaned back in her seat.

Her heart beat faster, and she found it hard to breathe.

She could feel the blood draining from her head.

She wanted to say something, but she could not.

She seemed to forget that she even breathed unless she was aware of it.

She heard the woman laughing.

“Nishinosono-san?” The woman called Moe’s name in a gentle voice.

“Yes ...” Moe could barely respond.

She was breathless, and sweat was pouring from her forehead.

But her body was cold. Her feet and hands seemed to be cold.

It was a sign of anemia, a precursor to collapse.

“Were your parents kind to you?” The woman asked.

These words echoed as if they were piercing Moe’s heart.

“Think back to ... the night your parents died.”

“Wh-why?” That was all she could say.

Her heart beat even faster, and she could hardly breathe.

“What clothes were you wearing then?”

Moe felt a chill, and her body shuddered.

She closed her eyes.

All she could hear was the sound of her heartbeat.

Am I running out of oxygen?

Why am I so breathless ...?

“I-I was ... wearing a purple one-piece dress then.” Moe recalled that.

But she felt faint.

“What did you do with the one-piece dress?”

“I threw it away.”

She was sweating all over her body. But she was cold and shivering shakily.

“Why did you throw it away?”

“It was dirty.”

“How did the dress get stained?”

“It was stained with blood ...”

Yes! Now I remember. I loved that one-piece dress ...

Her heart thumped loudly, and she felt a pain in her chest.

“Whose blood was it?”

“It ... it was Saikawa-sensei’s blood ...”

It was my favorite color, purple ...

“Why did Saikawa Sensei shed blood?”

Because I acted violently ... Because I hit Sensei and ran amuck ...

She breathed a little easier.

She felt like her blood was coming back.

I'm okay ...

“What’s wrong, Nishinosono-san?” The woman said plainly. “Why don’t you tell me the rest of your story?”

So, breathe slowly ...

Moe opened her eyes and saw the woman in front of her.

“I hit Sensei, and that broke ... his glasses and Sensei was ... He was injured,” Moe explained. “I cried and ... raged ... Yes, I forgot it ... That one-piece dress got stained with tears and blood. I was so sad ... It was my favorite one-piece dress ... Even though my mother made it for me ... I had stained it ... I washed it twice. I did it alone ... Only me ... There was no one in my house ... I had never done laundry before. I did the laundry alone ... The stains didn’t come out. I was very sad, but somehow I got so angry that ... I threw it away.”

Moe took a deep breath.

Tears welled up and blocked her vision.

“Since then ... I have never worn purple. I no longer wear a one-piece dress either ... I had forgotten about it. I owe an apology to Saikawa-sensei. I completely forgot it ...”

“Thanks for sharing your story.” The woman said gently. “Goodbye, Nishinosono-san.”

“Wait, please! Moe shouted in a small voice.

“You want to hear who I am, don’t you?”

“Who are you? How do you know what Dr. Magata and I talked about?”

“You know, in this world ... Nishinosono-san.” The woman answered slowly. “What you want to know is right in front of you. The person you want to talk to is always right in front of you. It is quite natural. That is the way it should be. Don’t you think so? Originally, the world was like this. But think how half-finished and inconvenient your world is now. You can hear distant voices and see distant things, but you cannot touch them. You are given so much information, but you can only forget and lose it all. There is so much information that you can’t even see the person next to you. People are getting further and further away. Why do you people

try to go so far away? Do you want to move away to a distance where pistol bullets can't reach us? Because if they are right in front of you, you will kill them? Hey, Nishinosono-san ... Why is God so far away? If God is really saving us, why isn't He right in front of us? Isn't that strange?"

"But ..." Moe tried to say something.

"Goodbye. Hope to see you again." Moe only heard the woman's voice. "It doesn't matter where we are. Whether you want to see the person or not, that is what determines the distance."

There was no one in front of Moe anymore. There were only two layers of blue sky and white clouds all around.

Moe took off her goggles.

She was sitting on an unstable seat in a darkened box.

She could only hear her own rapid breathing.

She pushed open the heavy door beside her. She removed her right glove, which had a thick cable attached. The seat was supported by a small hydraulic cylinder.

Moe wanted to get out of there as soon as possible, but it was hard to stand up.

"How was it? Wasn't it interesting?" Ayako Shimada's voice came from far away.

Moe closed the door of the black box and stood there. Next to the box was a single workstation with no display. There was a quiet sound of hard drives spinning, and green light-emitting diodes blinked nervously.

Moe looked around Ayako Shimada's cluttered room. She hurriedly put her hand over her eye to see if it was wet.

Was I really crying? Moe wondered.

"What's wrong? You look like you're not feeling well ... Did you get sick?" Ayako Shimada asked. She was facing the display a short distance away. "If you don't get used to it, it's not good to experience it for a long time."

"I met Dr. Magata," Moe said. She shook her dazed head.

"No way ..." Shimada laughed.

“Yeah, it’s probably someone’s prank ...” Moe sighed.

“Actually happened?” Ayako Shimada sat up in surprise. “Wait a minute, I’ll check it out.”

At that moment, there was a knock at the door, and they were both startled.

“Who is it?” Shimada asked a little louder.

“It’s Saikawa.” The voice came from nowhere. The sound quality came from the speakers.

“Identified him.” Moe heard Deborah’s electronic voice. “Open the door?”

“Okay.” Ayako Shimada replied.

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“Where else can I find this VR cart?” Moe asked Ayako Shimada.

VR Cart was a communication game based on early-level technology of virtual reality. Through the network, users could ride around a virtual town in a cart. They could race with other staff members in different rooms, drive together, and even talk to each other above the clouds. Moe sat in the machine’s cockpit with little explanation, as recommended by Ayako Shimada.

“You will find it everywhere,” Shimada answered. “There are more than twenty cart terminals. Most people bring them into their rooms as I do, but we also have three of them in a lounge on the first floor ... And if you don’t need the response, you can also join the game on a common terminal.”

“What do you mean by ‘the response’? You mean the acceleration by tilting the seat?” Moe asked.

“Yes. And when you put on the glove, your right hand would appear on the screen, right?” Shimada explained.

Saikawa sat in his chair with his cheek resting on his hand, silently listening to the conversation.

“I can’t identify who did it, though ...” Shimada looked at Saikawa and said. “Indeed, a new name, Michiru, was registered. When I checked it, it had been

logged off ...”

“How do you display the faces of players?” Moe was seated on the opposite side of Saikawa.

“Nishinosono-san’s data should have been taken by Deborah at the entrance.” Shimada pointed out. “Ms. Shiki Magata’s video data was also available to anyone, so the guy probably copied and used it.”

“Her voice, too?” Moe asked further. “That was definitely Dr. Magata’s voice.”

“That is also possible,” Shimada explained. “If you combine voice recognition and speech synthesis ... But indeed, it was an elaborate prank.”

“Even a male person can do that, can’t they?” Saikawa spoke for the first time.

“Yes, he can. Saikawa-sensei.” Ayako Shimada answered with a smile.

Saikawa looked at Ayako Shimada’s room with a curious look. *Saikawa might have made plastic models before*, Moe thought.

“Saikawa-sensei, would you like some coffee, too?” Shimada stood up.

“Yes, please,” Saikawa responded while looking at his watch. Moe also looked at her watch. It was 00:30 a.m.

Ayako Shimada smiled at Saikawa and disappeared toward the kitchen.

“I was shown a floor plan of this research institute,” Saikawa whispered to Moe. “I scrutinized it closely and found no secret way in Dr. Magata’s basement residence. Such a space could not exist. Both the ceilings and the floors of that residence were independent.”

“But all those tools were there. Since the doctor had as long as fifteen years, it would be easy to drill a hole in a concrete wall.” Moe also whispered.

“Well, yes. But if she had done that, they would have known it immediately. She had no choice but go out into another room or the ground. You know, that residence is on the second basement floor.”

“Umm, Sensei ...” Moe said with a troubled look. “I have something to talk about with you ...”

Her heart was full of what she remembered from a few minutes ago.

That purple one-piece dress ...

How could I have forgotten something so important ...?

Ayako Shimada showed up with a coffee cup and a glass pot. She placed the cup in front of Saikawa, then tried to add the pot of coffee to Moe's cup. Moe declined.

"Sensei, do you too prefer your coffee black?" Shimada asked, sitting next to Saikawa.

"Yes." Saikawa nodded and lifted his cup. *I never put impurities in my coffee*, he always said.

"Good. You know, I have no milk or sugar here ..." Shimada smiled. "Sensei, what are your hobbies?"

"Eh? My hobbies? None in particular." Saikawa answered. "Why are you asking me that?"

"No, I just wanted to ask you about it." Ayako Shimada put her fingers together and put them on her lips.

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Since smoking was not allowed in Ayako Shimada's room, Saikawa's energy was about to run out. It was a kind of torture, especially when he was drinking hot coffee and could not smoke.

The two left Shimada's room, walked a short distance down the corridor, and took the ramp to the first floor. Saikawa decided to go back to the entrance lobby to smoke a cigarette. On the way, there was a spacious room without a door, so he looked inside. As Saikawa peeked inside, the lights came on, and the room became brighter. The space was empty, but there were many chairs and two pinball tables. There were also three VR Cart boxes lined up in the corner of the room that Moe had ridden in Ayako Shimada's room.

"So this is the lounge, right?" Moe walked into the room and touched a pinball table.

Saikawa sat on a vinyl couch and quickly decided to smoke a cigarette. Quitting smoking for a while, he felt it really delicious.

“After meeting Mizutani-san, I also met Miki Magata-san,” Saikawa said as he exhaled smoke.

“Where is Miki-san?” Moe was still touching the pinball table. “Is she at the residence of the director’s wife?”

“No, Mizutani-san showed me the way, and she was in the guest room on the basement floor.” Saikawa leaned back in his chair. “I spoke English with her, so I didn’t understand the subtle nuances, though ... Miki-san told me that the bag she left on the helicopter contained a stuffed doll to give to Dr. Shiki. She met the director at a hotel in Nagono, then took a cab to the airport and came here by the director’s helicopter. She said she had planned to stay here for two nights.”

“Sensei, were you in Miki-san’s room for that long?” Moe walked over to Saikawa and sat down on the couch. “Wasn’t that a little too long?”

“You’re stinging.” Saikawa laughed. “No, after that, I went to Yamane-san’s room, and he showed me detailed architectural drawings of this research institute. The drawings were quite detailed, and they were all still there. Of course, they were digital data, so I saw them on the screen.” Saikawa let out a puff of smoke.

“Nishinosono-kun. Do you think Miki Magata-san looks like Dr. Shiki? Yamane-san and his colleagues are trying to make Miki-san out to be Dr. Shiki.”

“Well ... Since they are sisters, they are similar to a certain extent,” Moe said, looking at the ceiling. “But Dr. Shiki was much smaller and slender. Miki-san is taller and ... So, the impression is much different. Besides, Dr. Shiki was still more beautiful. She was more intelligent, had sharper eyes, and was more youthful ...”

“I only saw Dr. Shiki’s dead face.” Saikawa murmured.

Moe nodded silently.

“Tomorrow ... No, I should call it today’s event ... The police will be here tonight.” Saikawa held his cigarette and folded his hands over his head. “I also talked to Yamane-san ... He said they would leave Dr. Shiki Magata’s body in that room. So, they will pretend that Miki-san is Dr. Shiki Magata. It should happen ... only if the police insist on seeing Dr. Magata. I guess they will lie for a week.”

“What will they do when the police enter that room?” Moe asked, tilting her head.

“They are going to hide that yellow door.” Saikawa said. “They are going to put a

shelf in front of the door. Nishinosono-kun, we are criminals, aren't we?"

"But if we don't answer them, it doesn't mean we lied, does it?" Moe said flatly. "We have the right to remain silent, don't we?"

"Well, that's okay ..." Saikawa put another cigarette in his mouth. "I don't care anymore."

"We can tell the police everything and ask them to keep the fact that Dr. Shiki was killed a secret." Moe leaned forward and said. "Am I wrong? If we do that, no one will have to lie."

"How can we pass such a request?" Saikawa said with a wry smile.

"I can ask my uncle to do it," Moe replied. Her uncle was the chief of the Aichi Prefectural Police.

"That's impossible," Saikawa said quickly.

"Then I will ask my aunt to help me." Moe said. Of course, that was her aunt, the wife of the governor of Aichi Prefecture.

"It might be worth our while to try, though ..." Saikawa replied vaguely and looked up.

"Sensei ..."

After saying so, Moe fell silent. Saikawa, who had been counting the sprinklers on the ceiling, looked at her face.

"Yes?"

"Well ... Let me tell you about the night of that plane crash ..."

"Ah ..." Saikawa was a little surprised. His heart beat louder.

"Sensei ... I injured you. At that time ... I broke your glasses, right?"

"I still remember that."

"My apologies."

Moe then looked down.

"Haha ... Never mind. Not at all ..." Saikawa was at a loss for words. "It couldn't be helped."

Saikawa felt it had happened a long time before. Still, Saikawa recalled the scene he had seen in the airport lobby. They noticed the accident at once. The plane carrying Mr. and Mrs. Nishinosono had crashed at the end of the runway and burst into flames. The airplane was in pieces. Of the 400 passengers on board, only a few survived. It burned for three hours like a bonfire.

By all accounts, the passengers were doomed to survive. Family members could not even approach the scene until the morning. Moe was bawling, and Saikawa was soothing her the whole time. Moe hit him, and he was injured, but such pain was so slight that he himself did not even notice it. How many times had he wanted to hug her? That was something Saikawa could not do. All that remained in his mind now was regret for that.

“Sensei, you must have gotten blood all over your shirt, right?” Moe mumbled as she kept looking down.

“I don’t remember that well ...”

“Did you wash the shirt yourself, Sensei?” Moe looked up. Tears were running down her cheeks.

“I think I did. There was no one to wash it for me.” Saikawa smiled.

“Please forgive me ...”

“What’s wrong with you all of a sudden?” Saikawa gave her a shrug. “You should not ...”

“I had long forgotten that.” Moe looked serious. “I was reminded of that just a minute ago.”

“People tend to forget something serious until they can talk about it ... You’re all right now.”

Moe had taken a year off from high school after her parents’ accident. Saikawa recalled visiting her several times. A year later, she had shortened her hair and suddenly began to act more cheerful. It was as if she were a different person from the Moe Saikawa had known until then.

“Do you know the difference between reminiscences and memories?” Saikawa asked as he put out his cigarette.

“Reminiscences are full of good things, and memories bad things.”

“That’s not true. We have both bad reminiscences and happy memories.”

“So, what’s the difference?”

“We remember all of our reminiscences but cannot remember all of our memories.”

Chapter 7: The Amber Dream

-1-

The room of Dr. and Mrs. Yuminaga was the most unique one Saikawa had ever seen in the building. The first room after entering the door was carpeted and was a typical reception room. It had the deliberate feel of an elementary school principal's room or a drama set. Had he seen it elsewhere, it might not have seemed so strange. What seemed so ordinary was really unusual in this research institute, and on the contrary, it looked ridiculous, as if it were made up.

A glass-door cabinet was lined with whiskey, wine, glasses, and a nondescript crystal clock, a traditional wedding gift. The time was 2:20 a.m.

Tomihiko Yuminaga was sitting in an armchair, glass in hand. As Saikawa and Moe sat down on the sofa, Sumie Yuminaga appeared from the back of the residence. But when Saikawa and Moe declined their drinks, she quickly disappeared to the back.

“Somehow, we find ourselves in a complicated situation. Saikawa-sensei.” Yuminaga put his glass on the side table and stroked his mustache. “I’m not willing to do that, but it’s a decision we all have made. We have no other choice ... Even so, how could Yamane-kun come up with the idea ... of setting up the double of Ms. Magata.”

“Yamane-san was the person who came up with the idea, right?” Saikawa crosses his legs.

“Yes, he was.”

“Doctor, when you saw the bodies of Dr. Shiki Magata and Director Shindo, did you feel anything?” Saikawa suddenly got right to the point. “For example, the cause of death ... or something unusual, whatever.”

“Haha, you are like a detective.” Yuminaga picked up the glass again and took a sip of the liquid. “That’s okay. I can’t guarantee anything, but I’ll give you my views. First, let’s start with Ms. Magata’s case ... Her body was still slightly rigid when we found it last night. The dead spots had disappeared. I’m not an expert on that ...

and the corpse was missing both hands and legs, so I can't say for sure. But probably, she died about two or three days ago. It can't have been one day. Besides, I believe her limbs were amputated long after her death. Perhaps the killer did it in the bathroom. That must have taken a lot of work. It would have taken hours. If the killer had done it alone, it would have taken half a day. So, two aluminum angles were attached to the top of that wagon-shaped robot P1. That was how the body was secured from the back. The murderer had a hard and time-consuming job anyway. That was what I was particularly interested in."

"Can you identify the cause of her death?"

"There were no wounds as far as I could see. Without taking off her dress, I cannot say for sure. We can't do too much before the police arrive. Still, she was not strangled. I had a good view of her neck."

"Anything else?" Saikawa asked.

"Hmm, yes. That's all, I think ... As for Director Shindo, the cause of his death was clear."

"You had been examining Dr. Magata and Director Shindo the whole time, right?" Saikawa confirmed.

Mrs. Yuminaga emerged from the kitchen and sat down on a chair at a table some distance away.

"Right, ever since we came here." Dr. Yuminaga looked at his wife and then said. "Eleven years already? No, it's been twelve years ..."

His wife nodded lightly.

"Madam, I heard that you once entered Dr. Magata's room." Saikawa said to Sumie Yuminaga.

"Yeah, that was ... about three years ago, I think ..." Mrs. Yuminaga replied in a small voice. "Only twice, though ... Ms. Shiki became ill after dieting, and I gave her an IV (intravenous drip). It continued for about a week, but I was in her residence only for the first two days. Yes, I did. Specifically, I entered her bedroom for only five minutes twice a day. In short, four times in total. After that, the lady did everything herself."

“Do you remember what her room looked like at that time?” Saikawa questioned. “What was your impression of it?”

“I don’t think there was anything particularly unusual about it.” Mrs. Yuminaga replied. “A robot was there. A short, talking robot.”

“Was the room tidy?” Saikawa asked.

“Well, let’s see how it was ... I don’t remember anything in particular. Maybe it was tidy.”

“Did you not go into any other rooms?”

“I went through the reception room, followed by ... kitchen, I think, and behind that was the bedroom.” Mrs. Yuminaga replied as she recalled. “I did not go into any other rooms.”

“Dr. Yuminaga, have you never entered her room?” Saikawa looked at the doctor to confirm.

“No, not once.” Dr. Yuminaga lifted the center of his glasses slightly with his index finger. “Recently, Ms. Magata had been taking care of her health by herself, even taking her blood pressure. She even told me the name of the medicine she needed and requested it directly from me. I was just a pharmacist for her.”

“How was the director?” Saikawa folded his hands in his lap.

“The director was in excellent health, except his blood pressure was slightly high.” Dr. Yuminaga said. “He used to be a doctor ... so it’s not my place to come in. His wife is also very knowledgeable ...”

“When a staff member is sick, does the one come to this room?” Saikawa questioned as he looked around the room. “This place doesn’t look like a medical facility ...”

“No, the medical treatment room is in a different location. But usually, this room is. There are many young people here, so I usually don’t have much work to do. It is an easy job for the treatment, although it has the disadvantage that I can’t go to a town. If there were a golf course on the island, it would be perfect.”

“Dr. Yuminaga, is there a terminal in this residence?” Moe questioned.

“Of course, there is.” Dr. Yuminaga looked at Moe and smiled. “It is in the back

room. There is no place in this research institute where there are no terminals. All orders for medicines are placed by e-mail, and half of my job as a doctor is to respond to e-mail consultations from the staff. In this facility, we rarely use the phone. Everyone communicates with each other via e-mail. Well, I do that kind of counseling ... Then, you know. The director used to work in a hospital, and the research institute is often asked to work on medical software. In such cases, I sometimes sit at the end of the development team ...”

“How were Dr. Shiki Magata’s psychological symptoms?” Saikawa asked another question.

“Umm, since I did not meet with her directly, I never knew that. I am not familiar with that field. Psychoanalysis is not my specialty.” Dr. Yuminaga shook his head slowly. “My personal opinion is ... that was a bit like a full-fledged monologue. I too have met Mr. Kishio Kurimoto and Suma Sasaki-san. I mean, I have talked to Ms. Shiki Magata, who pretended to be both of them. I found it odd, but Ms. Magata was always not normal ...” While saying so, Dr. Yuminaga looked at his wife. “You have talked to Michiru Magata-san before, haven’t you?”

Mrs. Yuminaga nodded. “Only once, though ...”

“Michiru-san was a very shy personality in Ms. Magata’s personalities. Her personality was rarely seen in public. I was interested at one time in finding out more about her. I heard from an office staff member who had spoken with Ms. Magata on the job, and I watched a video of her at that time ... Michiru-san rarely appeared in front of men.”

“About those three personalities in Dr. Magata’s ... do you know the roots?” Saikawa asked. He wanted to smoke by now but refrained.

By roots, he meant the dead brother of Ms. Magata, the housekeeper who had an accident in the US, and the doll that was stained with blood at the time of the murder, as told to him by the director’s wife.

“Yes, I heard that story.” Dr. Yuminaga answered. “That is also an unusual nature as schizophrenia and multiple personalities. The lady’s multiple personalities are more likely, how shall I say it ..., active and intentional. I think she is willingly forming different personalities.”

“Dr. Yuminaga, you mentioned that you were Director Shindo’s junior at

university ... Have you heard anything from the director about the murder case fifteen years ago?” Saikawa questioned.

“Well, I heard briefly what happened.” Dr. Yuminaga replied. “Shindo-san, the director, was very concerned about that case. Because of that incident, he left the hospital and came to this facility. From the director of the hospital to the director of the software research institute. His life had changed drastically. I was impressed that his wife well followed his change.”

Dr. Yuminaga told Saikawa what he knew about the past incident. All the information the doctor had was the same as what Saikawa had heard from Mrs. Shindo.

“Umm ... Dr. Yuminaga.” Moe tilted her head and combed her hair back. “Let me ask you a question about that locked room. That yellow door of Dr. Magata’s room ... We went through all the VTRs filming the scenes in front of that door. There is no doubt that no one has been in or out of that door in the past week. Therefore, the hypothesis that Dr. Yuminaga mentioned last night cannot be established by any means.”

“Hypothesis? Did I say something?” Dr. Yuminaga asked back in a gentle voice.

“Yes, Doctor, you said there could be more than one culprit,” Moe said. “You also said that the records are unreliable ...”

“Ah, yes, indeed ...” Yuminaga looked like he remembered it.

“After that, the director was killed, and we had to examine Dr. Magata’s room as well.” Moe continued. “Dr. Yuminaga, what do you think about it now? What is your interpretation of that locked room?”

“Haha, you call it a locked room ... There would be nothing to interpret.” Dr. Yuminaga said with a laugh. “I am at least a man who thinks scientifically. No, I’m sure everyone in this research institute is, without exception. And Saikawa-sensei and ... you are too, Nishinosono-san? But the problem before us is indeed strange. I don’t believe in ghosts, but at least a flesh-and-blood person couldn’t have committed that crime.”

“So what being could have done that?” Moe questioned closely.

“Couldn’t a robot have done that?” Dr. Yuminaga said and looked alternately at

Moe and Saikawa.

“A Robot? Are you saying a robot is the killer?” Moe squinted one eye.

“At least it’s worth thinking so, isn’t it?” Dr. Yuminaga said, running his hand over his mustache. “Isn’t the robot somewhat more scientific as a killer than a ghost?”

“Even robots could not get in and out of that room.” Moe grabbed her right shoulder with her left hand. She might have felt chill at the mention of Dr. Yuminaga.

“The robot could have gotten in and out by dismantling it into pieces.” Saying so, Dr. Yuminaga stood up, went to a glass cupboard, and opened its door. “Look, I made this.”

He pulled out a bottle of whiskey that had been overturned. Inside the clear bottle was a small yacht. It was the so-called “ship in a bottle.”

“Isn’t this the same thing, Nishinosono-san?” Dr. Yuminaga said with a satisfied expression. “She must have brought the disparate parts into her residence and assembled them there. In short, Ms. Magata had the robot dispose of her corpse.”

“But such a robot was nowhere to be found,” Moe said quickly. “To begin with, can a robot do such a complex job?”

“Well, I don’t know it well, because I’m not a specialist. But maybe it’s not impossible, right?” Dr. Yuminaga put the ship in the bottle away in the cupboard like it was very important to him. “It would be possible for a robot to disassemble itself, I think.”

“Even if it could disassemble itself, its parts would still have been there.” Moe refuted.

“Doctor, do you think that robot, Michiru, dumped the dismantled parts into the dust chute?” Saikawa answered instead.

“You guessed it, Saikawa-sensei. How about it? My ... hypothesis,” Dr. Yuminaga looked at Saikawa and smiled. “Is there any more scientific possibility than this?”

“There is not.” Saikawa nodded lightly. “No, I can’t think of any at the moment. In fact, I thought of that possibility myself.”

“Sensei! That is absolutely impossible.” Moe said, knitting her eyebrows. “I mean, the killer had to clean the bathroom and put the wedding dress on the corpse. The guy also had to put the corpse on the wagon Are you saying that a robot did all those things?”

“No, I certainly don’t think that’s possible.” Saikawa sighed, then murmured. “But what other way could there be?”

“Sensei’s right. Nishinosono-san. This hypothesis is saner than thinking of the murder as psychic or haunted.” Dr. Yuminaga said so, too.

“That’s right, though ...” Moe pulled her chin and cast an upward glance.

“That’s what science is all about. Nishinosono-san.” Dr. Yuminaga smoothed his gray hair upward.

“How did the first life on Earth come into being? No matter what hypothesis you come up with, you have to be asked how such a miraculous thing could have happened. We have no choice but to choose the most likely one. We have no choice but to believe in it. Do you understand? We can build cars and appliances with robots alone. It doesn’t mean that they can operate on a live human being. It only cuts up dead bodies. It is not impossible.”

“But it is impossible to hypothesize that the robot will be dismantled and discarded.” Moe conceded a little and whispered.

“Nishinosono-kun. Have you ever seen that big crane on the rooftop of the building construction site?” Saikawa said. “At a high-rise construction site, cranes like that are jacked up and raised as construction progresses ... Then, when the building is completed, they are at the highest point. How do you think they would get that big crane down from the rooftop?”

Moe looked at Saikawa and fell silent. “Let’s see, will they hang it by a helicopter?”

“It’s not that light.” Saikawa shook his head. “You know ... they have the large crane lift a bit smaller one up to the rooftop, set it up there, and have that smaller crane take the larger one down.”

“Then what will happen with the smaller crane after that?”

“They raise a slightly smaller crane to the rooftop, set it up, and take the larger one down. That’s how they gradually make the crane smaller and smaller until eventually it’s big enough for a person to carry.”

“Hmm ... but what does that story have to do with the case? Sensei.” Moe was staring at Saikawa.

“The robot first disposed of the body and cleaned the bathroom ... It could have been more than one, I suppose. Another robot dismantled the first one and put it in the dust chute. Now it’s time for another smaller robot to dismantle that first dismantling robot. That’s how even a simple robot like Michiru could do the job in the end.”

“Saikawa-sensei.” Dr. Yuminaga winked and smiled. “I didn’t think that far ahead. Yes, it is more likely that she could have made it happen that way.”

“I can’t believe it ...” Moe folded her arms and leaned back against the couch.

“I can’t believe it either.” Saikawa shrugged his shoulders. “If there were an easier way, I would gladly discard such a ghostly hypothesis. But right now, I can’t think of any other way.”

“Sensei ...” Moe raised her hand. “If the hypothesis is correct, then it was Dr. Shiki Magata who created those robots, right? That would mean that Dr. Shiki committed suicide ...”

“That’s the way it should be.” Saikawa nodded. “Naturally, the logic boils down to that.”

“Then who killed Director Shindo?” Moe said triumphantly.

“That would be someone else,” Saikawa answered quickly.

“Sorry?! So, are you saying that Dr. Magata’s suicide had nothing to do with Director Shindo’s murder?”

“That is what I am saying.” Saikawa nodded at once. “Is there any reason why they should be related?”

“Oh no ...” Moe was at a loss for words. “That is absolutely ... weird.”

“Weird.” Saikawa repeated. “It’s very weird.”

“Sensei, you make fun of me, don’t you?” Moe seemed offended.

“There now,” Dr. Yuminaga said, snickering amusedly. “Nishinosono-san. This is just a possibility. It is a line often used by detectives in mystery novels. Let’s discuss it calmly.”

“But, I am calm.” Moe pouted.

“By the way ...” Saikawa was expressionless. “Plenty of people who could have gone out on the rooftop and killed the director. Some were the people we knew ... For example, the director’s wife, who was on the first floor then, and Miki Magata-san. They were together, but if they conspired together to commit the murder, it was possible.”

“Excuse me. I went to Mrs. Shindo’s room then, so I don’t think so.” Mrs. Yuminaga, sitting at a seat away from the others, gave her opinion. “When I entered Mrs. Shindo’s room, she was with Miki-san.”

“No, Yuminaga-san, you did not go to that room until long after the director’s helicopter arrived,” Saikawa answered nonchalantly. “Therefore, it was possible for those two to kill the director by then. Besides, after Yuminaga-san went to the first floor, Mrs. Shindo went to the director’s office alone, did she not?”

“Yes, she did. You know, I was taking care of Miki-san ...” Mrs. Yuminaga answered awkwardly.

“If so, Mrs. Shindo may have gone up to the rooftop alone during the time and killed the director,” Saikawa said and recrossed his legs. “As Dr. Yuminaga said ... all my hypotheses are just about possibilities. I’ve never read a mystery novel, so I can’t be as witty as a detective, though ...”

“Still ...” Moe said, leaning back on the couch and looking at the ceiling. “I wonder why there is no data in Deborah’s record file on who opened the rooftop door ...”

“Right ... that is the problem,” Saikawa admitted. “But the data problem is a software problem. So, let’s hold off on that for now.”

“Saikawa-sesei ... If you put it that way, anyone could have entered and exited through the opposite doorway on the rooftop.” Dr. Yuminaga offered his opinion. “It’s unrealistic to suspect the director’s wife, is it? Especially the hypothesis that

she did it with Miki-san is not acceptable.”

“You’re right,” Saikawa shrugged.

“Your hypothesis also doesn’t explain the elevator floor number indicator I noticed,” Moe mumbled to herself.

“That’s right.” Saikawa admitted again.

“So, isn’t your hypothesis still weird?” Moe said to Saikawa, sitting next to him.

“I know it is weird,” Saikawa smiled and nodded. “It is totally eccentric.”

“Sensei ...” Moe’s cheeks puffed up again.

“Should we ban weird or eccentric opinions?” Saikawa made a diagonal cross sign with the index fingers of both hands.

-2-

Saikawa and Moe walked around the research institute. They hardly saw anyone, but they passed the P1 robot several times. Saikawa walked around remembering the floor plan of the building, but Moe’s sixth sense was much more certain. The two finally managed to get to the rooftop from the public elevator.

In this building, the only approach to the rooftop was by elevator. Stairs could not be used to reach the rooftop. This kind of construction was not usually possible from the standpoint of disaster prevention. But this research institute was exceptional in fire and disaster prevention. Every room had three times the average number of sprinklers installed, and every door doubled as an automatic fire shutter. Forced smoke exhaust systems were also notable. In an emergency, the safest thing to do was for the staff not to leave their rooms. It was designed on the assumption that they would not evacuate. In terms of earthquakes, the building would be the most robust construction. There were no windows and no large rooms. All the walls are earthquake-proof. It would probably have had sufficient structural safety, comparable to that of a nuclear power plant.

The sky was already starting to lighten.

The morning star was shining in the eastern sky. *It is not that Venus is a special planet. Mercury and Venus always appear close to the sun because they happen to orbit closer to*

the sun than the earth. That is the only reason they appear only at dawn and dusk.

The location from which Saikawa and Moe reached was at the east end of the building. On the other side of the rooftop were a helicopter and an elevator house with a doorway. The two elevator houses were both about six meters or more high, and they could not go up. There were no cooling tanks or other equipment on the rooftop, as there usually are, and everything was flat enough to be a parking lot with no obstructions.

They decided to see the helicopter. When they opened its door and looked inside, they smelled a fishy odor. There was a square hole in the console above the cockpit and no radio.

Moe pointed there silently, and Saikawa said, "They are removing it and repairing it. That's what Yamane-san said," he explained. Saikawa was the only one who entered the helicopter's fuselage and stared around the cockpit with his hands in his pockets. Moe was waiting outside.

"It's not often that I get a chance to ride in a helicopter." Saying so, Saikawa got out of there. "I've only been on one once, in Niagara Falls. I think it was ... twenty dollars ... A dollar at that time was 250 yen ... so it was 5,000 yen ... It was expensive."

"After all, we can't investigate smoothly like a detective in a mystery novel, can we?" Moe said as she was walking. "What I heard from the people involved only confused me. I tried to find some evidence, but nothing came up ... I knew the investigation would not progress until the police arrive."

"We did what we could do ..." Saikawa leaned against the railing and looked at the eastern sky. There was a steel railing around the rooftop, about a meter high, about three meters inside the edge of the building, so they could not look down at the ground around the building.

Moe nimbly climbed over the railing.

"Watch out!" Saikawa shouted.

Moe turned around and said, "Don't worry," then walked to the edge and looked down from there.

"You've become quite daring, haven't you?" Saikawa said as he lit a cigarette.

Actually, the mere fact that Moe, not himself, was outside the railing made him more than a little nervous.

Moe got back over the railing. “With a rope, you can climb up and down. It is maybe six or seven meters high ...”

“I can’t do such an act ...” Saikawa said as he exhaled smoke. “I’m not good with distances in the direction of the earth’s radius.”

“I love high places.” Moe smiled happily.

“Congratulations on that.”

“Sensei, have you come up with an idea? Is there anything we should still investigate?”

“Well, let me think about it for a minute ...” Saikawa was leaning against the railing, leaning back, smoking a cigarette.

The air was raw and warm, but it felt good to him. The eastern sky in front of him was tinted pink, and he could hear the sound of waves in the distance. The roof of the building was waterproofed with asphalt, creating squares. At this hour, the lower half of his vision was still dark. The view at this time of the day was the quietest, and he felt as if he were looking at a miniature.

Something is bothering me, Saikawa suddenly thought.

However, he could not figure out what it was.

When he looked at his watch, it was 4:30 a.m. Saikawa had a habit of setting the second hand of his watch every day, but he had not checked it once since coming to this island. *Since this island is cut off from the outside world, there is no such thing as accurate time on this island. The computer’s internal clock is not so precise. The computer also corrects its clock daily through the network.*

Saikawa was strict only with time. Not once was he late for class. In the first place, students were paying customers and instructors were hired. Saikawa believed that students could be late, but instructors were not allowed to be late. In fact, he had no feelings toward students who were late. It was the student’s freedom and right to be late or to leave in the middle of class. The instructor had no right to criticize them.

There is a saying that time is money, but that underestimates time. Time is thousands of times more precious than money, and the value of time, in other words, is infinitely equal to life.

Something is stuck in me again, Saikawa felt.

Moe wandered aimlessly around the spacious rooftop. Saikawa's eyes kept following her, but his consciousness was elsewhere. He was still in the process of figuring out what he should be thinking about.

The cigarette soon grew short. He did feel a little guilty but dumped the cigarette on the asphalt and rubbed it out with his shoe.

He decided to look at the list Hasebe had printed out for him; it was about forty sheets of A4 paper. The first ten or so sheets were a list of items that had come in and out of that yellow door in the past year. They were marked with the date and time, whether the article had gone in or been taken out, and the name of the person who had checked it and its contents. The remaining thirty sheets were reports of items that had also been exchanged through the mailbox. A quick check revealed nothing suspicious. All he found was the fact that everything was kept under tight control.

The large packages that were let into the room through the yellow door included machinery, craft materials, and electrical appliances. Each boxed article had been checked for content. Also, let into the room through the mailbox were household items, books, electronic components, supplies, and food. Conversely, many things were put out as bulky trash. For example, one old piece of furniture had recently been thrown out, and some outdated machinery. Items marked as noncombustible waste were frequently removed from the mailbox.

He could picture Dr. Shiki Magata's life. *I wish I could have met Shiki Magata when she was alive,* Saikawa thought. He wanted to be in contact with her extraordinary talent. In the first place, he had come here to meet the genius. *How has that really turned out ...? Perhaps I am now in contact with a talent that is even greater than hers. Who came up with the idea of such a case? If this were a magic trick, we would have applauded. If one person created this mysterious situation, he or she must be a genius.*

Moe returned toward Saikawa. The sky behind her was already turning white, so her figure was silhouetted, and the outline of her hair appeared to glow dimly.

“Sensei ...?”

“Morning,” Saikawa said.

Moe chuckled. “Good morning. Have you settled on your thoughts?”

“No, they are just diverging ...” Saikawa took out a new cigarette.

“I still don’t think we have enough information, no matter what you think.” Moe crossed her thin arms. “Now we can only hope for a police investigation.”

“But the question has already been posed to us. Nishinosono-kun.” Saikawa said. “The investigation of the culprit can certainly be left to the police. But we actually saw the case happen. How could the guy pull off a trick like that? We are not short of information. It’s just that our thoughts don’t lead us to the truth.”

-3-

Saikawa and Moe revisited Yamane’s room. The deputy director seemed to be working with both displays turned on.

“If you two wish, you can use the shower,” Yamane told them. “Please feel free to eat whatever you would like to eat.”

Saikawa went to the kitchen in the back and looked in the refrigerator. Moe said she would take a shower and disappeared to the back of the residence. Saikawa drank a glass of cold milk and then returned to the room where Yamane was working.

“Thank you for having her use the shower,” Saikawa said, sitting in a chair near Yamane. “I had a glass of milk.”

“You’re welcome.” Yamane said, looking at Saikawa while keyboarding. “We can offer an empty room, and you may sleep there. But no food is in that room.”

“If you eat, shall I cook?” Saikawa said as he lit a cigarette. “But the food I can barely make may be sunny-side up at most ...”

“Then, please.” Yamane smiled and looked at Saikawa. “I’m a little busy with work right now. I am trying the last resort.”

Yamane continued tapping on the keyboard as he looked at Saikawa and talked. Saikawa knew a few people at this level at the university. The deputy director’s blind

touch reached a professional level.

“What do you mean by last resort?” Saikawa asked as he exhaled smoke.

“It is to stop Red Magic,” Yamane answered immediately. “We are about to switch to normal UNIX. This is the first time since this research institute was established. Right now, I am preparing for it with Mizutani-kun and Shimada-san. It would be easy just to switch over, but quite a bit of equipment in this facility depends on Red Magic. The question is what to do with them. In other words, there is even a possibility that the doors will not open ...”

“Do you think you guys can make it?”

“Yes, but ... it will take another three or four hours,” Yamane replied. “It’s disgusting, but it’s the only way now. If this doesn’t get the system back up and running, we are really screwed. If that happens, it will be the same as if this research institute had been blown up.”

Saikawa decided to go to the kitchen. He took three eggs out of the refrigerator, then looked for a frying pan and oil. He found seasonings quickly. The stove was electric. A search in the fridge turned up bacon. *It is pretty kind*, he thought to himself and was pleased.

The bacon slid noisily onto the pan. After setting the bread in the toaster, Saikawa cracked open an egg.

“Wow, smells great!” Moe came out from the back. Her hair seemed a little wet. “Is Sensei cooking?”

“As you see,” Saikawa said. “Can you get the plates out of the cupboard?”

Five minutes later, breakfast was ready on the gourd-shaped table with the racing cars on it. Yamane interrupted his work and walked toward them.

“I’m so sorry. I let a guest cook for me ...”

“After all, wasn’t it a computer virus that caused it?” Moe asked, holding a fork in her left hand.

“No, it wasn’t. We didn’t suspect that possibility from the beginning.” Yamane replied while biting into a piece of toast. “Considering the strength of Red Magic’s security and, moreover, the access route, there was no possibility that a virus

entered from the outside. What we suspected was a program that had recently run in the system. It was the so-called Trojan program ... in short, the Trojan horse.”

“What is the difference between a regular virus and the Trojan horse?” Moe questioned. Saikawa had already explained it to her in the past, but he remained silent.

“Ordinary viruses attach themselves to normal programs and data files,” Yamane said slowly, choosing his words carefully. “In other words, it is just like a pathogen entering a healthy person, and if you are very careful and always check up on your health, you can detect the change. And ... in some cases, the part can be removed and fixed. A program called Trojan horse, however, has the part of doing bad things from the time it was born. It pretends to be a program that does some useful job, but it has the ability to sabotage the system right from the start. Virus checkers cannot detect this type of thing. It is because it does not do anything wrong but rather does viral destruction in its normal state. In this case, vaccines do not work either.”

Saikawa wondered if Moe would know the story of the Trojan Horse. He himself had read it in a book he borrowed from school when he was in elementary school. He remembered an illustration of a scene in which soldiers in armor emerged from a giant wooden horse, perhaps ten meters high.

“In other words, it has the skin of a useful program. So, it became increasingly widespread, and when it gets popular, it suddenly does something crazy.” Saikawa was drinking coffee and smoking a cigarette.

“I suspected that the Trojan horse was in a program that had recently arrived at the research institute or a new program created by someone in the facility,” Yamane explained.

“You still don’t know the cause of the anomaly, right?” Moe started eating her toast.

“It takes time to find out the cause. Before I do that, I will shut down the system once and do a complete reset. Moreover, I will give up on Red Magic. This is the best I can think of at this point. There are many obstacles, but for now, the inability to contact the outside world is critical.”

Yamane started working as soon as he finished eating, so Saikawa and Moe decided to leave his room. Following the directions given by Yamane, they went up to the first floor and headed for the room at the northernmost end of the corridor. It was unoccupied, but as they waited there, Mochizuki, wearing a baseball cap, came in.

“Hi, I just heard from Yamane-san,” Mochizuki said with an affable smile. “You know, it’s time for us to end our shift ...” Mochizuki looked at his watch, which had Saikawa look at his own too. It was a little past 6:00 a.m.

“Is this the room with the incineration system?” Saikawa asked, looking around the small room.

Indeed, there was a control panel with several meters on one side of the room.

“All the control systems are located here,” Mochizuki said. “Sensei, what do you want to see?”

“You know, I wanted to see the trash heap,” Saikawa responded.

“Ah ... that’s what you want ...” Mochizuki made a drawn face. “You are trying to find the limbs of Ms. Magata, aren’t you? But that’s not possible ... A conveyor is going straight from the dust chute to the electric furnace, so that’s ashes by now.”

“Is there an electric furnace down there?” Saikawa confirmed.

“Well, that’s about right. That’s in the basement, and the main body is a little off this building. The chimney comes out away from the building ... Ash cleanup is done once a month with heavy equipment.”

“What do you do with those ashes?” Saikawa asked.

“We bury it some distance away.”

“What happens to the metals and other things that don’t burn?”

“We throw it away with the ashes,” Mochizuki replied.

“Then we could do nothing.” Saikawa slightly lifted his shoulders and walked out of the room.

Mochizuki and Moe also walked out the door. Finding an ashtray in the corner of the hallway, Saikawa lit a cigarette.

“Sensei ...” Mochizuki walked up to Saikawa and asked. “We’ve been checking the video with Hasebe ever since. We went back farther and farther in time. I’m certain we looked up to around New Year’s Day the year before last.”

“Oh, thank you for your hard work,” Saikawa said, exhaling cigarette smoke. “Did you guys find something interesting? Mochizuki-san.”

“No, it was just like the list I gave you, Sensei. There was not a single omission.” Mochizuki smiled happily. “The only person who entered that room in the past two years was a guy who came to fix the TV.”

“Eh?” Saikawa reacted. “Was there someone who entered that room?”

“Yes, that was an outsider who came by boat. He was just an electrician.”

“By TV, do you mean the old type in the doctor’s workroom?” Saikawa confirmed. He recalled a small 14-inch TV in Ms. Magata’s workroom. “Wouldn’t it be cheaper to replace that one than to call a repairman who comes by boat?”

“The cathode ray tube was broken, so we had our contractor bring in the part and replace it,” Mochizuki explained. “The lady loved the shape of it and cherished it. I think she had it for over a decade ...”

“Did that repair person meet with Dr. Magata?” Moe asked.

“No, I remember him saying that when he opened the door, she ran away and hid in the back of the residence. The young repairman took the liberty of entering her room and replacing that part ... He came out in about thirty minutes. He said he never saw the lady.”

“When did it happen?” Moe asked.

“That was last spring ... In April,” Mochizuki replied. “Would you like us to look further back in time?”

“Please.” Saikawa bowed his head a little, holding a cigarette in one hand.

“You know, we have a lot of free time now anyway. I’d be happy to, Sensei.”

After parting with Mochizuki, Saikawa and Moe returned to Yamane's room. The deputy director was still working, so they drank the rest of their breakfast coffee to avoid disturbing him.

Shortly after 7:00 a.m., Deborah informed them they had a visitor at the entrance of the research institute. Hearing Hamanaka's voice, Saikawa and Moe moved there to welcome him. Two male graduate students were there in addition to Hamanaka, and they brought Saikawa and Moe's bags.

"Still no contact with the outside world?" Hamanaka asked anxiously.

Saikawa nodded. "Yeah, we wouldn't be able to go home for a little while. So, you guys go home first. I think the boat will be here in the afternoon."

"Nishinosono-san, here ..." Hamanaka handed her Moe's parasol.

"Thank you." Moe smiled. "Camping was so fun."

The students left.

After leaving their luggage in Yamane's room, Saikawa and Moe decided to go to the lounge on the first floor. Yamane hardly spoke at all but kept staring at the display and tapping away at the keyboard.

In the lounge, Saikawa played a pinball game for about five minutes and found that he was not suited for such things. Moe was much better at it than he was. Saikawa lit a cigarette and watched Moe play the white ball.

"Why did you ask them to check old videos?" Moe asked in a cheerful voice. She put her hands on either side of the table and pressed buttons busily. "Do you really think someone has been lurking in that room for that long?"

"No, it probably wouldn't make sense," Saikawa answered slowly. "I think I just want something to trigger my thinking. It's like a clue to think about ..."

Saikawa thought it was a truly irresponsible statement, even though he was the person who said it.

As Moe was absorbed in playing the game, Saikawa walked over to the couch and sat down. From a distance, it was amusing to see her playing pinball as she kept

hitting her belly against that table. Saikawa recalled seeing a movie as a child in which Elton John played a pinball champion.

After finishing his cigarette, Saikawa suddenly felt sleepy and closed his eyes.

The only sound he could hear was a busy electronic buzz.

The thought of Dr. Yuminaga's ship in the bottle came to Saikawa's mind. *Was that really something he assembled in the bottle, with parts put in with long tweezers? There are some fakes these days that have tricks on the bottles.*

They put in the discrete parts and assemble them inside.

Then, they take it apart and out again.

Only those words were crossing his mind.

They can do the act on machines but ... cannot on human beings.

-6-

When Saikawa woke up, Moe was sleeping on the couch in front of him. He looked at his watch. It was a little before 11:00 a.m. He had dozed off for quite a long time.

Moe was in a sitting position with her head resting on the armrest. *She must be tired too*, Saikawa thought. Not to wake up Moe, Saikawa quietly got up, moved away a little, and lit a cigarette with a lighter. His head was much clearer now that he had taken a nap, but his throat was a little sore. Returning to his original position, he silently smoked his cigarette while watching Moe sleep.

Come to think of it, Saikawa had never been with Moe for such a long time before. Rather, they talked more in the last two days than in all the conversations he had ever had with her. To begin with, it was unusual for Saikawa to talk so much with another person. He had been quiet since he was a small boy, and even now, he was not very good at initiating conversation. In all his life, he had never spent hours alone with a woman, nor had he even been conscious of such a thing.

Now he was aware of it.

Why am I doing this now? Saikawa thought.

Saikawa was about to cross his legs, when Moe noticed and raised her head with a dazzled face.

“Oh, have I fallen asleep?” Moe mumbled.

“Morning,” Saikawa said. “It’s almost 11 a.m.”

Moe looked at her watch to make sure. “It’s true ..., I have slept for about three hours.”

“The boat will be here soon. When it does, they will contact the police, and then, probably, a lot of boring time would start.”

“I’m fine, I’m not bored. I mean ...” Moe smiled. “I will be able to be with Sensei all the time, right?”

“Ah ... That’s good.” Saikawa made an effort not to change his expression. Perhaps it was a success.

“I’ve had a good time since yesterday ...” Saying so, Moe stuck out her tongue. “I know such a remark is inappropriate. I was scared and ... felt bad. Also, I had a headache ... When remembering the day of that accident, I was sad ... But after I told Sensei what I remembered, I felt somehow lighter. Now, if only I knew the answer to this quiz, it would be greater ...”

“If we call it a quiz, we will be scolded.” Saikawa whispered. “Two people have died, you know.”

“But that happens everywhere, doesn’t it?” Moe said nonchalantly. “It just happened geographically nearby.”

“Hmm. You might be eccentric.” Saikawa appreciated her. At the same time, he was inwardly surprised because Moe’s words were close to his thoughts.

“Sensei, too, is incredibly eccentric.” Moe sealed her tiny mouth and formed her eyes like a crescent moon. “Sensei is in a much better mood now, right?”

“Eh? Me?” Saikawa was a bit surprised.

“I can see that,” Moe said, placing the index finger of her right hand on her temple. “You have noticed something, haven’t you?”

“No ...” Saikawa shook his head. He didn’t think he was in a good mood, nor did

he notice anything. But, surely, there was one thing that came to his mind. “If so ... it might be about F ...”

“About F?” Moe straightened her posture.

“I mean the phrase, ‘Everything turns to F,’” Saikawa said.

“Did you understand what it meant?” Moe shouted in a stifled voice.

“No ... not at all ...” Saikawa smiled.

“What do you mean?” Moe knitted her eyebrows and looked displeased.

“I still don’t understand it. I don’t know what that means ..., but I decided to think about it.” Saikawa explained. “I think I’m beginning to see a path. What can I say? It’s like solving a math problem. Sometimes you realize, ‘Oh, I just need to think about this point,’ right?”

“No, I don’t,” Moe responded quickly.

“Oh, really ...” Saikawa was at a loss for words. “Maybe you and I have different thought processes ... In my case, I start seeing the path to solving a problem first. Then, I just have to keep thinking about it. After that, there is always an answer. My hunch has never failed me.”

“That’s odd ... How do you know that you will eventually figure it out when you don’t know the answer yet?” Moe said quizzically. “I have never had that feeling. I come up with answers out of the blue. That’s how I’ve gotten through every problem.”

“You’re a quick thinker, I know ... That’s your calculation method. It’s different for everyone.”

“What clues does the phrase ‘Everything turns to F’ have to do with anything?” Moe asked.

“It’s a clue to something I don’t understand,” Saikawa said.

“Hmm ...” Moe leaned back on the couch and hugged her knees. She took off her shoes. “The F can be ... finish, formula, phantom, free? Or is it ... future? ... Ah! Does that mean Miki-san?” (*The Japanese name “Miki” means “future” in English.)

“See, that’s your thought pattern. Out of all the random things you come up with, you discover the right answer. But ... now that’s not the right answer.” Saikawa said. “Also, you could say that Shiki-san’s name includes F for four seasons and Michiru-san’s for full.” (The Japanese name “Shiki” means “four seasons” in English and “Michiru” is “full,” respectively.)

“It sounds like a word play.” Moe showed a blank look.

“What does the ‘everything’ indicate?” Saikawa murmured.

“Does it refer to Dr. Shiki Magata’s four personalities?” Moe bent small on the couch.

“If so, would it be more natural to use ‘everyone’ as the subject?” Saikawa said thoughtfully. “That’s the nuance of ‘all the things turning to F.’ It means something. I believed there must be a meaning.”

At that moment, suddenly, a woman’s electronic voice echoed in the lounge.

“Final call to all staff.” It was Deborah’s voice.

Moe got off her feet from the couch.

“At exactly 11:00 a.m., the main system will be shut down. All functions will stop for approximately 10 minutes.”

Saikawa looked at his watch.

“Only two minutes left.”

“They are about to stop Red Magic, right?” Moe said as she put on her shoes.

“Yeah, maybe they will ... I hope the lights don’t go out, though ...”

“But we can’t go anywhere else. The hallway lights won’t be turned on, and maybe the doors won’t open. We’ll just have to stay here.”

Saikawa looked at the second hand on his watch. *One minute to go ...*

Moe looked up at the ceiling with a nervous look on her face.

Saikawa’s watch had just turned 11:00. But the lights did not go out.

“It’s eleven o’clock,” Saikawa mumbled.

“The lights don’t seem to be going out. I’m relieved. It’s not easy when it’s pitch

black. There are no windows here.” Moe breathed a sigh of relief.

“Right ...” Saikawa was still looking at his watch. Thirty seconds had already passed. “Apparently, it’s okay. Even if they reset it, they might just lose control. I wonder if it is made to maintain the status quo.”

“So, will it work?”

“I don’t know. But according to Yamane-san, if this doesn’t work, it might be hopeless.”

Saikawa looked at the fluorescent lights on the ceiling, which were glowing unchanged.

But then suddenly, the lights went out.

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A flash of light went through Saikawa’s brain. It was not an illusion caused by darkening.

It was not a vision.

“Eh?” Saikawa shuddered at the indescribable idea of primary colors that rose to his consciousness.

The fastest-calculating personality emerged within Saikawa. That personality was also the most primitive. He began to calculate while yelling and screaming. Primitive as he was, the personality did not always hide his emotions.

“Sensei!” Moe’s hand touched Saikawa’s knee. Saikawa knew by the feel of the cushion that she was sitting right next to him.

Saikawa had no room to care about her.

A situation like this often happened to Saikawa. There was no cause for it, but somehow, it made him flustered. Sweating. His heartbeat and his breathing increase in speed. A feeling that he might start screaming at any moment. A feeling that he might start running at any moment. He was aware of his terrible looks, and he was excited inside.

It had been a common symptom since his childhood.

But he knew how to deal with it. All he had to do was focus his nerves on ostensible control. *Raise my hand slowly, breathe slowly, and speak slowly.*

“I’m okay. Don’t worry ...” Saikawa said in a calm tone.

But the primal personality that dominated his thinking was on a rampage. He was ranting and raving, spitting and hollering, and messily putting memories in and taking them out. The personality, who controlled his outer self, was being patted on the back and abused. The primitive personality was the smartest of all. Once he woke up, no one could resist him.

By waiting patiently, Saikawa would eventually be released from this state.

“I wonder if the whole building is without power?” Moe whispered in his ear.

How ridiculous she is! What’s the point of such a conversation?! His primitive personality yelled loudly.

“Probably, it is.” His personality, which controlled his outer self, said slowly.

Saikawa noticed that Moe was holding his right hand. Her hand was cold.

Saikawa had no room to be aware of such a thing.

His primitive personality was calculating.

Yes! That’s right! It’s obvious! How stupid I was ...

“Sensei ...” Moe spoke.

“Yes?” His outer persona somehow responded.

Shut up!

“Umm, I ... Sensei ...” He heard Moe’s voice in the distance.

That’s right! What an idiot I was!

“It was simple ...” Saikawa said slowly.

“Sorry?” Moe’s voice was far away.

Saikawa shuddered.

It was a horrible sight. That’s not accurate.

It was not a sight.

What he found frightening was the spirit of perfection.

And was its thought.

“It was the imperfection of trying to be perfect ...” Saikawa murmured. Perhaps he might have been speaking English at the moment.

“Sensei? What are you talking about?”

Ah, yes ... I saw it ...

“Umm, I ...” Moe held Saikawa’s hand more tightly.

“I have to make sure it ...” Saikawa uttered.

I don’t need to make sure it! It’s a foregone conclusion!

“About what? What are you about to make sure?” Moe asked in the distance.

Then, Saikawa could see the scene as his car was careening down the highway.

The road curved all the way gently. There were no other cars on the road. The orange light streamed in curves like it was on a large turntable. In his rearview mirror, he saw a fading semicircle. There was no sense of acceleration, and the cheap plastic keychain wasn’t shaking.

My motion is in sync with the rotation of the earth, he thought. I am going around the same place like this ..., he felt.

But a little more steering and his car would spin.

A little more steering back, and it would fly over the guardrail.

He tilted his head.

He inhaled, then exhaled slowly.

What goes in comes out again.

But it doesn’t stay that way.

His vision was released.

Before his eyes, it was pitch black.

Saikawa consciously tried to breathe. *I have to breathe ...*

Sweat was trickling down his forehead.

His primitive personality let out a discarded word and went into the back sitting room.

The *fusuma* (Japanese-style sliding doors) were closed. He retreated, watching it.

Again, the *fusuma* of the next room were closed.

The *tatami* mats under his feet were tilted so that he might slip.

The last *fusuma* were closed.

He tilted his head.

“I’m okay.” He felt like he hadn’t spoken in a long time. “I need a cigarette. Will you let go of my hand ...?”

Moe silently let go of Saikawa’s hand.

Saikawa took a flattened cigarette from the breast pocket of his shirt and lit it with a lighter. At that moment, the whole area brightened for a moment, and Moe’s face, peering at Saikawa with concern, was surprisingly close.

His hands were shaking a little.

His heartbeat was slowing down a bit.

The tip of his cigarette glowed brightly.

He inhaled the smoke deeply and exhaled slowly.

When he drew a circle with the cigarette he was holding, the light from the tip of the cigarette created a round shape in the afterimage.

Drawing ovals and straight lines, Saikawa moved the cigarette quickly.

Moe started chuckling.

“How funny ... this is,” Saikawa whispered. “It looks like a laser beam.”

“You are like a child,” Moe said.

Saikawa stopped moving the cigarette and put it in his mouth again.

“Sorry, I was feeling a little sick. To tell you the truth, I’m a little insane.”

“I, too, was insane that night,” Moe said, right up close to him. “I hit and hurt you, Sensei.”

“Yeah, maybe you were. I don’t have anyone to hit, so I hit myself ... Yeah, I see ... That’s one insight.”

He inhaled the smoke deeply again.

“I saw a little of the truth of the case,” Saikawa murmured. “I was just thinking about that now. Sorry I wasn’t listening to you ... Nishinosono-kun.”

“Truth?” Moe asked.

“No, not the truth yet. I’d say it’s a slightly better hypothesis than what we’ve had so far.”

“Is it that hypothesis in which a demolition robot is demolished by another robot?”

“No, we can discard that hypothesis,” Saikawa assured.

“Tell me about that, please. Sensei.” Moe touched Saikawa’s arm again. “Hey, what method is that?”

“I’m too scared to talk to you in this pitch-darkness.”

-8-

The room lights came on. But Deborah said nothing.

Moe got up and moved away from Saikawa.

“The lights have come on. Sensei, tell me your hypothesis.”

“Of course, I’ll tell you ... But, will you wait a little longer?” Saikawa said. “I should not make a joke this time. Anyway, let’s go to Yamane-san’s room first.”

The two left the lounge. The lighting in the hallway controlled the intensity automatically as they moved. They took the ramp down to the basement floor and knocked on the green door of Yamane’s room.

“It’s Saikawa.” Without being asked, Saikawa put his right hand on the glass panel on the wall and said his name.

The door opened without a sound.

Yamane was not inside the room.

“Yamane-san?” Saikawa opened the kitchen door and called out to the back of the space. There was no answer, and he went further in. But Yamane was not to be found in the living room or the bedroom.

As Saikawa got back into the first room, Moe was looking at the display in the partition. Many windows were left open on display.

“The computer hasn’t lost power.” Moe turned to Saikawa and said.

“No, that was not a power outage. It was probably just a reset of whatever Deborah was managing.” Saikawa gave his opinion. “They switched systems, so they must have also reset all the computers. I think Yamane-san must have opened that window after the reset.”

Saikawa looked at the display. A message indicating that the UNIX system was up and running appeared in the topmost window. Moe clicked the mouse and brought the menu window to the front. There was a phone icon. She opened that icon with the mouse.

A new window appeared, and the buttons for the push phone were lined up there. Moe looked at Saikawa once. Then she slid the mouse on the pad and pressed several push phone buttons on the screen. First, there was a pleasant, familiar electronic sound. Then a connection sound. Eventually, they heard the bell ring on the other side.

“It’s connected! We’re making a call.” Moe said.

“Hello, this is Nishinosono.” A familiar old man’s voice came over the speaker.

“Suwano! It’s me.” Moe shouted.

“Young lady, is everything okay?” Old man Suwano replied in a leisurely tone. “I will pick you up at the port around 2:00 p.m.”

“I’m in trouble! Please, come here now! And call my uncle!” Moe said quickly.

“There have been murders. Umm, we are at the Magata Research Institute now.” Saikawa supplemented from the side. “Two people were killed. The phone has been out of order until now.”

“Young lady, aren’t you injured?” Suwano asked in a refined voice.

“I’m okay. Please, hurry! Suwano!”

“Certainly. Then, I will be right there.”

“Your coming means nothing. We need the police.”

“Yes, of course, I understand that.” Old Suwano was not upset at all. “Young lady ... Please remain calm. Saikawa-sensei ..., please take care of our young lady. Until I come, please do not let her do anything rash.”

“You’re irritating me! I’ll hang up the phone.” Moe hung up the phone with the mouse.

Saikawa lit a cigarette.

“Already, Yamane-san might have called the police.”

“Right. They have made it by switching the system, haven’t they?” Moe said happily.

“In the end, it was a software problem.” Saikawa sat down on a chair at the table. “Now we didn’t have to wait for the boat to come.”

“Where did Yamane-san go?” Moe also came to the table and sat down.

“Well, now that he can contact the outside world, he must be busy with many things. He is probably with Mizutani-san or Shimada-san. We should wait here.”

Moe looked at the ceiling, then sighed.

“Ah ... It’s been a long time so far. It’s only been thirty-seven hours, though ...”

“So?” Saikawa said as he exhaled smoke.

“Well ..., Sensei.”

“Oh, about what I just said, right ...? Fine, let’s talk about it, shall we?”

Saikawa began to organize his thoughts in his mind to explain it to her.

“No, don’t talk, please ...” Moe tilted her head and looked Saikawa in the eye. “I’ll think about it myself.”

“I see ...” Saikawa nodded.

“How far did Sensei know? Perhaps ... do you even know who the culprit is?”

“No, not that far, not yet,” Saikawa said a little modestly. “I do not know the truth. I just realized that ... there is a scientifically feasible way to do it.”

“Fine ... I’ll think about it too.” Moe smiled happily.

Chapter 8: The Dark Blue Order

-1-

Yamane did not return.

There was a knock at the door. Debora said nothing. Saikawa got up, walked to the door, and placed his right hand on the glass on the wall. When the door opened, Ayako Shimada stood there, and she looked a little surprised to see Saikawa.

“Is Yamane-san inside?” Shimada asked. “I mean, he hasn’t shown up at all since a while ago ...”

“No, we also don’t know where he is,” Saikawa answered.

Ayako Shimada walked into the room. Saikawa put his right hand on the glass again to close the door.

“Shimada-san. You guys still can’t use Deborah?” He confirmed.

“We can only use that with Red Magic, the operating system.” Shimada looked at the display Yamane had been using. “We can finally use the phone and e-mail, but where has Yamane-san gone? Oh, man.”

“You know, we have already contacted the police.” Saikawa reported to Shimada.

“Perhaps, I think Yamane-san did so, too.” Shimada looked back at him.

“What happens when you receive a call from outside?” Moe questioned. “Who is it supposed to be connected to?”

“Let’s see, when Deborah is working, she will answer the phone and call the person in charge. But now ...” Shimada answered while thinking. “Calls from outside will be connected to everyone. Anyone who reacts the quickest will pick up the phone. After the one answers the call, they can call the person in charge by e-mail and connect the call. It’s a bit tedious, though.”

“Don’t you have a common phone at this facility?” Moe inquired. “I mean, an ordinary phone with a handset.”

“No, since Deborah took control of the phones, no one uses them anymore ...

About five years ago, we got rid of them all.” Shimada shrugged. “We’re a little inconvenienced, though ... It can’t be helped for now. It’s been hard for us just to get things back up to this point. I want to get Deborah back in order by the end of the evening ... So, I’ll get back to my work.”

“Ah, Shimada-san,” Saikawa called her back. “You were talking with Yamane-san, weren’t you? I saw your name on the window.”

“Yes, I was earlier ...” Ayako Shimada nodded. “I had chatted with him using the Talk for a long time before the reset.”

The Talk was the act of real-time conversation through e-mail exchange.

“I had actually intended to reset at 10:00 a.m., but Yamane-san suddenly noticed one problem after another. We both had been checking it out ... I really wonder what had happened to him? After the reset, Yamane-san had gone somewhere ...”

Saikawa opened the door for her. Ayako Shimada left the room.

An electronic sound came from the terminal, and Moe ran toward it. A button was flashing in the push phone window on the screen, so Moe clicked it with the mouse.

“Hi, I’m Nishinosono, the Aichi Prefectural Police Chief ...” It was a low, articulate voice.

“Uncle, it’s me. Moe.”

“Ah, it’s you ... I’m relieved ... Already, the first group is on its way. They should be there in about thirty minutes. You okay? Why are you at such a place?”

“Uncle, I have a favor to ask you,” Moe said as she took the seat in front of the terminal.

Moe told her uncle the events of the past two days. Saikawa was surprised at how straightforward and well-organized her story was. Moe’s story began the night before last when she brought Saikawa to the research institute. Within about a minute, Moe explained that they had found Ms. Magata’s body, that Director Shindo had been killed on the roof, and that they had searched Ms. Magata’s room. Then, she also explained that the deputy director had asked them yesterday to hide the fact of Ms. Magata’s death and that, in return, Saikawa and Moe had searched

the research institute about the incident ...

“So, what is your request?” They heard the voice of Chief Nishinosono.

“Can you not announce Dr. Magata’s death for a week? That way, Saikawa-sensei and I will not have to lie.”

“We cannot, that’s impossible. Moe-chan.” Chief Nishinosono’s voice was gentle. “Why should you two lie?”

“Because that is what we promised,” Moe said.

“If it’s just for a day or two, I can handle it because of the location, though ... Hiding the facts for one week is out of the question. I’ll make time to come over there this evening. I’ll get your full story then.”

“All the people here are trying to hide Dr. Magata’s death. I won’t talk about it either.”

“Why? That’s a crime. Don’t ask me to do the impossible ... Okay, here’s what I’ll do. I’ll come over there and talk to the people at the research institute directly. So, tell the police the truth. Nothing to worry about.”

“Understood.” Moe nodded.

“You okay? Are you in a safe place?”

“I’m okay. Uncle ...”

“Give my regards to Saikawa-sensei.”

Saikawa, of course, listened to everything. They heard the sound of a phone call disconnecting. Moe turned around and looked at Saikawa’s face, and they stared at each other for about three seconds.

“That’s enough,” Saikawa said at the table. “We better tell them everything. I’m sorry for Yamane-san, though ... I’ve already decided. I’m going to tell them everything.”

“That’s good ...” Moe smiled.

The sun was high in the sky, and it was hot on the rooftop.

Saikawa, Moe, and Mrs. Shindo were in the small shadow of the elevator house, staring off to the north. Of course, Moe was the first to spot them. She had a twenty-twenty vision in both eyes. It was a bit past noon.

Three helicopters came and landed one after another. Moe mentioned the names of the helicopter models, but Saikawa was unfamiliar with them. Including the helicopter in which Director Shindo had been killed, there were now four helicopters. Still, there was plenty of space on the rooftop of the research institute. The last helicopter to land brought down the most people, and they were about twenty in all.

A plainclothes, crew-cut man in his forties noticed Saikawa and the others and walked toward them. His forelock area was white, as if he had sprayed it.

“My name is Shibaike,” The man said in a low voice resounding in his stomach. The helicopter’s rotors were still spinning.

“This lady here is Director Shindo’s wife.” Saikawa introduced Mrs. Shindo to him. “And I’m ...”

“Saikawa-sensei and ... Nishinosono-san, right? We’ve heard most of the story. Could you show us around?”

All three helicopters took off and flew in a northerly direction.

Shibaike was giving some instructions to the men who had come down from the helicopters. A few of them were wearing police uniforms, and many of them were wearing short-sleeved shirts and dark blue work pants. The square aluminum trunks they carried slung over their shoulders were conspicuous.

Following Mrs. Shindo, a large group of men disappeared into the elevator house. About five policemen remained on the rooftop.

Shibaike was still there, too, and he was smoking a cigarette.

“Are some more coming?” Saikawa asked as he approached Detective Shibaike.

“Two more helicopters and about forty more people will come,” Shibaike replied in a low voice. “They will also come here by ship. By the evening, there will be about one hundred people in total.”

Saikawa was inwardly surprised that so many people would come. He had expected at most twenty people.

“If they come by ship, it will take much longer to walk here from the port,” Saikawa said.

“Don’t worry, sir. They will bring a car, too.” Shibaike smiled, showing his white teeth. “Could you please explain the situation a little? This place is hot ... Let’s go indoors from there.”

Shibaike pointed to the elevator on the far side. That was the public entrance, not the entrance exclusively for the director that the police officers had just entered. Moe followed them. It was weird to Saikawa that Detective Shibaike did not go to see the body immediately.

Inside the elevator house, the air conditioner was not working very well, but it was still better than the heat outside. Shibaike did not enter the elevator but threw his cigarette into an ashtray by the wall. Then he stared at Moe and said.

“Don’t leave my side, Nishinosono-san.”

“Huh?” Moe tilted her head.

“The Chief ordered me to do so by radio,” Shibaike said, with his mouth slanted. “He told me to ensure your safety absolutely. I am sorry, but I ask for your cooperation.”

“Yeah ...” Moe nodded, reluctantly.

“Can I stay with you guys?” Saikawa took out a cigarette and lit it.

“Yes, of course.” Shibaike folded his arms and stood haughtily. “So, what on earth happened? I heard two people were killed, but you don’t know who did it?”

“Why don’t you go see the bodies first?” Moe suggested.

“If we barge into the scene in large numbers, we will only confuse things. We have plenty of time, so we must get information first.”

-3-

After spending about 10 minutes, Moe organized her story and told it to the

detective. Shibaike listened to her story with a nod, but halfway through, one of his eyes narrowed, and his expression changed to a look as if he wanted to say something.

“That’s an odd story ...” Those were Shibaike’s first words. Moe had just about finished telling him about the drama of the past two days.

“Yeah, you’re right. I find it odd too.” Moe nodded with a serious face.

“How about you, Sensei?” Shibaike stared at Saikawa.

“What she told you was very accurate. I saw them too.” Saikawa said. “There is no correction and no need to add to them.”

“Well, let’s just check them out.” Shibaike narrowed one eye enough to close it. “In any case, it is not an easy story to believe.”

Young men knocked on the door from outside, and Saikawa opened it for them. They were three of those who had remained on the rooftop, dressed in plain clothes.

“How can we open this door?” one of the men who came in asked.

“Register your data in the computer in this facility, and it will open when you put your right hand on the glass there and say your name,” Saikawa explained slowly.

“Sir, we’re going to check inside the building.” Another man said to Shibaike.

“Go around the building anyway.” Shibaike said with his hands in his pockets. “Go check the entrances and exits.”

“There is only one way in and out,” Saikawa said. “And you can’t open the door. You need to register your data. For now, that registration system is down ...”

Saikawa had trouble explaining it. *To some people, this system is indeed just a hassle. In particular, the tediousness of explaining the system to such people is the greatest weakness of the research institute’s system,* he thought.

The elevator came up. The doors opened, and Chief Mizutani stepped out.

“Mizutani-san ... You’ve come to the right place ...” Saikawa spoke to him. “Could you please make sure the police people can open the door?”

“Ah, they’ve arrived already. That’s a relief ...” Mizutani said, out of breath,

shaking his belly. “Okay. I’ll set the doors to the entrance and public areas so anyone can open them. But I can’t do that to private rooms.”

“That’s fine,” Shibaike said. “I’m Shibaike of the Aichi Prefectural Police.”

“I’m Mizutani.” Mizutani introduced himself with an amiable face. “Currently, the control system in the research institute is having a little trouble now ... It will be working again in a few hours.”

Mizutani then turned to Saikawa and said. “Saikawa-sensei, do you know where Yamane-kun is?”

“Ah, no ...” Saikawa shook his head. “Have you not found Yamane-san yet?”

“Who is Yamane-san?” Shibaike interrupted.

“He is the deputy director,” Saikawa answered.

“Then I’ll look for him here and there.” After saying this, Mizutani rode down in the elevator with the three detectives.

“Is there a meeting room or conference room anywhere?” Shibaike asked Saikawa.

“This facility is unusual ... in that it does not have a room that looks like a meeting room. There is no large room that can accommodate everyone in the facility.” Saikawa explained. “There is a lounge on the first floor, though ... Still, it would be full with a maximum of twenty people. Everyone lives and works in their own rooms.”

“Is there not even a cafeteria here?”

“No, there isn’t. Every room is private.”

Saikawa spoke up to that point, and then a thought occurred to him. *Yes, the word “alibi” has little meaning in this place. All day long, everyone works alone without seeing anyone else. The terminals are everywhere, so no one is aware of where the other person is. The familiar and commonplace concepts of actual location and distance are very vague in this place.* However, it was troublesome for Saikawa to explain this to Detective Shibaike.

“Is there a guide map of this research institute anywhere?” Shibaike inquired. Saikawa thought it was an obvious question.

“Unfortunately, there isn’t.” Saikawa shook his head. “They don’t even have a room display plate. Ah, but there is a floor plan, so let’s have someone print it out. Because it’s in the computer.”

“Where are telephones?”

“The phone is also on the computer screen.”

“Huh?” Shibaike showed a wondering look. “Oh my, that sounds like ... a lot of troublesome ... I’m ashamed to say this, but I’m not even good at word processing.”

“I’m not good at telephoning.” Saikawa smiled.

-4-

Setsuko Gido was on a fast boat called a marine cab.

She did not know how fast it was going, but when it began to sail, the boat’s bow lifted considerably. There was seating for about twenty people, but besides Setsuko, only two old people were on board. It was cool and air-conditioned.

She wanted to pack as little as possible, but as usual, her bag was heavier than expected. The bulging Boston bag in the shape of a *kamaboko* (fish cake) was now under her feet.

The windows were high up on the boat, and as she sat in her seat, all she could see outside was the sky. The boat was bound for Sino Island, but when she asked at the dock if a boat was going to Himaka Island, she was told to take this one. The boat was going to make a stop along the way for her.

A large, round clock hung on the wall in front of her, and it was a little after noon. She could hear two old people talking loudly in the back, but Setsuko could not understand half of their dialect.

After about twenty minutes, the sound of the boat’s engine quieted. Eventually, a tanned man emerged from the wheelhouse, looked at Setsuko, and said in an easygoing tone, “We’re almost there.” The man stared at Setsuko’s legs, so she stood up and grabbed her heavy bag.

Indeed, an island was close by, and the boat was about to enter the breakwater.

Setsuko could see many young people on the pier.

When the boat arrived at the pier, Setsuko could hear the voices of the young people.

The door of the boat was opened for her by a swarthy man.

“This boat is completely different from the one we came here ...” Setsuko heard someone say so outside.

Setsuko went outside and basked in the sun. The floating pier was swaying, whether from dizziness caused by the intense heat or the number of people on it.

“We want to go back to Isshiki Port.” One of the young men was talking to a sailor. “Can you stop by on your way back?”

“So, come aboard now ...” The sailor replied. “We will go to Sino Island and then return to Isshiki Port.”

When Setsuko Gido got off the boat, many young people boarded the boat in turn. They numbered about ten. *Apparently, they have come here to camp or something.* From their clothes and luggage, Setsuko judged so. Noticing two women in the group, Setsuko asked a question to the slender woman with long hair.

“Umm, how far is the walk to the Magata Research Institute?”

“Ah, well, I’m not sure.” The woman’s pronunciation was different from the Japanese.

“About 30 minutes.” The young man next to her answered instead. “But I heard there was an incident, and now it seems to be in trouble.”

Setsuko walked to land with a hopelessly heavy bag slung over her shoulder. She found the nearest shade tree and held on until she got there. When she dropped her bag and turned around, she saw the boat backing up and slowly turning in the breakwater.

I don’t believe it ... It takes thirty minutes ...

She despaired in her mind. Or, she might have actually mumbled. She had planned to call the research institute from the hotel she had stayed this morning to have them pick her up, but for some reason her phone was disconnected.

Why did I bring so much luggage? To start with, it was a mistake to come here alone. I should have worn more comfortable shoes ...

The information board was stripped of its color, and she could not make out what it said, but there seemed to be only one way. She took a deep breath, lifted her heavy bag, and began to walk.

-5-

In the end, the cover-up of the incident that Deputy Director Yamane had planned did not take place. This was because Yamane himself had disappeared.

The police decided to base their investigation in the anteroom in front of Ms. Magata's room on the second basement floor and the security room next to it. Both the yellow door in question and the aluminum door behind it were left open. With so many busily coming and going, the other chairs and tables were pushed to the wall, leaving the terminal display in the center of the room. The corridors were also filled with men in work clothes, and the elevator was busy shuttling back and forth between the director's office, the rooftop, and the investigation headquarters on the second basement floor.

At the terminal sat Chief Mizutani and another young researcher named Hatanaka. They were in charge of displaying data and calling someone in the facility, according to police instructions. Moe bowed lightly to Hatanaka, who did not seem to notice her. Moe explained to Saikawa that she had met Hatanaka in the VR cart game world.

Each time new data appeared on display, Detective Shibaike requested a printout. But since the room did not have a printer, the printer in the security office next door was used for the output. Each time, the printed paper was brought in by Hasebe. In addition to Mochizuki and Hasebe, two other researchers in the security office, unknown to Saikawa and Moe, were showing video footage to the police. Both Mochizuki and Hasebe had originally been supposed to be sleeping in their rooms at this time.

As Shibaike had foretold, it appeared that personnel were transported to the island by helicopter in three separate flights. From what Saikawa saw, 50-60

investigators had arrived here. The population density of the research institute had doubled. Few officers were in uniform. Most wore white shirts and dark blue work pants, or plain clothes. Most of the personnel were concentrated in the director's office on the first floor, Ms. Magata's room on the second basement floor, and the director's helicopter on the rooftop. The two bodies were placed on folding stretchers and carried away by helicopter from the rooftop after about an hour had passed. Saikawa only saw the sheeted corpse and, of course, did not want to see it. He did not want to even imagine how the wedding dress was removed from the corpse, nor how it was unloaded from the wagon-type robot.

Some detectives had arrived here by boat. About an hour earlier, a detective at Isshiki Port called Detective Shibaike, who summoned Saikawa. He said a group of students returning from Himaka Island had disembarked at the port. When Saikawa explained the situation, the detective told him that he would have his man confirm the number of students and all their names.

There also were police boats coming from ports other than Isshiki Port. Saikawa heard two four-wheel-drive vehicles had landed on the island. When Saikawa and Moe went to look outside the entrance, they saw a large number of men milling around outside the research institute. Also, two uniformed police officers standing in the blazing sun on the entrance ramp, like *komainu* (a pair of statutes of lion-like creatures) at Shinto shrines.

Ah, it is such a serious matter to have someone killed, Saikawa suddenly thought.

Shibaike looked reluctant, but around 3:00 p.m., Saikawa returned to Yamane's room alone with Moe. Yamane was nowhere to be found in the research institute. More accurately, the building had yet to be searched in every corner, but at least Yamane had not answered the call, even in this emergency.

Moe brewed coffee for both of them in the coffee maker. Saikawa was smoking a cigarette and looking at the terminal display.

It was fortunate that Research Associate Kunieda and students from Saikawa's office had safely made it off the island. They too would be asked about some of the circumstances, but at least they could return to their own homes tonight.

The locked room of Ms. Shiki Magata where the murder took place is located in a larger locked room called the Magata Research Institute. The Magata Research Institute is located on Himaka

Island, which is even larger than the facility. If they extend the scope of the case to the outermost part of this triple-locked room, then anyone who was present at the campsite would be involved. However, the police apparently have a policy of not extending the scope of their investigation that far. Yet, it seemed that the police did legwork at Isshiki Port and that investigators were already in the forests surrounding the research institute. So, Saikawa did not know how long the limited investigation would continue.

The researchers were questioned little by little. Saikawa and Moe were also questioned for about an hour. Several staff members had been summoned in small groups while Saikawa and Moe were at the investigation headquarters on the second basement floor. Also, young plainclothes detectives seemed to be going around the staff's private rooms. The floor plan of the building had been printed out, some notes had been scribbled on it, and many copies had been made and distributed to the investigators.

As time went on, it became a strange situation indeed that Deputy Director Yamane was nowhere to be found. No one, however, could explain why. Both Ayako Shimada and Chief Mizutani had been talking with Yamane on the network until just before the Red Magic reset took place. Neither Dr. and Mrs. Yuminaga nor the director's wife knew where Yamane was, and Deborah's records were useless. They examined the records of people's comings and goings at the entrance of the research institute. However, there was no record of Yamane leaving the building. More likely, the record itself had not been made because Deborah had partially stopped after the Red Magic reset at 11:00 a.m. Deborah was silent and could no longer open the door. Only the lighting in the office was somehow managed. Several staff members, with Ayako Shimada as chief, seemed to be doing their best to restore Deborah.

"I wonder where Yamane-san has gone." Moe came back with two cups of coffee in both hands.

"Yeah, four hours have passed since then," Saikawa said, looking at his watch.

Saikawa found a terminal mode window in the display before him and brought it to the front. Then, with a few taps on the keyboard, he tried to telnet to the address of N University Computer Center. It took a while, but the connection was successful.

Saikawa logged into UNIX, a subsystem of the N University Computer Center, under his registered name, and also telnetted into the workstation in Saikawa's office. About 40 e-mails had arrived. They were addressed to Saikawa over the past two days. Holding the cup of coffee handed to him by Moe, he read the e-mails one by one, operating the keyboard with one hand. None of them were urgent business: clerical correspondence, the minutes of a committee meeting related to an academic conference, and idle chitchat from a foreign friend. Time seemed to flow surprisingly slowly in the outside world.

"As long as the network is connected, I don't care where I am." Saikawa turned around and said happily. "No, to be precise ..., I originally don't care where I am, but I only need a network ... maybe. Now it's just like being in my own office. The only inconvenience is that I can't go to the Co-op cafeteria to eat, and there are no cigarette vending machines."

Magata Research Institute may also have a cigarette vending machine somewhere, Saikawa suddenly thought.

"But if the network is cut off, this is just an isolated island," Moe said as she sat down at the table.

She had gone to Yamane's bedroom in the back with her bag, which had arrived this morning, and changed her T-shirt.

"If the network is cut off, every place is like an isolated island," Saikawa said while looking at the display. "The question of whether or not there is a cigarette vending machine within walking distance is certainly important for me, but whether or not you can hold hands with the person you are talking to is a trivial matter unless you are lovers."

Moe was silent, but after a moment, she said. "Well, this morning, Dr. Magata said the same thing in that game. I wonder ... who was operating that character? Whose prank was it?"

Saikawa remained silent and continued to watch the display.

"I am more pleasant talking up close with you, Sensei."

"Why?" Saikawa asked quickly. He had read about half of the e-mails. "That's probably because your habits give you those feelings. If you had been

communicating in electronic space since you were born, you wouldn't feel that way, I believe ... Besides, in the near future, you will be able to hold someone's hand in an electronic space. The desire for a physical touch response is a human luxury, but it can be solved by wasting some energy. It is a trivial problem as well."

"I don't think so."

"That's your opinion. I'm not going to force my opinion on you." Saikawa turned around and said. "I admit that your opinion is more major for now. Most people are also bound by the historical customs of the past, going back to the times in which they lived. I do not condemn such tendencies. No creature is more eagerly attached to history than human beings."

Moe sighed and fell silent again.

Saikawa focused his attention on the display and finished reading all the e-mails. He deleted all but the necessary e-mails and saved about one-third of them. There were no e-mails that needed to be replied to immediately.

Saikawa logged out of the system in his office and subsequently out of N University Computer Center. He stood up from his chair with a cup of coffee in his hand. Standing, he took a sip of the bitter coffee. Then he sat at a table with a racing car track on it. On the other side of the table, Moe was propped up on her elbows with her hands on her cheeks. She turned a bored look at Saikawa.

"Sensei ... What do you think the reality is?" Moe asked, tilting her little face slightly.

"It's an illusion that appears in human thought only at the moment we think what reality is," Saikawa answered quickly. "Usually, there is no such thing."

"But reality and dreams are obviously different, aren't they?"

"In the sense that it is subject to the interference of others or shared with others, you are aware of reality as somewhat independent of the self, right?" Saikawa said as he lifted his cup. The coffee was already cold. "But we can also partially construct a reality that is not interfered with or shared by others if we make an effort, can't we? In the future, for example, personal reality will certainly move in that direction. Because that is what everyone wants. So ... reality will be as close to people's dreams as possible."

“Some people like to be interfered with by others.” Moe curved her tiny mouth a little.

“Yes, most people, I don’t know why, want to be interfered with by others. But it is, after all, for their own satisfaction. Many people can’t be satisfied without praise from others, right? But ... even such interference by others can be created. You know, we virtually create only convenient interference for us ... or convenient others for us. It is the same as the games children are obsessed with ... We need convenient others to fight against us and lose. But convenient means simple, and the simpler something is, the easier it is to program.”

“I don’t understand it well ... You mean ...” Moe turned her upward gaze to the ceiling. “Are you saying that computers create others who satisfy individuals in the way, and in return, humans communicate less and less with real people ...?”

“Right ... If you think of it that way, you can’t go wrong. What comes after the information society, in my opinion, is information independent or rather dispersed society.”

“If there are so many computers, what are humans supposed to do?”

“We don’t have to do anything ... The idea that we have to do something is the very illusion.”

“That would mean more people hanging around and not working.”

“Well, I can sense a bit of intentional mislead of the word in that statement of yours, but ... you are right.” Saikawa lit a cigarette. “That’s what humans originally set out to do. I think humans have worked hard not to have to work. It’s not right to make a fuss now about the loss of jobs. It’s not human nature to work. Hanging out is much more creative. That’s what culture is all about, in my opinion.”

“Is it freedom to not interfere with others?”

“Probably yes, in my opinion,” Saikawa answered. “In society, even freedom also requires rules.”

“Is the environment of this research institute also free?” Moe questioned. “No one here interferes in other people’s lives. Even in such an ideal place, murders happen. After all, I don’t think ordinary people can think with the matter-of-fact thinking you describe.”

“I’ll also accept the opinion of yours.” Saikawa nodded. “I’m just stating my opinion. I don’t expect a lot of people to understand that. About this murder case ..., yes, after all, it was committed by a person who felt inconvenienced. I guess we could make that a general statement about any crime.”

An electronic sound came from the terminal display.

Saikawa got up and went to look at it. An e-mail that had been addressed to all the staff at the research institute was displayed in the window.

This is Ayako Shimada.

Sorry to keep you waiting. Deborah is back to normal.

I believe it should now work fine.

I, Shimada, have done a tough job and will take a few hours off.

See you later.

-6-

Saikawa and Moe came to the front of Ayako Shimada’s room. As they were about to knock, Deborah’s clear voice announced.

“Saikawa-sensei, Detective Shibaike would like to see you.”

Saikawa said to Moe, “I’ll be right back,” and turned back down the corridor.

Moe knocked on the door of Shimada’s room.

“Put your right hand there and say your name,” Deborah’s electronic voice demanded, and she did just that.

The door opened, and a cluttered room appeared before Moe. A woman sat across the table with many robots on it, but it was not Ayako Shimada.

“Please, come in.” Ayako Shimada’s voice was heard from the terminal in the back of the room. Moe entered the room.

“Oh, Nishinosono-san?” The woman sitting at the table stood up, pointed the camera in her hand at Moe, and pressed the shutter. The flash flickered.

Moe was so dazzled that she couldn't see the person clearly for a while, but she quickly remembered who the woman there was. Gido, yes, she's Setsuko Gido. She was the woman who had come to Associate Professor Saikawa's office at the university before.

“Hello.” Moe approached the table, taking care to avoid the toys scattered underfoot. “I remember you are Gido-san, right? Do you work at this facility?”

“No ...” Setsuko beamed. I've just come here ... It is I who wanna ask why you are here.”

Setsuko Gido was wearing a short skirt. She walked around to the front of the table while pointing the camera at Moe and stepped back to the kitchen door to ensure enough distance.

“Well, you know ...” Moe responded vaguely, and another murderous light was shed on her.

Gido lowered the camera, then slightly tilted her head and laughed, saying, “Sorry.”

“You two know each other?” Ayako Shimada got up from her seat at the terminal and walked up next to Moe. “Hey, Gido-san, can you take my picture too?”

“Is this an interview for a women's magazine ... or something?” Moe looked at Ayako Shimada and said.

“Right. It's for *Ms. Trend* magazine.” Gido returned to her seat on the other side of the table. “You know it?”

“No ... I don't,” Moe answered honestly.

“Oh, really ...” Gido smiled. “That's not well known at all, not in this region ...”

“Well ... now that my work is done, I think I'll have a drink ...” Ayako Shimada stood tall and then patted herself on the shoulder. “I have some beer.”

“Is that okay? You would be called by the police too.” Moe cautioned.

“That's okay ... don't worry. You know, I'm not driving the car now ...” Shimada

walked into the kitchen.

“Have you heard about the incident, Gido-san?” Moe asked the thickly made-up woman.

“Umm, yes ... This is a bit of a newsworthy case, isn’t it?” Setsuko Gido smirked, her crescent-shaped eyes narrowing more and more. “It took some wrangling to get me into this facility. But I ... spent no less than one hour walking all the way here with this heavy bag. If they hadn’t let me into this building, I would have just laid down and died ... There are no hotels or pensions on this island, right?”

“Are you interviewing Shimada-san?” Moe inquired.

“Yes, so ... This is an article to feature women who are active in these unique workplaces. I don’t really know the details. You know, I’m just a contributor ... I just take pictures, do a little interview, and make a two-page spread in a magazine ... But ... I wonder what comes next after such an incident has occurred. I am in the process of contacting the publishing company right now ...”

“Eh? You mean, you’ve told them about the incident?” Moe was surprised.

“No worries ... I didn’t tell them who died ...” Setsuko Gido said leisurely and slowly. The pronunciation was still slurring her tongue. “The police have warned me about that too ...”

Ayako Shimada appeared with a tray loaded with glasses, cans of beer, and potato chips.

“Oh, my, I’ve been doing hellish hard labor since the day before yesterday,” Shimada said, sitting next to Moe and handing out glasses and cans of beer to the other two. “I’m the type of person who can’t do my job unless I get proper sleep. This is total overtime, really ... I’m exhaaausted.”

Shimada and Gido opened a can of beer and poured it into a glass.

“But you managed to fix the system, too,” Moe said, wondering if she should drink the beer. “Deborah’s back to normal, too ...”

“Well, yes. If I hadn’t been here, it would have taken another couple of days.” Shimada drank half the beer from her glass in one gulp. “Ah, I feel refreshed, really ...”

“Hey, then, what’s going on? I mean the status of the case ...” Gido was sipping her beer. “Who killed Dr. Shiki Magata? Any suspects? You know, this is such a place ... that there would be a limited area to investigate. This story sounds like a mystery novel, I think.”

“At least, I don’t think it’s that easy of a problem,” Moe said as she made up her mind and opened a can of beer. “Because no one has been in or out of Dr. Magata’s room for the past week, and a week ago, she was alive.”

“It’s not just a week. No one has entered in that room for a long time.” Ayako Shimada added.

“No one ... in there.” Setsuko Gido said, holding the glass. “But ... that’s not true.”

“Yes, it is true,” Moe replied. “I mean, we have looked into it ...”

“We?” Gido immediately repeated.

“Saikawa-sensei and me.”

“What?! Sohei-kun is here?!” Setsuko Gido’s glass of beer almost spilled. “Hey, what’s going on? How come? Why is he coming to a place like this? He is ...”

“He has come here with me.” Moe said a little proudly.

“Hmm ... on his business?” Gido questioned. “But this place has nothing to do with his work at all, right? He likes computers, though ... He always walks around looking mainly at old buildings. You know ... he likes to take pictures of buildings that look like they might collapse at any time.”

“Well ...” Moe forced herself to cough.

The question, “What is your relationship with Saikawa-sensei?” came up to her throat, but Moe was too concerned about Ayako Shimada next to her to actually say it. She felt that to say the word would be equivalent to losing her advantage. At the same time, however, she was also aware of the mediocrity of her feelings. She had never felt herself like that before.

“Where do you think Yamane-san has gone?” Moe brought up another subject to Shimada.

“Who knows? So sudden, wasn’t it?” Shimada poured all the remaining beer into

the glass. “But he will be found soon. There’s nowhere to go ...”

“Do you mean he couldn’t leave this island?” Setsuko Gido interrupted. “But when I came here, some people got on the boat and left the island. There were no police in the harbor on the island. If there had been anyone there, I would have been given a ride. Then I wouldn’t have had to walk all that way ... At first, I got lost ... When I got out to the campground, I thought I would die.”

“The people who boarded the boat were students in Saikawa-sensei’s course.” Moe explained. “Well, there must have been nine people in all ...”

“Right, there were about that many. Two of them were female ...” Gido nodded. “They were all young people. How old is the Yamane-san?”

“He is thirty-seven years old, if I remember right.” Ayako Shimada said.

“There was no one that old,” Gido said confidently. “You know, I never misjudge a man’s age.”

“The police checked the boat, and he was not on it,” Moe told them the story that the police informed them of it from Isshiki Port.

“Then, after all, he couldn’t have gone anywhere,” Gido said. “So he is somewhere inside this research institute. Is the Yamane-san inconvenient to meet with the police?”

“What do you mean?” Shimada tilted her head.

“I don’t mean anything. I have no idea ...” Setsuko Gido laughed.

-7-

Saikawa looked at his wristwatch. He liked analog watches. And only those with Arabic numerals on the dial. There is something really strange about watch dials. Generally, numbers from 1 to 12 are written on the dial. This is natural. However, one hour is sixty minutes. Why don’t they write numbers from 1 to 60 on it? Teachers teach elementary school children that “if the long hand is at 2, it is ten minutes,” as if it were a matter of course. Saikawa wondered if they were teaching children the harshness of the world. *Why doesn’t anyone notice the irrationality of this? Everyone should look around to see if there are other meters that are so unkind. The best solution*

is to make five minutes into one minute and one hour into twelve minutes.

While listening to Shibaike's story, Saikawa was thinking about something else in that way. He had noticed the original meaning of the clock. It was now a little before 4:00 p.m.

"In short ... we searched everywhere in the research institute," Shibaike said as he smoked a cigarette. "The man named Yamane is nowhere to be found in this building."

"Are all the others there?" Saikawa asked blankly. How many staff members were there in total?"

"Excluding Sensei and Nishinosono-san ... err, forty-nine people in total." A young detective beside Shibaike reported, looking at his personal organizer. He belonged to the same generation as Saikawa. However, Saikawa had never had a personal organizer.

"So, they are one person short." Saikawa pointed out. "As I remember right, there should be exactly fifty people in total. Yamane-san himself said so. Originally, there were fifty-two, including Dr. Magata and Director Shindo ..."

"One woman from a publishing company came. She is in Shimada Ayako's room." The young detective reported. "I didn't want to let her in, but I couldn't turn her away."

"Then, Yamane-san must have gone out of the research institute," Saikawa stated expressionlessly. "He owns a jeep. Have you checked that out?"

"That vehicle is here." The young detective replied quickly. "Besides, the truck is also here."

"Then, I wonder if he went somewhere on foot ..." Saikawa muttered.

"He's suspicious, isn't he?" Shibaike said with a sly grin. "You know, as soon as they contacted the police, he disappeared. Am I wrong?"

"Umm ..." The detective's grin made Saikawa smile for no reason.

"Sensei and Nishinosono-san are the last people to see him. Well ..."

"It was just before 8:00 in the morning. We went to Yamane-san's room for the last time to drop off our luggage." Saikawa testified. "But even after that, Shimada-

san and Mizutani-san kept in touch with Yamane-san through the network.”

“We’ve made sure of that. They had been communicating until 11 a.m.” The young detective said.

“Well, okay, go over it again. Oh, and also check where everyone’s been for the past week.” Shibaike ordered the young detective beside him. He then urged Saikawa to sit down, and he himself did so. “Sensei, we’ve been investigating this and that ... Surely, there are a lot of strange thing. What can I say ... You know ... fishy. Yes, really, it smells fishy.”

“Have you guys finished examining Dr. Magata’s room?” Saikawa asked, looking at the yellow door left open just in front of him.

“We are still in the middle of examining it. At this rate, we’ll have to tear out the entire floor and ceiling.” Shibaike showed his white teeth.

“That’s a good idea. I was hoping that you guys would do that.” Saikawa nodded.

“Without that video recording, I could not have believed your testimony.” Saying this, Shibaike pointed to the adjacent room with glass walls. “But when the event was recorded so vividly, I could do nothing but believe it.”

“Sure, I told you the scene as I saw it.”

“But Sensei,” Shibaike pulled the ashtray closer to him and lit a cigarette. “There is no doubt that Shiki Magata was murdered. Someone was in that room ...”

“Was it a murder, after all?” As if following the detective, Saikawa lit his cigarette.

“That’s no surprise. You know, both her arms and legs were severed.”

“But what was the direct cause of death?”

“Stabbing. There was a wound on her back.” Shibaike said. “We are currently looking into the details. She died four to five days ago.”

“You mean, two to three days before she was found, right?” Saikawa confirmed. “How were the wounds on her back? Any distinguishing features?”

“That is also what I am not sure about ... But the same knife might that killed the victim on the rooftop might have been used.”

“If so, is it the same killer?”

“Umm ...” Shibaike bared his teeth and smoked the cigarette. “Well ..., you know, there are many possibilities ... Please don’t ask too many questions, Sensei.”

“How were the fingerprints?” Saikawa asked, ignoring the detective checking him. “You guys have taken fingerprints from Dr. Magata’s room, right?”

“It is also a work in progress ...” Shibaike pushed his cigarette disgustingly into the ashtray. “So far, not a single one has been found. This is another oddity.”

“You can’t find a single one ... But you must have had Dr. Magata’s fingerprints, right?”

“Of course. But other than that, not a single one has been found ...” Shibaike said, crossing his arms. “Some were wiped off. We examined everything we saw in the room. You guys touched the computer keyboard, didn’t you?”

“How was the helicopter?” Saikawa asked. “Any fingerprints in the helicopter?”

“Ah, we’re in the middle of work over there, too ...” Shibaike said, “We took the director’s prints and found a few others. It will take a little while to analyze them, though ... Well, but in a way, this is an easy site to work. No one can escape ... from this place.”

How leisurely, even though one of them has already disappeared, Saikawa thought but kept quiet. He, too, put out his cigarette. Mizutani was sitting alone in front of the terminal in the room. Hatanaka, the researcher who had been at the other terminal, was no longer there. When Mizutani’s eyes met Saikawa’s, he smiled. Saikawa did not understand why he smiled.

“If there were no other entrances or exits to Dr. Magata’s room ... how would you guys interpret that?” Saikawa boldly asked.

“From what I see, there are no other entrances or exits ...” Shibaike said matter-of-factly. “Therefore, it means that there is something we have overlooked then. It also raises the question of whether Shiki Magata was really in the room ... in the first place. What do you think about that?”

“I’m certain about that. You know, we all witnessed the scene. And the event was also recorded on video, wasn’t it?”

“It certainly looked like the dead body came out of that door,” Shibaike said. “But

you can manipulate a video recording, right? With a computer, you can do whatever you want to the video, am I wrong?

“If that is the case, it means that we are all lying,” Saikawa said a little too quickly. “Detective, you know I’m an outsider. Their reaction was not an act. That video is real.”

“Still, it is possible that someone brought the body into the room. We don’t know if she was killed in the room.”

“But if someone had brought it inside, it had to be recorded on video, right?” Saikawa pointed out, disgusted.

“You know, Sensei ...” Shibaike smiled wryly again. “We don’t care about figuring out the means. If only we could name the culprit ... We should just ask the culprit what method he used to pull off such a trick ... Isn’t that right? It’s no use thinking about this and that.”

“How do you figure out who the culprit is?” Saikawa asked slowly, hiding his emotions.

“Well, please keep an eye on our investigation. There is a guy on the run ... A guy who has killed someone has a different smell.” Shibaike said as he stood up. “We have enough human resources. There hasn’t been a lot of work lately, and everyone has become dull. My men are very motivated today.” Shibaike laughed. “Gradually, physical evidence should also come up. As for Miki-san, the younger sister of Shiki Magata. We are also looking for her bag. We have asked them to shut down the incinerator, so we will go inside once it cools down.”

“Speaking of which, have you met Miki-san?” Suddenly, something stuck in Saikawa’s mind.

“Yes, just a while ago ... I called her up on the terminal there. She is a beautiful person. But the conversation with her was in writing. I can manage to read and write English but am not good at English conversation. The English language skills of our generation are unbalanced.”

“In writing? Oh ... Detective, you can type on a keyboard, right?” Saikawa smiled.

“We call it a typewriter, though ...”

“What do you think about the message left on the computer in Dr. Magata’s room?” Saikawa stood up and asked the last question.

“Oh, you mean that one.” Shibaike frowned. “That has nothing to do with this case. It doesn’t mean anything. You’re talking about the message from three people, right? Besides, what did that mean? Everything turns to F ...?”

“Right.” Saikawa smiled. “Umm, that’s okay. I’m not particularly requesting your opinion, Detective.”

“I don’t have an opinion.” Shibaike turned both palms upward. “The guy who committed the crime must have gotten carried away ... That is like a state of being drunk. It is a common state for people after they have killed someone.”

Saikawa nodded sincerely for the first time at Shibaike’s words. *Indeed, I heard something interesting*, he thought.

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Ayako Shimada’s table, crowded initially with colorful robots, now had several empty beer cans lying around. Moe felt uncomfortable with herself laughing so hard.

“You’re a funny girl, Nishinosono-san ...” Setsuko Gido said with a laugh. “Is that a true story? It’s kind of too good to be true.”

It was not a very interesting story. Moe just talked about a dog she had at home. It was a Shetland Sheepdog named Thoma Nishinosono. The dog, whose nickname was Thoma, was an unfriendly one. There was nothing particularly unusual about the dog, but he would sleep on his back every day. So in the winter, Moe would gently cover the dog with a blanket. The dog sleeping face up with a blanket over his head looked a little comical.

Ayako Shimada was hardly changed by the beer. Setsuko Gido was blushing, and Moe was strangely inclined to laugh.

But unfortunately, there was no more beer in Shimada’s refrigerator.

“There is still beer in Yamane-san’s room.” Moe was a little surprised at herself for making such a bold statement.

“Let’s go, let’s go!” Gido said.

“That’s bad for Yamane-san ...” Shimada hesitated.

But Setsuko Gido was already on her feet. She picked up her camera and took a picture of Moe.

The three women went out into the corridor. They saw the police officers in the hallway and hurriedly made serious faces while walking. But when they turned the corner, the three started running again, laughing loudly.

The green door to Yamane’s room opened as Moe put her right hand there and said her name.

“Wow, this place is beautiful! It’s impressive ...” Setsuko Gido said.

Moe walked into the kitchen and brought glasses and cans of cold beer to the table. There were about ten cans of beer chilling in the refrigerator.

Ayako Shimada posed in a chair, and Gido was aiming the camera at her. The flash flickered about three times.

“That’s nice. This room is more picturesque ... yeah, yeah.” Gido smiled. “Career women have to live in a room like this ... Not with Gundam or Godzilla ...”

The three women made another toast. It was so strong that Moe felt the glass might break.

“Hey, how many women work in this research institute?” Gido asked over a beer.

“Well ..., I think it’s about ten percent or something,” Shimada answered.

“All the men here are single, aren’t they?” Gido’s pronunciation was becoming more and more lisping.

“All the men and women are single.” Shimada laughed.

“Is there no romance among you guys?” Gido asked.

“What a classy way to say ...” Shimada made a pistol shape with one hand and winked. “Well ... you know. There are no men here who are interested in women and no women who are interested in men. Do you understand?”

“That’s not a very classy way, I think ...” Moe pointed out.

“Hey, how do you say it in the Nishinosono family when you need to?” Shimada asked curiously. “In terms appropriate for a young lady, how would you put it?”

“At such times, I blush and keep my mouth shut,” Moe said in a ladylike tone.

The other two laughed heartily.

“Hey, you, Nishinosono-san. You have no idea how funny you are, do you?” Shimada said funnily.

“I’m getting hungry ...” Gido said. “I have laughed too much.”

“I’ll make you something to eat.” Ayako Shimada stood up. “Madam, please stay put here ...”

Shimada bowed her head deliberately and entered the kitchen.

Gido pulled a cigarette out of the small bag she had brought with her camera and lit it. Moe stared at her.

Ah, she’s an adult ..., Moe thought so suddenly.

“Why don’t we go for a little walk outside later, Nishinosono-san?” Setsuko Gido suggested. “I saw a beautiful beach on the way. I want to capture the natural scenery of the island ... If Shimada-san could swim in her swimsuit, that would be best.”

“Sounds nice.” Moe nodded.

To Moe, the murder case seemed somewhat like a TV drama she had watched many years ago. She suddenly remembered Saikawa.

I wonder what Sensei is doing now ...

“Sensei is late ...” Moe mumbled as she looked at her watch. It was 5:30 p.m. *It would still be hot outside. But it would be nice to go for a walk in a little while. If possible, I wanna go with Saikawa-sensei*, she thought.

“Hey, young lady ... How old are you?” Setsuko Gido was smoking a cigarette with relish.

“Nineteen,” Moe answered.

“Between Sohei-kun and you, what is the age difference?”

“Between Sensei and me ... Let’s see ... thirteen years.” Moe pretended to have done the math and deliberately took her time to answer.

“I’m seven years younger than him,” Gido said.

She should not use Saikawa-sensei’s age as the basis, Moe was annoyed. *I might as well ask about her relationship between Sensei and her,* she thought.

“Where do you live?” Moe found herself asking something else.

“Yokohama.” Gido answered.

Moe remembered the mooncakes Gido had brought as a souvenir the other day.

“Sohei-kun often goes to Tokyo on business trips, right? My house is virtually his hotel substitute. Well ... but he gives me an allowance, so I can’t complain, though ...”

Moe almost dropped the glass in her hand onto the table. She was aware of the blood rushing from her head.

Sensei would never do that!

Shimada came back with a plate of cheese. “I’m still preparing other dishes ... Wait a little while.”

She put the plate on the table and went back again.

Moe’s head was spinning in circles. She felt as if the ceiling were tilting.

I wonder if the alcohol is suddenly hitting me ...

“What’s wrong with you? Feeling sick?” Moe heard Setsuko Gido’s voice. *I dislike the way she speaks with her muffled voice,* Moe thought.

“Well ... Gido-san.” Moe sat up properly and straightened her posture.

“Yes?” Gido smiled with her eyes narrowed.

At that moment, they heard Ayako Shimada scream from the back of the room.

Moe Nishinosono and Setsuko Gido stood up at the same time and looked at each other.

“What happened?” Setsuko asked a little louder. There was no answer.

They slowly opened the kitchen door. Inside the kitchen, a frying pan was on the stove, and stir-fried green peppers and velvet shank were ready.

Further into the room, in the middle of the corridor, Ayako Shimada was sitting leaning against the wall.

Moe and Setsuko approached and picked her up.

“Ah, ah ...” Shimada looked pale and was uttering something. Seeing her face, Moe was almost anemic as well.

“What’s wrong?” Setsuko asked.

Shimada shook her head shakily.

The bedroom door was open, but it was dark inside. Come to think of it, Moe had gone in there alone this morning and changed her shirt.

Leaving Setsuko holding Ayako in her arms, Moe gingerly peeked inside the bedroom.

At first glance, there was nothing to surprise her. She pressed the light switch but found nothing out of the ordinary.

When she turned around to go back to them, Moe gasped.

On the other side of the corridor where Shimada and Gido are, a little further in, was a bathroom.

Its door was half open.

The light was still on, so it was much brighter than the corridor. *Has Shimada turned on that switch?*

Between the half-open door, a human arm was visible, as if floating in mid-air.

Moe’s heart skipped a beat.

Moe moved forward without taking her eyes off the arm. She passed Ayako Shimada and Setsuko Gido and approached the bathroom.

Two meters to go.

Gradually, the area she could see was widening.

That's a human left arm ...

Moe's mind flashed back to Ms. Magata's severed arm.

No, not that arm.

The arm was wearing a wristwatch. It was a male's muscular arm.

One meter to go.

“Nishinosono-san ...? Anything wrong?” Moe heard Setsuko Gido's voice from behind her. Her laid-back voice was unrealistically ridiculous.

Moe held her breath and peeked inside through the gap in the bathroom door.

Calmer than she had expected, she could see it.

The person lying in the bathtub was Yukihiro Yamane.

He remained clothed and was lying on his back. Red blood had spread to the bathroom floor, and the towel that had fallen was stained with blood. His left arm was sticking straight out of the bathtub. His right hand was holding the chest of his blood-stained shirt. His mouth was slightly open, revealing his teeth. His eyes were closed. His stubble looked the same as always.

Slowly, Moe stepped back, keeping her hand on the corridor wall.

Bumping into Setsuko Gido, Moe almost screamed.

“Who?” Setsuko asked bluntly. “That man is the Yamane-san?”

“Yes, he seems dead ...” Moe's voice was trembling. She thought she had spoken normally.

“Right ...” Setsuko Gido said in a low voice as she walked back down the corridor. “I might as well take a picture of that.”

The two helped Ayako Shimada get up and walk through the kitchen and back into the room where they had been. They sat Shimada down in a chair. Shimada looked blank, like a lifeless shell.

Moe could not believe it, but Setsuko Gido took the camera and returned to the back of the room. Moe couldn't bring herself to follow her.

I have to e-mail or call someone, Moe thought.

Ah, yes ... There should be police in the corridor outside.

Moe was about to open the door to the outside with her hand when she remembered that it was an automatic door. She realized she was in a hurry. She put her right hand on the glass and opened the door.

Moe let out a small scream.

Just outside the door stood a large man. Moe first saw the man's chest, then looked up into his face.

"You must be Nishinosono-san, right?" The man said. "I've been looking for you. I mean, you were not in Shimada-san's room ..."

"Are you a detective?" Moe dropped her shoulders in relief. "Yamane-san is dead ..."

Moe turned around and saw Setsuko Gido coming out of the kitchen. "It's in the back here ..."

Setsuko's voice sounded clearer and much more intelligent than usual.

The man darted to the back of the room.

Moe peeked out into the corridor and looked both ways. Two uniformed officers noticed her, and she beckoned them over. The two men also ran and entered the room.

Setsuko Gido put the camera on the table, lit a cigarette, picked up her glass, and downed all the remaining beer. Moe was impressed by Setsuko's surprisingly calm behavior.

"Umm, Gido-san, could I have a cigarette as well?" Moe asked as she walked up to her.

Setsuko Gido smiled with narrowed eyes. "You're a minor ... aren't you?"

Chapter 9: The Yellow Door

-1-

Three minutes later, Yamane's room was filled with people. Moe walked out into the corridor outside and stood alongside Ayako Shimada. Shimada was in tears.

Saikawa had returned with Detective Shibaike. He seemed quite surprised to find Setsuko Gido. Moe was stealing glances at Saikawa. Gido walked up to Saikawa and said something in his ear. Saikawa said something too. Their voices were inaudible where Moe was. *Their conversation is quite long*, Moe thought.

Saikawa was now standing near a table in the room, smoking a cigarette. Setsuko Gido was sitting in a chair right next to him. Moe did not want to go near where they were.

"How could something like this have happened ...?" Ayako Shimada, standing next to Moe, said in a nasal voice. "I can't believe even Yamane-san has been killed, too ... How come ...?"

Moe put her hand on Ayako's shoulder, who was ten years older than her. Moe wanted to think that just touching Ayako in that way was supporting her a little.

A middle-aged man with a shaggy head came out of the kitchen door and was talking with Detective Shibaike. The man had a yellow pencil tucked into one ear. The pencil was about to fall out, and Moe couldn't take her eyes off it. Moe didn't know what was funny to him, but the man had a smirk and was completely out of step with the atmosphere around him.

"A long time has passed, already ... Shiba-san." Moe could hear the man's loud voice. The man looked at his watch and said. "Let's see ... It must be between 9:00 and 11:00 a.m. What do we do now? Can we move that? I can't do anything in that place."

Moe could not hear what Detective Shibaike was saying, but clearly, he looked relieved. The fact that Yamane's presumed time of death was before the police arrived must have relieved the detective. For murder occurrence in the presence of nearly one hundred police officers would have been nothing short of disgraceful.

Moe wanted to know what they were talking about, but she could not leave Ayako Shimada behind now. It seemed Saikawa was listening near the detectives, so Moe hoped he would explain later.

“That’s not possible ...” Ayako Shimada said next to Moe. “You know, the system reset was just at 11 a.m., right? I was talking through the Chat with Yamane-san until just before 11:00 a.m.”

The Chat is a talk in which e-mail is exchanged in real time through a computer.

Moe and Saikawa visited Yamane’s room from the lounge as soon as the lights came on after the 11:00 a.m. reset. It was probably around 11:10 a.m., although the exact time was unknown. At that time, Yamane was already gone. No, Saikawa and Moe just called out to the room but did not look into the bathroom. Perhaps Yamane was already dead in the bathroom at that time.

Moe saw Detective Shibaïke asking Setsuko Gido many questions.

Saikawa finally came outside into the corridor.

“You okay, Nishinosono-kun?” Saikawa’s tone was gentle.

“Yeah, I am ...” Moe was already calm. However, she suppressed her anger at Saikawa.

“Yamane-san had been stabbed in the chest with a knife,” Saikawa said without changing his expression. “I heard he died between 9:00 and 11:00 a.m. When we came here, he was already ...”

Moe nodded.

“When we came to this room ... the computer was still on, which made me feel strange.” Saikawa unusually frowned a little. “If we had come to the bathroom right then, maybe he would have survived.”

“We were so preoccupied with getting the call through ...” Moe nodded. “But who in the world could have done such a cruel act ...”

“Now there were three victims.” Saikawa crossed his arms. “Yamane-san was not a member of the Magata family. He had no direct connection to the incident fifteen years ago. I wonder why he was killed?”

“That man was ...” Ayako Shimada said, clinging to Moe from the side. “Really a

good person. I can't believe he was killed ... The murderer is crazy. I don't know who he is, but the man is out of his mind. I can't believe someone could do something like this ...”

-2-

Since this research institute consisted mainly of private rooms, it took the police some time to decide which room to use. Ayako Shimada, Setsuko Gido, and Moe Nishinosono were separately interviewed briefly at Yamane's table on which the racing cars were placed. Moe was the first to be released. She got permission to take a walk outside the building from Detective Shibaike and returned to Saikawa, who was waiting for her in the corridor.

Saikawa was unwilling to go, but Moe hurried him along, so they headed for the entrance of the building together.

It was nearly 7:00 p.m., but it was still bright outside and hot enough.

Moe quickly informed a policeman at the entrance that they had received permission from Detective Shibaike. Saikawa kept quiet and walked behind Moe. She tried to walk further and further away.

“Nishinosono-kun. Too fast ... Let's walk a little slower.” Saikawa said unbearably. Then he lit a cigarette.

“I'm sorry.” Moe stopped and said.

“What's wrong? You seem upset about something ...” Saikawa walked slowly, exhaling smoke.

After passing through a forest path, it was a hollow overgrown with tall weeds, very unlikely they would be able to get through. There was a slight breeze, so even as they stood still, the smoke from Saikawa's cigarette drifted off to the side. It looked like the forest landscape Saikawa had played in as a child. It might not have actually been this large, but when he was small, every place seemed infinitely larger.

“I wonder if we can get to the ocean from here?” Moe was looking for a place where they could walk through. “I wanted to go to the beach.”

“I don't think it's possible from this side.” It didn't matter to Saikawa, so he gave

a curt reply. “Well, if you really wanted to see the ocean, we should turn around and head toward the campground for sure.”

“What have you been doing?” Moe leaned against a thick tree nearby and asked the question.

“What do you mean?” Saikawa was smoking a cigarette.

“Where have you been all this time, Sensei?”

Her words are apparently not a question, Saikawa felt.

“I have been with you all along, haven’t I?”

“No, I am talking about before Yamane-san was discovered.”

“Ah ..., I was in front of Dr. Magata’s room.” Saikawa twirled his cigarette with just his fingertips. “I asked Mochizuki-san and Hasebe-san to show me that video recording again. Besides, I was with the detectives the whole time. Rather than that, why were you guys in Yamane-san’s room? You have drunk alcohol, Nishinosonokun?”

“Yes, the three of us were having a bit of a beer,” Moe replied. “We were in Shimada-san’s room at first ...”

“Who found the body?” Saikawa exhaled cigarette smoke.

“It’s Shimada-san,” Moe answered. “Then, I did, too ...”

Moe told Saikawa how they found Yamane’s body. When she mentioned that Setsuko Gido had taken pictures of the bathroom with her camera, Saikawa snorted and laughed.

“Did you make any progress on your side?” Moe asked quickly, with a serious look on her face.

“Well ... I heard Dr. Magata had been stabbed with a knife,” Saikawa said. Then, Saikawa explained to Moe the progress of the investigation while recalling what the detective had told him. “So far, not a single loophole or even a single suspicious fingerprint had been found in Dr. Magata’s room.”

“How was the video recording?” Moe inquired. “You had been watching the video recordings the whole time, right?”

“Yes, that is being checked by the police and also by Mochizuki-san and his coworkers. They even brought up the video recordings from long ago. The old recordings were made on tape. You know, it wasn’t digital yet ...”

“Sensei, what were you yourself doing?” Moe’s tone was somewhat piercing. Saikawa had no idea what she was upset about. *Well, everyone has bad moods*, Saikawa thought. Any person would be in a bad mood if a dead body of someone she knew came out of the bathroom while she was pleasantly drinking beer.

“I had been looking into the way how to record video images.” Saikawa shrugged and began to explain. “The video footage taken before the yellow door was digital, compressed every minute, and recorded in each file. This system was independent of Red Magic, so I was certain it had been functioning properly. I checked all the individual files up to yesterday and found that the names and recording times matched.”

“By name, do you mean the ... file name?”

“Right. Each recording time was used as its filename. I wrote a little script to check if the file names matched the recorded time, but there was no problem. There were no omissions or duplicates.”

“So they were completely reliable data, right?” Moe confirmed.

“Well, maybe ...” Saikawa replied vaguely. “At least as far as the video recordings were concerned, there were no functional problems.”

“Is that video recording footage so important? Is that element necessary for the more realistic hypothesis than the robot you mentioned?”

“Yes, in my hypothesis, I really need a way to get through that yellow door.” Saikawa said. “I mean, don’t you see? In reality, there is no other pathway to the interior. At least, that’s the only way a living person could pass. And ... that video recording is the only physical evidence that makes that residence a perfectly locked room.”

“But since security guards like Mochizuki-san are always on duty there, even if the culprit tampered with the video recordings, the guy would not be able to get in or out.”

“Well, yes. But the police don’t believe in people.” Saikawa exhaled smoke again.

“By the way ..., I was also shown Dr. Magata’s video recording from nine days ago. It was the footage of Yamane-san and Mizutani-san talking to Dr. Magata. That was the last image of her alive. It was the first time I saw her.”

“Then the doctor took a week’s vacation.” Moe sat down on the grass and held her knees.

Saikawa sat down too.

The sound of many cicadas overlapped and sounded like a constant noise with no inflection. The sky was still bright, though the sun seemed to be already low and hidden by the trees. Silhouetted birds were flying away in a V-shaped formation. Saikawa tried to count those birds, but they were too far away. *With her excellent eyesight, Moe could do it*, Saikawa thought to himself.

Saikawa recalled the image of Ms. Magata that he had seen in the video recording. She looked as innocent as a little girl. *Was that the real face of a genius ...?* Saikawa thought. *She was one of the closest human beings to God. Yes, she was beautiful. How good it would have been if I had not had such a horrible encounter with her. Or perhaps my feeling that I would never see her again makes her beautiful in my memory ...*

Saikawa had never had these feelings before.

Of course, he had never been involved in a murder case before, so this was hardly a normal feeling. Still, Saikawa was not so interested in other people killing each other. He was that kind of man. He was frequently astonished by his own indifference to his surroundings. He did not know when he had become like that. He never analyzed it properly, but perhaps, it was a method formed to protect something within his. As a child, he was fearful and always frightened. With layers of shock absorbers stretched over his face, he had built up a thick, expressionless face. He avoided something by concentrating on the objects of his interest. He had devoted himself exclusively to research, probably because he feared something.

I do not want to lose it. I am afraid of losing it.

What is it ...?

Not wanting to lose it, I applied layer after layer of paint. Finally, I forgot what I was painting on. Perhaps by forgetting, I might have defended myself. I don’t know the truth. I am sure I must have done that not to make only me notice it.

A bee flew so close to his face that Saikawa was startled and dodged it.

He stood up to cover it up, expecting Moe to laugh at his move.

They heard the sound of a helicopter engine coming from the research institute.

When he looked next to him, Moe was watching in the distance with her chin resting on the knees she was holding.

She did not look at Saikawa.

What's wrong with her? When Saikawa looked into her face, she looked like she was about to cry.

“What’s wrong, Nishinosono-kun? You don’t look well ...” Saikawa asked.

“Right ...” Moe answered without moving her gaze. “I’ve found out the truth too ... Sensei ...”

Moe looked at Saikawa. Tears were now spilling from her eyes.

Ah, she has realized the truth.

Saikawa sensed that.

“Should I make some kind of joke?” Saikawa said gently.

“No ... I don’t wanna hear that.” Moe looked down again.

-3-

Saikawa returned to the research institute. Moe followed silently behind him.

In the lounge on the first floor, two detectives and Ayako Shimada were talking on the sofa. Shimada looked at Saikawa and Moe and smiled weakly. She seemed to have calmed down by now. Saikawa and Moe did not enter the lounge but walked down the slope to Yamane’s room. In the middle of the corridor stood Detective Shibaike, who appeared to be listening intently to several men.

“It seems we can no longer get in this room.” Saikawa said to Shibaike. Many men were still crawling around inside the room, doing some incomprehensible work. The flashes of the cameras flickered repeatedly.

“Ah, Sensei ...” Shibaike said as if he had just thought of something. “Lunch

boxes have been delivered to the second basement. Aren't you hungry?"

Come to think of it, Saikawa had not eaten anything since he had bacon and eggs early in the morning. Yamane, with whom he had eaten it, was no longer in this world.

Saikawa thanked the detective and turned back down the corridor.

"You would eat it, too, right?" Saikawa asked Moe, who was walking behind him.

She nodded silently.

They went down the slope to a room at the end of a long corridor. There were only two police officers, but that yellow door was still open. They could hear talking coming from behind the door. They could see Hasebe and Mochizuki's faces in the glass-walled guard room. There were also two detectives in that room.

"I heard from Shibaike-san that we can have our lunch here ..." Saikawa asked the younger detective, who was easy to talk to.

"Ah, yes ... well, please take the elevator up to the first floor." The detective replied. "Please eat it there."

"Thank you." Saikawa was about to head for the elevator, but as Moe walked to the adjacent room where Mochizuki and the others were, he turned around and followed her.

"How far have you guys been able to find out?" Moe asked Hasebe.

"All of it." Hasebe was moving his hands alternately. Saikawa wondered if his gesture was the training to imagine playing the marimba.

"All of it? you mean all fifteen years?" Moe confirmed.

"We've worked all night. No, all day, more correctly ..."

The detectives nodded, too. Mochizuki was smirking.

"Mochizuki-san." Moe asked seriously, "Do you remember when Dr. Magata entered this room fifteen years ago?"

"Yes, I do."

"Were you already working here at that time, Mochizuki-san?"

“No, this surveillance system was created, at least, after that incident. Ms. Magata was first kept in a hospital in Nagono City for about a month before being transferred here,” Mochizuki explained, shaking his body. “Well, that was in December. A lot of police came here. I remember that was around Christmas. It’s been fourteen years and eight months since then ... It really was a long time ago. Ms. Shiki was still kind of innocent when she walked into that room. Then after that ... she had been in here all the time.”

“But Dr. Magata had left this room before, right?” Moe inquired.

“Yes, she did. The following winter, she left here twice for trial. The police came to pick her up here. And she was sent back here again right away. That’s the only time she left. After that, she never left.”

“Has anyone been inside the room?” Moe asked the next question. “What kind of people have been inside the room?”

“In these years, no one had entered at all,” Mochizuki answered. “Only Mrs. Yuminaga three years ago and a TV repairman last year ...”

“And before that?” Moe questioned.

“No, no one had been in there,” Mochizuki said. “Fifteen years ago ... the first year or so, Director Shindo entered there a few times. You know, there were trials, and Ms. Shiki was unstable.”

“Umm ...” Moe walked to the back of the room and looked up at the ceiling. “I think you guys should review all the video recordings from the past week again. I’m sure something is missing somewhere.”

“How can you pull it off?” Mochizuki said, putting his baseball cap back on. “The recording files are all here. That’s what we went over with Saikawa-sensei earlier.”

Saikawa smoked a cigarette and stood silently at the entrance, listening to them.

“This system is ... running on a computer,” Saikawa mumbled to himself. “The computer’s clock is quite erratic, isn’t it? Do you guys set your clocks every day?”

“Yes, we are fine about that. All clocks in the research institute are synchronized. Therefore, they are accurate. The main system is set to Japan Standard Time by the network.” Hasebe explained.

“But this monitoring system is independent, right? You guys said this system is not connected to the network.” Saikawa exhaled smoke.

“Only the time is an exception. It is signaled by a special cable.” Hasebe said.

“I see ... What time is it now?” Saikawa confirmed.

Hasegawa looked at the digital clock on display and mentioned what time, minute, and second it was. Saikawa looked at his wristwatch. It was only two seconds different from Saikawa’s wristwatch. *My watch must have lost over the past two days*, Saikawa thought.

However, while looking at the Arabic numerals on the dial of his wristwatch, Saikawa realized.

“Speaking of which ... we didn’t check ... today’s recorded video,” Saikawa said after thinking for a moment.

“Today? Which time period?” Hasebe asked back with a curious look.

“It’s today’s daytime,” Saikawa said.

“Why do you need to examine today’s video recording?” A young detective beside him interjected.

“Sensei, you said earlier that all we need to examine are check the recording up to yesterday.” Mochizuki also said curiously.

“I was an idiot ... Why didn’t I notice it?” Saikawa said and walked over to the display. “Is the batch file I wrote earlier still there? It’s a script that checks for file and time matches.”

Hasebe tapped the keyboard and brought up the list on the screen. “Of course, we haven’t erased it yet.”

“Run it against today’s data, please,” Saikawa said, folding his arms.

Hasebe tapped on the keyboard.

The numbers flowed from bottom to top in the window for a while, but then there was a beep, and the screen stopped.

“You see ...” Saikawa said happily. “Well, one file is missing today at 12:00. Just as I thought.”

“Sensei! What does that mean?” One of the detectives approached the display. “Does this fact mean anything?”

“The video file for today’s noon ..., from exactly 12:00 to 12:01, is missing,” Saikawa explained to the detective. “That’s all.”

“Was there any trouble then?” The detective looked at Mochizuki and Hasebe. They both silently shook their heads.

“There was no trouble. I can’t believe it. What’s going on ...?” Hasebe stared at the screen curiously.

“Nishinosono-kun,” Saikawa looked at Moe and said, “Let’s go eat our lunch boxes.”

-4-

Saikawa and Moe rode the elevator up to the first floor and came out to the carpeted director’s office. Despite the room for the director, there was nothing special about the furnishings. A solid model of a helicopter was on a large desk in the back of the room. It was a very modest room, a little larger than Yamane’s and Dr. Yuminaga’s rooms.

Director Shindo’s body, found on the rooftop, was once brought to this room yesterday and placed here. However, this afternoon, after the police had examined it, the body was brought back to the rooftop and, along with Ms. Magata’s body, was put on a helicopter and taken off the island.

Three men in plain clothes were sitting on a sofa drinking Japanese tea. Lunch boxes, which they had finished eating, were on the table.

“I came to get our lunch boxes,” Saikawa said shyly.

“Saikawa-sensei, please come this way ...” One detective stood up, walked to a cardboard box by the wall, brought two lunch boxes from inside, and offered them to Saikawa and Moe. Saikawa did not remember the man’s face, but he seemed to know him.

“Thank you. We haven’t eaten anything since this morning.” Saikawa said smiling. “How is Shibaike-san doing?”

“The chief detective will be here soon to eat, too.”

The affable detective offered Saikawa and Moe each a cup of Japanese tea. The tea was cold and served in paper cups.

As Saikawa and Moe began to eat their lunch boxes, the three detectives left through the door that was not the elevator. The room suddenly became quiet.

“Has your mood recovered?” Saikawa asked Moe as he ate.

“Sorry ...” Moe smiled. “I’m a little depressed because of what I came up with ... But I’m okay now.”

“That’s good to hear. When we’re in a bad mood, we eat badly.” Saikawa said, in a good mood.

“Can I ask what that meant?” Moe had chopsticks in her left hand.

“What do you mean by ‘that’?”

“I mean the recording file you noticed earlier,” Moe mentioned. “How did you know today’s data was only one minute short?”

“It was a logical consequence,” Saikawa said as much and continued eating his lunch box.

“At 12 o’clock today? I wonder what was going on.”

“That system will probably set the clock to 12:00. I guess so ... Every noon and midnight ... once every twelve hours ... By the way, I also set my wristwatch’s second hand once every twenty-four hours, by listening to the time signal on the phone.”

“There are not many people like that.” Moe smiled for the first time in a long time. “Sensei is eccentric.”

“Unwillingly, my wristwatch is now off by two seconds because I haven’t been able to work on it for the past two days.” Saikawa showed Moe his wristwatch. “This watch cost ... as expensive as 9,000 yen. I took the plunge and bought this one. Nishinosono-kun, how much did your wristwatch cost?”

Moe looked at her wristwatch. She wore it on her right wrist. “My watch is not a big one either. 200,000 yen or so, maybe ...”

“Oh, really ...” Saying so, Saikawa ate his lunch box in silence for a while.

“Ah, I see ... Is it because of the power outage at 11?” Moe said, suddenly realizing.

“Right, that was a minute late.” Saikawa could not speak well because his mouth was full.

“Then, was the research institute’s clock off by no less than a minute?” Moe put her chopsticks and lunch box on the table. “Eh ...? That means ... In short ... The system corrected that one-minute delay to 12:00, so there is no recording file at exactly 12:00, is that right?”

Saikawa nodded. “That’s right.”

“When it saves the video recording as minute-by-minute data, that system automatically uses the time as the file name. But that clock itself was running behind. When the system corrected that delay by moving it forward one minute, that minute disappeared. So one file disappeared, right? It’s not that someone erased it ...”

Saikawa nodded. “That’s what happened.”

“Why was the clock off by no less than a minute?” Moe left more than half of her lunch and started drinking Japanese tea.

“Nishinosono-kun ...” Saikawa checked with Moe with a serious face. “That egg omelet ... you don’t eat?”

“Ah, yes ... please eat.” Moe brought her lunch box closer to Saikawa.

“Thank you.” Saikawa got Moe’s egg omelet. He was usually fond of whatever children liked.

“Even though the network was out, it couldn’t have been a minute late in two days.”

“In short, someone delayed it, deliberately ...” Moe murmured.

“Right.”

“Who did it?” Moe asked quickly.

“Murderer did it.” Saikawa was still eating his lunch box.

“How come? Why did the killer need to delay the clock?”

“It was so that the person could pass that yellow door,” Saikawa answered.

“Eh? What do you mean, Sensei ...?” Moe opened her little mouth, and her eyes widened.

Saikawa finished his lunch box. Then he drank his Japanese tea in one gulp.

“Consider it carefully.” Saikawa slowly took a cigarette out of his pocket. “That 11:00 reset allowed the network to send the exact time to that system. So, to fix the clock that was behind at 12 o’clock, the system advanced it by one minute. As a result ... that’s the only part of the data file that was left out. So far, have you figured it out?”

“Yes, I have.”

“So, conversely, what happens if someone deliberately sets the clock back? If the one suddenly set the clock back by one minute ...” Saikawa let out a puff of smoke.

“It would be two overlapping data at the same time,” Moe answered immediately.

“Correct ...” Saikawa nodded. “Then ... what happens next?”

“Two files with the same name will be created.”

“The system tries to record the second file with the same name ... What happens next?”

“I see ...” Moe gasped. “Since it saves the second file with the same name, the new data will erase the old data ... The last minute of data is gone!”

“It is common sense for computers to do so,” Saikawa explains. “If there is data with the same name, the newer one is written, and the older one is erased. Which is more important or which is more voluminous is irrelevant. A system as secure as Red Magic’s would warn or automatically back up. But the system in that security office is just a computer.”

“So you are saying that we were led to believe that all the data was there, but only one minute of video recording was missing?”

“That’s right.” Saikawa exhaled smoke vigorously.

“Did the killer walk through that yellow door in that one minute?” Moe tilted her

head. “But when was that one minute? The security people were on duty there ... Only a few people could have opened the door.”

“So ... that’s right. Nishinosono-kun, consider it carefully.”

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The elevator doors opened, and Detective Shibaike and two men entered the room.

“Uncle!” Moe stood up and ran toward the tall gentleman.

“I’m so relieved to see your face, Moe.”

Shosuke Nishinosono was a gentleman with an eagle nose, double eyelids, and a Western look. Saikawa had met him a couple of times. He was the younger brother of Dr. Kyosuke Nishinosono, Saikawa’s mentor. Saikawa first greeted him at a party at Dr. Nishinosono’s home when Saikawa was still a graduate student. The last time Saikawa saw him was at the funeral of Dr. Kyosuke Nishinosono and his wife, so it had been three years.

“Long time no see. Saikawa-sensei.” The prefectural police chief Nishinosono held out one hand to Saikawa.

Saikawa stood up and shook his hand. *This is probably the first time he has called me Sensei*, Saikawa thought.

Old man Suwano, wearing a bow tie, stood postured beside the door. Moe walked up to Suwano and said something to him, but Suwano did not change his expression.

“Moe, come here and sit down.” Chief Nishinosono called his niece while sitting on the sofa.

On the table were lunch boxes that had just been finished. Saikawa put it away.

Chief Nishinosono, Detective Shibaike, Saikawa, and Moe sat on the sofa. The police chief recommended that Suwano, the oldest, sit down, but the old butler was reserved and would not sit down. The old man stood still at the door of the room and did not move at all. He looked as if he thought he was a robot.

Shibaike's tone had changed in front of the prefectural police chief. The detective gave a summary of the case and the progress of the investigation. Chief Nishinosono listened silently to his subordinate's report.

Moe took over the explanation in the middle. It was clearly more persuasive and organized than Detective Shibaike's story.

"Then, now that the deputy director's body was found ..." The police chief looked at his niece. "Am I correct in understanding that your talk about whether or not to hide Dr. Magata's case has disappeared?"

"I think ..." Saikawa responded on Moe's behalf. "Those in this facility would no longer care about such things. We, too, were just concerned about Yamane-san."

"Okay. If that is the case, I wouldn't have come all the way here." The police chief smiled. "By the way ... Shibaike-kun, your story doesn't quite make sense to me."

"Sir, umm, our investigation has only just begun ..." Shibaike scratched his head. "Anyway, we are searching thoroughly in this building right now. We are especially looking into Dr. Shiki Magata's room."

"It is strange that no one entered the room, isn't it? Do you have any thoughts on that?"

"No, sir. I mean, that's the biggest issue we're looking at right now ..."

"Uncle ..." Moe made a ladylike voice and said. "Saikawa-sensei has an idea. Saikawa-sensei knows more about the case than anyone else."

"After the culprit, though ..." Saikawa corrected Moe's remark.

"Sensei, now is not the time for jokes." Shibaike sniffed and protested in a whisper to Saikawa.

"What is your idea, Saikawa-sensei?" Chief Nishinosono asked in a clear, low voice.

"Well, sir ... I don't have any particular proof, though ..." Saikawa shrugged. "At least, I can explain how that crime was committed."

"Sir, we have not found a secret pass yet." Shibaike smiled bitterly beside Saikawa. "Sensei, what are you talking about?"

“Interesting ... How do you think the culprit did it?” Chief Nishinosono ignored Shibaike and turned his sharp gaze toward Saikawa.

“If I were to tell you all about my idea, you probably would not believe it,” Saikawa answered without turning his gaze to anyone. He then looked at his wristwatch. The time was 7:25 p.m. “Well, some things are still somewhat unclear, and I want to be sure. Sir, if you allow me, could you please wait another thirty-five minutes?”

“I don’t have the right to allow you ...” Chief Nishinosono was staring at Saikawa. “In another thirty-five minutes, you will talk about your idea to us, won’t you?”

“Yes, I will talk about it right before the culprit,” Saikawa answered immediately. “If I tell the culprit directly that I know the truth, I believe the guy will probably confess everything.”

“What makes you so sure of that?” The police chief asked without changing his expression.

“It’s pride, sir,” Saikawa answered. “It is human pride.”

“You know who the culprit is ..., don’t you?” The police chief smiled.

“Yes, sir.” Saikawa nodded.

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Moe was nervous. She could feel her heart beating wildly.

“Sensei!” Moe called out to Saikawa from behind him. “Are you okay after saying that? What are you going to do? Until then ...”

“What are you talking about ...? You’re the one who started it.” Saikawa was walking down the corridor at a fast pace. “That’s because you said that I had an idea ...”

Moe rushed in front of Saikawa and looked at him. “Well, you mean ... Was everything you said a bluff?”

Saikawa stopped and smiled. “I’m just joking ..., Nishinosono-kun.”

Saikawa started walking again. Moe sighed with relief.

“You cheated ..., Sensei!” Moe shouted from behind Saikawa.

Saikawa knocked on the door of Ayako Shimada’s room. The officers were positioned in the corridor so that there were no blind spots anywhere. A uniformed man was looking in their direction from a short distance away.

The door opened as Saikawa put his right hand there and said his name according to Deborah’s announcement.

Ayako Shimada and Setsuko Gido were in the room.

Robots and monster dolls were lying on the floor. However, the room was a little tidier than before. *Maybe Gido-san has tactfully put it away*, Moe thought.

“Oh, Sensei ...” Shimada turned around and smiled. It seemed that she was completely back to her usual self. *It must be an emotion that heats up and cools down quickly, like a metal with low specific heat.*

“You don’t look normal. What’s wrong, Sohei-kun?” Setsuko Gido asked in a lisping voice from across the table. Setsuko’s tone had also returned to the mode Moe disliked.

“Setsuko, I warned you not to talk that way,” Saikawa said with a smile. “But ... that doesn’t matter now. Umm ... Shimada-san.”

Moe was surprised at Saikawa’s way of speaking to Gido.

“Yes?” Shimada stood up and walked closer to Saikawa.

“Shimada-san, you were looking into Red Magic’s source, weren’t you?” Saikawa asked immediately. “Did you find anything strange?”

The source is the program listing before it was compiled into machine language. Moe had never done any programming, but she had learned the term in her “Introduction to Information Processing” class in her first year of university.

“Well ... In the meantime, I have tried to look it up, though ...”

“Can you show that list to me?” Saikawa said.

“From now?” Shimada walked toward the terminal. “I can do that, but ... that’s not the amount you can check right away. You probably know that, though ... If you were to read every word of it, it would take weeks.”

“Find the variable that calls the time, please.” Saikawa made the request quickly.

“There are many such things. Which part do you ask me to search for?” Ayako started tapping keywords while talking.

“I want you to cover the entire Red Magic’s main systems ... Can I smoke in this room?” Saikawa stood behind Shimada.

Setsuko Gido, sitting at the table, quickly stood up and handed Saikawa an ashtray as she said to him. “You should calm down ... Here you go.”

How familiar she is with him ...

I’m going to get another headache, Moe thought.

“Oh, thank you.” Saikawa received the ashtray.

Moe also stood where she could see the display. Many small characters had appeared on it. Moe had no idea what the programming language was. She knew little about programming languages.

“Okay, I’ll jump in order. See?” Shimada stepped aside so that the screen was clearly visible to Saikawa.

A list of programs filled the screen in small letters, one section of which was marked pink.

“No. Not that.” Saikawa said. Shimada tapped some keys, and the list instantly changed.

“No.” Saikawa said again. “No ... It should be increment equal.”

What’s an increment equal ...?

Moe followed the rapidly changing screen with her eyes.

“What variable type?” Shimada asked. “If you want to look this up in order, there are hundreds ... no end in sight.”

“I guess it should be an integer.”

Integer? Ah, it means a whole number ...

Moe was struggling to decipher the conversation between Saikawa and Shimada.

The screen was busily unfolding. Staring at it, Moe was almost hypnotized. The

background was a pale blue, and the letters on the list were in black, red, and green. Moe had no idea what rules they were painted according to.

Saikawa kept repeating “No,” as he smoked his cigarette. The ashtray was tilted on top of the display, but Saikawa had already groped for his third cigarette.

“Ah, that reminds me ...” In the middle, Ayako Shimada said. “When I was checking my e-mail system, there was one line of if statement that I couldn’t make sense of.”

If statement?

That was another word that Moe did not understand.

“Put it on the screen, please.” Saikawa immediately requested it.

“Well, that one ... That one is ... I wonder where ...” Shimada opened a different window and displayed another list. “I think it is here ... Oh ... It isn’t ...”

Ayako Shimada used the mouse for a while and opened several lists.

“Ah, this is it ...” Shimada pulled herself back and turned around. “Just this one line. No comments or anything.”

Saikawa approached the screen and looked at it. “Ah, that’s it. Then, search for that variable.”

Shimada manipulated the mouse to change the variable to pink and lightly touched the keyboard.

A few seconds passed, and another window opened, revealing a single line marked pink.

“Eh? This is ...” Shimada moved the list up and down. “This is a phone selection routine! This is what Mizutani-san and his colleagues were looking into! I mean, I haven’t seen this ... It includes the same if statement, which means ... no way!”

Shimada was shaking with a shudder. She looked very pale.

“Hey, what’s going on?” Moe asked in a small voice.

“Shimada-san, search next, please.” Saikawa urged.

“I can’t believe it!” Shimada pressed the key with her mouth open.

The next list also had a similarly marked section. Moe could understand that Shimada was apparently searching through numerous source lists to find and display the part where the same variable was used.

“This is the part where that yellow door was opened,” Shimada said in a trembling voice. “Unbelievable! I remember the door number. I’m sure of it. We couldn’t expect it to be written directly here ...”

“And what’s next?” Saikawa urged expressionlessly. He lit a new cigarette.

The following list did not begin with an if statement.

“So ... this is what I’ve been looking for. This is the sandglass.” Saikawa nodded repeatedly.

Sandglass?

Moe could not understand it at all.

“What is that system call being made?” Saikawa asked quickly.

“Well ... This indicates time. The hour,” Shimada answered, putting her face close to the screen.

“What about the variable definition part?” Saikawa asked in a stern voice.

The list scrolled again.

“This is a global variable ... err, static. It’s an integer,” Shimada answered.

“Long?” Saikawa inquired.

“No, short,” Shimada answered. “Unsigned short.”

“It looks ... The integer is two bytes, right?” Saikawa asked before Shimada could finish her answer.

“Right, two bytes,” Shimada replied.

“Nishinosono-kun,” Saikawa looked back at Moe. She had never seen Saikawa speak so quickly. “Multiply 256 by 256, and what will you get?”

“65,536,” Moe answered immediately. Moe had no idea why she had to do the such calculation.

“Alright ...” Saikawa stared at Moe. It was the first time Moe had seen Saikawa’s

stern expression like this. “May I ask, Nishinosono-kun ...? When was the time 65,535 hours before the day before yesterday’s 7:00 p.m.?”

“Eh?” Moe asked back. But Saikawa looked at her silently.

Moe stopped breathing and closed her eyes.

Moe subtracted 19 from that number, divided it by 24, and memorized the remainder. *Now it is August ... Considering there were leap years in the middle ...*

It took her about eight seconds to do the math. She couldn’t do even half her usual ability when she felt Saikawa staring at her.

“That was seven years ago ... On February 10th ... At 4:00 a.m.” After answering that, Moe took a deep breath.

“That was when Red Magic version 4 became operational, correct?” Saikawa confirmed to Shimada.

Shimada looked at Saikawa with a gaping mouth but quickly regained her composure and searched the file. This confirmation took some time, but eventually, Shimada turned around and nodded deeply. “Yes, that’s right ...”

“Sensei ..., well ...” Moe asked in a whisper. “Can I ask you a question?”

“You can. My work is already done.” Saikawa smiled and said slowly. “What is your question?”

“What have you been looking into the list?”

“It’s the cause that made Red Magic out of control,” Saikawa answered. “And the reason why the doctor was hiding version 5, which had been completed long ago ...”

“How come? What’s going on ...? Oh ...” Ayako Shimada stood up and hugged both her shoulders. “Ah, I’m getting chills! How could this have happened ...? How ...?”

“Can you explain it so that we can understand?” Setsuko Gido, who was behind Moe, said this time.

Saikawa looked at his wristwatch. “I can’t. It’s already the appointed time.”

The moment he said this, an electronic beep sounded from the terminal.

A new window opened on the screen, displaying a request for Ayako Shimada to use the Talk.

“Whose request ...?” Saying this, Shimada touched the keyboard.

> Shimada-san. Or ..., is it Saikawa-sensei there?

The person’s login name was Michiru.

“I’ll take over ...” Saikawa said so, and Shimada gave the terminal seat to him.

Saikawa tapped the keyboard.

> This is Saikawa. Have you been watching us as we searched for the source lists?

> It’s nice to finally meet you, Saikawa-sensei.

> Is it? I believe it’s not the first time.

> Is Nishinosono-san there? I want to see her again.

> She is here, too. Shall we go to your room now? With the police?

> Not bad. But first, if you don’t mind, we’ll meet in VR.

“What’s VR all about?” Saikawa mumbled. “Virtual reality?”

“That cart!” Shimada shouted beside him. “There it is.”

“I’ll ride in it, too,” Moe said from behind.

> Nishinosono-kun wants to see you, too.

> Very well, I am waiting for you and your companions.

The person disconnected the Talk.

“Who was the guy ...?” Shimada said, putting her hands on her waists. “It must be the guy who played a VR prank on Nishinosono-san the other day. I wonder what the guy wants?”

“There are three VR carts in the lounge,” Moe said to Saikawa. “Sensei, let’s come over there.”

“Can I come with you?” Setsuko Gido asked. “I don’t understand well what’s going on, but ... that’s the game, right?”

“Then I will use my VR cart.” Ayako Shimada said. “Oh, it sends shivers down my spine! Nishinosono-san knows how to use it. Anyway, once you guys are on it, I’ll be there later ...”

“Shimada-san, please contact everyone,” Saikawa said calmly. “Including the police. We’ll come to the lounge. Everyone will probably join us ..., I guess so.”

“Hey ...” Gido tilted her head. “What is going to start from now?”

Chapter 10: The Silver Truth

-1-

Saikawa was driving slowly down the wide boulevard of the rainbow city. He couldn't see his left hand on the steering wheel. Only his right hand was floating in the air in front of him. He found it amusing just to open and close the virtual right hand.

This experience is quite enjoyable.

Saikawa laughed to himself.

The blue cart he saw in the rearview mirror caught up with his. Saikawa turned to the right. The driver of the cart running next to his also looked at him.

“Hey, Nishinosono-kun,” Saikawa said. “Your face looks somehow flat.”

“You too, Sensei,” Moe said in a booming voice. She seemed in a good mood, but her expression in the image did not change.

“Hasn't anyone else come in here?” Saikawa was looking around.

Next to the steering wheel, an orange light was flashing. Saikawa turned his gaze to see it. Then, a screen about the size of a postcard appeared in the air before him, and Ayako Shimada's face was displayed there.

“Saikawa-sensei, err ... There is a tower in the center of this town, so please go to the square in front of it. That tower is ... on your right side, isn't it?”

“Shimada-san ...” Moe spoke. “Can't we fly there?”

“Flying is impossible for beginners.” Saikawa heard Shimada laugh. “Because It's a secret trick ...”

“Have you made contact with everyone?” Saikawa confirmed.

“Yes, everyone should be gathering here,” Shimada said on the screen. “I'm watching you two from above in the sky now ... Sensei, you should turn right at the next intersection. Don't speed up too much.”

Saikawa looked overhead. He saw a green cart in the distance, floating in the air.

There were clouds in the sky above it.

Moe's cart got ahead of his and made a right turn at the intersection.

"Good thing there's no traffic light here," Saikawa said while turning the steering wheel. "No traffic jam, either."

"Please don't run into mine, Sensei ..." Moe turned to him and said.

"What would happen if we hit each other? I might want to try it."

"I guess we might be back to the *furidashi* (starting point) like *sugoroku* (Japanese board game)."

"*Furidashi*?" Saikawa laughed. "Oh, you know such an old word ..."

Ahead of Saikawa, in the distance, he saw a tall tower. Like the minarets standing around the mosque, the candle-shaped solid of revolution also looked like a cylinder. *That must be the tower Shimada-san was talking about.*

On either side of him, the townscape scrolled slowly backward. They were simple images but varied. There were show windows, neon signs, and even a rotating sign for a hamburger store, which was interesting. From time to time, signs appeared on the side of the road, and Saikawa gazed at each one. Naturally, they looked three-dimensional. *But that alone makes me interested ...* The fact that there was a sense of distance was a little out of place in the simple image, but Saikawa gradually felt as if he were entering the world of the animation movie.

Moe slowed down so suddenly that Saikawa almost rear-ended her.

"Be careful, Nishinosono-kun."

Moe's cart came to a stop. Saikawa stopped his cart alongside it.

"Sensei ... Now ... I've found out the truth!" Moe said in a nervous voice.

"What truth?"

"Michiru-san is the culprit, right?"

"Well ... you could say that," Saikawa answered vaguely.

"Ah ... I knew it! What a surprise ... I can't believe it." Moe said in a trembling voice. In this VR world, there was no change in her facial image, but Moe seemed astonished.

“You shouldn’t be yelling in the street ... So, let’s move on.”

This time Saikawa drove ahead. As they passed through an intersection, another cart jumped out from the left side.

“Sohei-kuuun!” It was Setsuko Gido’s voice. But the face was like a doll, not an image of herself. “Hey, why are you driving so slow ... Are you on the gas pedal?”

“Why such a face image ...?” Saikawa said to Setsuko Gido. “You look like Nobita Nobi (a fictional character in the *Doraemon* anime).”

The character emitting Setsuko Gido’s voice had the face of a boy with big round eyes.

“I guess they don’t have any data for Gido-san’s facial images,” Moe said from behind Saikawa.

“Oh, really? I can’t see my face image ... I’m so embarrassed ...” Setsuko sounded troubled. “By the way ... there’s no one in this town ... It’s so weird ... Besides, we can’t get off this cart, can we?”

“Can you go ahead of me ...?” Saikawa said coldly. “It’s even more weird looking at the face of yours.”

“That’s rude ...” Setsuko Gido said, and her cart accelerated and went on and on.

“Sensei ... Is it true that you often stay in Gido-san’s room?” Moe asked behind Saikawa.

“Eh? Ah, her room is very close to Shin-Yokohama. It’s very convenient.” Saikawa answered while looking ahead. Moe’s cart was reflected in the rearview mirror.

The candle-shaped tower was becoming closer and closer. Saikawa saw a park with a fountain surrounded by a row of conical parasol-like trees. It was also covered by grass and white fences. A public square was next to the park, where several carts gathered.

Saikawa and Moe slowly moved their carts into the square. Saikawa counted eight carts, all blue or orange in color. Dr. Yuminaga approached in a blue cart.

“Saikawa-sensei, what is going to start here now?” Yuminaga’s facial image remained the same as he asked that question. However, when his white right hand

touched his mustache, Saikawa thought it looked real to a certain extent.

“Well, it’s just a small gathering,” Saikawa replied.

A green cart came into the square with the force of a biker gang and came to a sudden stop.

“That cart is driven by Mizutani-kun.” Yuminaga pointed to it and said. “In this VR world, he is the speed king. Ha-ha ...”

“How is your wife?” Saikawa asked.

“Ah, she is sleeping now. Not in this VR world.” Yuminaga answered.

A green cart with Ayako Shimada was gradually descending from the sky above. Saikawa could see Moe’s cart slowly driving around the perimeter of the square.

“Are the detectives not in this VR world?” Saikawa asked Ayako Shimada.

“Let’s see ... I guess that orange cart is his.” Ayako Shimada pointed at it with her white right hand. “That faceless character is the detective.”

Saikawa moved his cart closer to the orange cart.

“Can you hear me, Shibaike-san?” Saikawa spoke to the faceless character on the cart.

“Sensei, what are you going to start now? That’s not what you promised.” Detective Shibaike’s voice was angry.

“Where is the real you?” Saikawa questioned.

“This is a terminal in the director’s office.”

“It’s Nishinosono ... Can you hear my voice?” The same faceless character said, this time in a dandy voice.

“Yes, I can hear you very well. Please wait a little longer. After you all gather here in this VR world, I will tell you the truth. To start with, it was the culprit who called us to this place.”

“What?” Shibaike roared. “Who is it?”

“Please don’t speak so loudly.” Saikawa said. “Are there police everywhere in the research institute? No one can escape, right?”

“Of course.”

“Then we’ll be fine. We can talk as we like.” Saikawa smiled. However, there was no concept of smiling in this VR world. “It’s hard for me not to smoke, though ...”

“We can smoke here,” Shibaike said.

Moe’s cart approached theirs. “Who is that? Who is that ping-pong-ball-looking guy ...?”

“It’s me.” The voice of Chief Nishinosono said.

“Wow, Uncle?” Moe laughed only with her voice. “I’m sorry.”

Many more carts had gathered.

All the carts were slightly separated from each other because if they got too close, they could not move their carts. There were twenty to thirty carts in the square. Saikawa did not recognize many of their faces.

Saikawa carefully turned his cart around and then returned to Ayako Shimada’s cart.

“Can I confirm who is coming to this town?” Saikawa questioned.

“Press the yellow button there,” Shimada said, extending her right hand.

When Saikawa pressed the button on the side of the steering wheel with his right hand, a screen appeared in the air again, and some people’s names were displayed in green and red. The screen automatically scrolled according to the movement of Saikawa’s gaze.

The names of Mizutani, Yuminaga, and Yumiko Shindo were also glowing green. The names of Mochizuki and Hasebe were also included. Looking around, Saikawa had no idea where they were. Saikawa didn’t know some of the names.

“Can we all talk together?” Saikawa asked Ayako Shimada. “I want my voice to reach everyone.”

“By everyone, do you mean all the people here?” Shimada confirmed.

“All of them are not good ... Too many.”

“Now select Air Meeting from the menu, then choose the people.”

Saikawa looked at the menu bar in front of him. An arrow appeared in his line of sight, and menus opened one after another. He found the Air Meeting button and clicked it with his right hand. He then chose people he knew from the list of names.

“Which is Shibaike-san’s name?” Saikawa asked Ayako Shimada.

“The ‘guest’ at the bottom is him ...”

Saikawa chose the “guest” at the end of the list.

“Please choose Gido-san as well,” Shimada said. “I think her name is probably ‘Nobita.’”

Saikawa found “Nobita” near the end of the list and chose it.

“I knew that character was Nobita-kun ...” Saikawa laughed. “Is that the default setting?”

“Yes, it is the character set on a machine in the lounge,” Shimada explained. “Gido-san doesn’t have any facial data registered either, right? That’s why the machine is substituting that character.”

Saikawa searched the list but could not find the name “Michiru.” A confirmation button was flashing on the screen, floating in the air. Saikawa pressed it with his right hand.

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Saikawa’s cart accelerated rapidly and eventually took off. The acceleration made him feel a little intoxicated. It was not a very pleasant sensation.

However, it felt a little better when he ascended above the clouds.

Having a meeting in the heavens is so graceful, Saikawa thought.

This situation makes us look like we were gods of Greek mythology or something ...

Saikawa’s cart eventually stopped ascending and hovered soundlessly a few meters above the white clouds. Below him, the clouds were drifting slowly. The ground was completely invisible. Perhaps displaying the clouds was saving computation needed to process the VR world.

One by one, the carts on which the chosen ones rode emerged from the clouds.

They all lined up in a ring, nose to nose. The carts were close enough to contact each other so Saikawa could see everyone's faces clearly.

They were just like the members Saikawa had chosen from the list. The only ones who looked different from themselves were Setsuko Gido as Nobita-kun, and Shibaike and Chief Nishinosono as the ping-pong ball.

“In Japan, when we want to play with others, we say, ‘Mazete’ (meaning ‘Let me in’), right?” Saikawa suddenly started talking. “This verb is the English equivalent of ‘mix.’ It was originally a word for bringing liquids together. In foreign countries, especially in the West, when people want to be included in a group, they ‘join’ in with the other person. They do not mix with the other person, they just join ... In other words, Japan is a society of liquids, while the West is a society of solids. Japanese individuals are like liquids. We are fluid and have a social instinct to want to be mixed with others. In the West, individuals are solids and never mix. No matter how many people come together, they are always independent as parts ... It is similar to the difference between Japanese architecture with mud walls and Western architecture with brickwork.”

“It is quite an interesting story, Saikawa-sensei. But is that why we are here, to talk about it?” Dr. Yuminaga said. “First, I would like to ask the purpose of this meeting.”

“This meeting is for ...” Saikawa replied. “Seeing Dr. Shiki Magata once again.”

“What are you talking about?” Mizutani said. He was slim except for his face in this VR world. “We don't have time to play, do we?”

“Dr. Shiki Magata ...” Saikawa called out. “Could you please come out here?”

Out of nowhere, they heard an engine sound.

“Up there!” Moe raised her right hand and pointed up.

They all looked up.

A white cart was slowly descending from above them.

Into the center of their ring, it came straight down and stopped there. Then the figure spun the cart around to look at them all.

On the cart was Shiki Magata.

“What kind of joke is this?” Mizutani raised his voice. “Showing us something like this using Ms. Magata’s data ... Is it funny? Stop it ... It’s a disgusting joke.”

“Mizutani-san ...” Shiki Magata stopped facing straight Mizutani. Her voice was gentle. “You gave me the stuffed polar bear ... It was still in my bed, wasn’t it?”

Mizutani was silent.

“That one has gotten very old, but I love it. Oh ... I have yet to thank you. It was fifteen years ago. You know, I have washed that boy countless times.”

“Shiki-san ...” Mizutani’s voice trembled. “Dr. Shiki ..., for real? You are alive ... But why ...?”

“Yuminaga-sensei ...” Shiki Magata turned the cart around and looked at Dr. Yuminaga. “How is your wife?”

“Oh ... err, my wife is now sleeping.” Yuminaga faltered.

“Your wife was kind to Michiru. I thank her.” She bowed lightly. “Please give my regards to your wife.”

Then, Shiki Magata turned to Yumiko Shindo.

“Aunt ...” Shiki said slowly. “I enjoyed playing at Aunt’s hospital. All the nurses were so kind to me. We played hide-and-seek ... So ... we played, rolling marbles from one end to the other in the long hallways. Do you remember it?”

“I do ... Really ... Are you Shiki-san?” Mrs. Shindo’s voice was also drawn out.

“Aunt was much kinder to me than my father and my mother. I have no parent but Aunt now, don’t I?”

Shiki Magata turned her head slightly to the side.

“Mochizuki?” Shiki spoke. “Long time no see.”

“Yes ..., young lady.” Mochizuki’s voice sounded nervous. His facial image was that of when he was not wearing the baseball cap, his trademark.

“You’ve always been close to me, haven’t you? But I have never seen your face. Have you been in good health?”

“Well, yes, thank you ...” Mochizuki bowed his head.

Shiki Magata slowly turned the cart around. When facing Moe's front, she stopped.

"Nishinosono-san. As I promised you, we have met again, right?" Shiki had a bounce in her voice. "Moreover, with Saikawa-sensei ..."

Shiki slowly turned to Saikawa.

"Dr. Magata ..." Saikawa said. "Did you already assume that I would solve your question?"

Shiki Magata laughed. "Well, you have a surprisingly short temper."

"Yes, it is short on the nanometer scale." Saikawa joked as best he could.

"Nishinosono-san." Shiki looked at Moe. "Did you tell Saikawa-sensei about the number seven being lonely?"

"I did," Moe replied.

"Did you also tell him about B and D?" Shiki asked.

"Ah, no, I did not." Moe shook her head. "You know, I didn't know what it meant ..."

"Oh ..." Shiki looked at Saikawa. "So, Saikawa-sensei opened the door without using the key I left? That was a bit of a surprise."

"I see ..." Saikawa said. "If I had heard that beforehand, I would have found out the truth about another hour earlier."

"You are a confident person," Shiki said with a laugh. "You are exactly what I imagined you would be."

"No, anyone can be a confident person as long as they realize the truth," Saikawa said what he really meant. "Confidence is like a pocket of a timid person."

"You seem to have several pockets."

"Right ..." Saikawa nodded.

"Is that faceless person the police?" She turned to the side and then asked.

"Yes," Saikawa answered. "I believe you will tell us the truth from now on."

"Alright. The game is over now ..." Shiki suddenly took a serious tone. "I will

answer anything you want, Saikawa-sensei.”

“You are the one who murdered the three persons, correct?” Saikawa confirmed.

“I am,” Shiki admitted.

“Why?” The question was heavy to the limit of what Saikawa could bear. His heart pulsed loudly.

What a question ... I am asking her something mediocre ...

However, Saikawa really wanted to hear the response from the genius in front of him.

“Because that is what I had decided to do. It’s not an answer to your question or a practical reason, but ... it was ultimately important to me.” Shiki answered slowly. “I had already decided fifteen years ago that I would do it.”

“It is for your freedom ... isn’t it?” Saikawa couldn’t resist and gave his answer.

Shiki Magata chuckled.

Then she said.

“You know ... Saikawa-sensei ..., I’m a Trojan horse.”

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Detective Shibaike moved away from the display and whispered instructions to his men.

“Listen, check all the rooms immediately. The culprit is the one using the computer right now. And I want you to set up security at the entrance and the rooftop. Increase the number of men. Let the guys on the outside in. I want three men on each corridor with a clear line of sight ... Got it?”

The man who had received the instructions ran out of the room.

Shibaike returned to Chief Nishinosono and whispered in his ear.

“I don’t know which one of them is the murderer, but I don’t think the guy is insane. Does the one think killing people is a game too?”

Chief Nishinosono nodded silently.

A large window was open on display in front of them, showing an animation that seemed to be a child's play from earlier. No, the word animation did not fit their age group. It was just *manga* (comics).

As Chief Nishinosono moved the mouse he held in his right hand back and forth and left and right, the view on the screen changed in that direction. They had just been briefed on how to use it, but what was going on was not clear to them. Still, they could hear the guys on the screen talking, and their voices seemed to be reaching the other side. Both Shibaike and Nishinosono remained silent the entire time, peering into the world inside the window.

They were now above a blanket of white clouds.

Dolls with the faces of Saikawa and Moe were floating in the air on what looked like small go-carts. So did the rest of them. They were all talking in a circle, when a white go-cart with an unfamiliar woman descended from the sky.

Everyone said she was Shiki Magata.

“This show is a bit much, isn't it?” Shibaike whispered in the police chief's ear.

“Who do you think is doing this prank?” Nishinosono also whispered in Shibaike's ear.

“I don't think it's the culprit ...” Shibaike offered his opinion. “I don't think the culprit can afford to do such an act.”

A young detective brought them two cups of Japanese tea.

Shibaike gestured for him to be quiet by placing his right index finger on his nose. The detective, a subordinate, shrugged and walked out of the room.

Chief Nishinosono asked Shibaike in a whisper tone. “Do you know what a Trojan horse means?”

Shibaike shook his head sideways quickly.

On the screen, the woman in the center said she was the murderer.

Shibaike and Nishinosono looked at each other again in silence. Shibaike raised one eyebrow as if he were making a deliberate effort to make his expression asymmetrical.

“Hey, can you give us a moment ...?” Dr. Yuminaga raised his right hand to speak. “What in the world does this mean? Who did you say is a murderer? Who is this person? Why is this guy imitating Ms. Shiki?”

“I am Shiki Magata.” The woman in the white cart in the center answered.

“You are NOT Doctor Shiki!” Moe cried out. “You must be ... Michiru-san, right?”

“It is the same either way.” Shiki Magata turned to Moe.

“I knew You were in Dr. Magata’s room.” Moe continued. “The whole time ... you were there. Then you killed Dr. Magata and walked out of the room ... Isn’t that right? You killed Dr. Magata to get out, didn’t you? You must have taken the elevator up to the rooftop when we followed the doctor’s dead body in the wedding dress out into the corridor. It was during that one minute when Yamane-san did the emergency reset on Deborah ... The yellow door was left open at that time. You loaded the doctor’s body onto the wagon-type robot and let it proceed to the corridor so that you could leave that room in the meantime. Am I wrong? But the elevator’s floor number display was recorded on video as it changed. You must have gone to the rooftop at that time to kill Director Shindo.”

“Nishinosono-kun ...” Saikawa tried to speak to Moe.

“Sensei ... I want to tell this person,” Moe spoke quickly to stop Saikawa. Then, looking at Shiki Magata, she continued. “By letting Red Magic run out of control, you disabled the network connecting the research institute to the outside world. And you set the computer clock back by one minute. So the video recording of you leaving the yellow doors and getting into the elevator did not remain. The old data was erased because the same files overlapped due to the time shift being set back by one minute. As Hasebe-san was playing back the video, he said he didn’t realize it was so short. So ... that video recording was one minute short. After we went out into the corridor, the footage of that room, where only Shimada-san was lying, was shortened by one minute. During that missing one minute, you came out of that room. Is that the truth, Michiru-san ...?”

“Nishinosono-san ...” Ms. Magata said in a gentle voice. “Your explanation is

somewhat less convincing, but yes, you are right on the whole. Even so, the lack of persuasion proves you have not yet fully understood.”

“Why did you kill Dr. Magata?!” Moe shouted. “Tell me why ...!”

“What on earth are you talking about?” Yuminaga said. “Who is Michiru? Do you refer to the personality of Ms. Magata’s doll? How could it come out of Ms. Magata’s room? When did it go inside?”

“This person was in that room the whole time!” Moe’s voice trembled while she was shouting.

“The whole time?” They heard Mochizuki’s voice. “What do you mean ... by the whole time?”

“This person is ... Dr. Magata’s daughter!” Moe’s voice was crying. “Dr. Shiki gave birth to her!”

“Daughter?” Someone shouted.

For a while, no one said anything.

White clouds were drifting beneath them all. It seemed to them as if they all were moving at a constant speed.

Ms. Magata’s cart, in the center, was spinning slowly.

“You said the lady’s daughter?” Yuminaga murmured. “The lady gave birth to her ...?”

“Like a Trojan horse ...” They could barely hear Mizutani whisper faintly in a trembling voice.

That woman in the center started to chuckle.

“What is funny to you? Michiru-san ...” Moe said, holding out her right hand forward. “You killed Dr. Shiki Magata ... your mother! Do you deny it?!”

“In a way ... you are right. Nishinosono-san.” Ms. Magata replied in a tender voice. It was as gentle as soothing a crying baby.

“In a way ... you said?” They heard Moe’s voice.

“So, Nishinosono-san ... Don’t cry ... You need not cry ... You know, I have never cried ... It’s strange for us to cry.”

“You’re ...” Moe’s voice became hoarse. She was trying to say something, but it didn’t come out in words.

“It’s hard for me to hear you sound like that. Hey ... you have more to say to me, right?”

“I have ...” They heard Moe breathe deeply. “Y-you were born in that room. You have lived ... in that room ... all your life. You have never been outside the room. But ... you killed ... your mother ...”

“Listen, Nishinosono-san. It is allowed for all life forms.” Ms. Magata said gently. “Please, don’t cry ... By nature, living things are destined to live that way. For the sake of a new seed, the flower withers. For the sake of new eggs, the mother dies. This is not sad.”

“You said she was born in that room?” Dr. Yuminaga asked. “Whose child is she?”

“Your father is Director Shindo, isn’t he?” Moe said, choking up. “She is the child of Dr. Magata and Director Shindo. You killed ... your mother and her uncle. No ... you killed your parents! Why? Tell me why!”

“You are incoherent, Nishinosono-san.” Ms. Magata’s tone turned a little cold. “Okay. If you wish, I will tell you the truth.”

Ms. Magata’s white cart rose slightly, and everyone looked up at it.

“Shiki Magata was fourteen years old when she became pregnant ... The father of the child was Seiji Shindo.” As if a different personality had appeared, Ms. Magata’s speech changed to an inflectionless, emotionless delivery, as if she were reading an academic paper. “She told her father, Dr. Sachiro Magata, about the case. She also told her mother, Dr. Michiyo Magata. She had a child with her own uncle. But Shiki didn’t know. She was happy to tell her parents ..., but never imagined they would be so surprised and angry about it. That was the background of that murder case ... fifteen years ago ... Shiki was beaten and scolded for the first time in her life ... Can you imagine how surprised she was? She had no idea what she had done wrong. No one told her that there were such rules ... Her parents abused and beat her. How unreasonable that was, don’t you think so?”

“Is that why you killed your parents?” Moe asked. Her voice was a little calmer

than before.

“No ...” Ms. Magata answered in a gentle voice. “It was Seiji Shindo who killed Dr. Sachiro Magata and Dr. Michiyo Magata. In other words, Sachiro Magata’s actual younger brother ... That is not a fact recognized by the public, but since Shiki saw it, there is no doubt about it. Shiki saw her uncle kill her parents right in front of her eyes.

It was indeed Shiki who first took out the knife. But she could not move at that moment ... Seiji Shindo held Shiki, who was motionless like a doll, from behind, grabbed her hand holding the knife with both hands over her back, and stabbed Michiyo Magata without hesitation. Dr. Michiyo did not even try to avoid it. Shiki had seen it right in front of her. The knife was in Shiki’s hand. Her mother’s warm blood was on Shiki’s face ... Her mother was stabbed in the chest and fell backward. Then she hit the wall and fell to the floor as if sitting down slowly. She said nothing ...

The knife in Shiki’s hand was controlled by Seiji Shindo’s large hands. Shiki was just a doll to watch. She did not even scream. The two of them then stabbed Dr. Sachiro Magata ... It really was a quick and easy thing to do ... When her father collapsed, Shiki’s doll fell off the shelf and was stained with blood. That was the first time Shiki screamed. It was what actually happened then. Therefore, it is not wrong to recognize that Shiki Magata stabbed her parents. She had the will to do so, and the knife was in her hand. But that Shiki was a doll. Shiki remembered that after she had the child and ... after the trial was over.”

“Did Shiki-san ... tell you so?” Yumiko Shindo asked in a nasal voice.

“I heard that Aunt came into the room at that time.” Ms. Magata said. “What Aunt witnessed in that room was Seiji Shindo, who was seizing Shiki. That was also what actually happened.”

They heard Yumiko Shindo sigh. She must have been thinking about her murdered husband.

“Facts are fleeting, aren’t they? What is considered reality ... really shows us only a portion of it.” Ms. Magata said matter-of-factly. “Shiki and Seiji Shindo’s child was four months old in Shiki’s womb at that time. Shiki was moved from the hospital to that room and confined. Shiki gave birth to a child there. Of course, she was not

alone. Seiji Shindo visited her room from time to time. He was a doctor, and she needed him when she gave birth.”

“Did Director Shindo know that his child was in Ms. Magata’s room?” Dr. Yuminaga confirmed. “Are you saying the lady was raising her child in that room all along?”

“The child born did not have a name. The child did not need a name. For there was no one there but her mother.” Ms. Magata continued. “The child rarely left the bedroom in the back. She did not talk to anyone. So, instead, there was a robot to keep her company. It was a robot named Michiru, created by Shiki. The child did not even know that Shiki was her mother.”

“The child is you!” Moe pointed out in a trembling voice. “You are fourteen years old ... aren’t you?”

“The child is now fourteen years old, the same age Shiki was when she killed her parents.” Ms. Magata continued in a gentle voice. “Fifteen years had passed. Shiki taught her child words and letters but did not show her television. The child never met another human being. The child only read books. But all the books in that room were only up to volume fifteen. Do you know why?”

No one answered.

“The child was never taught numbers greater than fifteen. She was taught that a human being could only live fifteen years. Do you know what that means ...? When you are fourteen, in the fifteenth year, you must kill your parents, just as your mother did when she was fourteen ... That child was taught that from birth ...

Ever since she could remember, the day to do it had been set. It was the day that Shiki had decided. On that day, the child would kill Shiki, walk out of the room, and kill her father. The child was taught that countless times. She never considered whether it was a good or bad thing. She was not taught that way of thinking. Everything was predetermined. The child was taught that this was the way of human life.”

“That’s a lie! I can’t believe it!” Moe shrieked. “How couldn’t you notice such a downright lie?”

The others were silent. Saikawa didn’t move either.

“You say that Ms. Shiki Magata planned the entire schedule, don’t you?” Yuminaga confirmed in a low voice. “What do you mean that the date was fixed?”

“Red Magic was a Trojan Horse!” Ayako Shimada yelled. “That operating system had been counting the time since it started running seven years ago. That count was full on the day of the incident, and it did what it was set to do.”

“Are you saying Red Magic is a Trojan horse?” Mizutani voiced.

“Saikawa-sensei has found it.” Ayako Shimada replied.

“Yes, I have.” Saikawa opened his mouth for the first time in a long time. “This time, the anomaly in the system was something that had been planned from the beginning. Red Magic had a variable that counted time built into it. Like a sandglass, it had been adding one number every hour for seven years. That day ... it had just run full. The yellow door stopped accepting commands. Then it suddenly opened. People at this facility could no longer send e-mails or select phone calls. It set the clock back a minute and erased the video recording at the minute. All of this was a set-up. Red Magic’s main system was itself a Trojan horse.”

“Everything has turned to F.” Ms. Magata said with a laugh. “It was possible for me to erase that trace. But ... I might have wanted someone to notice it. Probably ... someone like you ... Saikawa-sensei.”

-5-

“Why did you even kill Yamane-san?” Moe asked.

“That man noticed the Trojan horse.” Ms. Magata looked at Moe and said. “The timing was a little bad. I had no choice.”

“Timing? What do you mean, the timing was bad?”

“Nishinosono-san, you still don’t get it, do you?” Ms. Magata replied.

“Where are you now?” They suddenly heard Detective Shibaike’s voice.

“How could you escape from the rooftop?” Yuminaga questioned. “How could you hide after you killed the director?”

“Saikawa-sensei?” Ms. Magata’s cart spun around and faced Saikawa’s front.

“Would you follow me for a moment?”

Ms. Magata’s cart suddenly lost altitude and sank from the center of everyone into the clouds.

Saikawa heard some shouting.

Saikawa did not know what to do. But his cart was moving spontaneously, even though he had done nothing.

“Sensei!” Saikawa heard Moe’s voice calling him from overhead.

In the clouds.

Saikawa’s vision was filled with profound whiteness.

There was a sense of weightlessness. And there was a glare that made him want to close his eyes.

The space felt to him as if the far and near distance had been turned inside out. So, it was as if a cream puff had been turned inside out.

It’s the ocean.

It spread out below him. It was flat, tilted, and glowing like wavy glass.

“This place is free.” He heard Shiki Magata’s voice.

He had no idea where she was.

“Do you know *Jonathan Livingston Seagull*?”

Saikawa nodded slightly.

He was falling.

The surface of the sea was approaching him. He could see the horizon tilted in the distance.

As he approached it, he could feel his speed.

He heard the sound of water.

His vision turned blue.

He looked up and saw glowing amoeba-like bubbles. The nearby objects were

absorbing each other and merging into one. They transformed and vanished as if alive.

What do amoebas realize? Saikawa thought.

“Our time passes so fast ...” It was Shiki Magata’s voice. “Things we think of as solid are actually flowing like a liquid. Our time just goes by too fast ...”

“Dr. Magata ...” Saikawa spoke to her.

“If you hadn’t come here, I wouldn’t have died ...”

Saikawa landed on the white sand at the bottom of the ocean.

There were no fish around. No seaweed, either. This place was already dark, and even looking up, Saikawa could not see the light of the sea surface.

It was a noble royal blue.

Saikawa heard an artificial sound of water. It was like being on a submarine.

Saikawa looked around in circles.

Far off to the left, Saikawa could see something shiny.

It was approaching him meanderingly.

“How do you intend to escape?” Saikawa asked. “The police guard this building. So ... you can no longer escape.”

“At first, I had no intention of escaping.” Shiki Magata’s voice answered.

The light came closer.

Saikawa thought it was a fish, but it was a white mermaid.

The mermaid was smiling and screw-rolling happily in front of Saikawa.

Then the mermaid stopped slowly before him, her long tail slightly bent.

Her long hair swayed in the gentle tide. Her hair was emerald green. She wore a shell ornament on the side of her head.

The mermaid brought her face close to Saikawa.

“Sensei, if you and Nishinosono-san had not come here, Shiki Magata would not have died.” The mermaid said. “To keep the research institute existing, the lady’s

death would have been covered up.”

“Wasn’t our coming here within your expectation, Doctor?” Saikawa said this in a sarcastic tone.

“It was unexpected. That person ... Nishinosono-san ... Her ideas are genius. No one can predict what she will do. That talent is very valuable.”

“But she is wrong,” Saikawa said.

“Yes, she is. Sensei is right.” The mermaid said happily.

“Why did you kill Yamane-san? Saikawa questioned.

“I explained it earlier.” The mermaid answered. “He noticed Red Magic’s time counter. So he gave up on Red Magic and tried to replace the system. That was a little too soon ... So I had no choice. You know, I had waited fifteen years to be free ...”

“Killing someone for any reason is unforgivable,” Saikawa said the obvious.

“Oh, the expression you chose sounds cheap, right? Sensei, is that what you really mean?”

“Well ...” Saikawa hesitated. “I do not really believe that. In the past history, people have killed people and ... praised it. For the purpose of freedom or liberation, humankind has killed many people.”

“So, you are honest ... Let’s not talk about that. Is there anything else that you do not understand?”

“No, there isn’t. But let’s talk in person. I’m on my way to you now.” Saikawa said.

“Why? Do you dislike this mermaid figure of mine? Is this not to your liking?”

“Yes, but ... I want to smoke. I can’t smoke in the water, can I?”

“Ah, that’s nice ...” The mermaid chuckled. “Sensei, I am glad I met you ... I will definitely come to you someday. Remember that.”

“What do you mean?” Saikawa became upset. “Someday? Dr. Magata! Why?!”

The glowing white mermaid was already gone.

Saikawa hurriedly removed his VR goggles and gloves. In front of him were the serious faces of Moe Nishinosono and Setsuko Gido.

“It’s Miki-san’s room!” Saikawa exclaimed and hurriedly stood up.

“Miki-san?” Moe widened her eyes. “Why?”

Two plainclothes detectives were in the lounge, listening to Saikawa and the others.

When stepping out into the corridor, they saw Detective Shibaike running toward them with four police officers in tow.

“Sensei! Sensei!” Shibaike shouted. “Tell us. Who was that guy?”

“She’s in Miki Magata-san’s room!” Saikawa said. “It’s her. She is the culprit. She might commit suicide. Hurry up!”

“That can’t be!” Moe grabbed Saikawa’s arm. “Michiru-san must be hiding somewhere. She is still a child. Detective, please find her ... She must be somewhere.”

“That’s not ... Nishinosono-kun,” Saikawa said to Moe. “That’s not true.”

A young police officer unfolded a floor plan of the research institute and said. “Miki-san’s room is on the first basement floor.”

“Why is Miki Magata the culprit?” Shibaike asked Saikawa as they started running. “I have no idea. What’s going on ...? I need explanation ...”

Many people ran down the slope. The sound of shoes echoed loudly.

Dr. Yuminaga came running down the corridor.

“What happened?” Yuminaga shouted to Saikawa. “Ah, Sensei ... Where is she?”

All arrived in front of the guest room shown on the floor plan, but that door would not open.

“Deborah.” Yuminaga ordered. “Open this door.”

“Acknowledged the command,” Deborah’s electronic voice echoed in the

corridor. “No one but Shiki Magata-san can open this door.”

Ayako Shimada came running. She stood next to Setsuko Gido at the farthest point from the door.

“This is an emergency!” Yuminaga exclaimed.

“Acknowledged the command,” Deborah responded. “Only the director and deputy director can authorize emergency orders.”

“Break it!” Shibaike ordered.

The stalwart men stuck to that door.

“Impossible,” Yuminaga said. “This is a fireproof shutter.”

“Get some tools!” One of the detectives shouted to a police officer in the corridor.

The officer nodded and ran off.

“Deborah, open the door.”

Everyone quieted. It was Shiki Magata’s voice.

“Acknowledged the command. The password entry is not in use now. It will not work next time.”

The door opened slowly.

“Come on in, everyone.” They heard Shiki Magata’s voice again.

No one was speaking. The voice, like Deborah’s, was coming from the speakers in the corridor.

The police officers rushed into the room.

Shiki Magata’s laughter echoed down the corridor. “That’s good. You guys didn’t have to break the door.”

“Check the exit!” Shibaike confirmed his men. “Not here!”

“She’s not here!” They heard the voice come from inside the room.

“Where is she?” Shibaike looked at Saikawa.

Saikawa was too surprised to respond immediately. “It can’t be ... She has to be

somewhere. Find Miki Magata-san!”

“Check all the rooms!” Shibaike shouted.

The detectives scattered.

Shibaike approached Saikawa, who was standing in the hallway in a daze. “Sensei, is it true that Miki Magata is the murderer?”

“No doubt,” Saikawa assured the detective. “She must be somewhere in this research institute.”

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Saikawa lit a cigarette in the director’s office.

Many people had gathered here.

Moe stood a short distance away, looking at Saikawa with concern. Ayako Shimada and Setsuko Gido were standing by her side. Beside them, Dr. and Mrs. Yuminaga were leaning against the wall.

On the sofa sat Yumiko Shindo, nodding. She had her hands over her face. Next to her sat the plump Chief Mizutani. Mochizuki and Hasebe stood at the far end of the room, their arms crossed, talking.

Several police officers were in the corridor, but they did not enter, only peeking into the room from time to time.

Saikawa took a deep drag on his bitter cigarette.

“That’s odd ...” He mumbled to himself.

The elevator to the left of the doorway opened noiselessly, and Shibaike stepped out with a reluctant look. Chief Nishinosono was with him. Everyone looked at them and fell silent.

“She’s gone ...” Shibaike said as if to spit it out. “What’s going on? Why did she disappear?”

“Is there any place you can think of, everyone?” Chief Nishinosono asked the others.

Everyone was silent.

“What kind of person ... is Miki-san?” Setsuko Gido asked in a lisping tone.

No one answered. No one seemed to expect her anything.

“She’s not in the research institute ... so she’s outside,” Shibaike said bitterly.

“But if she’s outside, she can’t use the computer.” Saikawa quickly pointed out.

“Hey, why is Miki-san the culprit?” Moe uttered. “Sensei ...”

Saikawa raised one hand to stop Moe. He looked down and kept silent.

The carpet was checkered, like a checkerboard, dark red and gray. Saikawa counted its squares. First, he counted the squares from one end of the room to the other.

Then, like a knight at chess, he turned his gaze back. *Dark red, gray, dark red, gray ...*

“Alright, we’ll search the outdoors now!” Shibaike called out to his men in the corridor.

“Wait, please ...” Saikawa raised his hand again. “Detective ...”

“Saikawa-sensei ... We don’t deserve to be ordered what to do by you,” Shibaike said with a laugh. He nodded again to his men in the corridor. The young detectives ran off with heavy footsteps.

“What was that farce earlier?” Shibaike said as he was walking. “Dr. Magata is alive? Her daughter is the culprit? What play was that ... eh?”

“Detective ...” Moe stepped forward. “That was not an act. Dr. Magata had a daughter. That daughter killed Dr. Magata.”

“Moe ...” Chief Nishinosono called his niece in a low voice. “You mustn’t be out of line.”

“But, Uncle ...” Moe cast an upward glance at the police chief.

“Where is such a child ... a fourteen-year-old girl?” Shibaike touched Moe’s shoulder. Moe brushed it off.

“Chief. Your niece seems to like to be daydreaming.” Shibaike smiled bitterly.

“This is not just imagination,” Moe said resolutely.

“All the conversation earlier was just a play, wasn’t it? Who created that *manga*?” Shibaïke said, glaring at all the others. “Well, we’ll find that out now. Can you leave the rest to us?”

“Detective ...” Moe stood in front of Shibaïke. “Then, who do you say did that?”

“I don’t know. We are looking into that as well, young lady.”

“It is absolutely true that Dr. Magata had a child. There is no other possibility, is there?”

“Young lady. I am very sorry to say this, but please give me a break ...” Shibaïke showed the palm of one hand. “Shiki Magata’s body is being dissected at the university hospital right now. Just a few minutes ago, I received a report by phone. They told me ... Shiki Magata had never given birth to a child. That is what we will find out when we do the autopsy.”

“No way ...” Moe put her hand over her mouth and backed away. “It can’t be.”

“It’s true.” Shibaïke grinned and nodded.

The others listened to them in silence. Mrs. Shindo, who was nodding off on the sofa, stared at Shibaïke with wide eyes. Next to her, Mizutani’s eyes were focused on the air.

Moe sighed and stepped back further.

“It can’t ...” Her voice trailed off in mid-sentence.

Saikawa was smoking a cigarette. Only the smoke was moving in the room.

Moe looked at Saikawa.

Saikawa said nothing.

He kept thinking. He looked at Setsuko Gido.

Ah, that story Setsuko was talking about ...

Saikawa finally realized it.

“Sensei ...” Moe sounded like she was about to cry. “Am I wrong?”

Saikawa nodded without words. He was absent-minded.

Ignoring Moe, Saikawa walked toward Setsuko Gido.

Got it!

Saikawa was convinced as he walked.

“Can I help you, Sohei-kun ...?” Setsuko Gido looked up at him and narrowed her eyes.

“My students got on the boat when you got off, right?” Saikawa confirmed to Setsuko.

“Right ...”

“If I remember right, you said two women were in the group, right?”

“Yeah, right ...” Gido responded while tilting her head.

“One of the women must have been Chinese.” Saikawa pointed out quickly.

“Yes, her Japanese sounded a little strange. She was a slender, pretty student with long hair.”

“What was the other woman like?”

“Let’s see ... She was a beautiful woman who wore a skirt and ... looked quiet and a little cold.”

“Eh?!” Moe raised her voice behind Gido.

“Then, the boat didn’t go directly to Isshiki Port, did it?” Saikawa questioned Gido in a slow tone.

“Yeah, you know, I got off when that boat was on its way to Sino Island ...” She answered while recalling it. “The students also returned to Isshiki Port via Sino Island after that.”

“Detective ...” Saikawa turned around and looked at Shibaike. “That’s what happened ... Miki Magata-san left this island on that boat. She got off the boat at Shino Island. She did not go to Isshiki Port.”

“What do you mean?” Setsuko Gido asked Saikawa.

“Momoko Kunieda-kun, my research associate, does not look like a woman at first glance. I guess she must have been wearing a straw hat then.” Saikawa smiled slightly. “Kunieda-kun would never wear a skirt, no matter what. The woman in the skirt you saw was Miki Magata-san.”

“Is Miki Magata on Sino Island now?” Shibaike asked. “No, that’s odd. I talked with her. That was around 4:00 p.m., I think ... Mizutani-san, am I right? I called her up, and we had a written conversation on the computer. Miki-san was still at this research institute at that time.”

“To where are boats leaving from Sino Island?” Saikawa asked Mizutani, ignoring Shibaike.

“There are boats from there to the Chita Peninsula, to the Atsumi Peninsula,” Mizutani answered. “It takes about thirty minutes.”

Saikawa turned his hands upward.

“Detective ... It is totally too late. She is no longer here.” Saying so, Saikawa lit a cigarette. Saikawa was a little surprised when he noticed everyone’s attention was on him. “By the time Detective Shibaike talked with her, she was already far away. Perhaps a university computer center somewhere in Nagono City or maybe a computer store? Anywhere with an Internet connection. These days, it can be a coffee shop. Written communication can be done anywhere, as long as she has a keyboard there ...”

“But I saw her face on the screen ...” Shibaike was upset.

“It was probably a video recording ... I guess she had it memorized on the workstation in her room. She had managed to get away with it. Already ... It’s no use looking for the research institute or the island anymore.”

“And when she appeared on the VR cart earlier, she was operating it from a distant computer?” Moe asked.

“Right ... Wherever she was, it was possible,” Saikawa answered.

“That had to be a workstation somewhere because she was sending audio.” Shimada gave her opinion. “It would have to be a university ... A university computer center would let anyone in, right?”

“She might have sent the audio over the phone in analog,” Mizutani said with a hand to his chin. “Using a machine somewhere in the research institute as a host ... she ran it over the phone and the Internet.”

“Why did Miki Magata run away?” Chief Nishinosono asked in a low voice.

“She is the culprit,” Saikawa answered. “She is the murderer of three people. Rather, the entire incident was carried out by her alone. Detective, you should contact headquarters immediately. I know it’s already too late, though ...”

Shibaike nodded, his mouth hanging open.

“A genius. She is truly a genius.” Saikawa nodded repeatedly. “There is no way we can compete with her ... From the very beginning, we are no match for her ...”

“Doesn’t Miki-san only speak English?” Chief Nishinosono asked.

“You know, I said she’s a genius ...” Saikawa smiled. Saikawa exhaled smoke and twirled the cigarette he held in one hand with his fingertips.

“She is Dr. Shiki Magata.”

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After Detective Shibaike and Chief Nishinosono left the room, saying they would be right back, none of those left in the director’s office spoke.

It is summer now, Saikawa remembered that.

The university is on summer vacation. Of course, summer vacation only means no classes. A researcher-type person like Saikawa was usually unaware of summer vacation or even the *Bon* holidays. Saikawa’s office had a window, but there were basically few things different from those at the Magata Research Institute.

Smoking his cigarette, Saikawa thought about what he was supposed to think about when he returned to the university. The murder case was already over. At least Saikawa’s interest was rapidly drifting away from the case.

Saikawa picked up the solid model of a helicopter on the desk in the director’s office and looked at it.

“The helicopter is an invention of Leonardo da Vinci,” Saikawa muttered as if to himself. “It was invented in history earlier than airplanes. Strangely, it took so long for humankind to realize the principle of airplanes ... People misunderstood that birds were pushing air downwards when they moved their wings ... That was the reason for the failure.”

No one was talking to him, but Setsuko Gido, who was by the wall, started chuckling. Moe seemed to care about Saikawa and walked toward him.

“Sensei ...” Moe said. “You said Dr. Shiki Magata was the culprit earlier ...”

“I said so,” Saikawa said, putting the helicopter model back on the desk. Cigarette smoke was rising from his hand. “I’m not an expert, so I don’t really know what exactly, or even physically, multiple personalities are. But I suspect that, originally, an individual has many different personalities. Some may say this is not true, but at least in my case ... I have quite a lot of personalities within me. In my personal opinion, few people have only one personality.”

Again, no one could respond to Saikawa’s story.

Saikawa turned around and began to speak to all the others.

“I mentioned earlier that Japan is a liquid society and the West is a solid society ..., and this can also be said about individuals. The Japanese are like a liquid, mixing and stirring the many personalities within an individual. Western thought is not like that. Individuals are solid, too. Will individuals become increasingly like solids in Japan in the future?”

So, Shiki Magata said, solids are also liquids when viewed over a long period of time. Saikawa recalled that.

“Sensei, what are you talking about?” Dr. Yuminaga asked, touching his mustache.

“Well, I am just dazed,” Saikawa said as he put out his cigarette. “What are you all doing?”

Chief Nishinosono opened the door and appeared, followed by Shibaike with a reluctant look on his face.

“Now, Sensei, will you explain it to us?” Shibaike said, walking up to Saikawa.

“About what?” Saikawa asked back.

“How could you say so ...?” Shibaike said in an exaggerated tone. “We did what we could. We’ve arranged for Aichi Prefecture and Mie Prefecture to investigate. Miki Magata will be caught. But ... I am not convinced. I want you to explain it to me.”

“I agree with him. I am not convinced either.” Yuminaga said.

Saikawa took a cigarette and lit it. “Everything is clear now, though ...”

“Sensei ...” Moe whispered close to her mentor. “We all need explanations, not just answers.”

“Ah, I see. I understand that ...” Saikawa nodded. “Do you all need that?”

Everyone in the room nodded. Saikawa was a little surprised.

“Well, let’s see ...” While exhaling smoke, Saikawa walked slowly to the center of the room. “Where shall we start with ...? So, let’s start with why Red Magic went out of control. Shall I explain?”

“I already know why,” Mizutani said. “Red Magic itself was a Trojan horse.”

“I have a question about that.” Moe raised her hand like a student and said. So, she was an actual student. “Dr. Magata said everything turned to F that day, right? That’s what we saw on the calendar on the lady’s computer. That was ... What was the ‘F’?”

“F is for Fifteen, you know,” Saikawa answered immediately.

“Fifteen? You mean, the number fifteen?” Moe frowned. “F for Fifteen? But then, many other numbers begin with the letter F, such as Fourteen, Five, Four, ... and so on.”

“It’s Hexadecimal, Nishinosono-kun.” Saikawa answered. “The variable that counted time in the Red Magic program was an integer type. Computers work with numbers in binary, but programmers combine them into four digits and write them in hexadecimal. A normal integer is called a 2-byte ..., which means that up to four hexadecimal digits, or sixteen to the fourth power, can be used.”

“Sixteen to the fourth power?” Moe repeated. “We got 65,536 ... That’s the calculation that Sensei said to multiply 256 by 256, right?”

“So, that is the resolution or the limit. Even I can remember about sixteen squared. In a program, an integer variable is a positive integer that starts from zero if it is an unsigned type. It is up to eight digits if it is a double-precision long type, and up to four digits if it is a single-precision short type. Since it starts from zero, the largest number is actually 65,535, which is one less than 65,536.”

“How does that relate to the F?” Moe asked.

“In the hexadecimal system, there are up to fifteen one-digit numbers,” Saikawa explained. “But we only have numbers from zero to nine in decimal, right? In decimal, ten is a two-digit number, and ten is represented by 1 and 0. In hexadecimal, a two-digit 10 (one zero) is used when it reaches sixteen. If we only have letters up to nine, we cannot use the hexadecimal system. That’s why ... it usually denotes numbers from ten to fifteen with the letters A, B, C, D, E, and F. The F is the decimal fifteen, and like the decimal nine, F is the largest single digit number in the hexadecimal system.”

“Everything turns to fifteen ...?” Moe still didn’t seem to understand it well.

“Among one to ten, seven is lonely.” Saikawa said, remembering Ms. Magata’s words. “Among one to sixteen ..., B and D are lonely.”

“B is eleven, and D is thirteen, right?” Moe answered. “Ah, I got it ... In the numbers up to sixteen, seven will not be lonely, because fourteen is there ... So that’s what Dr. Magata was talking about ... But, what does it mean that everything turns to F ...?”

“The maximum value of the single-precision type integer 65,535 in decimal notation is FFFF, or the largest number with four digits when expressed in hexadecimal notation. The program started counting at 0000 and counted until all digits reached F. It was a timed device that counted until all digits reached F.” Saikawa explained. “Dr. Magata had been planning this incident for at least seven years. The system could not be tampered with from Dr. Magata’s room. But Dr. Makata was involved in the development of that system. The timed device was set at FFFF hours, or 65,535 hours, from the beginning. Dr. Magata’s sandglass started 65,535 hours before the day of the incident.”

Saikawa looked around at everyone and continued. “The rest was as Nishinosono-kun had said earlier above the clouds. Red Magic was not an anomaly. It was just as it had been programmed to do, to prevent the yellow door from opening that day. And it opened that door at the appointed time. As a bit of a stunt, it even dimmed and brightened the lights. Everything was according to the program. But for Deborah, which was created afterward, it would have been an unexpected error. Please carefully examine the Red Magic source list. You will find

all the evidence there.”

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“Now, the next proposition is Dr. Magata’s locked room.” Saikawa found himself walking slowly around in that room. It was his habit during class. “But about that, Nishinosono-kun has already explained almost the correct answer. There was, in fact, another human being in Dr. Magata’s room besides Dr. Magata. And, based on the boundary conditions we were given, we had to conclude that it was Dr. Magata’s child.”

“Hey, wait a minute ...” Shibaike raised his hand. “So, I told you about that earlier. That was not possible.”

“I will not accept waiting.” Saikawa said as he walked looking downward. “When I accept questions, I will say so.”

Shibaike smiled bitterly and looked at Chief Nishinosono, but the police chief did not change his expression.

“A robot named Michiru was in that back bedroom ...” Saikawa continued. “That robot can open and close the door. We made sure of that. So why was the robot there?”

“It must have been a child’s playmate.” Moe offered her opinion.

“I allow you to speak freely ...” Saikawa smiled. “But it was a secondary consequence. My guess is that the initial motive was not. Someone could have locked that bedroom from the inside. That person locked the door and fell asleep in the bedroom. That was why the doctor could not sleep in her bed for the night. I imagine that such a thing may have happened. That is why she created the robot. You know, it’s a robot that unlocks and closes the door.”

“Ridiculous. Then, she should have taken away the key. She didn’t need to make a robot to do that ...” Dr. Yuminaga said with a laugh.

“That is exactly the kind of genius thinking that ordinary people cannot understand.” Saikawa shrugged and said. “The little child locked the door in defiance of her mother. The kid, however, fell asleep immediately. Dr. Magata did

not remove the key. She allowed the child to lock the door. But after the child fell asleep, she ordered the robot to open the lock. That seems to me to be a highly natural act ...

Well, in any case, when I saw that robot, I thought that there must have been someone else in Dr. Magata's room. And that person must have been a child ... The girl was confined in the room alone fifteen years ago. No one had entered the room since then. No, even if someone did go in, they came out immediately. Even the luggage was strictly checked. There were no secret passages. But ultimately, as long as the body was mutilated, there must have been two people present. What do you think? With all these boundary conditions, can you think of any other solution that is scientifically reproducible? Can you draw any other conclusions?

When Dr. Magata was confined in that room, she already had new life in her womb. Seven years later, the Red Magic time device was set in place. Dr. Magata had already calculated everything and made the decision to carry it out.

As for that dreadful plan, Nishinosono-kun told us about it." Saikawa looked at Moe and said gently.

"I believe the schedule should have been that she would be killed by her own daughter. But ... it wasn't what actually happened."

"It wasn't?" After asking back, Moe suddenly opened her eyes wide and stepped back, putting her hands over her mouth. "Oh my ... What a tragedy!"

"So ..." Saikawa said in a low voice as he exhaled smoke. "The reality was not as Dr. Shiki Magata had envisioned. Because ..." He was at a loss for words. "Because ... Dr. Magata's child could not kill her mother. She could not follow her mother's orders. Her child was ... not a genius."

"So sad ..." Moe's eyes were red.

"Dr. Shiki Magata was not killed by his daughter ... Dr. Shiki Magata killed her daughter," Saikawa said, stifling his emotions. "Dr. Magata killed her own daughter, who was fourteen years old and didn't even have a name. The doctor's daughter was an ordinary child. The daughter was not a genius. She could not kill her mother. She could not understand her mother's ideology. I believe this decision was a harsh one for Dr. Magata as the pre-set deadline loomed ever closer. This miscalculation must have bothered Dr. Magata. As a result, she left those three messages and the

calendar schedule. Besides, earlier in the VR space, she told us what could be called a confession of the crime. I want to think that ... all of this stems from her remorse for the murder of her own daughter. The plan did not work out the way she thought it would. It was not perfect, an incomplete outcome.

It is rather pitiful that she has no name, so for our convenience, let us call the victim Michiru-san. Dr. Magata murdered his daughter Michiru and dressed her corpse in a wedding dress. The corpse we saw was Michiru-san. Once we make this hypothesis, it all makes sense very easily. For example ..., the reason why both limbs were severed from that corpse is also very simple. It was to hide Shiki Magata's fingerprints ..., which means that only both hands were enough. Dr. Magata was a suspect in the case fifteen years ago. Of course, the police have her fingerprints. Also, her amputation of both legs might indeed have made it easier to stand the body on the wagon-type robot P1. Still, it also had the effect of making the fingerprints less suspicious than if only both arms had been amputated. There was an initial theory that the murderer might have used Dr. Magata's right hand to open the door. Perhaps Dr. Magata had calculated that far. But if Dr. Magata is the murderer, she can open the door with her own right hand.

She decided to kill her own child instead of being killed. When did this change of plans take place?" Saikawa continued. "Of course, this is just my speculation ... but I think it is safe to assume it was probably about three years ago. That was around the time she purchased the wedding dress. Because since then, Dr. Magata has been putting Michiru-san on the TV screen instead of herself. Then ... over many days, Dr. Magata must have wiped off Michiru-san's fingerprints all over the room. From then on, the mother made Michiru-san wear gloves. Such preparations ensured that Michiru-san's fingerprints would not be left behind.

Michiru-san grew up faster than Dr. Magata. But no matter how much they resembled each other as mother and daughter, it would have been impossible for them to suddenly switch from Dr. Shiki to Michiru-san, from mother to daughter. But Dr. Magata was feigning multiple personalities. Besides, the people outside kept the image of Shiki as a girl when she was fourteen years old. Dr. Magata is now twenty-nine years old, and she has grown over the past fifteen years. She would have grown taller and gained weight. However, those on the outside could only see her through the display. Various conditions made their replacement a success.

I heard that Dr. Magata went on a diet three years ago. But did she really do it? I think she might have switched places with Michiru-san at that time. Michiru-san spoke just like her mother. She had long hair, and no one could tell she wore earphones. I believe Dr. Magata taught her what to talk about when discussing her work in front of the TV camera. Just as her mother taught her, Michiru spoke in front of the TV camera. She spoke exactly like her mother ... Sometimes her actual words might have come out, but those around her would have judged it to be the persona of Michiru in Dr. Magata's mind ...”

“The woman I met was Michiru-san ...” Moe murmured. “Yes, indeed, she was wearing gloves.”

“Dr. Shiki Magata was no longer the girl everyone had imagined.” Saikawa continued. “This shift was made using the image they all had of the fourteen-year-old girl Shiki. For the past three years, it was Michiru-san who appeared before them all.

Let's get back to where we were ... Dr. Shiki Magata murdered Michiru-san. Then she mutilated the corpse. She cleaned the bathroom and prepared for her escape that day. Dr. Magata left the room while the wagon-shaped robot P1 carried Michiru-san's corpse out of the room and made a big mess outside. That, too, is just as Nishinosono-kun explained. By setting the computer clock back one minute, Dr. Magata had the saved data overwritten with the same file name, thus erasing the recorded data of the video footage for one minute as a result. The time change was also pre-programmed by Red Magic's sandglass. I believe you could find the evidence in the source list, too. During that one minute, Dr. Magata exited through the yellow door and boarded the elevator.”

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“First ... Dr. Magata took the elevator up to the director's office on the first floor. In short, this room we are in now.” Saikawa walked to the corner of the room, made a U-turn, and came back again.

“In this room? The doctor dropped by this director's office? For what purpose?” Moe questioned.

“At that time, they received an e-mail from Director Shindo. It was an e-mail that the director was bringing Miki Magata-san here with him. That e-mail was sent by Dr. Magata from this terminal.” Saikawa replied with a blank expression. “It was to give them all an image that soon Director Shindo would bring Miki-san, Dr. Magata’s younger sister, to this facility. Images, preconceptions ... these things largely govern human judgment.

It took her less than a minute to do that. After sending out that e-mail, Dr. Magata went to the rooftop. At that moment, the rooftop door was already open. The white door on the rooftop was opened as programmed, as was the yellow door. She did not open the door by placing her right hand there and saying her name. Deborah’s regular routine did not open it, so it was not recorded. It was all an actuation that had been programmed into the system and had been decided upon seven years earlier.”

Saikawa walked up to Moe. He looked at Moe and said in a slightly quiet voice. “At that moment, Dr. Magata was outdoors for the first time in fifteen years. She must have felt nostalgic for the sultry summer night. She remembered summer. She saw the same starry sky as fifteen years ago. She also heard the sound of insects ... What was Dr. Magata feeling before the director’s helicopter arrived? In fact, that is what I am most interested in ...”

Saikawa walked slowly again, lighting a new cigarette.

“Then ... After that, Director Shindo arrived by helicopter. Once the helicopter landed, Dr. Magata immediately got into the helicopter and stabbed Director Shindo, who was in the cockpit, with a knife she had brought from her room. The radio was also destroyed at the time.”

“Sorry?” Moe screamed. “But ... Yamane-san and I met Director Shindo, and ...”

“This what actually happened, Nishinosono-kun ...” Saikawa said as he walked, looking down. He moved his feet precisely in the movements of a chess knight on a checkerboard carpet. “Dr. Magata stabbed the director with a knife. But the director did not die immediately ... Then came Yamane-san and Nishinosono-kun. So did Mochizuki-san. Director Shindo was mortally wounded. But he hid it and acted as if nothing had happened. Since he was inside the helicopter, his condition would not have been clear from the outside. Then ... Dr. Magata came down from the

helicopter. Yes, she acted as Miki Magata-san.”

“Why?” Moe asked. “Why would Dr. Magata do such a risky act? Even if she could calculate that Director Shindo would cover for her ... What was she going to do, if he died immediately?”

“In that case, she would just scream out loud,” Saikawa replied. “She could have said in English that someone had just jumped in and stabbed the director. That’s all, right? In the first place, Dr. Magata had the perfect calculation not to be caught by the police. It didn’t matter if they suspected her a little.

Director Shindo returned alone. There was no Miki Magata-san on the helicopter. She had not even come to Japan in the first place. This was a fabrication of Dr. Magata and Director Shindo. Dr. Magata had cut her hair short. She had just now impersonated her younger sister Miki-san, who had just come from the United States. Director Shindo flew the helicopter that day at the request of Dr. Magata.”

“Are you saying the director knew about Ms. Magata’s murder plot?” Dr. Yuminaga questioned.

“Yuminaga-sensei, there is more to the story.” Saikawa held out one hand. “Director Shindo knew that his daughter was in Dr. Magata’s room. This was a problem he would have to deal with at some point. He discussed it with Dr. Magata and came up with a plan. In short, I believe that Dr. Magata told him about the plan like this.

The P1 robot is let out through the yellow door and runs into the corridor. Then the security guards, Mochizuki-san and Hasebe-san, chase after it. While they are on the way, Dr. Magata lets Michiru-san out. Michiru-san meets Director Shindo on the rooftop. She then makes it look like she visits the research institute as Miki Magata-san. Now, Michiru-san can go outside without anyone noticing. In short, I believe that Director Shindo cooperated with the plan to get Michiru-san out of the research institute by using Red Magic’s time-limited program. From the standpoint of Director Shindo, he had no choice but to cooperate. Or ... it can be thought of this way ... The director might not have been told the detailed escape procedure. Perhaps he was just following Dr. Magata’s instructions without knowing what they meant. He was under Dr. Magata’s thumb ...”

However, it was actually Dr. Shiki Magata herself who appeared on the rooftop,

and moreover, Director Shindo was stabbed by her. Seeing the grown-up Dr. Shiki, I think the director instantly realized everything. But he protected Dr. Shiki. He hid his serious injury and made his last big play.”

“Even the director could not have had private contact with Ms. Magata,” Mizutani said bluntly. “How could they have made such an arrangement?”

“There was a radio,” Saikawa answered matter-of-factly. “Director Shindo used to fly in helicopters. Helicopters have radios. Therefore, if there was a radio in Dr. Magata’s room, it would be easy for them to communicate with each other. The doctor could easily build something like that. She had the parts and the tools. Even I can make a simple walkie-talkie.”

“But her residence is on the second basement floor ... It must have been hard to get a signal.” Mizutani pointed out.

“Still, a TV was there, right?” Saikawa smiled. “In other words, the TV antenna line was run to her room. Doesn’t the antenna wire extend all the way to the rooftop? Wouldn’t it be enough to connect it to a radio, no matter how childish and low-powered the circuitry? My guess is that the radio is probably inside that old TV. It may share components with the TV. Dr. Magata took good care of that TV so much that she even replaced the cathode-ray tube. Whenever the director rode alone in the helicopter, he could always talk with Dr. Magata. Riding helicopters was his hobby.

Thus, I think you all can see that the second murder was easily fulfilled. Dr. Magata was in the research institute as Miki Magata-san after that. She had already calculated that the system would not be reset for a while to investigate the Red Magic’s anomaly. She had time to leisurely think before the police arrived about how to escape from the research institute.”

Everyone in the room had slightly calmer expressions on their faces. Detective Shibaike was listening intently, nodding his head as well. Moe was leaning diagonally against the wall, her arms folded. She was following Saikawa with her eyes only.

“Now, there were no more difficult problems left.” Saikawa lit another cigarette. Chain smoking was this kind of condition. “Dr. Magata probably expected the people at the research institute to hide Shiki Magata’s death. As Yamane-san came up with, they would make Miki Magata-san the double for Dr. Shiki Magata. The

only murder victim would be Director Shindo. It was the story Dr. Magata calculated. And if things had gone according to plan, she would have been absolutely safe. She would have had to go back into the locked room. But once the police investigation was over, she could have been completely free. The case would never be solved. All she had to do was wait and see. As Miki Magata, she could have walked out at any time if she requested.

That would have happened had Nishinosono-kun and I not come to this research institute.” Saikawa stopped there.

“If we had not come here, the fact of Dr. Magata’s death would have been covered up. Therefore, our presence was an unexpected and very troublesome problem for Dr. Magata. After moving to the guest room while impersonating Miki-san, Dr. Magata must have thought of a way to escape from the research institute. She entered the system and gathered information. She also listened to the conversations of others. In the midst of all this, she could have called the ship on the phone at any time. She knew what was wrong with Red Magic. But then she found an e-mail in which Shimada-san said she would meet with a person from a publishing company. Dr. Magata became a super user of Red Magic, which she had created, and read Shimada-san’s e-mail sent to Yamane-san. It was enough for her to escape from the island by the boat. You know, the police had not yet acted at that point ...

Now all that was left was for her to get on that boat, and if the police did not come until she was off the island, that was fine with her. That was all needed for Dr. Magata’s series of maneuvers to get free.

However, Yamane-san unexpectedly found it out. He had watched a video recording of Nishinosono-kun’s interviewing with Dr. Magata a month earlier. At the time, he had heard Dr. Magata talking about how lonely B and D were. The message ‘Everything turns to F’ and the talk about B and D are a pair of simple riddles. He looked up Red Magic’s sources. He was at least in a position to recognize the truth before I did. Yamane-san realized that the series of system anomalies were caused by a Trojan horse planted by Dr. Magata. Once that happens, there is only one path to the conclusion.

It was also Yamane-san who made the wise decision to give up on Red Magic and switch systems. He was aware of the cause of the system’s anomalies. But for Dr.

Magata, she did not want the police to arrive before she got on board. Switching over the system around 10:00 a.m. would be too early. She really needed to stall it until around 11 a.m. If it occurred at 11 a.m., she could get on the boat before the police arrived. She probably needed to kill Yamane-san to ensure this one hour.

Dr. Magata made sure that Yamane-san was alone in his room and came there. She then killed him in the bathroom. When Yamane-san went to the bathroom, Dr. Magata must have waited in the hallway and stabbed him. Yamane-san had been having a final consultation with Shimada-san to switch systems. After killing Yamane-san, Dr. Magata took his place and consulted with Shimada-san using the Talk. Dr. Magata asked Shimada-san for numerous confirmations and stalled the reset until 11:00 a.m.”

“I totally didn’t notice it.” Ayako Shimada said. “I had no idea that the reset had been stalled ... At that time, Yamane-san made a number of very pertinent points, and I was checking them out. I had no idea that was Ms. Magata ...”

“I am sure those instructions were spot on.” Saikawa smiled. “You know, she’s Shiki Magata, the genius programmer ... Dr. Magata left this building through the front door after the system reset at 11 a.m. This period was when Deborah was not working, so it was not recorded. She walked to the harbor and got on the boat with my students. The police response was unexpectedly quick, but Dr. Magata disembarked not at Isshiki Port but at the Sino island on the way. From there, she took a boat to another port. She would have arrived in Nagono City before 3 p.m. After that, she got back to the institute’s system from some university’s computer center and talked again with Shibaike-san and us.”

Saikawa sighed as he exhaled cigarette smoke.

“That’s all I can explain ... I have given you an explanation of how Dr. Magata committed this crime ... We didn’t realize it until she was far away from the island. It wasn’t hard to recover the system. But she had calculated that average programmers would take two to three days. Even if things had not proceeded as planned, Michiru-san’s body, which could not be matched with fingerprints, would probably have been buried as Shiki Magata.

This is my speculation, though ... Dr. Magata’s plan must have been meticulously constructed for every possible situation. Think about it. The current situation is the

worst possible scenario in Dr. Magata's envisioned patterns. I mean, her entire crime has been revealed. But still, she only succeeded in escaping. It is called a fail-safe. It shows how strong the security of Dr. Shiki Magata's program is."

Saikawa stubbed out his cigarette in an ashtray on the desk.

"Umm," Shibaike groaned loudly. "So Miki Magata's bag was never there in the first place? We are now frantically searching for it ..."

"There is no such thing." Saikawa nodded.

Chapter 11: The Colorless Weekend

-1-

Saikawa had been dreaming of the mermaid since then.

It was the last Sunday of the *Bon* holidays. Saikawa was walking around the university campus. The asphalt was hot, on the verge of melting. He believed smoking cigarettes would constrict his blood vessels and cool him down. The campus had recently placed stout steel trash cans with an ashtray mounted on their round head. Saikawa smoked cigarettes as he strolled, crossing from ashtray to ashtray in a zigzag path like a migrating bird alighting on the islands of the ocean.

The wind was not blowing.

In the real world, there is an enormous amount of data. Most of it is unnecessary and meaningless data born only to be thrown away. Garbage is everywhere. The real world is polluted with excess data.

Nothing is pure.

Everything is too complex, ambiguous, and obscured in its essence. Simple models are marginalized and criticized as empty theories. That is the modern world, filled with data.

Saikawa wanted to find some literature in the library. The library at N University was open to the general public, and anyone could enter, even on Sundays. *I want to see the people called general public once*, Saikawa thought. The library was a magnificent building that had recently been built. *Sunday is the last day of the week, but it is at the very front of the calendar for some reason. Why a week does consist of seven days ...?*

Seven is a lonely number.

Yesterday, Saikawa received another e-mail from Moe Nishinosono. She asked Saikawa what his plans were for Sunday. Saikawa had never met her on holiday. She had asked him about his schedule for the first time, so Saikawa was a little surprised.

However, Saikawa was in the habit of working on Sundays. It was rarely the case, but when he wanted to take a day off, he did so even on weekdays. He did not like to be interfered with by others.

Moe must have wanted to talk with Saikawa about the incident. It had been about

two weeks since they were released from the incident at Himaka Island. But Saikawa had not seen Moe since then. Saikawa had nothing to talk with her about that incident. There were no more mysteries left, and there was nothing more he wanted to know. He was not interested in how the public treated the case or what was reported in the media.

After that incident, Moe sent Saikawa e-mails almost every day. She said that the police had found several pieces of human bone in a garbage incinerator in the basement of the research institute. The police disassembled a toy soldier that had been assembled from blocks. When they examined all the Lego parts, they found a fingerprint that seemed to belong to Michiru. The radio was hidden inside Dr. Shiki Magata's old television set. And some scrips were written into Red Magic's source list to assist Dr. Magata in her escape. In this way, a great deal of physical evidence was found to prove that Shiki Magata had committed the crime. However, Shiki Magata had not yet been arrested.

None of them was of interest to Saikawa.

He answered Moe's e-mail that he would be at the university library this afternoon. *She would probably come. Well, I should keep her company just a little*, Saikawa thought.

What interested Saikawa most about this case was Dr. Shiki Magata's idea. She killed her own daughter to free herself. However, it is unlikely that the doctor's concept of freedom is the same as Saikawa's. *What kind of freedom was it, then?*

She would not have had to kill three people to be free. At least she did not have to kill Director Shindo or Deputy Director Yamane. Well, with the doctor's brain, she did not even need to take her daughter's life. In her case, it is hard to believe that such a low-level reason as "she did it to win her freedom" is valid. In the first place, I wonder if ordinary people can understand her true motives ...

As the days passed since the incident, these thoughts became stronger and stronger in Saikawa's mind.

The ideas of a genius must be beyond the comprehension of ordinary people. Just as she created that robot simply because a child would lock the door ...

That robot remained there to unlock in the locked room with no one in it. From the genius point of view, humans must be beings with only that level of functionality.

There was a rectangular pond in the lawn. This artificially created recreational space looked as if relaxing in the harsh sunlight. There were no creatures in the pond. *Come to think of it, parks in residential areas are also created by destroying nature. Humans are trying to release carbon dioxide, which took hundreds of millions of years to stick to the earth.*

Will summer get hotter and hotter ...?

Saikawa walked on square concrete blocks, trying not to step on the joints. Ever since he was a child, he had walked looking down. Such was his habit.

He walked up a flight of stairs of the library's entrance and stepped inside the door. The cool air relieved him. The interior still smelled of a new building. The lobby was empty, with only one middle-aged man reading a newspaper on a sofa.

Inserting his card into a gate that looked like an automatic ticket gate, Saikawa walked through it.

Its floor was made of soft material, and his footsteps did not make a sound. The reading room was filled with young people who appeared to be students, but the seats were still half empty. Many of them were sleeping. The ceiling was high, and the space was much larger than needed. *For their naps, the air conditioning works, consuming enormous amounts of electricity. Thermal power generation pollutes the air. Hydroelectric power kills life in the water system. Forests are cut down for power lines. Without taking away some life in this way, people cannot even nap.*

Smoking was prohibited outside the lobby. Since Saikawa could not read a book without smoking, he would quickly look for the book he wanted, make a copy of it, and be about to return to the lobby.

Going to a corner with a row of terminals, Saikawa tapped the keyboard to search the literature. He was looking for an article that should have appeared in a journal about fifty years ago. It turned out to be on a bookshelf that was apparently open to the public. He could not yet rejoice because even though he had thus searched and visited the place, the book was often not there. He decided to go up the stairs to the third floor.

Saikawa opened the heavy steel door and entered the slightly musty room. However, he did not dislike the smell. The lighting was a little dark in there.

There were rows and rows of tall bookcases, and the spaces between them were only wide enough for one person to pass through barely. Although he could not reach the higher parts, there was a sliding ladder that he could move. This room seemed to be full of Western magazines. Many books were in the same binding, and most of them had the A.D. year written on them. They were thin monthly magazines bound and lined up every year or six months.

There seemed to be no one in that room. Only the sound of Saikawa walking could be heard.

The one with a light purple spine and gold lettering was the Western magazine Saikawa was looking for. *How many people have ever come here to read it?* Saikawa thought. *This building was built for such a small number of people, and this room is waiting for them with electricity. They occupy this much space for a long time. What a waste of energy and resources. But for me, today, I am grateful for it.*

Saikawa quickly found the paper he wanted.

He heard the door open. It seemed that someone had entered the room.

Saikawa was reading an English paper. It had been written before he was born. *The person who wrote this paper would no longer exist in this world. I wonder if my paper will be read somewhere in the future. How long will this leisurely transmission of information continue?*

The content of the paper seemed interesting but full of somewhat obscure terminology. Just reading the abstract, there were a few words he did not know.

Saikawa looked up from the paper when he felt someone nearby.

“Hello.” The woman said, smiling.

Saikawa almost dropped the thick book he was holding in his hand.

“Dr. Magata ...”

Saikawa’s body stiffened like steel.

Her hairstyle had changed. Her short hair was now curly and slightly chestnut. She wore glasses. The lenses were pale pink and seemed a little too big for her. She was wearing a finely patterned shirt and a long skirt with folds. Only her small shoes were visible on her feet. She looked like a female student he would see anywhere on campus.

But the person standing there was impossible for him to misidentify. She was Miki Magata, no, Shiki Magata.

The woman leaned against the wall and smiled, showing her white teeth.

“Is everything okay, Saikawa-sensei?”

With her hands behind her back, she pulled her chin and stared at Saikawa.

“Why are you here ...?” Saikawa could barely speak. His hands were holding the page of the paper he was reading open. Otherwise, his hands would have trembled.

“I promised I would see you again, didn’t I?” Shiki Magata said pleasantly. “Your course system is not very secure. I read the e-mail you wrote to Nishinosono-san.”

“You know, the police are chasing you.”

“Don’t say a mediocre thing ...” Shiki looked a little disappointed. “Why don’t we move to some other place? This place smells ... musty. I think I’m going to sneeze.”

“Yes, let’s go down to the lobby ...” Saikawa hurriedly put the book he was holding back on the shelf.

“Is it okay if you put that book back? You came here to research something, didn’t you?”

“Ah, yes, it’s okay. I can come here anytime.”

The two left that room without saying anything.

As Saikawa was about to go down the stairs, she stopped to look up.

“Can we go upstairs?” Shiki said.

“Up here is ... the conference room.”

“Can’t we go out to the rooftop?”

“Are you going to commit suicide?” Saikawa said. “You can’t go out to the rooftop.”

Shiki Magata chuckled.

“I would never kill myself. If I were going to, I would have done it by now. I just want to see the view since we are on top of a hill.”

They went down the stairs. Shiki followed behind Saikawa. Halfway down the

stairs, Saikawa turned around and saw that she was coming down slowly, one step at a time, with her hands clasped behind her body. Perhaps she was not used to taking the stairs.

“Did you have your card made?” Saikawa asked. “You can’t enter this building without registering, right?”

“Yes, I registered it. I wrote my real name, Shiki Magata, properly.” Shiki replied. “I confirmed sixteen of my books in this facility. I also saw eighty-four papers in total. I just searched. So, almost all of my works are here.”

“Two of my books are here,” Saikawa said. “But that is more than Isaac Newton. Only one of his books is available here.”

Shiki Magata smiled at Saikawa’s joke.

From the lobby, they could see the campus through the brown smoked glass. The glare outside was like bubbles boiling in the heat. They could not see anyone walking in the vicinity.

I am now walking awkwardly, Saikawa thought.

They sat down side by side in a comfortable one-seat chair. Dr. Shiki Magata’s face was close to Saikawa’s. Saikawa shuddered at the strangeness of being so close to her. Although they were close enough to touch, Saikawa felt as if they were infinitely far away.

Thinking about it calmly, Saikawa was older than her. However, no matter how hard he tried, he could not recognize it as such. No matter how young the woman in front of him looked, Saikawa could not honestly accept that fact. He could only feel that this woman, or rather this human being, was ... an immortal disguised as this figure. She was a marionette ... controlled by the immortal.

Yes, she is a doll.

Shiki Magata looked at Saikawa’s face and said nothing.

He could not look directly into Shiki’s face.

He pretended to look everywhere in the lobby. His gaze wandered. He was searching for an old person, an immortal, who was controlling this beautiful doll from somewhere above them.

The old person controlling the doll was nowhere to be found.

“You do not say anything?” Shiki whispered.

It was the gentle voice that the mermaid had spoken in the sea.

“What made you do that?” Saikawa asked the question he wanted to know the most.

“For the first question, it is not a clever one. The answer is to get outside.” Shiki answered immediately.

“I don’t think so.” Saikawa shook his head while looking down. “That’s not true ...”

“Then what other motives can you think of?” Shiki spoke in a leisurely manner.

“Was that revenge?” Saikawa said so, but he did not believe it.

“Against whom?” Shiki tilted her head like a marionette.

“Against Director Shindo.” Saikawa pointed out. “You killed him and his child ...”

“Your assumption is incorrect ... First, I cannot capture the concept of revenge correctly.” Shiki suddenly changed her tone and said indifferently. “To take revenge, I have to be defeated first. But I have never been defeated before. Therefore, even the spirit of revenge is not real to me. Even as an idea, I don’t think it has much significance. Second, I have never held a grudge against Uncle. I loved him.”

“But Shindo-san killed your parents ...” Saikawa said in a low voice. “Wasn’t your act revenge for that?”

“It wasn’t.” Shiki shook her head. “The Uncle’s feelings about killing my father and mother were not irrational. Therefore, I do not blame him. Rather, it was my father and mother who were unreasonable. I have already told you about that, haven’t I?”

Saikawa took out a cigarette and lit it. “Yes, that is understandable ... That was not an act like revenge ... Actually ... I believe that, too, Dr. Magata.”

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“Can I have a cigarette too?” Shiki Magata returned to her gentle tone.

“Ah, yes, do you smoke cigarettes?” Saikawa took one cigarette from the box and handed it to her.

“No, I have never smoked.” Shiki put the cigarette in her mouth. “Sensei, since you are smoking it so deliciously, I want to try it too. Is it sweet?”

“Ah, if so, you’d better not.” Saikawa withdrew his hand, holding out the lighter.

“Why?”

“That is not a tasty thing.”

“But you’re smoking it.”

“So ... Will you dare to try ...?” Saikawa reached out his hand again and lit the cigarette for Shiki.

“Oh, this smell is ... my father’s,” Shiki said happily, seeing the cigarette in her hand. Then she put it back in her mouth and smoked it but immediately coughed.

“You okay?” Saikawa stood up and asked her.

“Eh ...” Shiki coughed repeatedly and could not speak well.

“This is not good for your health,” Saikawa said. “After all, it would have been better to stop, right?”

“Err ...” Shiki finally calmed down. “Yes, that’s right ... It was my fault for not listening to your advice ... Ah ... I am fine now. I had an interesting experience.”

Shiki threw the cigarette into the ashtray. There was lipstick on its filter. Seeing this, the illusion of a marionette disappeared from Saikawa.

“Someone takes the advice of others and realizes that it is better that way ... This kind of experience is wonderful. It is somewhat artificial, though ...”

“Oh, really ...” Saikawa exhaled smoke. “I have all those experiences.”

“Why do you smoke something bad for your health?”

“Well ..., I wonder why.” Saikawa smiled slightly. “Honestly, I find it tasty. That’s all. Maybe it’s because I’m not very attached to my life ...”

“No one is afraid of death. Everyone is afraid of life leading to death. If we could die without suffering, who would fear death?”

“You are right.” Saikawa nodded. He agreed with her opinion.

“It is more abnormal for us to be alive in the first place.” Shiki smiled. “Being dead is our natural state, and being alive is, you know ... like a malfunctioning machine. Life is a bug, right?”

“Bug? You mean, a computer bug?” Saikawa understood her thought in an instant.

A mistake lurking in the program ... So, we may be bugs. We can say that the bugs in the program created by God are humankind.

“It is like a pimple ... that is, a disease ... Being alive is itself a disease. When the disease is cured, life also disappears. So, for example, Sensei, you want to sleep, don’t you? The comfort of sleep is a mystery. Why does our consciousness want to lose consciousness? Isn’t it because it is normal to lose consciousness? Wouldn’t you be uncomfortable being awakened when you are asleep? Awakening is instinctively unpleasant. The same is true of birth ... That is the reason why babies are born crying. They don’t want to be born ...”

“As far as I know, the only person who laughed right after birth was Zoroaster.”

“You know very well ... When Zoroaster was born, there were seven wise men. Buddha did not cry either. Buddha walked seven steps as soon as he was born. Seven is a lonely number ..., right? People who know loneliness do not cry.”

“Even you must have cried when you were born.”

“Well ... I don’t remember it well ...” Shiki blinked charmingly and widely. “But the baby I gave birth to cried.”

“Even when you killed your daughter. I guess you didn’t cry ...”

“Why? What reason? Did I have to cry?” Shiki smiled. “Do you think my spirit would have allowed such a contradiction?”

Saikawa decided to ask one last question.

“You did that to get yourself killed, didn’t you?” Saikawa said nervously.

Shiki Magata smiled happily and nodded. “So ... that is an initiation to freedom.”

“You are turning yourself in to the police, right?”

“If I turn myself in, I may not be executed ...” Shiki put her hands on her cheeks. “I wonder if they tell me when I will be executed. I want to write the date of my death on my calendar ... What other schedule could be so extravagant?”

“Why won’t you, yourself ... well ... commit suicide?”

“Maybe I want someone to kill me ...” Shiki looked into the distance with an enraptured expression. “People want someone else to interfere in their lives. Isn’t that the essence of people’s desire to be loved by someone else? Saikawa-sensei ... No life is born of its own will. Isn’t the urge to die from the interference of others an instinctive desire for those born not of their own will?”

“In theory, I can see that ...”

“My father and mother may have thought so when they died. They would have been surprised that it was so sudden, though ...”

“Well, still, I don’t understand that.” Saikawa threw his cigarette into the ashtray. “But the reason why I don’t understand it is that I am programmed that way. What you say may be correct.”

“It is right for me, it is not right for you ...” Shiki said. “Either way, that is the extent of the concept of right.”

“Umm, Doctor ...” Saikawa asked. “Why did you come to see me?”

“Because I liked what you said in that ocean ... You said you could not smoke in the water. That was a statement I could not have predicted. That is the only reason. Saikawa-sensei ... you are a slow thinker but outstanding in your orientation. You are weak in judgment but excellent in objectivity. Maybe you have several personalities inside you, haven’t you? There must be many different Saikawa-sensei. Your slow thinking is due to the independence of the personalities within you, and your weak judgment is due to the balance of forces among those personalities. But ... that independence has created superior objectivity. The balance of forces creates a keen sensitivity to the direction of orientation. You have many eyes inside. They are miraculously not mixed together. No, the other you was created to protect the real you. Your structure is ... similar to mine.”

“I am honored to have you analyze me.” Saikawa smiled. “But what is the difference? Between you and I ...”

“We have very similar CPU architectures ... but yes, the biggest difference is probably the clock.”

“Then, in another one hundred years or so, will I be like you, Doctor?”

“No, one hundred years is still not enough.” Shiki tilted her head and chuckled. She stood up.

“Some people are waiting for me outside. Now ... Let’s say goodbye, Saikawa-sensei ...”

Saikawa stood up hurriedly. “Who guys are waiting for you?”

“They are the police who are following you.” Saying this, Shiki held out her right hand.

Saikawa shook hands with her. The genius’s hand was small and cold.

“They are following me? I haven’t noticed it ...”

“Honestly, I was hoping you would kiss me,” Shiki said. “But you wouldn’t do that ...”

“No, I won’t do that.” Saikawa bowed his head.

“She will be here soon.” Shiki smiled gently. “Will you kiss her?”

“It is none of your business, Doctor ...” Saikawa bowed again.

“I knew you would say so.”

“I am afraid I cannot give you a response you did not expect.”

Shiki Magata walked out through the lobby door.

Saikawa looked outside through the smoked glass.

He saw three men coming slowly up the library stairs. They surrounded Shiki Magata. She looked at Saikawa and waved.

I’m a hundred years too young to say I’m sad ..., Saikawa thought.

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To relieve the nervous stress, Saikawa smoked again in the lobby.

He felt like he would shed tears without the cigarette, but perhaps he just wanted

to believe so.

I have developed right now, Saikawa felt.

Then Saikawa returned to the third floor to pick up the foreign journal. Also, he could make a copy of it on the second floor. It was a sixteen-page paper.

As Saikawa was going down the stairs reading the copy, he saw Moe inserting her card into the automatic ticket gate in the lobby.

“Sensei!” Moe noticed Saikawa and waved to him.

Saikawa put his index finger to his mouth and indicated it to her. The students in the reading room looked up and saw them.

“Sorry ...” When Moe came close to Saikawa, she stuck out her tongue. Then she said in a small voice. “Already, have you finished your work?”

“Nishinosono-kun, if you like, shall I buy you coffee?” Saikawa said, smiling.

Moe widened her eyes and was surprised. “Wow ... I can’t believe it!”

“Don’t be loud ...” Saikawa whispered. “Let’s get out of here anyway ...”

The two left the library and got into Moe’s red sports car parked nearby. Saikawa put on his seatbelt, and she started the vehicle energetically.

“You are in a good mood ..., Sensei,” Moe said as she turned the steering wheel. Her car slid out through the campus gate and onto the main street.

“You think so ...?” Saikawa fudged.

The sports car was a two-seater, and the sound of its engine was so low that it resonated in Saikawa’s belly. The seats were low as if he were riding in a go-cart. It was the first time in his life that Saikawa had been in the passenger seat of a car driven by a woman.

Her vehicle pulled into the parking lot of a family restaurant closest to the university. Saikawa often walked here from his workplace. As they walked up the stairs and entered the restaurant, a female waitress in a uniform came out and said, “You are the group of two, correct?” *The group of two ... that’s quite a fresh word*, Saikawa smiled.

The two sat at a window seat by the street and both ordered hot coffee.

“Oops ...” Saikawa noticed. “I don’t have my wallet ... I left it in my office.”

“I have it.” Moe smiled. “I’ll buy you a drink.”

“I’ll pay you later, I promise.” Saikawa crossed his arms. “This is what happens when I do something I’m not used to doing. I’ve never been in a place like this with a girl, just the two of us.”

“That’s a joke, right?”

“Maybe it is a joke ...”

There were few customers in the restaurant, and quiet music was playing. It was a nostalgic melody Saikawa had heard in his student days, but he could not remember the song’s name.

The waitress brought two cups of coffee. It was a little diluted, but Saikawa drank the hot demonic liquid. Moe stirred her cup with a happy expression on her face. She did not add milk or sugar. Apparently, she was cooling it by stirring it.

“When I took my first class at Nishinosono-sensei ...” Saikawa looked out the window and said. “In the first class, Sensei asked us if we had done our preparation. I, who was sitting in the front row, answered honestly that I had not done any preparation ... Then, Sensei only told us to study the first chapter by next week ... and he walked out of the classroom.”

Moe had both elbows on the table and her face on her hands.

“The following week ... Well, I did most of the prep work. I just read the text, though ... When the class began, Nishinosono-sensei asked us if we had something we could not understand. No one asked any questions. Then Sensei told us he could do nothing if we already understood that. Sensei announced that next week would be chapter two and left the classroom again.”

Moe started to giggle. “Is it such an easy job? A university instructor is ...”

“No, I’m not finished with my story yet ... That next week I was seriously reading the text and thinking of questions. And then I asked the question. What do you think happened?”

“Think for yourself, he said, right?” Moe gave her opinion.

“No ... Nishinosono-sensei spent the next four weeks answering my question.

Week after week, he went on and on about his answers to my question. On the fourth and final week, he said, ‘Well, that’s my answer to Sohei Saikawa-kun’s question. What’s the next question? Does anyone have any other questions for chapter two?’ ...”

Moe smiled happily. Saikawa lit a cigarette.

“This is the first time Sensei has talked about my father to me ...” Moe smiled and said, but halfway through her words, her expression turned tearful.

“Ah, sorry. I hurt you ...” Saikawa put his cigarette on the ashtray and said. “It wasn’t a very interesting story ...”

“Yes ... I’m happy.” Moe took her eyes off her mentor and looked out the window.

“There aren’t any more professors like Sensei at the university in recent years,” Saikawa murmured.

“Sensei, why did you talk about my father suddenly?”

“Well, maybe, I was so nervous in the first situation that I was at a loss as to what I would say.” Saikawa shrugged. “My blood pressure must be going up about thirty. I guess ...”

“Sensei, have you never been to a restaurant with Gido-san?” Moe said, looking out the window.

“I have with Setsuko. But, you know ... Her husband is usually with us.” Saikawa picked up the cup. “Her husband is as giant as a wrestler. Too big for a human being ... I may be able to say so.”

Moe turned to Saikawa. “Gido-san has been married?”

“Of course. That’s why it’s Gido’s last name.” Saikawa smoked a cigarette and drank coffee.

“That’s why it’s Gido’s last name ?” Moe repeated. “What do you mean?”

“She got married and took the family name of Gido ...” Saikawa laughed. “The Gido family has quite a long history.”

“Umm ... What is the relationship between Sensei and Setsuko Gido-san?” Moe

looked straight at Saikawa.

“Eh? Haven’t you heard from her?” Saikawa was surprised. “She’s my younger sister ... Why? You didn’t know that until now?”

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Moe lay face down on the table and did not move for a while as if she were dead. But eventually, she looked up and glared at Saikawa for a moment. Then she continued to giggle for a very long time.

“But she called Sensei ... Sohei-kun ... So ...” Moe said, her breath breaking off. “Oh my ...”

Saikawa thought Setsuko must have been talking with Moe about it, and perhaps Setsuko thought Saikawa had already informed Moe of that.

“She’s a puzzle fanatic.” Saikawa explained. “She collects a lot of wondrous things, like disentanglement puzzles and such. You should ask her to show it to you next time ... Ah ..., she has a puzzle in her collection with a wooden key inside a glass jar. The key inside is bigger than the mouth of the jar, so there is no way to get the key out. It’s a puzzle to figure out how to get it out.”

“How about adding hot water to soften the wood?” Moe asked joyfully. “Or ... how about drying the wood to make it smaller?”

“Well, I don’t know the right answer,” Saikawa replied. “But ... Maybe that key can’t be taken out. There might be no answer, I suppose.”

“If so, how did the author of the puzzle get it inside?”

“The author must have placed a branch in the bottle when it was small. The tree would have grown and thickened inside, and then the author would have cut the branch with some special tool, shaved the wood ... to carve it into the shape of a key.”

“Ah, I see ...” Moe looked around nowhere once. “That’s the same as this case.”

“So ... That’s why I remembered it.” Saikawa smiled slightly.

“Umm, Sensei. About that incident ...”

“No, let’s not, Nishinosono-kun.” Saikawa said immediately. “I no longer want to

talk about that case. I don't want to know any more details. You know ... all the interesting parts are over. Now the police don't need to follow me."

"Oh, have you been aware of that, Sensei ...?" Moe smiled. "In fact ... Uncle strictly forbid me to talk to you about it."

"Because Dr. Magata might appear before me ... They have been spying on me, right?" Saikawa lit a cigarette. "The detectives would have had a hard time with this."

"Uncle told me I shouldn't even visit Sensei until yesterday ..." Moe shrugged. "He said it would be dangerous if something happened to me ... That's terrible, right?"

"Until yesterday?" Saikawa asked back.

"If something were to happen to Sensei, that would be a disaster ... But Uncle said Sensei would be absolutely safe. He's selfish and says all the right things ... Indeed ... I couldn't hold back ..."

"Nishinosono-kun. What do you mean by until yesterday?" Saikawa asked again.

"It turns out that Dr. Magata is now in Tokyo. They found traces of her access from a computer terminal in Tokyo ... It seems to be a computer center at T University. So it looks like a number of detectives headed for Tokyo this morning ..."

"Eh? Then, how are those following me?" Saikawa almost dropped his cigarette.

"Err, they have stopped following Sensei this morning." Moe narrowed her eyes and smiled happily. "I'm glad they didn't follow us on our date. Hey, why don't we go for a drive somewhere? Sensei, you know, today is Sunday."

Saikawa was absent-minded and slowly leaned back in his chair.

He pretended to look out the window but could not focus anywhere. He shoved his hands into his pants pockets.

They have stopped following me ...?

She moves others as easily as she writes programs. And how impregnable the security is ...

Who was being manipulated ...?

Who was the marionette ...?

Saikawa had the urge to start laughing.

“Go for a drive, you say ...” He smiled.

His right hand in his pocket touched some little hard substance. Saikawa plucked it out.

“Oh, it is ...” Moe said as she held the coffee cup with both hands. “A memento ..., right?”

The memento Saikawa placed on the table was a square plastic yellow block ...

It was a tiny loneliness, having dreamed of becoming a fine toy soldier.

This book was first published in 1996 in Japan by Kodansha Ltd., Tokyo, and translated in 2023 for The BBB: Breakthrough Bandwagon Books.

The Interview About The Perfect Insider with Dr. MORI, Hiroshi

B (Chief Editor of The BBB): Today, to commemorate the completion of the English version of “The Perfect Insider,” we would like to talk with the author Dr. MORI, Hiroshi. Dr. MORI is one of Japan’s most popular novelists, having written over 370 books as of February 2023 and having been selected by Amazon.co.jp as one of the “20 Hall of Fame Authors 2001-2010.” “The Perfect Insider” is the first novel of “MORI Mystery,” which has sold more than 17 million copies. This novel itself has sold more than 900,000 copies, making it not only Dr. MORI’s debut novel but an immortal milestone that will surely be named one of the greatest Japanese mystery novels ever written. We would like to ask you about various topics so that those new to this novel will be interested in the S&M (Saikawa & Moe) series starting with this work. Dr. Mori, thank you so much for your time today.

MORI, Hiroshi: It’s my pleasure. This novel is certainly the most widely read among all my books. So, I think there is no doubt that it is objectively my best-known work. This work is actually the fourth novel I have written, but it was the first to be published and can be considered my debut novel. However, as an author, this was not my first novel, and the response at the time of publication was not so great, which made me think, “After all, it is not a mystery nowadays, is it?”

This novel began to sell very well quite a few years later. About twenty years after its publication, it became a TV drama series and a TV animation series, and only recently has it been talked about more and more. I think it can be said that this novel was a so-called “slow starter.” This time, twenty-seven years after the publication, it is being translated into English. Thank you for taking it up.

B: The birth of this novel began when Kodansha, one of Japan’s leading publishers, issued a call for manuscripts in the Mephisto magazine in search of new novelist talent. Dr. MORI, an associate professor at a university at the time, sent Mephisto a novel you had written in your spare time from your work, which led to your debut. I heard that your first submission was not “The Perfect Insider,” the first Mephisto Prize winner, but “Doctors In the Isolated Room,” which was published as the second novel. Can you tell us how that came about?

MORI: Back then, I had no idea what kind of publishing company Kodansha was, nor did I know about the Mephisto magazine, of course. Anyway, it was my first attempt at writing a novel. That was “Doctors In the Isolated Room.” When I finished it and showed it to my family, they did not respond well. So, I thought it would be better to show it to someone who would understand its value and went to a bookstore.

I had never picked up a fiction magazine or something like that. But imagining that perhaps they were accepting fiction submissions somewhere, I took a magazine that looked appropriate on the shelves of a bookstore and rolled up the back of the page to check it out.

However, all of the magazines that invited manuscript submissions had a limit on the number of pages on manuscript paper. They also stated that the manuscripts had to be written vertically. Since my printer was incapable of vertical writing, and I had no manuscript paper, I did not know how many sheets of paper my work would be worth. Only one magazine did not specify the number of pages or the vertical writing style. It was the Mephisto magazine.

So I decided to submit it to the magazine. The Mephisto magazine was not looking for talent for any existing awards, and there was no prize money. It just said that it would be published immediately if it was interesting. I thought that royalties would be more considerable in the future than prize money, especially in the age of eBooks.

My first novel was a little more restrained because I wanted to make each book progressively more attractive. From the beginning, I was aiming for a series and continued to write more. While writing my third novel (“Jack the Poetical Private”), I received a call from Kodansha, saying they wanted to meet with me to discuss publishing. When I met with the editors for the first time, I handed them my second novel (“Mathematical Goodbye”), and shortly after, I sent them my third novel as well.

I was looking forward to my novel being published as a book. Around that time, I received a call from the chief editor asking me what my next piece would be like. I told him I was working on my fourth novel (“The Perfect Insider”), which would be about a locked room on an isolated island. The chief editor said he would publish it first as my debut novel. He decided to do so even without having read the story yet. Perhaps he judged that a flashy situation would be better for a debut novel.

For my part, I intended to make it progressively more amusing, so naturally, I thought the fourth novel would be the most entertaining at that point. I was worried that if this was to be published first, readers would be disappointed by the sequel. But if it became a book, I would receive royalties. That was why I wrote it. So I did as I was told and rewrote these four novels to be consistent chronologically.

I think it was about six months from my first submission to the time my fourth novel was published as my debut work. Shortly before the book was to be published, my editor told me that a new novelist prize called the “Mephisto Prize” had been established and that my novel would be the first winner. It was like a promotion for my debut. For my part, I did not write my work for the prize, nor did I submit the novel for it. But I basically think it is a good idea to leave everything to the editors regarding the publication.

By the time this novel was published, I had also completed the fifth novel (“Who Inside”), and the titles of the second to fifth novels were announced as being scheduled for publication in the future. Such a thing was apparently unusual in the publishing industry. I believe that the natural condition for announcing the titles of works to be published is that they have already been completed.

My debut novel was published as a Western paperback-size book called *Novels*. I

was surprised because I had expected it to be a pocket-size book called Bunko. I had no idea that such a size novel existed.

B: When Dr. MORI made your debut with “The Perfect Insider” in April 1996, I remember well I was shocked to learn that you had announced the titles up to the fifth novel “Who Inside” in the series. Moreover, I was astonished when I learned that the fifth work had already been completed at the time. It is quite unusual in the world’s publishing history for a newcomer novelist to have completed up to his fifth novel and already have a publication plan when he makes his debut. In the Western publishing world, it is common for authors to sign a contract to write several novels before they start writing, but even in such cases, the actual writing is done after the contract is signed and then in order.

Some non-Japanese readers who first learned of “The Perfect Insider” with this English edition may be surprised to learn that this work, Dr. MORI’s debut novel, is actually the fourth novel he has written. Compared to his earlier three novels (“Doctors In the Isolated Room,” “Mathematical Goodbye,” and “Jack the Poetical Private”), this work “The Perfect Insider” seems to have suddenly leaped to a higher dimension. Was this the result of your experience of writing the first three novels through trial and error had just come to fruition? Or was it the result of your being told by the chief editor that your fourth novel would be your debut, and you put a lot of energy into writing it?

MORI: When the chief editor decided to publish my fourth novel first, it did not affect my writing. I am not a kind of person who writes with a lot of energy. You know, I just write what comes to mind, what I envision, in a straightforward manner. Still, I am gradually getting used to writing novels. My first novel was technically immature and uncoordinated and required a lot of rewriting, but by the fourth novel, I could write one from the beginning that required almost no revision. It was probably because I learned the technical aspects of composition.

In that sense, I feel that having my fourth novel be the first was a good outcome. Anyway, I was a novice, not used to writing novels. I think the fact that I rewrote the four novels six months after I finished the first versions was also a good result.

When a book is published, it is read by many people. I was not originally drawn to such a situation, nor did I ever dream of becoming a novelist. I am a person who does not feel very happy when others praise me, so I was not particularly

enthusiastic about the idea of becoming a book author.

My purpose in writing novels is to make money. If I get royalties, I get my money back. Royalties are paid immediately after the book is published, regardless of whether the book sells well or not, even if many copies remain unsold. On the other hand, I do not benefit from awards or praise from readers. People often tell me that I am cold-hearted, but from my point of view, I feel other people are all too hot. I wrote novels as a job or part-time job. Of course, as long as I am paid, I have to think hard and do my work with integrity. But I never had any desire to be recognized or to be popular. I still don't even now.

B: Dr. MORI's consistently business-like stance may still surprise many in Japanese society. However, as "cool" is a compliment in English, people like Dr. MORI, who always think coolly and practically, may be regarded as more professional in countries outside Japan.

In the interview at the end of the English edition of "Down to Heaven," Dr. MORI said, "All the excerpted books, other than novels, in my works are what I have read, of course." The excerpt from Mr. Atsushi Aoki's "Introduction to Object-Oriented System Analysis and Design" presented at the beginning of "The Perfect Insider" can be read as an abstract allusion to the core of the story. Could you decide on this quote right away? Was it a passage that had made an impression on you long ago?

MORI: Well, I think this is a fine book in the field concerned. But what is important is not how good or bad the writing is but the direction of its ideas. When quoting it, I looked for striking passages.

The reason I include quotes in my novels is because many foreign novels have quotes. I recognized that it would be normal for a novel to be accompanied by an excerpt from some book. It is not that I want readers to read the book I am quoting from, nor does it directly relate to my novel. It is simply background music to create an atmosphere. It is an abstract allusion to the story, in other words, to create an atmosphere.

When I first started writing novels, I used to quote from books I owned. But eventually, I ran out of material and started buying appropriate books and flipping through them to determine where to quote. I did not read through those books.

B: Thank you for sharing why you have quotes in your novels and what you intend to do with them. It certainly has the effect of starting background music with a quote at the beginning. Hearing that the quotes were taken from books you had on hand when you began writing novels, I think I could look at the quotes in the sequel to the series with a new perspective.

I will not spoil the interview at the end of this book since some readers may read it before the novel, but the main trick of “The Perfect Insider” had a genuinely unprecedented impact. Even now, twenty-seven years after I first read it, I can vividly recall the excitement I felt at the time. Did you come up with such a bold and novel trick when you were working on your fourth novel? Or did you have the idea even before that?

MORI: I came up with the idea shortly before I actually wrote it. I also thought that perhaps someone had already written the same idea. But so far, no one has pointed that out, so it seems like an idea that has never been done before. There may be some ethical issues that make it challenging in some aspects to write and publish it. I am a little concerned about whether it would be safe to be translated into English and read worldwide. But the animation, drama, and comic versions of “The Perfect Insider” have already gone overseas, and I have not received any complaints to date. Is it allowed because it is still minor work?

Many readers seem to perceive the meaning of the “F” as the main trick of this mystery, but I think that is not quite true. Such a misunderstanding is, of course, completely acceptable. Also, the method of escape from the locked room is not a great trick.

In reality, this novel was not evaluated as a mystery at all when it was published. It was only recently that it was recognized as a mystery. Perhaps it was out of the strike zone that mystery fans were waiting for.

Rather, the futuristic IT-related atmosphere was still rare back then, and this novel was perceived as science fiction. However, I did not feel these elements were so unique, and that level of technology existed at that time. It was not that I was trying to write something advanced.

In my writing plan, I was more confident about the trick of the next fifth novel “Who Inside.” But apparently, the average reader sees something else than tricks.

Readers say what I consider a good trick is simple and disappointing. They say what I consider a small trick is flashy. In other words, I found that my perception is off.

This experience led me to modify my subsequent approach to writing. I do not believe that reader response is a matter of joy or sorrow, but I do believe that it is a business strategy that should always incorporate some measures.

B: Indeed, there will naturally be some foreign readers who will be ethically resistant to the core of this novel. However, such “shock” could have been seen in many excellent mysteries in the past, both in Japan and abroad. In the first place, the murder itself is against the ethics of society, and I feel that in many cases, works that have an impact as mysteries deviate greatly from ethics in some direction. As for the trick, it is true that many readers may perceive it superficially. I am very much looking forward to seeing how international readers will appreciate that as well.

By the way, I think the most significant factor that increases the tension and power of the world of “The Perfect Insider” is the presence of a genius named Shiki Magata. I assume that Shiki Magata is a person who was inevitably created to make the unprecedented trick of this work possible. Was there any other reason behind the placement of Shiki Magata in this novel?

MORI: Well, it required an unrealistic situation and a unique character to make the trick work. You could say that she was born out of necessity. Besides, in conventional stories, a genius is usually a man. Since I am a contrary person, I set the genius as a woman.

When I wrote “The Perfect Insider,” I naturally imagined Shiki Magata’s history. About half of the story of the “Shiki” tetralogy I later wrote had been constructed in my mind. Therefore, I felt that I wanted to have her appear again. As a result, Shiki Magata appeared in most of the subsequent series. It was not because it was something I wanted to do but instead because of my judgment that this was what readers wanted in their reactions.

Readers often say the author must like this kind of thing, but I am not writing it because I like it. It makes no sense to write about what I like. I am making a product for work, and it would be a fundamental attitude to respond to the needs of consumers.

The response to Shiki Magata has been more excellent than expected, and the character has become a long-lasting brand. I feel this was fortunate as a result.

B: As you said, in Dr. MORI's later novels, the mere mention of Shiki Magata's name instantly heightened the tension and always raised the anticipation of what unexpected developments might await us readers. I understood that it was because of the readers' needs that Shiki Magata repeatedly appeared in such a way. And the fact that Dr. MORI could invent a character with a strong presence called "Shiki Magata" was one of the factors behind your success, and I feel that "The Perfect Insider," which gave birth to this character, is still a special work, regardless of the fact that it is his debut novel.

This novel "The Perfect Insider" was published in April 1996, when Dr. MORI was thirty-eight. The associate professor Sohei Saikawa who appears in this novel is set to be thirty-two years old. Was this age a time of particular significance for you, such as when you were mature as a researcher? Or was it simply a consideration to keep the age of Sohei Saikawa and Moe Nishinosono as close as possible so they would not be too far apart like parent and child?

MORI: I myself was about that age when I became an associate professor. I was the youngest associate professor in the Faculty of Engineering at that time. Also, I think I was at a mature age as a researcher. However, I set Sohei Saikawa's age not because I wanted to be realistic but because I thought it would be easier for readers to empathize with him if he were as young as possible, considering the age range of the readers. That is why Moe Nishinosono's age is also set young. However, I later learned that many other novels in Japan have much younger teenage protagonists.

B: I see. As you said, I have the impression that many Japanese novels have much younger protagonists. The age of Associate Professor Saikawa may be close to the upper limit for young readers to empathize with him as a familiar presence.

In 1996, when this novel was published, the Internet and e-mail, both of which appear in this work, had yet to spread to the national level. Many people felt the novelty of this work as a novel at that time. In addition, VR (virtual reality) technology, an essential prop in this work, was not well known at the time, even more so than the Internet and e-mail. I personally feel that VR was only in the late 2010s that it really became widely recognized. In this sense, I feel that the times have finally caught up with "The Perfect Insider." As a researcher, you have used

the Internet and e-mail on a daily basis since then, right? Did you use VR in your novel not only as a necessary prop for tricks but also because it was originally related to your field of research and you knew it well?

MORI: Right, I was already using the Internet back then. I also thought of communicating with my editor via e-mail, but at that time, only some editors could do e-mail. Still, I was convinced that the Internet would become widespread within a few years, so I had no hesitation in using it for my novel. I think sending out a product with a few years in mind is natural. However, memory capacity has changed about a million times since then. I would be happy if readers could convert the units (for example, kilo to giga) when reading it.

As for VR, it is a totally different field from my own research. However, I already learned this in a university course in the early 1980s. It was a normal technology even before that. It took a lot of work to do and display complicated things in real time because the computing power could not keep up. As a concept, it has been around for a long time.

Even when I wrote it, to the extent I depicted in the novel, technology was not uncommon and was by no means science fiction. If you ask me if it was standard back then, I do not know. I just thought it was normal for me because I had been in the research world for so long that I lacked a general knowledge of the subject.

I rarely read fiction, so I am concerned that my ideas might resemble existing work. But with something new like this, I have a better chance of avoiding that duplication. In that sense, IT-related items were easy to use.

B: Indeed, memory capacity has expanded remarkably compared to twenty-seven years ago. I agree with what you said about VR, that the computing power was not up to par back then. Still, the idea has been around since then, hasn't it? The world of such research was rarely depicted, at least in Japanese novels, so many readers at the time had the impression that it was science fiction. But now, we can discover that all of these technologies have become commonplace after twenty-seven years.

The fact that many readers have recently grown fond of "The Perfect Insider" may have something to do with this historical background. What do you think is the reason why "The Perfect Insider" has been widely read by the Japanese people for over a quarter of a century without a single interruption?

MORI: It is simple. The reason is that people who have read the subsequent works will want to read the first one. In other words, every subsequent work promotes the previously published work. And in terms of content, I have written works that lead readers to do so. As a result, the first work had the highest circulation.

That is the characteristic of a novel product. The consumer's eye is always drawn to only the most recent development in ordinary products. This is true for both consumer electronics and video games. The newer the product, the more technologically advanced it should be.

But a novel can lead the reader back in time. This is because the product does not deteriorate. I also anticipated that in the Internet age, word of mouth would have a huge effect, so I wanted to make sure that people who read subsequent works would want to spread the word on the Internet if they related to previous works. In other words, if a large number of readers wrote that they had to read the first one to enjoy it, that would be good publicity.

In fact, the number of copies of this novel gradually increased as word of mouth spread among readers. Of course, there are many people who, after reading this work, give up on the works of MORI Hiroshi, saying that they are not suitable for them. However, a certain percentage of people would probably decide to read a few more of my works. This is the reason why my works have been selling slowly and steadily for a long time.

The uninterrupted popularity of this novel is due to the fact that subsequent works have been created in such a way. In a word, it is designed that way.

This work is too minor-oriented to be widely read and gain a large number of readers in a certain period of time. Still, gaining a small number of readers over a long period can result in gaining as many readers “in total” as possible. That is how we thought of it.

While it is difficult to make this kind of sale with books in bookstores, I foresaw that books would be sold online and that e-books would become mainstream. In such a situation, past works would be readily available to all. I envisioned such a business.

B: All of Dr. MORI's vast collection of works have led new readers to “The

Perfect Insider,” which is why you have continued to accumulate circulation over the past twenty-seven years. Indeed, that is one of the significant differences between ordinary products and novels. I am again strongly impressed by the fact that Dr. MORI’s works are designed to penetrate the market over such a long period of time. I look forward to seeing the same gradual penetration over time throughout the world in the future.

This work “The Perfect Insider” has been made into comics, a video game, a TV drama, and a TV animation. Of course, such media mixes contributed greatly to the proliferation of the original novel. Was any of these works particularly memorable to you?

MORI: It is interesting and business pleasing for an author to have my work converted to other media. However, it is something other than what we can sell by asking for it. I have never interfered in a case where a media mix has been realized. I honestly feel that it is interesting to have my work reworked by different people. After all, I know my own work well.

There are two comics, one game, one drama, and one animation. I enjoyed them all. Each left an impression on me. Each is interesting in its own way. It’s like, “Ah, so this is how you did it.” or “That’s how you interpreted it.” Even though they differ from the original, I don’t feel any resistance at all. In fact, I sometimes find it more interesting when they are different because they go through the trouble of making them different.

I know it is not well known to the general public, but when my web diary was published as a book, Mr. Naoki Yamamoto, a *mangaka* (cartoonist), drew a very short manga. I found it really funny. Perhaps it was the closest to my image.

B: The fact that this novel has a different appeal when converted to other media is probably because “The Perfect Insider” is a novel in which many different approaches can be found. This work also discussed Associate Professor Saikawa’s thoughts on the differences between Japanese and foreign natures. In recent years, popular Japanese novels are sometimes adapted to Hollywood. Would you feel uncomfortable if “The Perfect Insider” were to be made into a live-action movie overseas?

MORI: No, I feel no differently about it. On the contrary, when I was writing

this novel, I imagined what it would be like if it were made into a movie in Hollywood. This is always the case with me. I am interested in media mixes abroad, not domestically. But it has not happened. I guess it is still difficult. I am confident that reconstructing a film in a different culture will produce something interesting.

B: If “The Perfect Insider” were to be made into a movie in Hollywood, it would probably be very different from what we can imagine at this point. But that is why we would like to see it, right? Just imagining what kind of actors would play the characters of Associate Professor Saikawa, Moe Nishinosono, and Shiki Magata is exciting. I sincerely hope this English version will be widely read and that the day will come true in the future.

Finally, we have recently received your permission to translate the second novel in the S & M series, “Doctors In the Isolated Room,” following “The Perfect Insider,” into English. Thank you so much. “Doctors In the Isolated Room” is also extremely important because it is the first novel by author Dr. MORI, Hiroshi. As an English translator, the interviewer personally hopes to be able to translate this S & M series into English in turn in the future. To do so, the support of our readers is essential. If you liked this series through “The Perfect Insider,” please continue to support the S & M series in the future. Thank you so much, Dr. MORI, for sharing your valuable story with us today.

MORI: It is I who want to thank you. My second novel is relatively modest and, in a way, solid. Since it is my actual first novel, it can be said that it is the most representative of who I was at the time. I look forward to working with you again on the novel.

This interview was conducted in January 2023, exclusively for The BBB: Breakthrough Bandwagon Books.