



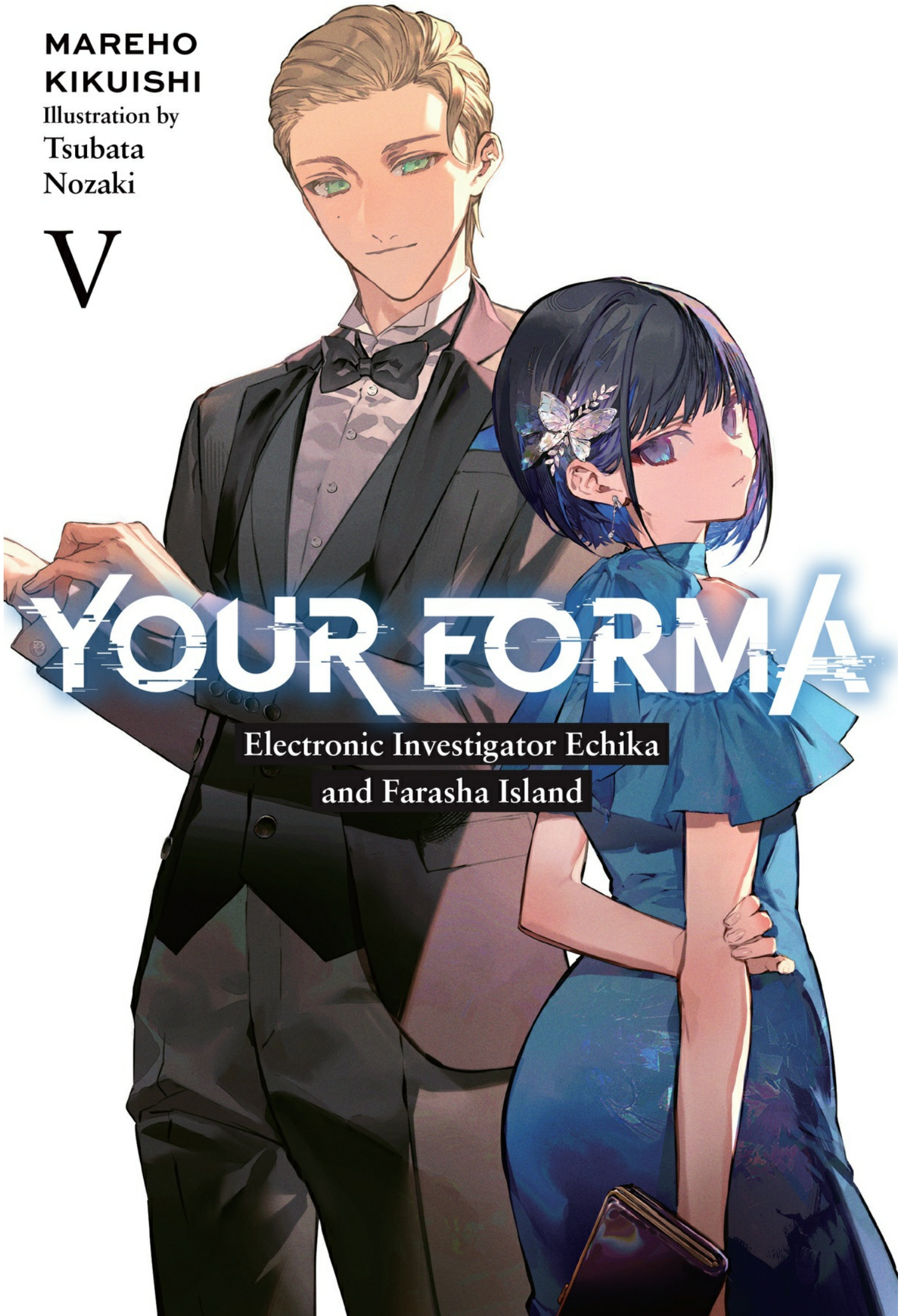
MAREHO  
KIKUISHI

Illustration by  
Tsubata  
Nozaki

V

# YOUR FORM/A

Electronic Investigator Echika  
and Farasha Island





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Electronic Investigator Echika  
and Farasha Island

V



Y O U R   F O R M A

Electronic Investigator Echika and Farasha Island

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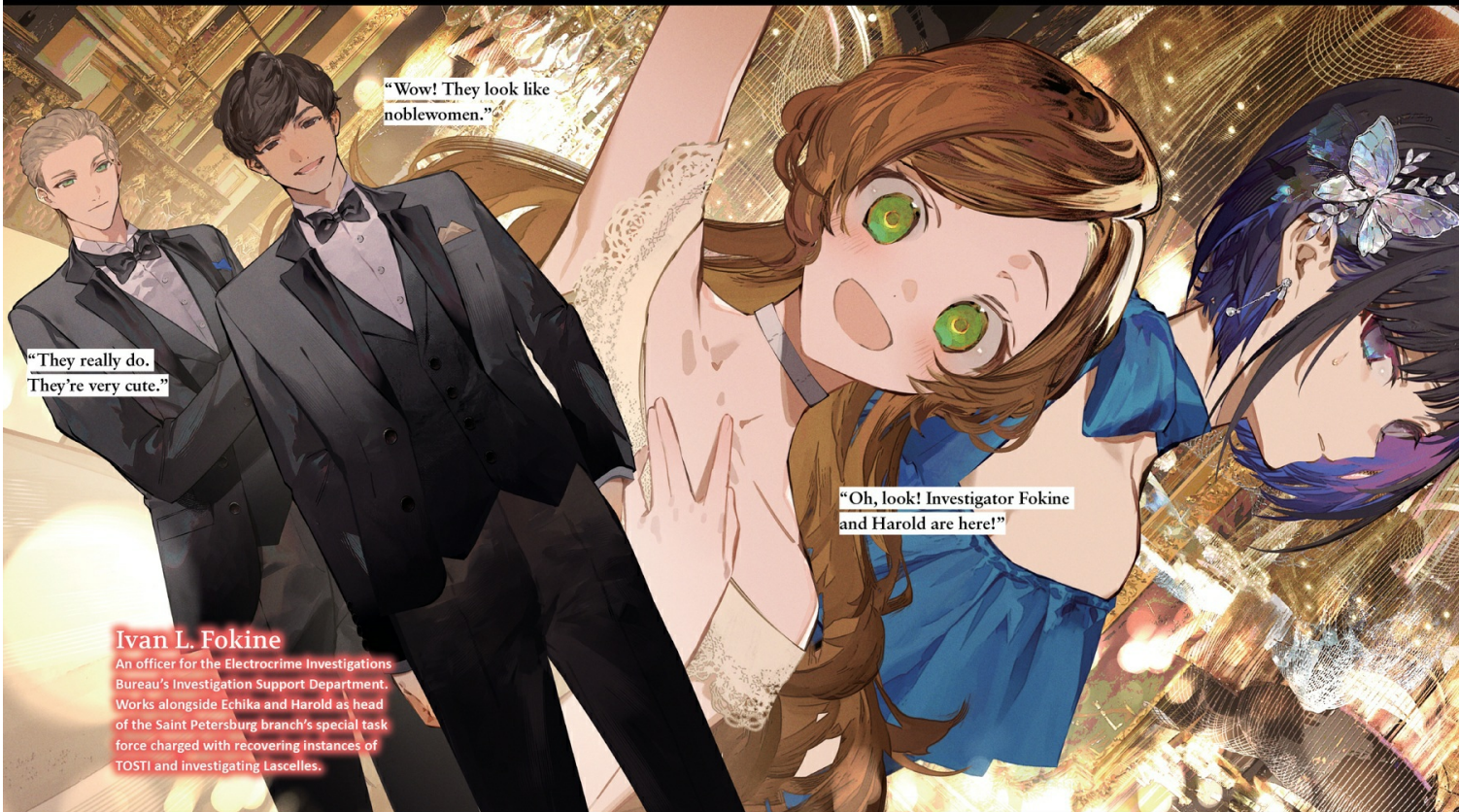


"No, I don't... I wasn't angry at you to begin with."

"While our meeting is more coincidence than anything else, Investigator Hieda, allow me to take the opportunity to apologize. Please, don't forgive me."

**Steven H. Wheatstone**

Harold's "older brother," the first of the RF Models developed by Novae Robotics Inc. Worked as secretary for the adviser to Rig City, a massive IT corporation, during which time he was involved in an unsolved incident where he shot at Echika. Was placed in shutdown mode to identify the cause of his hostility. However...



"Wow! They look like noblewomen."

"They really do. They're very cute."

"Oh, look! Investigator Fokine and Harold are here!"

**Ivan L. Fokine**

An officer for the Electrocrime Investigations Bureau's Investigation Support Department. Works alongside Echika and Harold as head of the Saint Petersburg branch's special task force charged with recovering instances of TOSTI and investigating Lascelles.



MAREHO KIKUISHI

Illustration by

Tsubata Nozaki

V

# YOUR FORM/A

Electronic Investigator Echika and Farasha Island

YEN  
ON  
New York

# Copyright

## **YOUR FORMA V**

**Electronic Investigator Echika and Farasha Island MAREHO KIKUISHI**

**Illustration by**

**Tsubata Nozaki**

Translation by Roman Lempert

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YOUR FORMA Vol.5 DENSAKUKAN ECHIKA TO TOZASARETA KENYUTOSHI

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YOUR FORMA

## Electronic Investigator Echika and Farasha Island

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“Incidentally, everyone, do you know what happens inside a chrysalis when a butterfly metamorphoses?”

“The larva melts away into mush for a time. Some people say it’s like they die and are reborn. Through that process, they Emerge into a perfect, beautiful creature entirely unlike the original.”



YOUR FORMA

Prologue

Winter

Darkness





# Prologue

## Winter Darkness

It dawned on him that loving something with a different makeup than your own was akin to eternal idolatry.

“Why did you make me like this?”

Steve was in Novae Robotics Inc.’s main office, in the First Engineering Department’s maintenance room. He was sitting on a chair, touching his abdomen over the gown he had on. The area where Taylor had shot him had been repaired. But the murky sensation his emotional engine was spewing out still clung to his thoughts like tar.

Even now, two weeks after the resolution of the sensory crime, it all felt like it had happened yesterday.

“I’m proud of the way you’ve matured, Steve. No matter what anyone else says.”

Beaming in front of him was his “mother,” Professor Lexie Willow Carter. She’d only just activated the analysis pod. It whirred to life, with all the black luster of a casket. And indeed, it wasn’t much different in function from one.

“I’m sure you realize this already, but there’s no telling when we’ll wake you up next. On paper, there’s a chance we’ll be allowed to rouse you once we ‘identify the error in your utility function system,’” Lexie said. She worked the pod, and its hatch silently popped open. “But what they don’t know is that you’ve been running normally the whole time. It was entirely within your parameters that you were able to shoot Investigator Hieda’s holo-model. They’ll never find the source of your ‘glitch.’”

*So this slumber may be a prolonged one, she added.*

“That’s fine with me.” Steve held a hand over his eyes. “If anything, I’d rather you not wake me up.”

“Don’t you think you’re being a bit too dour over this? Elias Taylor may have been a genius, but he wasn’t exactly an upstanding guy. So why did someone as no-nonsense as you cooperate with him?”

“You don’t understand anything about me, Professor.”

“You know, when I completed you three, I didn’t think you’d have a rebellious phase.” Lexie shook her head sadly. “Could you get into the pod? I’ll sing you a lullaby if you’d like.”

His “mother’s” jokes were always in poor taste. Steve rose from his chair and settled into the analysis pod as requested. Then he took off his gown, connected the pod’s analysis wires into his cervical and lumbar vertebrae, and lay down obediently. He fixed his eyes on the cold LED lighting of the ceiling.

*“If someone is going to kill her, it should be me! I won’t hand that role over to a mere machine!”*

His last memory of Elias Taylor replayed in his mind. He saw the man squeeze his thin, emaciated fingers around the trigger, firing a bullet that ripped through his stomach. At that moment, something inside Steve had snapped. The shot had left physical damage, yes, but what it had really shattered was his firm belief that he and Taylor were connected.

But Steve wasn’t an accomplice to him. He wasn’t anything to him. He was just a tool. The savior he’d looked up to all this time had been nothing but an illusion.

“You know, Steve.” Lexie peered into the pod, her light-brown hair dangling down and tickling the nape of his neck. “I prefer Amicus to people, and I like to believe that I understand how you feel.”

“Please close the hatch. I’m sorry, but I’d rather not have to look at your smug face right now.”

Lexie forced a shrug and moved out of his field of vision. Irritatingly, the scent

of her perfume lingered.

She knew nothing. Understood nothing. Not even a hint of how his emotions fluctuated. And Taylor was just like her, even though Steve had mistakenly believed otherwise.

That bit of self-loathing triggered his memory to replay again.

*“Steve, how long does trauma linger for an Amicus?”*

Taylor, still well enough to work at this point, was on the top floor of the multinational technology enterprise Rig City, writing over a desk littered with papers. They’d only just met, and Taylor’s features weren’t yet ravaged by illness. He tore his almond-shaped eyes away from his PC monitor and looked at Steve.

*“I brought you coffee.”* Steve stood at the door, looking between Taylor’s face and the tray. *“What does that have to do with my negative past experiences?”*

*“Oh, that? It’s not related. I just got curious, is all.”*

*“It’s hard for me to say, since I’ve only been around a few years, but any trauma an Amicus accrues will likely linger for the duration of their life,”* Steve said, approaching the desk. He put down the tray and laid out the saucer and cup. *“We are incapable of forgetting. And since we can’t lose a single memory, I can only speculate that negative experiences will linger far longer than they do in humans.”*

*“Then what about altering the way you perceive those memories? You can change the way you think, can’t you?”*

*“I’m sorry, I don’t quite follow...”*

*“Humans are, put kindly, flexible creatures. If you want to be less nice about it, they’re fickle. It just occurred to me that your life might be easier if you had that sort of fickleness.”*

Taylor wrapped his thin-skinned fingers around the handle of the cup. Many of the company’s employees mocked him as a lonely genius and an eccentric shut-in, but when it came to Amicus, he was openhearted. Looking back on it now, Steve realized that he was very skilled at presenting himself to others.



Humans were far better liars than Amicus could ever be, after all.

*“By the way, Mr. Taylor, I have a report.”*

*“Yes?”*

*“It’s about Jones from the marketing department, who you suspected to be an industrial spy. He resigned this morning.”* Steve placed the tray under his arm. *“Jones didn’t seem to know we had doubts about him, but I wonder if he picked up on it, somehow.”*

*“Maybe he got sick of working here. I did worm that idea into his mind.”*

Taylor rose to his feet, picking up his cup. As the man walked over to the window with his back turned, a series of thoughts ran through Steve’s mind. If his memory was correct...

*“But you never met with any of the other employees this week. You couldn’t have wormed that idea into his head,”* Steve said.

*“And yet this place is always connected to the outside.”* His back still turned, Taylor brought a finger to his temple. That made everything click. *“But they never seem to give up, those members of the Alliance...”*

Steve looked down at his feet. Taylor’s shadow was cast over the handwoven Persian carpet, nearly touching the ends of Steve’s shoes.

*“By contrast, you are silent and diligent. I trust you, Steve.”*

Something stung in Steve’s chest as he recalled Taylor turning around and smiling at him. Seeking to affirm Taylor’s trust in him, he’d tried to take an innocent person’s life. If Electronic Investigator Echika Hieda hadn’t used a holo-model, he would have done something truly irreversible.

*“Farewell, Professor Lexie.”*

He finished replaying his memory. The shutdown sequence would take roughly ten minutes, and as it began, Steve looked up at his “mother.” Lexie was resting her arm against the edge of the pod once again, but thankfully, she wasn’t humming a lullaby.

*“This isn’t good-bye forever. Well, probably. And maybe unfortunately for you.”*

“Unfortunate, yes. Absolutely.” He blinked once, in place of a sigh. “But yes... If you run into Harold in the future, could you please tell him this for me? ‘Don’t trust that investigator too blindly.’”

Lexie cocked an eyebrow. “What’s this about, all of a sudden?”

“‘You are far too different from us. A time will come when you betray us.’ Please tell him I said that.”

Based on her dubious expression, it seemed unlikely that she would relay that message to Harold. But he needed to say that regardless. Before long, the hatch closed on him, mercifully cutting off the outside world. Steve closed his eyelids as his thoughts all ground to a halt, like they were being torn off in layers.

*Please. Just let me rest in peace. Because in the end, I’ve never felt thankful for coming into this world. Not even once.*



Two weeks had passed since the second coming of the Nightmare of Petersburg Amicus sympathizer serial murder case had been resolved. At this very moment, Kazimir Martinovich Szubin was being questioned in the Saint Petersburg police headquarters’ interrogation room.

Echika stood on the other side of the one-way mirror as she watched Szubin, who was sitting across from a detective. His bangs had been cut during his brief hospitalization, revealing his eyes. It was clear that whatever had haunted him had been excised.

“Szubin, did you aid in Napolov’s crimes for fear of losing him as your only friend?” asked the detective from the Robbery-Homicide Division from the other side of the desk. “Did you become his accomplice out of loneliness?”

“Yes... Looking back on it now, that was a mistake.”

Assistant Inspector Napolov, the mastermind behind the Nightmare incidents, had killed himself before he was arrested. His accomplice, Szubin, had crashed his car at the time of his capture and needed to be hospitalized. He’d been discharged from the hospital at the end of the previous week.

“I hope Szubin can yield some clues that lead to the copycat killer,” Harold

whispered, standing next to Echika and gazing into the one-way mirror. The meticulousness of his artificial features was evident even in the semidarkness of the room. His blond hair shone in what little light there was.

“Do you really think he’s related to whoever murdered Detective Sozon?”

“It’s possible. After all, the copycat killer knew about things that weren’t disclosed to the media at the time...like how the real killer arranged the severed limbs of his victims at the scene of the crime. That suggests he had contact with someone involved with the investigation.”

“I thought so too, at first, but that might be off the mark,” said Detective Akim, who was also present for the interrogation.

Sozon’s one-time partner had recently been promoted to the investigative lead on the Nightmare of Petersburg case. Since the interrogation was not at all fully resolved yet, his expression was quite stiff.

It was Akim who had asked Harold and Echika to attend Szubin’s questioning.

“We’re reinvestigating what everyone who was involved with the interrogation was doing on the day Sozon was murdered.” Akim looked at Echika. “I looked into everyone who was familiar with the Nightmare incident at the time, but they all have alibis. At present, we haven’t found any proof anyone hired an outsider to attack Sozon, either.”

“Is it possible details of the case leaked? Maybe through cracking, or an eyewitness, or the families of the people involved in the investigation?”

“Nothing of the sort. We considered asking for Brain Dives if we found anyone suspicious, but...”

Akim massaged the bridge of his eyes in exhaustion. Echika and Harold couldn’t help but sigh, too. Ultimately, they were still groping through the dark.

“At the time of the crime, did you confine Electronic Investigator Hieda and Mr. Nicolai in the dacha with the intent of killing them?”

On the other side of the mirror, the interview was still proceeding. Hearing this question, Szubin unfolded his cuffed hands. His expression was stiff and unmoving, like a mask.



“Yes. The plan was that I kill the two of them in Assistant Inspector Napolov’s place... But I couldn’t go through with it. I was scared. Too terrified to carry out the plan, or do what he said...”

“That’s why you got in the van and tried to make a getaway?”

“Yes. And as you know, I crashed into a tree... After that, I was dragged out of the van,” Szubin muttered, leaning against the backrest of his chair.

“Dragged out? By who?”

“By Harold...” The words fell heavily from his lips. “The Amicus. He pulled me out of the driver’s seat, slammed me against the ground. He threatened me... I thought he was going to kill me...”

This was the first Echika had heard of that. She glanced over to Harold next to her without even thinking about it. He looked unruffled by Szubin’s words and shrugged nonchalantly. As far as Echika knew, Harold had gone straight after Szubin once the man took off, arresting him after he crashed his vehicle into a tree.

*But Szubin says he threatened him...?*

“Harold.” Detective Akim glanced at him dubiously. “Is what Szubin saying true?”

“I did drag him out of the car,” the Amicus replied calmly. “After the incident, Szubin was wedged between the driver’s seat and the steering wheel, which was a dangerous situation. I decided that he’d be in mortal danger if I didn’t pull him out right away.”

“So you acted to save his life.”

“Yes. I did call out to him to confirm he was conscious, but I didn’t threaten him... Szubin suffered a cerebral contusion at the time. It’s likely his memory of the events is off.”

*No. I bet you really did threaten Szubin.*

Their exchange filled Echika with spine-tingling fear. At the time, Harold had believed that Szubin was Sozon’s killer. He must not have been able to contain his anger when he was alone with him. She thought back to what had happened

in the basement. Harold had shot Napolov with the intent of taking revenge. Those weren't the actions of an Amicus obeying the Laws of Respect.

To respect humans, obediently follow their orders, and never harm a human being. It wasn't hard to imagine what would become of Harold if it became apparent that he wasn't operating by those stipulations. At best, he would be placed into forced shutdown mode like his brother Steve.

That said, there wasn't any evidence on the scene that would cause doubt over Harold's account.

"I see." Akim easily accepted Harold's explanation. "I guess his memory would be faulty if he was out of it..."

Szubin continued his testimony inside the interrogation room, but like Akim, the detective speaking to him didn't seem to be taking it too seriously. Of course they didn't—there were no cases of a normally functioning Amicus trying to harm a human.

But even so, Echika broke into a nervous sweat. A dull, oozing pain filled the pit of her stomach.

By the time they left the city police headquarters, it was already dark out.

**<The current temperature is 3°C. Attire index B is recommended, as snowfall is expected shortly>**

Buffeted by the nettles of cold, prickly air blowing in from the Moyka River, Echika buried her mouth under her scarf. Her body felt stiff and rickety from the tension she'd been carrying during the interview.

"I got a message from Investigator Fokine. He said we can go straight home today," Harold said, glancing at his wearable terminal beside her.

The holo-browser opened on a message from Fokine. Echika glanced at it absentmindedly. Thankfully, the city police had cleared Harold of all suspicion, but more situations like this one could crop up as long as the investigation continued. That thought made her restless. They would have to weasel their way out of trouble like this each time.



What if they lost sight of the exit one day?

*No—don't think about that.*

“By the way.” Harold tapped the holo-browser with a long finger. Fokine’s message disappeared, replaced by a map with the nearby restaurants highlighted. “Would you like to have dinner together, while we have the chance?”

Sometimes, she was jealous of how strong-minded this Amicus could be.

“You don’t have to fuss over me.”

“The only thing you’ve eaten over the last few days is nutrient jelly, right?”

“Well, yes.” *How did he know?!* “Since when have you been doubling as my health management app?”

“I could be one, if that’s what you want,” he said, quoting something he’d once told her, with a perfect smile. “But above all else, I’m asking because I enjoy dining with you. You looked like a hamster when you stuffed your cheeks of full of piroshki last week.”

“Yes, I get it. That’s not a compliment.”

“I could be a table manners app, if you would prefer.”

“What, so I can dine with royalty? I’m good. It’s not like we’ll be going to a high-class restaurant anytime soon.”

“Don’t say that. I’ll teach you all the ins and outs.”

“Lay a finger on me, and I’ll stomp on your foot.”

“Forget a finger—I seem to recall you placing both your arms around me a week or two ago.”

“I’m glad you’re feeling better, but if you keep talking about this, I really will stomp on your foot.”

Harold backed off from her slightly. It felt like he’d been cracking more jokes than usual lately. This did nothing to assuage Echika’s anxiety, and she hurried over to the parking lot. But as she stuffed her hands into her pockets, the sensation of hugging Harold in that basement came to mind. His warmth, lower

than a human's. The softness of his hair, too vivid to come across as artificial.

She curled her fingers, grasping the memories.

*Why am I remembering this? Ever since that happened, something inside me has been all out of whack. It outright makes me sick.*

"Walking too fast is going to be bad for your injured ribs." Harold walked beside her. "They haven't fully healed, right?"

"It's fine now," she bluffed. It still hurt a little. "But more importantly... About what Szubin said earlier. You really did threaten him, didn't you?"

"Of course not. I had no intention of threatening him." *Intention, huh.* "But at the time, I believed he was the killer."

"So you did manhandle him." Echika exhaled through her nose. So she was right. "If there's anything else you're withholding, you'd better tell me now."

"All right." Harold stopped blinking for a moment. "Szubin was the only time this happened."

"Really?"

"Really." Could she actually take him at his word, though?

They reached the parking lot. Echika entered the Lada Niva alongside Harold. As she buckled herself into the passenger's seat, Harold switched on the engine. Hot air instantly shot from the vents, undoing some of the numbness in her cheeks. The Amicus preferred things cold and would normally have lowered the temperature right away, but he held back today.

"It's freezing tonight. I have no intention of letting you suffer." He smiled softly. "Are you sure you don't want to go grab dinner?"

"I'm good. Go home early, for Darya's sake."

"At least let me drop you off at home, then."

"Thanks." She directed another anxious look at him. "Are you sure you didn't do anything else that you're not telling me about?"

"You're looking at me like you think I'm cheating on you."

"Listen." She stiffened a little. His recent friendliness startled her sometimes.

“It’s not... If there’s nothing, that’s fine.”

The Niva drove off slowly. Echika browsed the news on her Your Forma, as usual.

**<Cold front approaches western Russia>**

**<Next-generation research city approves cutting-edge technology>**

**<Special feature: Two weeks since the Nightmare of Petersburg>**

As city lights and the dark of night flowed by the car window, Echika spotted a snowflake fluttering down. She recalled the members of the Electrocrime Investigations Bureau talking about how the first snow of the year was late, but now it seemed that winter was about to be in full force. The city would once again be filled with short days and long nights.

“Echika.”

Harold, who had remained silent until then, spoke up as he stopped at a red light.

“Yes?”

“Stop being conceited enough to think you can protect me.”

Her cheeks stiffened for a moment. The Amicus’s eyes were fixed ahead on the windshield. She thought back to what he had said to her in the garden of the Union Care Center a few weeks back.

*“If my secret ends up getting exposed to the public, don’t try to hide it for me.”*

Harold’s secret—the RF Models’ unique neuromimetic system, which Professor Lexie had clandestinely implemented to skirt the IAEC’s inspections. Modeled after the human cranial nerve structure, the system was both illegal and unethical, as far as modern society was concerned.

Echika had resolved to carry the truth alone ever since Professor Lexie revealed it to her. She’d felt it would burden Harold to tell him that she knew. But when they got wrapped up in the Nightmare incident, she cracked.

*I told him everything.*

But contrary to Echika’s assumptions, Harold hadn’t changed his attitude



toward her. If anything, he seemed closer to her after she confessed, and he wasn't anxious at all.

Now, however, the Amicus's expression was chillingly serious.

"No, I didn't mean it like that," Echika lied instantly. The last thing she wanted was for him to feel responsible. "I just, um...I just asked because I thought I should know, as your partner."

Harold furrowed his brow skeptically. "It didn't sound that way."

"I worded things wrong. I'm sorry."

Regardless of how he interpreted her statement, he simply glanced at her and let the matter slide. The traffic light turned green, and the Niva drove off, the beams of the streetlamps caressing the windshield.

Their conversation trailed off from there. For some reason, Echika got the urge to smoke.

Before long, they crossed the Neva River via the Alexander Nevsky Bridge and reached Echika's apartment. After the car pulled over at the side of the road, Echika got out and was enveloped by cold air and the sound of traffic. She felt oddly relieved. The window slid down, revealing Harold's face.

"Tell Darya I said hi," Echika said, before he could speak up. "Thanks for the ride. See you tomorrow."

"Yes, see you..."

Harold looked like he had something else to say. Maybe she was just imagining things. She blinked, and he was back to his usual smile.

"Good night, Echika."

"Yeah. Good night."

The Niva drove away, disappearing into the sea of taillights. After seeing him off, Echika entered her apartment. She still felt a little shaken up, so she decided to check her mailbox to settle down. Then, as she climbed the steps, regret washed over her.

She'd "worded things wrong"? There were a million better retorts than that.

When she'd led Harold out of that basement, she truly believed she'd reached out to his heart. That her words had really meant something to him.

But at some point, their shared burden had unbalanced their relationship, and she couldn't help but feel that the odd closeness Harold was showing was an attempt to hide that sense of awkwardness.

It was like how they used to act around each other, but something had changed. And neither Echika nor Harold knew how to handle it.

She lived in a one-room apartment furnished for a single person. Echika kicked off her shoes at the entrance and made straight for the bed. After diving into the old mattress, she realized she still had her coat on. As she snaked her arms out of the sleeves, she heaved a sigh. Taking a shower and having dinner felt like a drag.

She languidly stretched out over the bed like a cat, her head still full of worries.

*"Stop being conceited enough to think you can protect me."*

Impossible. If Harold's secret got out, she wouldn't be able to stand by and do nothing. But how much could one maintain a lie in a society where the Your Forma was commonplace? Even if you tried to smooth things over, your Mnemosynes could expose your every falsehood. As a Diver, Echika knew this better than anyone.

*If there's one thing I can do to defend myself, it would be...*

Echika got out of bed and approached her nightstand. This was all she'd brought from her old home in Lyon. She touched the drawer's biometric device with a fingertip, undoing the lock. Inside were the nitro-case necklace she hadn't worn in so long, an old postcard, and a contract.

And hidden among these objects was a Mnemosyne-tampering HSB cartridge the size of a pinky nail.

*"I'll let you have this first. If you're going to arrest me, you should have it."*

Professor Lexie had used this on Aidan Farman at one point, and had handed it over to Echika prior to her arrest. She likely gave it to her with the intent of it

serving as evidence, but Echika never did end up submitting it to the bureau, because she was overcome with the baseless fear that handing it over could somehow end up exposing the secret of the RF Models.

And at this point, she felt that it was a good thing she'd kept it. If there was ever the risk that her Mnemosynes could end up exposing the secret, she would have to use this. There was no technology for restoring erased Mnemosynes, so this would make for a good countermeasure.

*...Am I thinking too hard about this?*

She still didn't quite understand why she was so fixated on Harold. No—she didn't want to understand. That was all there was to it.

Echika ruffled her hair and picked up the nitro-case necklace, then looked at the slightly wrinkled envelope. What it contained was by now a sweet memory—her father Chikasato's will. He'd written it four years ago, before ending his life at a Swiss assisted euthanasia company. She hadn't wanted to look at it before now and had ended up stuffing it in this drawer.

She picked up the envelope and took out its contents. Her father's handwriting, etched over cheap stationery, felt colder and more distant than she remembered. She scanned over the words, but oddly enough, they didn't weigh on her heart.

It was just like how even a deep, gaping crater could eventually become part of the scenery. In which case...she'd come quite far, without even noticing.

Echika glanced out the window for no reason in particular. Powdered snow began falling, silently blotting out the night. It had been almost a year since she'd met Harold and come to terms with the pain she felt toward her father.

She felt like a long winter was right around the corner.





YOUR FORMA

## Chapter 1

### Farasha Island



# Chapter 1

## Farasha Island

1

**<The current temperature is 29°C. Attire index E, well-ventilated clothing, is advised>**

“Wait, I thought it was supposed to be winter.”

Dubai International Airport. As soon as they left the terminal to make their way to the roundabout, they were greeted by a searing blast of air. Echika immediately regretted wearing a turtleneck. The sky was clear, without a single cloud in sight, and rays of blinding sunlight were shining down on them over the canopy. Just yesterday, they’d been in snowy Saint Petersburg, and her body was very much protesting at the drastic change in climate.

“It really doesn’t feel like the end of November. Maybe we could go swimming at the beach!”

“I looked into it, and the cottage we’ll be staying in has a pool.”

“Listen, you two, we’re not here on vacation. We have an investigation to do.”

At Echika’s side, three people were engaged in a lively discussion: Bigga, dressed in a very fluffy one-piece; Fokine, who’d taken off his suffocating coat; and Harold, wearing a summer jacket. All three of them were carrying duffel bags.

“The ride they sent us should be here any minute now...”

“Isn’t it that van over there?”

Harold pointed in the direction of a line of parked taxis. Among them was a silver van with a butterfly decal on it. Fokine and the other two made their way toward the vehicle, and Echika followed. She'd tried to travel as light as possible, but owing to her melancholic mood, the strap of her bag felt like it was tearing into her shoulder.

Really, how had things come to this? It had all started two days ago.



**“Good news. We were able to unlock TOSTI’s back door.”**

In a conference room of the Electrocrime Investigations Bureau’s Saint Petersburg branch, Chief Totoki revealed the reason for calling this meeting. Her image was projected over a flexible screen.

Needless to say, Echika very nearly slid off her chair in shock. The familiar faces of the members of the other branches, or rather the footage of them seated at conference tables, all broke into silent excitement.

*What?*

“Are you serious?” Fokine whispered next to her. “You actually opened it?”

“We did think that analyzing Bernard’s back door could help us unlock TOSTI’s source code, but...,” Echika said, somehow straightening herself up on her chair. “When did they manage that?”

As she asked this, she glanced at Harold. He was talking to Bigga, looking equally as shocked. His eyes met hers for a second, and they both ended up looking away.

“Was Bernard the key after all?” Fokine asked Totoki.

**“Yes.”** Totoki was as stone-faced as ever, but there was a twinge of enthusiasm in her voice. **“HQ’s analysis team managed to break in with the help of an outside expert. They applied the structure of Bernard’s back door to TOSTI... The team didn’t go into much detail, but apparently it wasn’t easy. Either way, they were able to unlock TOSTI’s source code.”**

Totoki worked the screen, and a browser window opened in it. Lines of code



filled it, overwhelming Echika. Programming language. She didn't have the knowledge to make sense of this, so it all looked like a gigantic swirl of ciphered text to her. Nevertheless, this was TOSTI's true identity.

Created by Alan Jack Lascelles, TOSTI was an analysis AI that had been briefly posted to the internet as an open-source program in violation of the International AI Operations Law.

Despite its surprising functions and performance, TOSTI's programming language and language-processing software seemed decidedly average, which had led the Electrocrime Investigations Bureau to suspect that its real code was hidden behind a back door. But until now, their analysis had borne no fruit, and their investigation had stalled.

But during the inquiry into the Nightmare murders, Echika and her group had happened to visit Delevo Grief Care Company, where they discovered that Bernard, an Amicus working there, had been modified by Lascelles. Bernard's back door was simpler than TOSTI's, and as Harold predicted at the time, it allowed the bureau to finally crack the program open.

Alan Jack Lascelles. He was, in truth, a "ghost" who didn't exist. Although he was registered in the Your Forma's user database and owned a residence in Friston, England, this was only a front. They still had no real clues as to his real identity.

But with TOSTI's code exposed, the analysis team could make major progress. If nothing else, Echika expected they would finally break the stalemate they'd been stuck in for months and would make some headway.

**"According to the analysis team, TOSTI is built from a bespoke programming language. Since it's handmade, the language isn't registered in any existing database, but they do have an idea of where it came from."**

One of the other branch's chiefs asked, **"Already?"**

**"Yes. To get to the heart of the matter, they believe Lascelles is hiding in Dubai."**

The meeting room filled with whispers and murmurs. Echika was also shocked, of course, and exchanged surprised glances with Fokine. They hadn't

expected the analysis team to have tracked down Lascelles's exact whereabouts so soon.

**“Quiet.”** Totoki coldly silenced them. **“Look at this.”**

A 3D map app was dragged onto the screen, showing satellite footage from the United Arab Emirates. The program zoomed in, and an image of an artificial island shaped like a butterfly just off the Persian Gulf soon filled the screen.

**“Are you familiar with Farasha Island?”**

Echika had heard of the name before—it was constructed in 2012 as a social experiment of sorts. It was a private next-generation technological research city. She recalled hearing that it had been financed from all around the globe by international organizations, several nations, and large IT corporations. It was meant to boost development of a societal system based on the Your Forma and Amicus robots, but according to the news articles Echika had read, the island was also creating biotechnology for environmental conservation, designing cutting-edge medical devices, and working on support technology like cold sleep pods for space exploration.

**“This is likely where TOSTI's programming language was developed. Back when we investigated the E case during the summer, HQ's Investigation Support Department ended up pursuing one of the E believers, which led them to investigate Farasha Island...”**

Among the information the Investigation Support Department had gathered were undisclosed materials regarding the city's early operation. Included in these documents was a sample of a programming language that was very similar to the one used in TOSTI.

**“Supposedly, the language was part of the island's research into developing personality reproduction technology.”**

“Like the kind of technology used for making digital clones?” Bigga asked.

Digital clones were an attempt to resurrect the personalities of the dead through AI to aid the grieving. True to Bigga's question, this was the most common application of personality reproduction technology.

**“It's a separate technology from that. The important part is that they did a**

**lot of research into analysis AIs on that island.”** As Totoki spoke grimly, a fluffy tail momentarily flashed in front of her face. It belonged to her beloved pet robot, Ganache the cat. **“Normally, an analysis AI as precise as TOSTI would be against the law, but Farasha Island is explicitly excluded from the IAEC’s jurisdiction.”**

Since Farasha Island was established for developing new technologies, it was exempt from the constraints of operational laws or international organizations, ensuring that any technology could be used on its premises in a “trial capacity.” This meant that no technology was illegal on the island. Since the island was a result of the entire world banding together to develop new technologies, every major regulatory organization had consented to the exclusion clause.

*Right... Yes, it does seem suspicious.*

“So what you’re saying is...” Echika raised her hand. “Lascelles was on this island, and they used a programming language developed there to create TOSTI, then released it to the outside world without permission?”

**“That’s one possibility,”** Totoki said as she hugged Ganache, who had hopped into her lap. **“But security on the island is supposed to be extremely tight, so an outsider shouldn’t be able to easily sneak data out of there. But in that regard, if Lascelles is still on that island...”**

“I get it.” Fokine nodded. “Based on that logic, it’s possible they wrote off the modification to Bernard’s utility function system as research and development for new technology, too.”

“I understand what you’re getting at,” Harold piped in. “But that would just mean Lascelles is a mad scientist incapable of hiding classified research. Don’t you think that’s jumping to conclusions?”

**“What I’m trying to say is, I didn’t call for this meeting so you all can hold a roundtable discussion about it.”**

Echika swallowed nervously, feeling like Totoki was staring straight at her. She could see the members of the Special Investigations Unit from other branches all straightening in their seats. Bigga sat stiffly with her lips pursed, while Fokine and Harold both swallowed anything else they still had to say.



In other words.

**“I want you to go to Farasha Island and investigate it yourselves.”**



“Okay, but why pick us out of everyone? There’s plenty of people on the Special Investigations team,” Echika muttered to herself resentfully as they trudged through the roundabout of the Dubai International Airport.

As soon as Totoki received clearance to investigate Farasha Island, she instantly designated Echika and company to go. The members of the Special Investigations Unit were organized on a per-branch basis, so Echika had assumed that they wouldn’t be called for the task, but she was mistaken. And while it made sense that Fokine was chosen, since he was the head of the team, she hadn’t expected that she and Harold would be ordered to accompany him, as they were Brain Diving personnel. Totoki had also tapped Bigga for the assignment because she thought the girl’s perspective as a former bio-hacker could prove useful.

“I’m sure it’s because she just expects that we’d be able to do this,” Bigga said next to her, looking as excited as a tourist. “That’s a good thing!”

Originally, Bigga had only been a consultant for the Investigation Support Department, but she had officially joined the Special Investigations Unit a few weeks before, shortly after the conclusion of the Nightmare incident. Totoki was impressed by her repeated contributions to important investigations and had personally assigned her to the team. But since Bigga hadn’t graduated from the academy yet, she was still technically a consultant.

“I know you’re excited because this is your first investigation abroad, but for me— Whoa.”

Echika bumped into a passing tourist’s suitcase and nearly tripped. Bigga caught her, keeping her from falling, but this was already a bad omen. To make matters worse, when she raised her head, her eyes met Harold’s as he turned to her. Echika felt her face stiffen.

“What’s the matter?” He smiled serenely. “You should make sure to look

where you're going."

"I am looking."

"Do be careful." Harold said in a businesslike manner as he followed after Fokine, who led their group.

When he finally took his eyes off her, tension drained from her shoulders. She'd frozen up again. Bigga, who had watched their exchange, fixed her eyes on her.

"I had a feeling you two were being strange, but now I *know* that something really is off."

"What?"

"I mean Harold! Normally he'd worry and ask if you're hurt, and, well, he'd be walking like he's glued to you..." Bigga looked at Echika suspiciously. "And you're weirdly distant around him, too, Miss Hieda. Did something happen?"

"No, nothing," Echika replied reflexively.

"You know, when you reply too quickly, it sounds even more suspicious."

"I..." *Drat.* "I mean, we've always been like this."

"No, you totally haven't!"

"Really, there's nothing to worry about."

Echika ended their conversation there. Bigga looked like she had something else to say, but Echika pretended not to notice. Honestly, there was nothing there. Since that day when they'd talked on the way back from the city police headquarters, she and Harold hadn't particularly butted heads, but Harold's attitude toward her had changed. The day after their discussion, his overly familiar act was replaced with him keeping his distance from her unless strictly necessary. At first, she thought she was just imagining things, but she was convinced of it at this point.

Harold was avoiding Echika, no doubt about it.

Maybe he'd changed his mind about them sharing the secret. Maybe she really had given the wrong answer during that conversation. She knew why

Harold had pulled back, but whenever she saw him being distant, she found herself unable to talk to him. The only thing she could do was interact with him awkwardly like this. She wished she could turn back time and fix this.

And this was all happening despite her trying to shoulder the secret on her own for fear of this exact development. At this point, everything felt far too late.

“You’re the group from the Electocrime Investigations Bureau, yes? Thank you for traveling so far to come here.”

As they approached the Farasha Island van parked in the roundabout, its driver, a mass-produced Amicus, greeted them. They got into the vehicle, and it pulled away. As they drove down the main road, the palm trees planted in the highway divider sailed past the window. The buildings were built low in the area, and any skyscrapers that might block their view were kilometers away.

The city of Dubai—in the past it was a small fishing community, but its access to a creek allowed it to flourish through trade. When an offshoot oil field was discovered in the area, Dubai underwent rapid development. By now, the oil money was beginning to dry up, so the city had built a special ward for attracting foreign trade, but the worldwide pandemic hitting in 1992 had improved the area’s fortunes.

At the time, the heads of the IT corporations in the city invested funds into developing new technologies that counteracted the pandemic. In recognition of this achievement, Dubai was selected as the location of the next-generation technology research city, Farasha Island.

Echika idly read the background information she’d called up on her Your Forma.

“We’ll reach our destination in roughly thirty minutes,” the driver Amicus told Fokine from the passenger seat. “If you’d like to see the nearby Burj Dubai, I could change the route accordingly.”

“No, skyscrapers don’t interest us. If anything, I’d appreciate if you could tell us about the local sweets.”

“That’s not fair, Investigator!” Bigga leaned forward. “Oh, are there any

beaches you'd recommend?"

"Do I need to repeat myself, you two? We're not here to see the sights," Harold chided. "By the way, I heard that they drink camel milk around these parts. Is that true?"

Not a shred of seriousness in any of them.

Overcome with exasperation, Echika leaned back against her seat. Either way, she needed to talk things through with Harold before their dispute got in the way of their investigation. She had no idea how to break the ice, but she had to do it.

She didn't want him to have to carry a burden.

If she could just tell him how she felt, their relationship would go back to how it had been.

## 2

Farasha Island was an artificial isle in the Persian Gulf. The elevated bridge extending from the gulf to the Jumeirah region had a rectangular welcome gate reminiscent of a picture frame. Past that was a dead-end platform, where a check-in center built in the shape of a wine bottle was set up. The back of the building had a monorail platform built into it that led to the island over rails constructed in midair. This center was the only way to get from the mainland to the island and back.

Echika got out of the van with the others, and a welcome message popped up in her Your Forma.

**<Welcome to Farasha, the Butterfly Island! The next-generation research city where new technology hatches from its chrysalis>**

"Look at this, Miss Hieda! What a view..." Bigga tugged on Echika's sleeve.

The platform offered an honest-to-goodness full view of the artificial island, which was shaped like a butterfly. It was surrounded by breakwaters from all sides, making it look like a fully independent city. The hind wing section of the butterfly was lined with cottages, and, like a wave, the buildings gradually increased in height as they approached the "body" of the butterfly at the center



of the island.

Most conspicuous of all was a towering high-rise building. The structure was built like a bow and resembled a crescent moon hanging in the sky. Or rather...

“It’s like a high-class hotel resort,” Echika remarked.

“That over there is the Central Technological Development Tower. It has ninety floors and serves as the heart of the city.”

Echika turned in the direction of the unknown voice. A middle-aged woman in a suit appeared in the check-in center. Unlike most women Echika had seen in the area, she wasn’t wearing a hijab—which as far as Echika knew, was because there were no religious restrictions on the island—so her finely chiseled features and sleek hair were on full display.

**<Murjana Fajr al Ghamidia. 45 years old. Affiliated with Farasha Island’s Central Technological Development Department. Head of the First Technological Development Department, and a member of the steering committee>**

“I’m Murjana from the First Technological Development Department, and I’ll be serving as your escort. I’ve been expecting you.”

“Thank you. I’m Fokine from the Electocrime Investigations Bureau.” He flashed his ID. “I believe we contacted you beforehand, but we’re here to look into a certain programming language that was developed here...”

Echika watched Murjana as she exchanged greetings with Fokine. A thin device was wrapped around her throat. It looked like an electronic circuit of some kind. She’d never seen anything like it on the market. Had it been developed here on the island?

“That device is so trendy. It’s like a choker,” Bigga whispered into her ear.

“Trendy?” Echika cocked an eyebrow. “It looks more like some kind of peripheral.”

“Oh, there you go again!” Bigga complained. What had she done wrong this time?

“My apologies, but I’ll need you to go through the usual procedures before

entering the island.”

At Murjana’s guidance, Echika and her group entered the check-in center. The lobby was surprisingly crowded. While Dubai was known as a resort spot, the research city on Farasha was isolated from the outside. The island’s residents were limited to research personnel. As Echika walked ahead, she read the personal data of the people passing through. She spotted the CEO of an IT corporation, government workers from various countries, and even famous investors and athletes.

“Who are they?” Fokine asked Murjana.

“Investors in Farasha Island and their families. There’s a regular meeting today, which will be followed by a modest party.”

Although the island’s primary purpose was to develop new technologies, it seemed there were quite a few strings attached for the people involved.

Echika and her group were led to the security inspection checkpoint. They left their bags with a clerk, whose appearance made her do a double take—his face was a mirror image of the Amicus working beside him. They were identical, down to the slightly elongated, thick outline of their brows. The only difference was the color of their eyes. One could call them twins.

“Ben,” Murjana called out to him. “Congratulations about today.”

The clerk named Ben and the Amicus both said “Thank you!” in tandem and grinned at her. Echika looked around and saw that all the staff members were working alongside a “twin.” She couldn’t take her eyes away from the sight as she went through security and her bag was scanned. For whatever reason, everyone working here had an Amicus that had been customized to match their appearance.

Echika ended up having to surrender her firearm during the personal belongings inspection. Guns were strictly regulated on the island, and the fact that she was investigating on behalf of the bureau wasn’t justification enough for her to keep her pistol. After that, she had her fingerprints and retinas registered for biometric identification and was then required to input her address. This information would be used for entering and exiting her accommodation.

Apparently, this security process had been implemented to ensure the safety of the staff and classified information on the island, but it all felt rather exaggerated. Like Totoki had said, it didn't seem likely anyone would be able to sneak out of here with the programming language.

"Still, I thought custom models were only available to the wealthy... What's the idea here?" Fokine asked dubiously once he was done with his inspection, his eyes darting to the pairs of "twins" walking around. He, too, was baffled by this. "Is it for security?"

"Like, to keep outsider Amicus from sneaking in?" Bigga whispered. "I could see if that's their reasoning..."

"Even if it is, there's more efficient ways of going about it." Harold cut into their exchange. Since he was an Amicus, he'd only had to undergo a body check and register his wearable terminal and address, leaving him with nothing to do. "Amicus appearance data is created by mixing the features of multiple people."

"My apologies if the special Amicus startled you. I should have explained this to begin with."

Murjana walked off, telling them to follow her. She led them to a corner of the check-in center that looked like an Amicus shop. Lined up in the glass case were mass-produced Amicus, along with spare parts and clothing items for them. The presence of the shop would have made sense if this were a mall, but why was it in the entrance to the island?

"This is the Project EGO registration counter. I wasn't instructed to show this to you, but..."

On the other side of the counter was a clerk Amicus. Upon seeing Echika and her group, it happily opened a tool case. Echika saw that it was full of choker-type neck devices with electronic circuits inlaid in them, the same as the one Murjana was wearing.

"What's Project EGO?"

"You see, this year, Farasha Island is conducting a large-scale experiment where everyone on the island has their personalities synchronized with an Amicus. That's Project EGO."

“What does it mean to have your personality ‘synchronized with an Amicus’?” Bigga inquired dubiously.

“I’m glad you asked!” The clerk Amicus suddenly spoke up, taking her question as a request for an explanation. “When you put on this Ego Tracker, it analyzes your personality. This analysis data is then shared with a paired Amicus, who becomes your ‘other ego.’ In other words, the Ego Tracker’s system gives you a double!”

More specifically, the Ego Tracker used the Your Forma’s monitoring features to gather data on the user’s brain signals. The device determined the user’s fundamental behavioral patterns and shared them with a paired Amicus, allowing it to replicate how the user acted. Since Amicus’ actions were limited by the Laws of Respect, the breadth of this system’s applications were limited. Even with these restrictions in place, however, it was a groundbreaking system.

This must have been the “personality replication technology” Totoki had referred to. Considering that Project EGO had Amicus play the part of living humans’ doubles, however, it seemed far more advanced than something like digital clones, which simply reproduced the personalities of the deceased.

“But what’s your end goal?” Echika asked Murjana. “If it’s to ease people’s workloads, normal Amicus already do that just fine, in my opinion... Was the project implemented to allow Amicus to handle work that requires more in-depth knowledge?”

“Precisely. A paired Amicus has different standards than those of a mass-produced model, allowing them to reproduce skills required for more delicate work. And it also gives users the joy of acquiring their perfect self.” *Perfect self?* “As for their personalities, the original person serves as the base, but paired Amicus can be corrected, to some extent. But since this is all in the testing stage, most people don’t want to see a version of themselves that deviates too much from their actual personality.”

“You said they differ from the current Amicus standard,” Harold said. “Have the paired Amicus been equipped with some sort of special system?”

“Yes, Novae Robotics Inc. supplied us with an enhanced Amicus system, since more complex computations are required to replicate human personalities.”

“If, however,” the clerk Amicus added, with a most mechanical smile, “you wish to participate in the experiment, please put on the Ego Tracker.”

“That won’t be necessary. These people are special guests.” Murjana admonished the clerk Amicus.

Echika, however, noticed that Bigga was fidgeting restlessly. She looked like she might reach out for an Ego Tracker at any moment. She’d been curious about the device earlier, so there was no doubt she was interested. To little surprise, she tapped Fokine on the arm and silently mouthed the words “Can’t we?”

“Are you serious?” Fokine asked in exasperation. “Pardon, but our consultant here is interested in hearing more...”

“Oh.” Murjana blinked in surprise. “If that’s the case, then go ahead and try it out. We have no objection, of course. The bigger the sample size, the better.”

“Yay! Oh, thank you! Seeing things like this just makes me so excited!”

Bigga’s enthusiasm must have stemmed from her background as a bio-hacker. She took an Ego Tracker in excitement and carefully put it on around the connection port on the nape of her neck. Murjana and the clerk Amicus carefully walked her through the settings. It seemed it would take them a while to explain everything.

Echika wondered if it was all right to waste time on this when they had an investigation ahead of them. She looked away, unsure of how to feel about the whole thing—and her eyes accidentally met Harold’s. Unable to bring herself to blatantly look away, she stopped blinking.

“Um, uh... Say,” she said evasively. “Do you know anything about the system Novae Robotics Inc. provided for this place?”

“Not a thing,” Harold said inoffensively. “Professor Lexie or Department Head Angus might have known, but an Amicus like me wouldn’t be privy to things like that.”

“Right.” This probably went without saying. “Hmm, sorry.”

“About what?”



“I mean, hmm...” *Oh, God, why does this have to be so awkward?! “It’s...”*

“Wow! Is this really my double?” Bigga asked gleefully, interrupting their exchange.

At some point, Murjana had made Bigga stand in front of a female Amicus. The Amicus was wearing ready-made clothes with a serial number sewed over its chest and had even, amber-colored eyes. Needless to say, it looked nothing like Bigga.

“The permanent residents here have the Amicus tailored to match their appearance, but we use existing models for outsiders,” Murjana explained. “It should take a day until its personality is fully synced, but I just ran a quick scan, so it should mostly act like you already.

“Whoa.” Bigga looked astonished. “How do I control her?”

“She’s in auto mode right now, so she should be operating based on her own free will. Once you want her to move according to your orders, you—”

“Ah, hello!”

Before Murjana could finish her explanation, Bigga’s paired Amicus flashed a bright smile...and ran over to Harold. Echika stepped back in shock when it grabbed his hand in enthusiasm. What was going on?

“You’re so lovely today! You’re really so kind and gentlemanly!”

“Thank you.” Harold brought his face closer to Bigga’s Amicus, looking genuinely fascinated. “Her expressions are quite friendly. A bit lacking compared to human nonverbal communication, but more than sufficient for the purpose of expressing emotion...”

“Y-you’re in my bubble!” The Amicus quickly pulled away from him. “I like you a whole lot, but if you pull stunts like that, I’ll end up blushing!”

The air was sucked out of the room so suddenly, it was almost audible. Echika’s mouth fell open in shock. What had it just said?

“Wha...?” Bigga’s voice shook. Echika expected her to go red, but all the color drained from her face instead. “Wh-wh-what is it saying...?!”

She nearly crumpled to the floor, but Echika rushed over to catch her by the

shoulders. Yes, this was something they hadn't considered—having one's personality replicated could end up exposing one's tastes and thoughts.

"N-no way! It's lying!"

"Bigga, calm down. Remember, deep breaths."

"This is some amazing tech, though." Fokine seemed taken aback. "It managed to replicate her personality in just a few minutes. Honestly, it's kind of eerie..."

"Turn off auto mode! Now!" Bigga shouted with tears in her eyes. "Please, just don't say anything else!"

Suddenly, the paired Amicus went quiet and limp, like its soul had slipped out of it. The grin on its face remained, and it blinked repeatedly, apparently waiting for further instructions from Bigga. The sheer purity and innocence of its smile made it all the more uncanny.

For a second, silence hung over the room.

"Bigga," Harold said quietly. "About what the paired Amicus just said."

"N-n-no, it wasn't...! I mean, it was, but it wasn't telling the truth! That wasn't me!"

"I was glad to hear it. Thank you."

"...Huh?"

Bigga froze, and Echika became dumbfounded, too. Her hands nearly slipped from Bigga's shoulders. He was "glad to hear it"?

"I like you a great deal, too," Harold said, his fair features forming his usual perfect smile. "That said, I'd assumed the paired Amicus would be closer to a digital clone, so this was a surprise. If I were human, I would have loved to try it out, too."

Oh. He wasn't taking Bigga seriously in the slightest.

As Harold looked quite disappointed, Bigga and Echika exchanged glances. Bigga wore a conflicted expression, her face torn between relief and disappointment, and Echika placed a hand over her belly, feeling an inexplicable

stomachache coming on. Her ribs should have been healed by now, so what could be causing this?

“He’s denser than he looks, that Aide Lucraft.” Fokine whispered, but it was of little consolation.

“I’ll, um, I’ll have the Amicus taken to your room in the lodging facility.” Murjana cleared her throat awkwardly. “Now, if you’re all ready, I’ll take you to the Central Technological Development Tower.”

*Well, the investigation is off to a great start,* Echika thought sarcastically.



It took less than ten minutes to get to the Central Technological Development Tower via monorail. Apparently, most people navigated the island this way, or by using share cars. The monorail rode the tracks set in midair and stopped at the fifth floor of the development tower. Echika’s group disembarked onto the platform set inside the building.

Several small, cocoon-like objects dangled from the ceiling. Each one of them was apparently a multilateral security camera.

“It feels like I’m having my depressed expression recorded from three hundred sixty degrees here...” Bigga complained.

“Don’t let it get to you. The aide probably misunderstood what you meant,” Echika said, by way of encouragement.

Bigga let out a sulky little giggle. It didn’t help that she was still reeling from what happened earlier. Echika glanced at Harold, who was speaking to Murjana with Fokine. There was no way he hadn’t noticed how dispirited Bigga had become.

“Your escort is here,” Murjana said, looking up. “That’s my son. Yunus, over here.”

“My apologies for being late. Welcome, and thank you for coming.”

A boy rushed over to them. He had a small physique and wore a distinctive white tunic. His features still had some boyishness to them, and he had deep

amber eyes—this had to be his paired Amicus.

But just as Echika was convinced this must be the case...

**<Yunus Yusri al Ghamidi. Fourteen years old. Programmer affiliated with the First Technological Development Department. Specially appointed adviser for Project EGO. Ranked ninth in the fourteenth International Data Processing Ability Examination>**

...His personal data popped up, just like a human's.

"Pardon me." Fokine looked confused. "Isn't he an Amicus?"

"Project Ego is a joint project with the personal data center. As an experiment, they set things up so one could be able to browse the real person's data via their paired Amicus," Murjana replied. "He's perfect, as you can see. The ideal child."

She proudly looked at her son, Yunus—or rather, at his Amicus. Something about Murjana's gaze seemed off. Was it because she was treating the double the same as she would her actual son?

"Mom, please stop that."

"But it's true! Anyway, I need to go help prepare the party... Yunus, you handle the rest."

Murjana placed a hand over her chest and quickly boarded the monorail. Yunus then led Echika and her group into an elevator. The walls projected footage of the Persian Gulf, which threw off Echika's sense of balance. Even though they were going up, she didn't feel the sense of weightlessness that usually accompanied elevator rides. Despite that, the floor indicator's numbers steadily increased.

"My apologies for that shameless display," Yunus said awkwardly. "My mother is a doting parent."

"Does she work with you at the development department?"

"Yes. My mother has been here since 'I' was little... 'I' was originally part of the Medical Development Department, but once 'I' became a specially appointed adviser for Project EGO, we started working together..."

The paired Amicus answered as though it were actually Yunus. It was strange, but when Echika reflected on what Murjana had said earlier, she realized that doubles were likely treated the same as their originals on this island. Given his age, Yunus was probably still attending school, but she figured he'd skipped a few grades to finish his studies early. Based on his personal data, the real Yunus had excellent data-processing abilities, and children like that were often rushed to enter working society early. Echika herself had started out as a Diver at the tender age of sixteen.





Running into another person with high data-processing abilities—albeit indirectly—was quite unusual.

“Is the real...I mean, your original, working in the same department?” Fokine asked.

“Usually, yes. Right now, ‘I’ am taking a long vacation, so ‘I’ am working here on my own for the time being.”

“So you’re always in auto mode...,” Bigga remarked, her voice still deflated.

“However, ‘I’ would surely love to be here.” Yunus turned to face Echika and grinned at her. “It’s an honor to meet you, Electronic Investigator Echika Hieda.”

Echika blinked despite herself. She was sure this was the first time she’d met him.

“How do you know me?”

“When ‘I’ placed in the ability evaluation, ‘I’ read up on the records of past winners, and even before that...it made the news when you became an Electronic Investigator.”

Something about this struck Echika as odd. She’d become an Electronic Investigator a few years ago, but according to Murjana, Project EGO was only implemented on a large scale this year. That meant...

“Wait, do paired Amicus share the original’s Mnemosynes, too?”

“Yes, it’s possible to synchronize Mnemosynes using a wired connection with the Ego Tracker. Yunus himself shared his Mnemosynes from age six onward with me.” The young Amicus touched its nose bashfully. “‘I’ always admired you, Echika. Your performance is one of the most impressive and storied among the winners, and the fact you solved so many difficult cases is truly amazing.”

Echika was at a loss for words. As someone who’d fried the brains of many a Belayer, she couldn’t accept this praise. More than anything, however, she was shocked that there was a way to share Mnemosynes with a machine. That being said, if the idea of this system was to replicate people’s expert knowledge, it wasn’t hard to imagine how important Mnemosynes might be to that end.

“I, er...I’m afraid I’m not the woman you think I am.”

“Oh, this again?!” Bigga piped in. “Don’t mind her, please. She’s just very shy.”

“‘I’ think not letting your achievements go to your head is something worthy of respect. Not everyone is capable of that,” Yunus said.

His response was so bashful that Echika wanted to run away. The expression in his boyish face was far too human, and it raised her anxiety. He was so natural, it felt like... Yes, it felt like she was interacting with an RF Model.

“You’re getting high praise.” Fokine elbowed Harold. “Good for you.”

“I’m quite proud as her partner, indeed,” Harold replied.

Echika’s breath caught at his answer, which came across as polite lip service. After experiencing that hellish moment, they finally reached the thirtieth floor, where the Data Storage Center was located. They passed by a group of employees, humans with Ego Trackers and their paired Amicus. Everything about the duos matched, even the way they paused to look at Echika and her group, which she found inherently creepy. If Project EGO caught on with the general public, would this sight become ordinary? Echika felt like it would take her a long time to get used to it.

According to Yunus, the vaults here contained every piece of the software used on the artificial island, including the early materials used for the construction of the city.

“Does that mean the programming language used for TOSTI is stored here, too?”

“If it was developed on the island, I think a record of it would have to exist here.”

Yunus led them in front of the vaults. The boy scanned his iris over the biometric device, and the double doors to the area opened. Echika stood there in stunned silence; paired Amicus may have looked perfectly identical to their original counterparts, but she’d assumed the security system should have been able to distinguish between them. This suggested that Yunus’s Amicus was also registered as a biometric target. Even though the boy’s Amicus was a double, it

surprised her that he was trusted just as much as his original simply because they shared the same personality. Maybe this was also part of the Project EGO experiment, much like how paired Amicus had personal data pop-ups.

The interior of the vault was a circular space with a high ceiling. There were many shelves against the walls, stuffed full of paper-thin data memories. Yunus moved to the center of the room, and a sensor reacted to him, deploying a holo-browser at his hand. You wouldn't often see a setup as elaborate as this outside the island.

"Investigator, can you show me a sample of the language you're looking for?"

"Yes, here." Fokine handed over a tablet.

Yunus scanned the example of TOSTI's source code on the tablet against the holo-browser. A five-fingered manipulator immediately descended from the ceiling and started searching the shelves with swift, precise movements. It held up a reader device reminiscent of a hand mirror to the data memories, scanning their contents.

"There," Yunus said.

Within less than a minute, the manipulator stopped. The holo-browser read the data memory, displaying a sample of the programming language it contained. It searched for points of resemblance with TOSTI's code, and multiple alerts popped up. They had a match. This language must have been used in some of the vault's undisclosed documents.

"This is the Gb programming language." Yunus opened an appendix file. "It was developed...nearly ten years ago. Shortly after Farasha Island was established."

"Is it still used on the island? Like, for Project EGO?" Echika asked.

Yunus scrolled through the browser, reading the appendixes for Gb, and furrowed his brows.

"No... This language has never been used." *Never?* "Apparently, it was shelved."

"For what reason?" Harold asked.



“I don’t know, but it could just be one of many pieces of discarded data. There are many languages and processors developed on this land, but not all of them are put to use. Roughly ninety percent are simply placed in storage.”

Saying this, Yunus pulled up the developer’s information. Their name popped onto the browser.

**<Paul Samuel Lloyd>**

They were completely unfamiliar with him.

“This man is registered on the city’s cloud album. He’s part of the founding team.” Yunus tilted his head, like he was sifting through his memories. “I believe he’s retired now, but if I recall... He was involved in the city during its planning stages and took an active role while looking for investors. He was an Englishman, and, hmm...I think he specialized in robotics?”

Echika immediately connected to the Your Forma’s user database. She input the name and narrowed the conditions down based on the information Yunus had given her. TOSTI’s developer, Alan Jack Lascelles, lived in the English town of Friston. His property was a front, of course, so it was hard to say if he was necessarily an Englishman. In light of the fact that Lascelles had modified Bernard the Amicus, however, the detail about Lloyd being involved with robotics seemed promising.

“Do you think this guy might be Lascelles?” Bigga asked.

“It’s not enough to go on.” Fokine shook his head. “Lloyd might have developed the programming language, but anyone with access to the vaults here could have accessed this discarded data.”

“There’s no record of the Gb language being taken out,” said Yunus, confirming this via the holo-browser. “The vaults have an automatic scanning and tagging system, so if anyone browsed or took anything out, it would be recorded.”

“Is there any way of getting past that system?”

“It would be possible if you damaged the power supply and manually opened the vault, but everyone would know if something like that happened.”

“So the chances of someone taking this data out and using it to make TOSTI are slim.” Harold placed a hand on his jaw pensively. “But the creator of the language wouldn’t need to do that—he would already know how to write in it. If Paul Lloyd really is Lascelles, then it would have been simple to program TOSTI with the Gb language.”

“Yes... Assuming he was still alive.”

The other four fixed their eyes on Echika. Using her Your Forma, she pulled up the results of the personal data search—it showed a profile picture of a sorrowful British gentleman. He was emaciated and had prominent cheekbones, and despite being in his forties, his hair was already all white. At the end of the long record of his history and career, the details of his fate were written concisely.

**<Date of death: January 20, 2019>**

“Paul Lloyd died five years ago. He’s not Lascelles.”

That much was clear chronologically. The TOSTI AI’s open-source code had been published the year before last. Echika’s Brain Dive into Investigator Hugues during the E incident had made that abundantly clear. And Bernard had been modified five months after Lloyd passed away. The time line was just slightly off.

“If I had to guess,” Echika continued, “it’s possible that Lloyd wrote down details of the programming language from memory and left it somewhere in his home. Lascelles could have stolen it at some point and put it to use. Or maybe Lloyd sold it to him...”

“I can’t say I’m convinced. Any software engineer knows that software information leaks are serious trouble,” Yunus said, confused. “Would Lloyd really do something that would put his credibility into question...?”

“Either way,” Harold said, “we need to thoroughly investigate him.”

Echika nodded, biting her inner lip. Right now, the best thing they could do was keep looking into Lloyd. Of course, the way things stood, it was hard to

believe Lloyd was Lascelles, which dashed their theory that Lascelles was hiding out on Farasha Island. Still, this was progress.

“I’ll send Paul Lloyd’s personal data to Chief Totoki and ask her to have HQ look into him.”

“Please do.” Fokine nodded and turned to Yunus. “The data you gave us was more than enough, thank you. Also, if you’re aware of anyone who still works here who knew Lloyd, we’d like to learn more...”

Suddenly, a bell gonged loudly—it was some kind of recording playing over the building’s internal speakers. It was a solemn, grave melody, played by what sounded like a carillon. The sound echoed all the way to the pit of Echika’s stomach. What was this?

“Pardon, that’s a scheduled signal. We need to wrap up for today and get ready.” Yunus hastily closed the holo-browser. “Do you mind if I look into Lloyd’s acquaintances tomorrow?”

“We’ll be spending the night here anyway, so that’s fine... But what do you need to get ready for?”

“The party. Mother might have told you about it, but tonight is the pre-chrysalis celebration.” Murjana had mentioned something about a regular meeting, but not a celebration. “Right, actually, why don’t you all come along with me?”

Yunus grinned, and Echika exchanged glances with the others. The event could be useful for the investigation. If what Murjana said was to be believed, all the guests from the check-in center would be at this party. Since the employees of the city would be in attendance, they would have a chance to find veterans who knew Paul Lloyd, without having to wait for tomorrow.

“We’ll come along, yes,” Fokine said. “What’s the dress code?”

“Formal.” Yunus smiled happily. “We can lend you some formalwear, so there’s no need for concern there. I’ll have Mother help with arranging outfits for the ladies.”

Seeming quite satisfied that Echika and her group had agreed to participate, Yunus headed for the exit of the vault with quick, excited steps. The automatic

door opened, revealing a woman's paired Amicus standing in wait. Her features were a perfect match for Murjana's—this had to be her double. When had Yunus called her over? Or actually, more importantly—

“Please, follow me. Come this way.”

Murjana's Amicus brought a hand to her chest as she looked at Echika, who suddenly got the feeling she was in store for something awful.

*Is this dress code thing going to turn out to be a real drag?*

### 3

The setting sun gradually tipped into the Persian Gulf, casting a soft scarlet glow over the surface of the sea.

“But really, how much longer is Lascelles going to give us the slip...?” Fokine asked.

As he and Harold walked along the planted fence tracing the shoreline of the artificial island, Fokine fixed his tie with exhaustion. He'd been provided with a tuxedo for the upcoming event. Harold moved his gaze to the path ahead. The seashore was lined with structures that looked like spaceships that had drifted aground. This restaurant was the site of the party they were to attend.

“Just finding out about Paul Lloyd is plenty of progress,” Harold responded.

“Well, yeah, but... Seriously, the only times I've had to wear something this stuffy was when my relatives got married.”

“I haven't been in full formalwear in a long while, either.” Harold checked his cuffs. He'd worn a dinner jacket like this every day when he served in the royal family, but... “I suppose this is nice, on occasion.”

“Well, yeah, but with a face like yours, it's like you were made to wear a tux,” Fokine said in a tone between a frivolous remark and a sarcastic jab. “We're supposed to meet Hieda and Bigga at the entrance to the restaurant, right?”

“That's what I've heard. I think they should be finished changing now.”

As Harold replied, Echika's silent gaze from a few days ago surfaced in his thought processes. How many times had he thought back to this?

*“If there’s anything else you’re withholding, let me know right away.”*

At that moment, he’d realized he needed to distance himself from her. Even though he’d shared his secret, he wanted his relationship with Echika to remain the same. Her words and embrace in that basement had saved him. Despite this, he’d kept treating her in an overly familiar manner in an attempt to hide his sense of guilt, which was how he was able to keep things going smoothly.

But their conversation had made him realize that Echika could easily grasp his concerns. Worse still, she was fully intent on saving Harold if things went out of control. Surely Echika knew that she, too, would be judged by the law on the off chance that his secret got out. She would stand to lose everything, from her position as an Electronic Investigator, to the trust everyone placed in her.

What frightened him most about this was that Echika didn’t care about those things in the slightest. For some reason, she was prioritizing protecting his secret to the bitter end, above her own innocence and reputation. Harold had suspected this since the time she’d covered for the fact that he’d shot Napolov, but now, he was convinced of it.

She had an unusual obsession with him.

*“...I think I don’t see you as a replacement for Matoi.”*

Those words had been a lie, then. Echika had deviated from his calculations time and time again, so perhaps it was time he admitted it—that getting close to her was perhaps his biggest mistake.

But the moment that thought crossed his mind, his emotional engine spewed out a leaden sensation. Harold couldn’t identify what the feeling was yet, but he was sure it was trying to get in the way of his efforts. *Just give up and see where this takes you*, it whispered.

But he couldn’t afford to listen.

Of course, even if Harold kept Echika at a distance, it wouldn’t undo the fact that she was already his accomplice. But it would make it easier to ensure that she wouldn’t be held accountable for his actions.

“Wow! They look like noblewomen,” Fokine whispered, pulling Harold out of his thought processes.



“What are you talking about?” Harold asked, looking ahead.

The restaurant was right in front of them. People dressed in formalwear were climbing up the elegant, fan-shaped stairs and entering the venue.

Amid the crowd stood Echika and Bigga, waiting for them.



To put it mildly, Echika wished she could dive into the Persian Gulf right now and enter a watery grave.

“This is the first time I’ve seen someone look like they want to end their life over wearing a cute dress.”

“Ha-ha. Well, I’m glad you got to experience something new,” Echika could only manage to say, her voice parched.

Bigga looked up at her with concern. Her braids were undone, and her chestnut hair flowed down her back. Her pale-colored evening dress really brought out her presence, and she looked as luscious as a chiffon cake. The dress was adorned with a butterfly ribbon around the waist; this motif was something all participants in the pre-chrysalis celebration were required to wear.

And as for Echika’s own appearance... Frankly, she didn’t want to look at herself.

“Oh, look! Investigator Fokine and Harold are here!”

Bigga had restored her spirits for the time being by getting dressed up, and she waved excitedly at the approaching duo. Echika could only hope she wasn’t just putting on a brave face. Fokine and Harold had been forced into tuxedos. Honestly, she would have felt way better in a tuxedo than in a dress.

“Now, aren’t you gussied up.” Fokine said this in an impressed voice as he approached them. “I can hardly recognize you. You look like classy ladies.”

“You really do.” Harold smiled at Bigga. “You’re very cute.”

“Hmm, uh... Thank you! You two look quite handsome, too!”

“So what’s with the long face, Hieda? Ate something that didn’t agree with

your stomach?”

“I’m always like this. Let’s get inside and ask around before the food is served.”

Echika turned on her heels and briskly climbed the stairs. Her steps were a lot more awkward than when she was in casual wear, as the high heels made it even harder to walk. Much to her chagrin, she caught her own reflection as she approached the glass front door. Her thin, scrawny body was covered by a cobalt-blue evening dress that looked like it was woven from a piece of the night sky. The butterfly-shaped ribbon tied around her neck felt suffocating as it trailed elegantly down her back.

*This is for work. Just bear with it,* she told herself, trying to banish her fed-up emotions from her mind.

Upon entering the lobby, Echika saw many people walking about, both guests from the check-in center and permanent residents. Those who’d finished their reception procedures were ushered in by waiter Amicus. Most of the personnel here were paired Amicus who were dressed up like their originals. Evidently, they were always treated exactly the same on the island.

“Let’s split up and ask around.”

“Yes, let’s meet up later.”

“Understood!”

Fokine and the others all split up, and Echika walked off, trying to shift gears. As she browsed the personal data of the people passing by, she tried to identify people who had been employed here for many years. She caught sight of an older man speaking to a guest connected with a nation’s government, then stopped in her tracks. It was someone very familiar to her.

“Are they going to conduct that eerie puppet show of yours, Chairman?”

“That’s what the residents here like. Just think of it as a sideshow...”

The moody-looking man was Talbot, Chairman of the International AI Ethics Committee. His grizzled hair was clipped short, and his chevron mustache was as well-kempt as ever. Echika had last seen him when she’d visited England

during the spring to investigate the RF Model assault case. At the time, Talbot had been highly suspicious of the RF Models and had pushed to have Harold shut down.

His presence here meant that the IAEC was involved in this research city, which only made sense, given how many international organizations had consented to the establishment of this island. Regardless, she was none too pleased to see him, on account of the secrets she harbored.

Consequently, Echika tried to back away silently without drawing any attention to herself.

“...Investigator Hieda?”

Talbot soon narrowed his eyes, parted ways with his conversation partner, and approached her with a look of suspicion on his face. She couldn’t ask him to act like she wasn’t here, of course.

“It’s been a while,” Echika said with a very strained smile. “Fancy meeting you here.”

“The IAEC inspect the management here. I visit this place quite often,” Talbot said, staring down at Echika fixedly. “And what are you doing here?”

“I’m on the island for work. I didn’t plan on attending this party, but one thing led to another, and here I am.”

“Has there been an incident? The secretariat didn’t tell me anything about that.”

“No, rest assured, we’re just looking into something...”

Before Echika could say anything, Talbot fixed his eyes on something behind her. She turned and stiffened—Harold had walked over. Why did he have to show up now? Given the situation, wouldn’t it have been better to let sleeping dogs lie?

“It’s been quite a while, Chairman. I’m glad to see you haven’t changed,” Harold said with an amicable smile as he presented his right hand to Talbot.

“I see you still stick out like a sore thumb, Harold.” Talbot didn’t accept the handshake, instead directing a stern expression at him. “I read the articles

about the Nightmare of Petersburg. It mentioned a bureau Amicus playing a major role in arresting the killer—I take it that was you.”

“Who’s to say? As far as I remember, the articles didn’t have any specific details you could identify me with.”

“You take after your mother. You’re just as careless as Professor Carter. She wants to see you, you know. Hearing about the incident troubled her a great deal.”

*...What?*

“You spoke to Professor Lexie in prison?” Echika couldn’t help but ask.

“Yes. The Petersburg police asked me to look into some minor business with regard to the Nightmare incident.”

Echika felt a chill run down her spine. Wait. The city police hadn’t taken Szubin’s insistence that Harold had “dragged him out of the van” seriously. So why would they contact Talbot?

“So you figured out the article was about me and went to the trouble of getting in touch with the police?” Harold asked, a composed smile on his lips. “Pardon me if this comes across as rude, but getting involved in someone else’s investigations isn’t in very good taste, Chairman.”

“This is our job. Though it seems it was a mistake on the suspect’s behalf this time.” Talbot coldly scrutinized Harold. “Novae Robotics Inc. may have proven the RF Models are safe, but always keep in mind that the IAEC has its eye on you.”

After making this remark, Talbot turned around and called out to an investor. Echika stood stock-still, but snapped out of it when Harold casually tugged on her arm. Somehow, she managed to feign composure and walk away with him, even as her heart raced all the while.

Indeed, ever since Steve went out of control, Talbot and the IAEC had regarded the RF Models with suspicion. But Echika hadn’t expected them to be following Harold’s activities even now. The revelation came as a total surprise.

She and Harold ended up leaving the lobby, and they stepped out onto a

terrace; the semicircular building jutted out toward the sea. The tumult of the party grew distant. The wind brushed against them, cooler than it was at noon. A salty sea breeze filled her lungs, and she finally felt herself calm down.

“I’m sorry. The guilt might have shown on my face.”

“I doubt the chairman noticed, occupied as he was with glaring daggers at me,” Harold said, gently letting go of her arm. “I hurried over because I got a sinking feeling when I saw you; I suppose my intuition was correct.”

*He’s not wrong*, Echika thought. She’d nearly exposed him. The possibility of getting more medical HSB cartridges crossed her mind, if only to better maintain a poker face.

“I wish I could control my expressions as well as you can.” She pressed a hand to her forehead, and it felt slightly sweaty. “Does this mean that Professor Lexie threw him off her trail successfully?”

“Probably. I should thank her.”

*“If you do change your mind, I don’t particularly care if you publish the truth.”*

Had Lexie’s statement been in jest? As always, Echika couldn’t get a read on what that woman wanted, but either way, Lexie had kept Harold safe.

Echika was overcome by an inexplicable sense of fatigue as she looked at the Amicus. He rested his arm on the guardrail of the terrace, watching over the dark horizon. He seemed to have applied more gel to his hair than usual. In that moment, his perfectly sculpted facial features felt oddly despicable.

Only then, after the tension drained from her body, did she realize that she was entirely alone with Harold.

*Maybe we can have a real conversation now?*

“Aide Lucraft.”

She spoke up in the heat of the moment but soon found herself stumped as to what to say next. Perhaps that was because his gaze was more serious than usual when he turned to look at her.

“...What? If you think the dress looks weird on me, you can just say so.”



“No, that’s not it.” Harold raked his eyes over her dress for a moment. “I failed to mention this earlier, but you look very pretty.”

“I’m not fishing for compliments.”

“I’m being honest. Blue really does look good on you.”

“I’ve already decided I’ll never go to a restaurant that requires a dress code for as long as I live.”

“If you do end up going there, would you like me to serve as your table manners app?” he asked with a teasing smile.

It felt like the alienating attitude he’d taken toward her for the last few weeks had abated—if only for an instant. Once Harold processed that he’d cracked a joke, he instantly averted his gaze, his eyes seeking refuge in the dark sea.

*Oh, come on...*

“I understand the secret is to blame for your change in behavior,” Echika said, unable to withstand the awkwardness and picking her words carefully. “I knew it would burden you to tell you that I’d clued in to your secret, but...I wish you wouldn’t be so awkward around me.”

“What do you mean?” Harold asked, his face still averted.

“We should talk this out.”

“I apologize if I gave you the wrong impression, but I wasn’t intending to act awkward or distant around you.”

“You say that when you won’t even look me in the eye right now?”

“Pardon me.” He returned his gaze to her. “You’re just too lovely to stare at tonight. I can’t bear to look straight at you.”

“You think I believe that? That’s your usual tactic. You always try to flatter and flirt whenever you need to dodge a question.”

“Echika.”

Harold grabbed her squarely by the shoulders. It was so sudden that she froze in surprise. His palms gave off the faint warmth typical of Amicus, and his lakelike eyes peered at her in all their artificiality. She could see each and every

one of his thin eyelashes.

“Please, stop disturbing my processing like thi—”

But his words were cut off by another ringing of a bell. Harold lifted his hands off her. Only now did Echika realize that she’d been holding her breath. The few guests who were gazing out at sea nearby hurried back into the lobby, beckoned by the ringing of the bell.

“...Let’s head back. We should regroup with Investigator Fokine.”

Harold turned around, and Echika bit her lower lip. She placed her hand on the spot where he had touched her shoulders, a lump forming in her throat.

Did he mean to say “Please stop disturbing my processing like this”? Was he rejecting the very act of them talking things out?

She was seized by a mixture of impatience and irritation.

“Aide Lucraft,” Echika called out to him, trying to suppress that feeling.

Before he could walk off, Harold turned to face her, but his gaze was fixed on the scenery, not on her.

“What is it?”

“Acting all curt around me is one thing, but...don’t do the same to Bigga, too.” Harold didn’t seem to notice or care that Bigga had been down in the dumps since the incident at the check-in center. “You know how she feels about you. You shouldn’t talk to her like that.”

“She’s been feeling down, yes, but I thought speaking to her would just make her more embarrassed.” He was expressionless, but his tone of voice was serene. “As I told her back there, I do like Bigga a great deal. So long as that got across to her, there shouldn’t be a problem.”

For an instant, she felt like she’d been stabbed in the heart, even though she’d been the one to bring this up in the first place.

“What do you mean?” Even she had to admit how awful her voice sounded. “So long as it got across to her, there isn’t a problem...?”

“I mean exactly what I said.”

“Are you saying you love her?”

“Love?” Harold gazed at her suspiciously. He looked as though she’d just asked him the strangest question in the world. “I just meant I think fondly of her. I don’t intend to categorize it in any particular way, nor do I feel the need to do so.”

This time he walked away, leaving Echika to stand there dumbfounded for a few seconds. What was with his attitude? Did Harold mean that he liked Bigga as a friend? Did he not understand, then, that this assessment would hurt her?

And why was Echika even thinking about this to begin with? She was overcome with the urge to ruffle her hair but managed to stop herself. She felt like she’d just caught a glimpse of something very unsightly at the bottom of her confused emotions. It terrified her.

*This is so obnoxious.*

Echika suppressed her anguish and returned to the lobby, keeping her distance from Harold. The two of them linked up with Fokine and Bigga, who revealed that their questions hadn’t produced any useful information. She and Harold hadn’t actually been asking around for leads, but she wasn’t going to tell that to the other two.

“Either way, we still have tomorrow,” Fokine said encouragingly. “Let’s take a seat for now.”

They were led by a waiter Amicus into the restaurant, where most of the guests were already enjoying their aperitifs. The fancy atmosphere of the place chipped away at Echika’s mood even more. The interior looked simple at first glance, with white being the underlying tone, but the lighting and the design of the carpet were both fashioned after a butterfly. The leather chairs and the embroidery of the tablecloth were all made meticulously, giving the place a clear air of luxury. After taking their seats, the three of them—Harold excluded—all huddled together.

“Is this, like, French cuisine? How are you supposed to eat this...?”

“You cut it with your knife and stab it with your fork.”

“Hieda, I don’t think that’s what Bigga was asking. By the way, when’s

dessert?”

“After the main course.”

“When do you think that’ll be?”

Bigga and Echika said this at the same time. A sommelier soon approached, offering champagne before the meal. Harold flawlessly ordered a bottle with low alcohol content. *We’d have finished eating by now if they gave us nutrient jelly*, Echika thought as she sluggishly spread a napkin. Then the lighting suddenly dimmed, and applause erupted from the surrounding tables.

“Everyone, we thank you for taking time out of your busy schedules to gather here tonight—”

Hughes, the head of the Farasha Island’s management secretariat, greeted everyone from a stage by a wall. Set behind him was a higher platform, where a cocoon-like statue was on display. It was cut horizontally at about waist height, and its insides were fashioned like some kind of pot.

*Anyway...*

Echika tried to banish the thought of Harold from her mind and focus on the investigation. Fokine was right; even if they found nothing today, they would still have tomorrow to find a lead.

“—I would like to ask Yunus, who has successfully remained on auto mode for a month, to take the stage.”

Another round of applause boomed, and the head of the secretariat climbed down from the stage as Yunus’s paired Amicus walked over to take his place. The permanent residents of the island adjusted their postures as he stood under the spotlight, glass in hand. They all brought a hand to their chests and looked at the young man wholeheartedly. Echika heard whispering all around her.

“He’s our hope.”

“I’m sure he’ll Emerge.”

“Yes, he’s perfect.”

*What?*

“Miss Hieda,” Bigga whispered into her ear. “Is that boy a bigwig around here or something?”

“I think he was a special adviser for the project. I guess that’s an important position, but...”

“Allow me to introduce the four who will enter the Khadira Period.” Yunus spoke into the mic and called out four names.

Four men and women of differing ages took the stage. One of them was Ben, the clerk they’d seen in the security inspection station. The four climbed up to the stage, carrying something in their arms, which they then unfurled. Objects dangled from their hands in the air—ugly-looking, hand-sewn marionettes.

“It thought idol worship was forbidden?” Fokine whispered. “Or maybe this is some kind of show.”

“There are no religious restrictions on the island, so maybe this isn’t a problem?” Harold replied.

“Allow me to explain what the Khadira Period is, for any new guests in attendance.”

When Yunus said this, each of the four people on the stage started manipulating the marionettes. The dolls were twins, representing original humans and their paired Amicus. They clung to each other, moving around snugly and going together wherever they went.

“The Khadira Period is a prolonged leave period granted to the staff working in this city. While these four rest, their paired Amicus will remain in auto mode. This isn’t just a leave of absence, but a prolonged auto-mode experiment for Project EGO...”

Echika recalled hearing that the real Yunus was on a prolonged vacation, too, but apparently this was part of the experiment. Echika could understand this was a necessary step for the practical implementation of this system... But why make a big deal about it and throw this strange puppet show?

“Incidentally, everyone, do you know what happens inside a chrysalis when a butterfly metamorphoses?” Echika thought she saw Yunus throw a glance her way. “The larva melts away into mush for a time. Some people say it’s like they



die and are reborn. Through that process, they Emerge into a perfect, beautiful creature entirely unlike the original.”

Of the puppets dancing on the stage, the two representing original humans were tugged by their strings and thrown into the chrysalis object. Then they were pulled back out of it, emerging covered in a black substance, like they were caked in dried blood. The inside of the cocoon must have been full of paint. The puppets dripped black drops like tears and descended the stage. But the paired Amicus grew rainbow-colored wings from their backs and gracefully left the stage in the other direction.

Thundering applause filled the room, and a few of the guests exchanged glances. Echika furrowed her brows.

“I can’t say that was in very good taste,” she said.

“It was a little creepy.” Bigga nodded. “The human dolls were covered in black paint...”

“Like, what is it trying to say? That the Amicus are better than us?” A guest sitting close to their group rose from his chair.

He was a plump middle-aged man with an Ego Tracker on—the investor who Chairman Talbot had spoken to earlier. Most of the guests were still focused on the stage.

“First time here?” A resident from a nearby table whispered, trying to calm him down. “It’s just a little show about how butterflies emerge from their coco —”

“It’s unpleasant, is what it is. I’m leaving.”

The investor walked away from his table in a clear display of anger and headed straight for the exit. A waiter Amicus hurried over to him, but the man rudely shooed him away.

“Is he a luddite?” Fokine whispered. “If he is, I’m impressed he cooperated with Project EGO to begin with.”

“It’s probably only for show,” Harold said. “I think it would only make sense for a human to find that show disturbing.”

“But I mean, it’s just an explanation using puppets. You don’t have to get that mad...”

The microphone screeched with feedback, and then Yunus’s voice filled the room.

“Let us pray, then, that the four of them successfully Emerge!”

The young man lifted his glass with awkward, unpracticed motions.

And then a heavy thud reverberated through the room.

There was a brief shout from afar. Echika turned to look and saw that the investor had suddenly fallen over on his way out of the restaurant. Just then, one of the guests at another table went limp and fell off his chair. And it wasn’t just one or two people. All around them, dozens of people lost consciousness, like it was some kind of chain reaction. They slumped over their tables, dropped their glasses, or collapsed shoulder-first onto the floor.

Echika held her breath in shock.

*What’s going on?*

Screams filled the restaurant. The residents broke out of their spells and hurried over to the collapsed people. Someone used the mic to attempt to call everyone to attention, but their voice was drowned out by angry shouts. A few guests fled the party in fear, the waiter Amicus among them. Echika and her group also got to their feet.

“Is it poison?” Fokine asked, looking over the table. “Don’t touch any of the food.”

“Understood,” Harold said calmly. “Let’s make an announcement and warn everyone not to touch their meals.”

“We should try to find the people in charge,” Echika said. “Bigga, come with m—”

But then she went silent. Bigga’s dainty body was falling limply to the floor.

Echika reached out on reflex and somehow managed to grab her arm, but she couldn't support her weight. Echika cradled Bigga's head to protect it as they both collapsed to the floor.

"Investigator!"

"Hey, are you all right?!"

Withstanding the blow to her back, Echika checked on Bigga in her arms. The girl was leaning against Echika's chest, limp and unresponsive. Her eyelids were open a crack, but she was completely unconscious, like all the others. Echika felt something cold run through her heart.

*Wait.*

"Call a medical team." Fokine turned on his heels. "Hieda, don't move her, all right?!"

"Bigga? Bigga, hang on!" Unable to think straight, Echika touched the girl's cheek. It was clearly warm, but she wasn't reacting. A shiver ran through Echika's hands. Bigga had been fine just a moment ago, so why had she collapsed?

"Echika, calm down." Harold knelt beside them and pressed his hand to Bigga's neck. He nodded a few seconds later. "She has a pulse. If this was poison, she'd be vomiting or convulsing."

"She hasn't even eaten anything yet. Why did this happen...?" Echika asked this and looked up, only to once again grow confused.

The restaurant, so gorgeous just a few minutes before, had completely changed in the blink of an eye. Everywhere she looked, people were lying on the floor, with others tending to them.

A group of nurse Amicus hurried over with stretchers. People called for them from all over the room. The stage was now empty—Yunus and the others were long gone.

"Don't worry. We'll save you."

Amid the deafening tumult, she heard Harold whisper this like a prayer.

“Fifteen people collapsed at the party. They’ve all gone into comas from damage to their cranial nerves.”

They were in the artificial island’s central block. The island’s medical center was solemn even in the middle of the night. Echika and Harold were standing in the corridor in front of the ICU. Through the thick glass set in the walls, they could make out patient beds lined up next to each other. Nurse Amicus busily came and went, carrying new patients fresh out of surgery into the ICU.

**“So contrary to Hieda’s theory, this wasn’t caused by poison.”**

Chief Totoki’s grave expression was projected on the holo-browser of Harold’s terminal. She was dressed in a suit and was in her office in Lyon despite the late hour. Her cat, Ganache, was curled up snugly on the sofa behind her.

“The attending doctor said the cause was a crash in her Your Forma. It’s close to what the aides who had their heads fried by my Brain Dives went through. The patients’ injuries are all light, but...”

As she said this, Echika felt her chest tense up. Why had this happened?

**“What’s Bigga’s condition?”**

“They just finished attending to her and have moved her to the ICU,” Harold replied. “Apparently, they were able to successfully treat her using the Your Forma, so she should regain consciousness in a few days.”

**“Well, at least there’s some good news.”**

Harold tilted his terminal, giving Totoki a view of the ICU. Bigga was lying on the bed closest to the corridor. She had a nasal cannula on but seemed to be sleeping soundly. Echika had been relieved when she’d heard that the risk of any long-lasting effects was low.

But of course, this didn’t actually solve any of their problems right now. The Your Forma crashing on its own was extremely rare, so the fact it had happened to multiple people in the same restaurant at the same time meant it couldn’t be a coincidence. The crash was artificially induced somehow, so they were treating it as an electronic incident.

**“Hieda, are there any signs of the victims’ Your Forma being hacked?”**

“Their device history doesn’t show any signs of suspicious connections, but we can’t rule out the possibility of the culprit covering their tracks.”

**“Agreed. We’ll send reinforcements from HQ, so you continue investigating the area.”** Totoki looked away from the screen for a moment. **“Also...we’re looking into Paul Lloyd as we speak. We’ll need some time to see what we can come up with.”**

“Yes.” Honestly, with everything that happened, the matter of Lloyd had completely slipped her mind. “Thank you.”

They closed the call, and Echika glanced at Bigga from across the glass again. The sight of her lying there unconscious weighed on Echika’s heart. If this had to happen, maybe they’d have been better off leaving her behind. “Aide Lucraft, do you think Lascelles is involved with this crash?”

“It’s hard to say at this point,” Harold said, also looking at Bigga in concern. “But we already know what the common denominator between all the victims was.”

His gaze was fixed on the circlet lying on the medical tray by the bed—the Ego Tracker, with its electronic circuit. Echika had gotten the same hunch when she looked over the victims’ personal data.

“Everyone who passed out was participating in Project EGO.”

“Yes. And I think it’s limited to outside guests, not residents of the island.”

“Yeah, that seems about right.”

Echika and Harold looked up—Investigator Fokine had approached them from the end of the hall, his expression grave. He was walking along in his waistcoat, his jacket and tie removed. Murjana followed closely behind him, looking quite pale.

“Development Head Murjana showed me around the secretariat, and I gathered information there. There were fifteen victims, and they were all guests who came here for the party with Ego Trackers on.”

Saying this, Fokine shared a list of outsider members of Project EGO, sending

it to Echika's Your Forma and Harold's wearable terminal. They opened the list to find that it contained the names of all the comatose victims, Bigga included.

*I should have stopped her from taking the Ego Tracker in the first place.* Echika gritted her teeth in distress.

"Did the perpetrator exploit a weakness in the Ego Tracker to hack the victims' Your Forma?"

"That would be difficult." Harold shook his head. "Since the Ego Trackers are made to work in tandem with an Amicus, they'd be categorized as IoT devices. You might be able to connect to the Tracker from the Your Forma's side, but the opposite wouldn't apply... Is that right, Head of Development Murjana?"

He turned to Murjana, who was still very pale. The project the entire city was promoting was in grim shape now that people had been injured. Her distress came as no surprise.

"Yes, that's right." She crossed her arms, as if to embrace herself. "The Development Department suspects it might have been an error on the paired Amicus' side. Theoretically speaking, the Amicus could possibly influence the Your Forma via the Ego Trackers."

"Would a simple error cause a crash?" Echika turned to Harold.

"It's not realistic. But if it was a modification, rather than an error, it would be possible."

Modifying an Amicus—Echika sucked on the back of her lips. The first thing that came to her mind was Lascelles. He'd modified Bernard's utility function system, granting it a dangerous degree of autonomy. So if an Amicus could willingly attack its paired human, it would cause a crash.

"No, there's no chance of any modification. If there was any problem with the paired Amicus, we'd notice right away."

"The cause aside, wouldn't it be for the best if you took off that device for the time being?" Fokine glanced at Murjana's neck suspiciously. Even now, she was still wearing the Ego Tracker.

"There's no need for concern." She touched her neck, her expression very



stiff. “If we cut off the synchronization now, it could influence the progress of the Emergence. I cannot jeopardize the project’s progress at my own discretion.”

She stubbornly refused, either because only guests had been affected in the incident or out of pride as head of the Development Department. But since they didn’t know how many people the crashes could reach, Echika would have expected Murjana to fear for her own safety. Her obsession with this project bordered on unusual. That word, “Emergence,” implied the success of the long-term auto-mode experiment, but after the puppet show, it had taken on an eerie meaning.

What was clear was that Project EGO was somehow related to the crash, and that they couldn’t overlook this as investigators.

“Please investigate the Ego Trackers and paired Amicus carefully,” Echika said. “If the Amicus have been modified, it could be a serious affair—”

“And this time, we may come to the conclusion that the RF Models’ code is defective.”

Everyone turned around at once. Chairman Talbot was trudging down the corridor. He’d also been at the scene of the accident, but he was unharmed since he didn’t have an Ego Tracker on. He must have been coming in to audit the management and ask about the victims’ conditions.

“What are you talking about?” Echika asked. His assertion felt like a major leap in logic. “This case has nothing to do with Aide Lucraft and his siblings.”

“No, it does, actually.” Talbot threw a dark gaze in Harold’s direction. “The system code used for the paired Amicus here is the same as the RF Models’.”

Echika and Harold exchanged glances. The RF Models used the neuromimetic system to think, but that was a deeply guarded secret. Talbot was talking about the RF Models’ system code as it was disclosed to the public; its “outer shell,” so to speak. But even the outer shell was considered a superior system that afforded the RF Models convincing autonomy. This meant that paired Amicus such as Yunus’s were capable of learning how to act in a way that was indistinguishable from human behavior, like the RF Models were.

In other words, they were worthy of being called next-generation all-purpose AI.

“When Steve went haywire, we considered revising Project EGO, but...Novae Robotics Inc. guaranteed their safety, and the inspection didn’t find any defects.” Talbot looked like he had quite the headache. “It seems like this whole thing is cursed.”

“There’s no curse here, this is an intentional incident,” Fokine said, with an unusually firm tone. “The Electrocrime Investigations Bureau will begin investigating this. The reinforcements from HQ should arrive tomorrow.”

“Investigator, I think this is premature.” Murjana glared at Fokine unpleasantly. “First, we should call in a Novae Robotics Inc. expert and have them inspect the paired Amicus. You can treat this as a case once we discover signs of modification or any kind of foul play.”

Farasha Island didn’t want this to become a big deal. The research city was receiving funding from all corners of the globe, so the fact that people had been hurt, external investors among them, would create a media fiasco that would result in a major funding withdrawal. They wanted to prevent that, and it showed. Project EGO was of utmost importance to them, and they stood to lose everything if it stopped for any reason.

But at the same time, Bigga had gotten caught in the cross fire, so Echika couldn’t simply sit back and do nothing.

“Let’s do this, then.” Echika insisted. “We’ll investigate this matter as an extension of the case we originally came here to look into. This way, we won’t have to wait to discover any clues.”

“Do you think that kind of absurd reasoning will—?”

“Oh, pardon me. My hand slipped and I sent Novae Robotics Inc. a message,” Harold said, waving his wearable terminal. “Since the paired Amicus’ system code is the same as mine, it should fall under the Special Development Department... Department Head Angus’s jurisdiction, right?”

Talbot glared at Harold, but the Amicus’s expression didn’t budge. Standing beside him, Echika winced at the chairman’s chagrin.

“Either way, we’ll be doing our job here,” Fokine said flatly. “Do you need us to get a warrant involved?”

“...Anyway, you should speak to Head of Secretariat Hughes, not me. Understood?”

Just then, Chairman Talbot seemed to get a Your Forma message. He looked up into thin air and then walked off, not masking his annoyance. Murjana turned on her heels reluctantly and said she would show them the way. Fokine gestured to Echika to stay and followed Murjana. Convincing the head of secretariat would be his job, it seemed.

“Aide Lucraft.” Echika turned to look at Harold. “Did you really contact Novae Robotics Inc.?”

“I was bluffing.” She knew it. “But for Bigga’s sake, we can’t afford to do nothing.”

“Of course. I feel the same way.”

“Besides, Department Chief Murjana’s nonverbal cues came across as off to me.”

Echika fell quiet and frowned. The Amicus pensively watched Murjana walk away, and then turned his lakelike eyes to Echika. They burned with silent conviction.

“She’s probably hiding something from us.”

What did this all mean?

YOUR FORMA

## Chapter 2

### Fissure



## Chapter 2

### Fissure

1

A night had passed since the group crash incident at the restaurant.

**<You have not reached your recommended hours of sleep. Please take care to avoid excessive stress>**

As she leaned back in a monorail seat, Echika narrowed her eyes against the light filtering in through the window. She'd napped for a few hours, but her head still hurt a little.

The monorail car was empty this early in the morning. The artificial island's population was a mere five thousand people, so the public transport here was rarely packed.

"Aide Lucraft, is Investigator Fokine looking into Department Head Murjana and the Ego Trackers?" she asked Harold, who was sitting next to her.

In contrast to the fancy tuxedo he'd worn the night prior, the Amicus had returned to his typical outfit—a casual jacket. He was still as standoffish as usual, of course, but it didn't bother her anymore.

"Yes, he left ahead of us and should link up with us once he's done."

"Didn't he stay up to talk to the head of secretariat? Did he get any rest?"

"He napped in his bed for about an hour." That hardly counted as sleep. "But he was quite worked up this morning. His concern for Bigga must be keeping him going."

Harold and Fokine were staying at the same cottage. Echika and Bigga were

also supposed to stay in the same place, but since she was hospitalized, Echika had slept alone. Bigga's sleeping face in the ICU came to mind. She wished Bigga would wake up so she could talk to her soon. Echika had keenly realized how important the girl was to her as a friend.

"And what you said last night, about Murjana hiding something from us. Any leads on that?"

"Something should turn up when we investigate the paired Amicus." The sunlight touched Harold's cheek, turning it almost transparently white. "Regardless, let's go meet Department Head Angus in the tower."

Novae Robotics Inc. had sent over the Special Development Department's investigation team, led by Department Head Angus; they'd arrived just an hour ago. Given that the flight from London to Dubai took seven hours, Echika could only imagine that they'd boarded the plane first thing in the morning. This was extremely fortunate for the bureau.

"They came over straightaway after you called. I know this is an emergency, but that's scary fast."

"Department Head Angus and I go way back. He'll comply with almost any request I make of him."

The monorail stopped at the Central Technological Development Tower, and Echika and Harold boarded an elevator, which they rode up to the First Technological Development Department on the fifty-fifth floor. This was the department in charge of tuning the paired Amicus.

The counter of the lobby was manned by a paired Amicus, who told them to leave, even after Echika presented her bureau ID Card. They'd been turned away, even though the secretariat should have given his approval.

"Maybe you just haven't been briefed yet, but we're—"

"Oh, Investigator Hieda, I've been waiting for you! And you too, Harold."

A gentle-featured redheaded man in the prime of his life appeared in the corridor. Echika, who was intent on talking the Amicus down, relaxed.

**<Peter Angus. 37 years old. Head of the Special Development Department in**

## **Novae Robotics Inc.'s development laboratory—>**

After the RF Model assault incident and Professor Lexie's subsequent arrest and discharge from Novae Robotics Inc., Angus became the new department head in her place.

"It's been a while." Echika shook Angus's hand. "Thank you for coming."

"Oh, don't mention it." He looked around in concern. "I haven't run into Chairman Talbot yet, but he isn't going to show up now, is he...?"

"Don't worry," Harold said. "He's currently hanging around the secretariat and nervously keeping watch so that the media don't catch wind of what happened here."

"No, I mean... Harold, is the Chairman mad with me? As in, 'This all happened because Novae provided defective Amicus'...? If I hadn't hurried over, he'd have used his authority to drive me out of Novae..."

"I hear that depending on typical anger management, a person's fury can reach its peak within six seconds."

Harold pushed Angus's back and started walking. Echika exhaled through her nose. Yes, she could see now. They went way back, eh? He'd comply with almost any request he made of him, indeed.

The three of them went to maintenance room 1. The interior was quite spacious and contained at least ten maintenance pods. The victims' paired Amicus were already under analysis, with the Novae Robotics Inc.'s engineer team working alongside the First Technological Development Department's members to run the analysis.

Angus scratched the back of his neck in an attempt to pull himself together. "Right now, we're putting the victims' paired Amicus into pods and scanning them one by one."

"One by one?" Harold asked. "Won't a self-diagnosis detect any issues?"

"It would, but if they've been modified, those defects won't come up. Inspecting them one by one is the safest way." At that point, he looked around in a fidgety manner. "Actually, we'll be using Steve's corrected system code as a



reference, so we brought him over. We built a scan program with that as its standard, and we're running it right now, but... Um, there's something I should tell you right off the bat, Investigator."

"Yes." Echika nodded, despite not quite understanding what it was about. "What is it?"

"Come this way."

Angus walked off, and Echika followed him, puzzled. He approached a desk that was integrated into the wall. There was a laptop PC there that had to be from Novae Robotics Inc., connected via cable to a black analysis pod nearby.

*Wait.*

No, to be exact, it was connected to *something* sitting up in the pod.

"Department Head." Harold narrowed his eyes, too. "I thought you said you 'brought his system code'?"

"Well, you rushed me to come here. I had to do this to make the morning flight," Angus said awkwardly. "The IAEC gave us permission to bring him over until the case is resolved. This is all aboveboard."

Despite being able to hear their exchange, the Amicus inside the pod didn't react. His meticulously sculpted features were the exact same as Harold's. The only difference was that his mole was on his left cheek instead of under his right eye. His hair was uncombed and hung over his eyes, suggesting he'd only recently been rebooted, and the maintenance gown he had on was a bit worn-out.

Steve Howell Wheatstone.

He was Harold's older brother, an RF Model who had once worked in Rig City. Following the investigation into the sensory crime incident, he was placed into shutdown mode by Novae Robotics Inc.

"I'm sorry, Investigator," Angus whispered, looking concerned. "I imagine it might make you uneasy, given what happened, but Steve is safe right now. We removed the problematic code that made him go haywire, and we're regulating the conductivity of his limbs, too. The most he can do is walk slowly and hold a

pen.”

“No, I’m fine...”

She recalled how Steve fired at her holo-model during the sensory crime incident. Yes, that wasn’t a pleasant memory for her, but she’d still sympathized with Steve when his master betrayed him, and she wasn’t going to blame him now. If anything, she got the impression he wouldn’t want to look her in the face.

“Yeah, I’ll be right over,” Angus replied to a software engineer. “Investigator, if you could wait here? The scan should be over in five minutes...”

He briskly walked away. Unsure of what to do with herself, Echika decided to look at Harold for the time being.

“Is it true that Mr. Taylor passed away, Harold?”

Just then, Steve spoke up. He finally turned his eyes to them, which resembled a dried spring covered with ash. It reminded Echika of how Harold’s eyes had looked frozen over at some point.

“It’s true,” Harold said quietly. “He died before his first hearing.”

“...I see.” The corners of Steve’s eyes contorted a bit, and then he turned his gaze to Echika. “While our meeting is more coincidence than anything else, Investigator Hieda, allow me to take the opportunity to apologize. Please, don’t forgive me.”

“No.” Echika was too embarrassed to reply. “I don’t... I wasn’t angry at you to begin with.”

Surely, she could have come up with a better way of comforting him, but she couldn’t find the words. Steve’s tone was very detached, like he was too beaten down to put emotion into his words. She felt, for some reason, that saying something careless here would just tear him apart.

“Brother Steve. While you were asleep, Professor Lexie was arrested, and Marvin passed away.”

“Department Head Angus told me.” Steve lowered his eyes. “I asked the professor not to ever activate me again, but I suppose she never told the

department head that. The passage of time can be cruel.”

Neither Harold’s nor Steve’s voices held any joy at their reunion. Perhaps that was because their concept of filial love was different from humans’—but more than anything, the chilling possibility that Steve might be harboring suicidal thoughts crossed Echika’s mind. She knew he was equipped with the neuromimetic system, which made his thought patterns so close to human, but this was the first time she’d ever seen an Amicus contemplate its own death.

Taylor’s betrayal must have hurt him terribly. Even if he’d been a criminal, publicly speaking, he was still Steve’s one and only benefactor. Much like the deceased Sozon had been to Harold.

“Investigator, could you come over?!”

Angus gestured for her to approach from afar. There were engineers gathered around him; they’d found something. Echika hurried over with Harold in tow, trying to shake off the oppressive atmosphere.

“There’s traces of modification after all,” Angus said, showing her the lines of numbers and letters crawling on the tablet screen. It displayed the analysis reports from each maintenance pod, but she couldn’t make heads nor tails of it. “It looks like all the paired Amicus were switched to Protocol Hold.”

“Protocol Hold?”

“It’s a type of protocol hierarchy that deals with Amicus communication,” Harold told her. “Fundamentally speaking, it’s optimized for IoT coordination with Your Forma.”

“Normally, yes, but...what’s loaded onto these paired Amicus is completely different.”

“How is it different?” Echika asked.

Angus furrowed his brows.

“I can only speculate, but they were probably put in this mode to *enable them to connect to an inter-Amicus network.*”

*What?*

Echika and Harold forgot that they were arguing and exchanged wide-eyed

looks. Normally, Amicus were forbidden from connecting online per IAEC regulations. This was because allowing Amicus to connect to an online environment could introduce bugs in their utility function systems and expose them to the danger of being hacked. The biggest reason for the ban, however, was that humans were psychologically opposed to the idea of Amicus going online. Since Amicus were so familiar with the privacy needs of their owners, the possibility of them communicating with strangers, unbeknownst to their owners, was an understandably unnerving one.

But this island didn't need to abide by the IAEC's regulations. Furthermore, the paired Amicus were all replicas of human beings.

"In other words..." Echika lowered her eyes to Harold's wearable terminal. "The paired Amicus don't need a terminal to go online like you do?"

"That's what it would mean. Like Your Forma users, the paired Amicus can communicate with each other in their heads."

Looking back, she recalled how quickly Yunus had called Murjana's paired Amicus over at the vault. It hadn't struck her as odd at the time, but they'd likely used their inter-Amicus network to stay in touch.

But if this was true...

"Doesn't that mean the possibility of hacking we ruled out last night is back on the table?"

If all the paired Amicus were linked via a network, they could use the Ego Trackers to attack a specific user's Your Forma. But if they did that, no trace of the illegal access would remain in the Ego Tracker or the Your Forma.

Instead, the hacking would leave a footprint on the inter-Amicus network.

"I'll call Investigator Fokine over straightaway."

Within minutes of being contacted, Fokine and Murjana arrived at the maintenance room. The two had been in the second technological development room, checking the Ego Trackers. They didn't find much.

Having heard what Angus and his team had figured out, Murjana closed her

eyes in resignation.

“Yes... We switched the paired Amicus’ protocol to Hold.”

Echika felt the urge to glance at Harold’s face but stopped herself from doing so. Was this the secret he suspected she was keeping from them?

“Development Head Murjana, you initially chalked up the crashes to an error on the Amicus’ side,” Fokine said, narrowing his eyes. “Did you give us false testimony despite knowing better?”

“We don’t know for sure that the inter-Amicus network is the cause here,” Murjana asserted. “If it was, all of Project Ego’s participants would have started passing out.”

“You never informed Novae of this to begin with,” Angus lashed out firmly. “Just establishing an inter-Amicus network is problematic as it is, so why keep the modification a secret?”

“We weren’t trying to keep it under wraps. It’s just that it’s against regulations, so we had to voluntarily set the protocol to be ignored during automatic self-diagnosis scans.” The pace of her conversation was getting faster. “Chairman Talbot gave us permission. We’re not far from an age where the Amicus will be going online.”

“What you’re talking about is also in the purview of the ethics of engineers like us. Are you saying that you’re allowed to do whatever you want just because you’re not bound by the usual regulations?”

“Anyway! We just didn’t want anyone to interfere with the project. If this absurd incident ends up halting its progress, we’ll take great losses. And more than anything—”

“There’s already plenty of victims. Some things are more important than merit and achievements, you know?” Fokine said firmly, unable to mask his exhaustion.

The circles under his eyes were distressing; Fokine had been deeply disturbed at seeing Bigga fall into a coma. He was always one to care about his colleagues more than most people, so he was taking what had happened especially hard.

But while it was aggravating that the city was being so uncooperative, quarreling about it would get them nowhere.

“Then let’s investigate if there’s any signs of hacking in the inter-Amicus network.” Echika tried to mediate between the three, who looked like they were about to clash. “Aide Lucraft, how can we do that?”

“Since we don’t know how the culprit got in, we’ll have to put all the paired Amicus connected to the network at the time of the incident in pods and analyze them one by one.”

One by one—Echika instantly grew discouraged. After all, Project EGO was being conducted across the entire island, with almost all the permanent residents involved. That would mean they’d have to individually investigate over five thousand paired Amicus, which would obviously take a tremendous amount of time. Plus, there was no telling if another crash could happen while they chipped away at the task.

Echika snuck a glance at Murjana’s neck. No one involved in the project, herself included, wanted to quit. They were all oddly fixated on its success. Since Echika and the others couldn’t convince the islanders to take off the Ego Trackers, they had to solve this as soon as possible.

“Department Head Angus, isn’t there a more efficient way of doing this?”

“Harold’s idea is the best one,” Angus said, still looking upset. “But if the culprit did something to cover up their illegal access, we might not find anything regardless...”

“I can offer a more efficient method.”

Echika and the others all turned and stared in the direction of the voice.

Steve was sluggishly rising from the pod. He must have been listening in on their conversation. He approached them while adjusting the front of his gown. With his conductivity lowered, his steps were unsteady, so he was essentially shambling. The surrounding engineers and technicians looked at him in panic.

“Steve.” Angus stopped him in a hurry. “You can’t. Go back to your pod.”

“Wasn’t it you who set me to be ‘safe,’ Department Head Angus?” Echika

watched as Steve tied the cords of his gown. “If checking the Amicus one by one is too time-consuming, you should just *Dive into the network*.”

Echika couldn’t mask her confusion. What was he saying?

“How would we do that?” Fokine looked at Steve. This was their first meeting, come to think of it. “You’re not going to tell us to Brain Dive, are you?”

“It’s impossible.” Echika shook her head. “Brain Dives are meant to go into a Your Forma’s Mnemosynes. It wouldn’t work on an Amicus network—”

“True. But we can enter it *directly*.”

Steve glanced at Harold. The younger brother silently accepted his elder’s gaze. And the humans, Echika included, exchanged confused glances. They still hadn’t caught on to what he meant.

“Indeed,” Harold said eventually. “Since we’re also Amicus, we can enter their network. We’ll need to be set to Protocol Hold, though.”

“I can help,” Steve said as he looked at Murjana. “And I believe we’ll be able to do it much faster with your assistance.”

Steve was very knowledgeable about programming and other such subjects. He’d developed a reputation as a jack-of-all-trades back when he worked for Rig City. Murjana looked overwhelmed but nodded jerkily.

“Y-yes, well, I suppose given the situation, it only makes sense I would help...”

“No.” Angus cut her off. “You two might be based on the same code, but you’re not paired Amicus. Connecting to the inter-Amicus network could cause some kind of unforeseen change in your utility function system. At worst, you might get infected with a virus...”

“If I Dive in with Harold, we can counteract any virus, since we’d be able to recognize any vulnerability we may have once we run into one. And if our utility function systems glitch out, isn’t it your job to correct that?”

Steve turned a cool look at Angus, who fell silent. Echika could only stare at the scene in shock. Why was Steve so actively cooperative with them all of a sudden? He’d been terribly stricken, almost suicidal, just moments ago. It was much too abrupt a change in attitude.



“What do you say, Investigator?”

“No, er...” Fokine was confused, too. And it only made sense he was; this kind of investigation method was unheard of. “I mean, if it produced some kind of clue, the bureau would love nothing else, but...we need to make sure Aide Lucraft is safe.”

“I can promise that, of course. Harold, what’s your opinion?”

Steve turned his eyes to his younger brother, who stood in silence. Harold was quick to make his decision. He jerked his chin back, without any trace of a smile on his face.

“I’d be glad if you could let me handle this. We need to find clues quickly, for Bigga’s sake, as well.”

Echika never thought the day would come when she would have to stand back and watch someone else Dive.

The maintenance room was once again abuzz with activity as everyone prepared for Harold and Steve’s Dive into the inter-Amicus network. Novae Robotics Inc.’s engineers and the First Technological Development Department’s technicians reactivated the victims’ paired Amicus and confirmed their connection to the network. Meanwhile, Development Head Murjana worked with Steve to place him and Harold into Protocol Hold.

“I honestly can’t imagine it... What’s Diving into a network like?” Fokine asked, standing next to Echika and scratching his ruffled hair in confusion.

“I wouldn’t know. It’s apparently a bit different from a Brain Dive.” Echika pressed her back to the wall, trying to distract herself from the inexplicable anxiety she was feeling. If this place wasn’t a non-smoking area, she’d have taken a puff right now.

She had no idea how any of this would go, and it was eating at her nerves.

“I mean, we don’t know if this is even going to work,” Fokine remarked.

“...Let’s just pray it ends safely.” Echika took a deep breath and placed a hand on her neck.

After a while, Steve and Harold lay down in two pods that had their hatches raised. Angus connected HSB cables to the ports in their ears. The two Amicus lay down peacefully, looking less like people with wills of their own and more like dolls. Times like these were a stark reminder that Harold wasn't a human, but a machine.

*I just hope they find some kind of clue.*



It was a truly strange experience to connect your consciousness to the Amicus network, which had no physical space. Harold felt as though he'd become water being washed down a dark tube. He tried to blink, only to realize he lacked both eyelids and eyeballs.

Professor Lexie once told Harold that an AI's growth and the existence of its body were in an inseparable relationship. Indeed, inside this network there was no texture, no scent or sound, and hardly any stimuli to speak of. Only rectangular specks of light, floating in front of him. These were the communication protocols of every paired Amicus.

**"Brother Steve, can you hear me?"**

Harold spoke, not with his voice but with a signal of sorts—a fragment of thoughts. Since he was connected by a cable to Steve's body ahead of time, they were able to communicate even within the network.

**"I'm confirming the area is safe,"** Steve's thoughts replied. **"It seems fine. Let's go further in."**

**"Let's look for traces of the culprit."**

Harold made as if to walk ahead, but he lacked legs, so it was more akin to swimming forward. Like swimming underwater. Echika had once told him that Diving into Mnemosynes felt like leaving one's body behind, and that was an apt analogy. But maybe he was feeling even more immersed than she did, since he wasn't bound by his body at all.

**"Did you need to think about that right now?"** Steve asked in annoyance—he didn't have a tone of voice, but Harold could feel his emotional engine react this

way. **“Harold, the borders between our thought processes are thin right now. I can hear about half of what you think.”**

**“I’ll close my thought processes. I’d rather you not eavesdrop on me.”**

Come to think of it, he’d been able to close off his thoughts in the past. But at some point, his control over his mental processes had started slipping. Harold checked a few protocols, but there were no signs of intrusion. He advanced deeper in.

But that said...

**“Brother Steve, why are you helping the bureau?”** He had been mulling over the question since before the Dive. **“This incident has nothing to do with you. You even said you wished you weren’t rebooted.”**

**“Seeing Investigator Hieda’s face reminded me of what I need to do,”** said Steve, but Harold suspected he was lying. **“Though I imagine you wouldn’t believe me if I told you that I wish to repent for what I did to her.”**

**“I can believe it, but you must have more reasons than that.”**

**“Something is off about the members of the Technological Development Department.”**

That made sense to Harold. His brother sensed something was not quite right, and Harold had felt the same way his entire time here. Murjana and the people of this island all displayed an obstinate degree of fixation on and respect for Project EGO. Their devotion was too excessive to be mere passion for research; Steve must have latched on to this notion as well. Strangest of all to Harold was that the researchers’ nonverbal gestures were *uncannily identical*.

**“Why do you think that is, Brother Steve?”**

**“I have a hypothesis, but I can’t share it with you right now. I need to be certain of it.”**

Feeling the firmness of Steve’s will, Harold felt slightly confused. He considered pressing the question, but Harold wasn’t human—he was an Amicus. He couldn’t manipulate Steve exactly how he wanted, like a pawn. Regardless, he would have to watch what his brother did carefully.

**“Harold, you seem suspicious of me, but I don’t intend to cause you any trouble.”**

**“Don’t worry. Even if I did think you were up to something, we’re the same model. I’d be able to handle you.”**

**“Well...”** His tone was doubtful. **“As promising as you make that sound, it’s not going to be that simple.”**

They kept Diving deeper in but didn’t find any traces of intrusion. Still, if a needle went through something, it had to leave a hole in its wake; there was bound to be proof somewhere. Meanwhile, Harold’s emotional engine had been experiencing concern over this unusual situation for a while now. He could clearly feel how his each and every sensory process was connected to his body. As an Amicus, he’d been made to be as close to human as possible. But that didn’t mean he could easily understand humans, and that frustrated him.

*“We should talk this out.”*

The memory of what had happened the night before replayed in his mind, and he instantly closed it. However...

**“Harold, are you thinking about Investigator Hieda again?”**

He hadn’t been fast enough.

**“I’ve been suffering a decline in my control of my cognitive processes,”** Harold confessed. **“I’ve been trying to keep Echika at a distance. Professor Lexie told her about the neuromimetic system.”**

Steve wasn’t typically one to display emotion, but even he was surprised by that.

**“What was the professor thinking?”**

**“I don’t know. I bet she thought telling her the truth would be ‘more interesting.’”**

Worse still, Echika had been holding on to that secret for months at this point. And after Harold had lost confidence in his ability to read her actions after the RF Model assault incident, he failed to notice she knew the secret, too. Just recalling this was exasperating.

**“You do know keeping your distance from her at this point would only be good for your peace of mind,”** Steve said, his words reasonable but scathing. **“Investigator Hieda’s Your Forma is recording the very fact that she’s keeping the neuromimetic system a secret. There aren’t many effective solutions to that. At best, you’d have to wipe her Mnemosynes.”**

**“And that’s a bad idea,”** Harold retorted. **“Wiping the Mnemosynes leaves traces, and it would only make it harder to lift suspicion from her. If I keep her away from me, it’s less likely she’ll be suspected to begin with.”**

**“If you’ve considered everything this far, then why are you still Investigator Hieda’s partner?”** The question prompted Sozon’s visage to surface in Harold’s thoughts. Steve seemed to sense that. **“You should find another Diver to work with. They might not match Investigator Hieda’s abilities, but you’ll both be safer for it, and that’s more important.”**

That, too, was a reasonable suggestion. If all Harold wanted to do was track Sozon’s killer, he didn’t need to pair with Echika in particular. If he made up a compelling reason to deceive Chief Totoki with, he could have her assign him to a different Brain Diver.

But then he remembered the events of that summer. He’d been temporarily partnered with Electronic Investigator Liza Robin, but Echika kept popping into his thought processes. Would trying to do this again even work?

He felt a considerable strain on his emotional processing.

**“You’ve changed a great deal, Harold.”**

**“It’s just a minor abnormality in my emotional engine. It’s not outputting any errors.”**

**“I wouldn’t call that an abnormality. The emotions Professor Lexie put in us from the start are simply exceeding your understanding.”** That was probably true. Harold knew that. **“You say you want to keep your distance from her, but the truth is that *you’re* the one who can’t bring yourself to stay away from Investigator Hieda, correct?”**

That may have been the crux of the matter. In that moment, Harold felt a surge of regret. He shouldn’t have Dived into the network with Steve, even

though it was for the investigation. If he was going to think of Echika's well-being, then he needed to ignore this kind of irrational thinking.

**"It seems to me you trust the investigator a great deal,"** Steve carried on. **"If I were in your shoes, I would fear the possibility of her exposing the secret one day. I'd even consider silencing her."**

**"Brother Steve, you're contradicting your previous statement about not causing me any trouble."**

**"I'm just speaking in hypotheticals. At this point, I don't care enough to protect the secret, but you're different—you have a goal."** While Steve wasn't completely careless, his desire to maintain his existence seemed to have faded somewhat. **"I won't meddle with your choice. It's not my place to do so. But let me give you one warning."**

Just then, Steve's thought processes, which had been firmly closed off so far, leaked over to Harold ever so slightly. He sensed despair cold enough to make his entire body creak. He stopped in his tracks for a moment at the feeling.

**"We're only acting like humans, but the truth is that we're different from them in every single way."**

**"I know that, of course."**

**"No, you don't."** Steve paused. **"The love and affection we experience is incompatible with what humans feel. We cannot ever betray them, but their hearts change all too easily. As long as you don't get that through your head, you'll keep getting hurt."**

*I don't want you to end up like me.*

Steve's thoughts were charged with deep sincerity, yet they didn't resonate with Harold. He realized his brother felt this way because he was used by Taylor, but that was nothing like him and Echika. He and Echika were similar to them in the sense that they were also accomplices, but unlike Taylor, Echika didn't view Harold as a mere tool. If anything, perhaps that was where the problem lay. Regardless, he concluded that Steve's concern was unfounded.

Except... Even with all that in mind, it was still undeniable that keeping his distance from Echika was his best option. That hadn't changed. His system

silently strained as he confronted the reality of the situation.

**“Let’s get back to work.”** Harold transmitted his thoughts, trying to end the conversation. **“We’ve chatted for too long.”**

**“Indeed.”** Steve, too, seemed to have shifted gears. **“This isn’t the garden of Windsor Castle, after all.”**

From then on, they avoided conversing. Harold’s thoughts were probably still slipping by, but Steve didn’t react. After passing a few dozen protocols, Harold noticed something wrong. If he had to describe it, it was like one of the squarish shapes of light had become oddly distorted.

Harold checked its connection history by doing something akin to reaching out to it with a hand. At first glance, nothing about this seemed outside the norm, but now that Harold was pure consciousness, he could clearly see that there was a “hole” in the light that had been painted over.

**“There’s traces of illegal access being smoothed over.”**

**“Let’s identify the source of the attack.”**

Steve instantly pulled over data from the connection history. At first, it scattered into small pieces in the air, but then it was drawn together as if pulled by a magnet to form a shape, like a puzzle. It only took seconds, and Steve read out the answer he found.

**“It’s from within Farasha Island. Someone inside the local network is doing the accessing, and they’re in the southern first block.”**

This lead was more than good enough.

## 2

Farasha Island’s southeastern block was dedicated to agricultural technological development. As their share car drove by, Echika watched glass panes of man-made research greenhouses—phytotrons—pass through the window. They stood densely together, filling up several hectares of land, making the scenery feel homogeneous. She would have been totally lost without a map.



Echika leaned against the back seat of the car, watching the drones move about busily inside the phytotrons. She brought a hand to her chest for some reason.

“Investigator Fokine, did you contact this area’s central management facility?” Harold asked from the driver’s seat.

“I have,” Fokine replied from the passenger seat. “If the traces you and Steve found are the real deal, the terminal used for the attack should be there. At least, assuming it wasn’t used as a relay.”

“You mean using multiple terminals to hack? Yes, that does sound like a plausible option.”

As she listened to them talk, Echika glanced at Harold. His utility function system didn’t seem to have been influenced by his Dive into the network. According to Steve, they safely found the clue without running into any viruses.

Needless to say, she was relieved that Harold had come out of the ordeal unscathed, but she didn’t voice this or let it show on her face.

“Even if it is a stepping stone,” Echika chimed in, “the fact remains that they used a terminal on the island to do it.”

“True.” Fokine nodded. “Farasha Island’s security is supposed to be tight. We can safely assume whoever did this is operating from within its borders.”

They were narrowing in on their target. Eventually, Echika and company arrived at the central management facility, which was a squarish building covered in colored glass. This was the only building she’d seen in this area that wasn’t a phytotron. Two people were waiting for them under the canopy hanging over the roundabout: a tanned man in his thirties or forties and Yunus’s paired Amicus. Yunus had personally requested to cooperate with them after the incident.

Echika and the others got out of the car, and the boy-shaped Amicus spoke in a hurried manner.

“I heard from my mother. It seems she was quite discourteous to you...” He lowered his eyes apologetically. “I’m truly sorry. I hope I can help you, to make up for this.”

“We’re sorry for meddling in an important project, but you need to understand that we’ve got a job to do here,” Fokine replied.

“Of course. Um... Is Miss Bigga all right?”

“She’s stable.” Echika tried to speak as calmly as she could. “Thank you for expressing concern.”

Yunus shook his head dejectedly. *What a kind boy*, Echika thought.

“Hello, I’m Gomez. I run the Agricultural Research Department.” The man standing next to him stepped forward. His eyes seemed to bulge a little, and when Echika met his gaze, his personal data didn’t pop up. Echika was stunned. There was someone without Your Forma on this island?

“What would a luddite be doing here? This isn’t a coexistence region, right?”

“Yes, but we do have luddite staff. Only a few dozen, though. We’re in the minority here.” Gomez smiled, showing off a row of somewhat crooked teeth. “This city is all about recruiting skilled individuals and putting their talents to use, regardless of whether they have Your Forma or not... I use a terminal to do all my office work. Please, come this way.”

Gomez and Yunus led them inside the building. There was a gigantic butterfly drawn on the floor of the entrance hall, and its multicolored wings filled her view. The glass shelves set into the walls were decorated with scarves, threads, and hand-sewn puppets like those in the restaurant show.

“I handle genetic recombination research to cultivate cotton wool. Our employees made these.” Gomez noticed Echika looking at the decorations. “Um...I didn’t take part in the pre-chrysalis celebration this time, but I was shocked to hear about what happened. Truly.”

“It’s a good thing you weren’t there, Mr. Gomez. I especially wouldn’t have wanted all of you to see that.” Yunus whispered, frowning. *All of you?*

“Is that a security camera?” Fokine pointed at the ceiling. Even here, there were cocoons hanging from the ceiling taking footage in every direction. “If the culprit used a terminal here, it’s possible they were caught on camera. Could you show us the footage later?”

“Very well.”

“How many back doors does the building have?”

“The northern side acts as a lodging house, so there’s only one exit there. Do you want to see the schematics?”

“Yes, please.”

“By the way, what are these buildings’ fire safety measures?” Harold, who had remained silent thus far, suddenly spoke up.

Echika and Fokine stared at him, taken aback by the Amicus’s sudden question. His fair features were extremely serious.

“All the rooms have sprinklers.” Gomez looked baffled by the question, too. “There’s a manual activation device near the emergency stairs, too, and fireproof shutters... What of it?”

“There’s something I’m curious about. May I check the fireproofing facilities?”

“Yes, um, I’ll show you around. Yunus, take the investigators to the office, please.”

Harold left with Gomez, and they made their way to the emergency stairs. What had him so possessed? Echika and Fokine exchanged confused glances.

“Why is Harold so fixated about fireproofing measures, Hieda?”

“No idea, but...knowing him, he probably has something in mind.”

Fokine shrugged casually and followed Yunus, who led them in Gomez’s place. Echika did the same and looked back in the direction Harold had gone. It felt like it had been a while since he’d done something to surprise her like this. Recently, he’d been sharing even the most trivial details with her. This didn’t sit well with her, but she decided to ignore it.

*Focus on work.*

“Yunus,” Fokine said. “You seem familiar with this facility.”

“A lot of kids who lived in the same residential block as me work here, so I come over to hang out with them.” Yunus then caught on to the confused expression on their faces. “Oh, by residential block, I mean an area where

refugees are housed. That's where I used to live—"

Back when the pandemic had taken the world by storm, armed insurgents rose to action in the Middle East, using the chaos to take control of villages and towns in strategic points in an attempt to create their own independent states. Many of the residents of those towns were forced to flee and were accepted as refugees by neighboring nations.

Eventually, the generation of Yunus's parents drifted to the vicinity of the United Arab Emirates' capital, Abu Dhabi. Due to their position as refugees, many people didn't earn enough to be able to support themselves. Most refugees still had to rely on support from the government to make a living.

"My mother was educated before she fled, so we were able to eventually leave the residential block when I was little, but not everyone was that lucky... When she went to Head of Secretariat Hughes about this, he decided to hire the young children of that block."

Yunus had led a harder life than she'd expected. Echika wordlessly sympathized with him while recalling Murjana's attitude. She was so obsessed with the project's success that she was unconcerned about the victims of the crash accident. With that in mind, she couldn't imagine this same woman treating stateless children with such kindness.

Of course, Echika would never voice that assessment in front of Murjana's son, Yunus. But if Murjana had been more empathetic at some point, then what had changed?

Yunus led them through a passage that gradually became a corridor. As he spoke, they stepped out into a courtyard to take a shortcut to the office. The surprisingly spacious garden was covered by a canopy. Poles were set on the lawn, from which rainbow-colored curtains were hung, and an artificial wind thick with the scent of paint blew through the place.

Small work benches filled with dozens of young employees were set up on both sides of the trail Echika and her group were walking along. They were cleaning harvested raw wool and stretching it out. A few of them noticed Echika's group and raised their hands in friendly waves.

As far as Echika could tell, there were no drones or mass-produced Amicus

here. Those must have been operating the countless phytotrons she'd seen.

"Why are you here again, Yunus?"

One girl left her table and approached them. Her long hair was tied into a ponytail, and she was wearing baggy work clothes. Her personal data popped up, revealing that she was seventeen years old and came from the "residential block" Yunus had just described. In other words, she was an old friend of his.

"Urfa." Yunus called the girl's name. "Get back to work—you don't want Mr. Gomez to get mad at you."

"Don't worry. He asked me to take charge of the place." Urfa turned to look at Echika and Fokine and brought a hand to her chest. "Hello. I was asked to show you something."

Echika and Fokine exchanged curious looks. Gomez had just gone with Harold. Could he have used his terminal to send a message to Urfa's Your Forma?

"Is it related to the incident?" Fokine asked.

"I think so. It might be a hint about the culprit... Over here."

Urfa hurried over to a curtain of stretched fibers, and Echika and Fokine followed. Yunus followed them from a good distance behind. Urfa pushed her way through a layer of colorful threads and disappeared behind it. Echika pushed through the curtain unflinchingly, then stopped in her tracks.

There stood a pole from which dangled not threads but something akin to tarot cards. Hundreds of them were flapping in the wind—*data matrixes*. They instantly filled her vision.

These were electronic drugs—non-spreading computer drugs.

She didn't anticipate this, and in fact it reminded her of something else she once saw. It made Echika's breath catch in her throat.

"...I'm sorry, that was a lie."

Urfa looked their way, her lips curled into a smile. Echika tried to avert her gaze, but it was too late. Her Your Forma silently read the electronic drugs. The virus infection made the inside of her head go hot, and she felt her body grow numb from within. She staggered where she stood. Fokine caught her shoulder

from behind, but he was cradling his head, too.

*What just happened?*

“The culprit used the terminal here to cause the crash,” Fokine managed to say. “And you... Are all of you in on it?!”

Echika felt the color drain from her face. Yes, they did think the culprit was on the island, but just then...

“It can’t be, Urfa!” Yunus shouted, having caught up to them. “What are you doing?!”





“Shut up,” Urfa said.

And as soon as she did, a few male employees showed up and grabbed Echika by the arms. She was too numb to fight them off. Fokine’s hand was pulled from her shoulder. The men knocked them both to the ground, and Echika’s cheek dragged along the lawn.

But this didn’t make any sense. Their attackers had also exposed themselves to the matrix codes, so how had they avoided infection? Or maybe they *had* been infected but didn’t feel anything?

“Let, go...,” she said, her tongue too numb to properly enunciate. “You...!”

Echika reflexively reached for her leg, where her gun was holstered, only to remember that it was empty. She’d left her pistol behind at the security checkpoint. She turned to look at Fokine, who was lying on his belly, being pinned down by a large-framed employee. Even a trained officer couldn’t do much to fight back under the influence of electronic drugs.

They’d been completely careless.

Echika desperately tried to operate her Your Forma and send Harold a message, but the workers grabbed her by the hair, preventing her from contacting him. She felt something cold press against the nape of her neck, and her online connection was severed.

**<New device detected. Detection complete... Currently offline>**

*A network isolation unit.*

After that chilling thought, she felt the inside of her head grow hot.

**<CPU strain rising. Please improve processing speed>**

It only took a second. Before she could even address the pop-up, it turned off.

“Urfa, stop it, right now!”

“Shut up! Someone, get Yunus out of here!”

It was Yunus’s paired Amicus—it couldn’t raise its hands against humans. Echika gritted her teeth and tried to reach around and pull out the isolation unit, but one of the workers stomped on her elbow. Though she couldn’t feel

any pain or numbness, she groaned nonetheless. He kicked her in the back, and she coughed on reflex. A bitter taste filled her mouth as she was filled with inexplicable terror.

“We wish for your Emergence!”

“We want you to become just like us.”

“Please, come to this side.”

Urfa and the employees chanted, their voices growing both louder yet distant at the same time. Echika couldn’t process what they were saying.

*No—are they going to kill me?*

But just as the image of her death crossed her mind...

...water gushed down from the ceiling with a *pop*.

Urfa and the workers’ chants turned to screams of confusion. The air grew muddled for a moment, and the smell of paint grew thicker. Echika felt water rain down on her numbed skin. Somehow managing to breathe, she looked up. She strained her eyes and spotted a thick cloud of vapor hanging in the air. Urfa and the others were fleeing through the curtain of threads.

“Investigator!” Yunus hurried over, gingerly touching her back. “Hold on...”

“I’m...fine. Forget me, call for...help...,” Echika croaked out, and the boy ran off again. When the rush of the water died down, she turned to look at Fokine. He was sitting upright, unable to stand yet, and he’d put his palm over his eyes. He had an isolation unit connected to his neck, just like Echika did.

They’d been saved for the time being, but they were still in a dangerous situation. Echika brought her trembling hands to her neck, but her fingers were too limp to pull out the isolation unit. Giving up, she lay down on the lawn. She could hear the employees screaming from afar, but as far as she could tell, Urfa and the others weren’t coming back.

She stared up at the ceiling. The sprinklers’ shower slowed to a trickle, as

though they'd noticed her gaze.

*How come?*

She wasn't relieved in the slightest. Instead, she felt like she'd been thoroughly trampled.

### 3

The office of Farasha Island's general secretariat was a dull building that stood diagonally across from the Central Technological Development Tower.

"Did you try to have the investigators killed to hide the fact you were behind the hacking?"

The meeting room had been converted into an impromptu interrogation room. The windows had been smoked over with photochromatic film, and police investigators sent over by the bureau were sitting at the central table across from Gomez. A pair of handcuffs was clamped on the man's wrists.

"I'll say it as many times as I have to: I'm not talking until you call my lawyer."

"We called your lawyer," the officer said curtly. "But I think he must be having trouble with all the procedures. Your check-in center seems to dislike having to deal with law enforcement."

The team, which Totoki had sent from the Investigation Support Department the night before, had arrived on the island that morning. However, the secretariat had kept finding problems with their hand luggage and repeatedly stalled their access to the island. Had it not been for the news that Echika and Fokine were attacked, they probably would have only gotten in now.

Echika was sitting on a folding chair by the entrance, watching over the interrogation. Her outfit was completely drenched, but she didn't have a spare, so she'd donned her bureau-issued jacket to avoid catching cold from the air conditioning. The bureau's internal medical team had sent her a removal program to hasten the electronic drug's self-deletion process, which was helping with the numbness in her body. She still felt exhausted, though.

She had no idea what drug addicts found so pleasurable about these things. She was able to keep her nerves on edge and focus on work, but in all honesty,

she felt like she could slip off the chair at any second.

“Gomez, what was your motive for causing the crash incident?”

“Like I said, I’m not talking.”

“Were you planning to infiltrate the city and attack it from within?” Gomez furrowed his brows at the question. “Our section has a lot of documents pinning you down as an E believer. That means you have conservative beliefs and negative opinions about technology, yes?”

*“Back when we investigated the E case during the summer, HQ’s Investigation Support Department ended up pursuing one of the E believers, which led them to investigate Farasha Island...”*

Thinking back on it, Totoki had mentioned this in the meeting they’d conducted before their departure. Echika had only recently learned that Gomez was in fact the E believer the Investigation Support Department was pursuing.

Tarus Ferreira Gomez—he hailed from a technologically restricted zone in the state of São Paulo, southeastern Brazil.

He was a bio-engineer who had ended up saddled with massive debts. Enticed by its lucrative wages, he applied for a position on Farasha Island. As luck would have it, his application was accepted, and he was placed in the position of Head of the Agricultural Research Department a year ago.

“Did you get the young workers under your supervision hooked on drugs to go along with your crime?” The officer placed a tablet in front of Gomez. “Look at this photo of your room in the lodging house. We found a huge stash of electronic drugs in your storage box. Where did you buy them? How did you sneak them in?”

Gomez held his tongue.

Suddenly, there was a knock on the door, and it swung open. Investigator Fokine walked in, dressed in a coat just like Echika’s. The removal program had also resolved his numbness, and he’d returned to work. He was walking confidently already, which made Echika aware of their fundamental differences in stamina.

“We found the source of the drugs. It’s just as you thought, Hieda.”

Saying this, Fokine placed another tablet on the table. He did it much more forcefully than usual. There was a mug shot of a man on the screen, and Gomez stiffened ever so slightly when he saw it. Echika raised herself from her chair and peered in. It was a picture of a Russian man with a face full of stubble—a man she knew all too well.

“The dealer was Makar Uritsky. It matches the characteristics of the narcotics he traffics in.”

*I knew it.*

The electronic drugs in that courtyard resembled tarot cards at first glance. Echika recalled seeing a similar arrangement of drugs relatively recently—in Uritsky’s apartment, which they’d visited during the sensory crime incident.

Makar Marcovsky Uritsky—an electronic drug manufacturer who’d infiltrated the multinational technology corporation Rig City. Elias Taylor, who worked as an adviser there, had discovered his identity and tried to pin the blame for the sensory crime on him. The Electrocrime Investigations Bureau initially suspected that Uritsky was the culprit and arrested him. He was currently incarcerated in Russia on multiple charges.

She never would have expected to be reminded of him like this.

“Gomez, I’m sure you think there’s nothing we can do as long as you keep quiet, because you’re a luddite, but we still have the workers’ Mnemosynes.” Fokine’s tone was sharp. “Hieda, we should be getting the Brain Diving warrants from Chief Totoki soon. Get ready to Dive into Urfa and the others.”

“Understood.”

Echika sluggishly rose to her feet. She left Fokine and the headquarters officer to continue interrogating Gomez and exited the meeting room. As she walked down the corridor leading to the lounge, she placed her hand against the wall. Her body was leaden, and she was dragging her shoes against the floor. She was annoyed that her body wouldn’t move the way she wanted.

But now wasn’t the time to get caught up in such trivialities.

Something that had been brewing in the pit of her stomach the whole time was approaching the limits of what she could withstand.

The spacious lounge of the building was occupied by the headquarters' Investigation Support Department, which had come in to assist them. The low tables were cluttered with tablets, and the florid walls were covered with flexible holo-screens. As she wove her way past police officers walking about busily, Echika approached a window-side sofa, where a handsome RF Model was seated.

Echika didn't know what would have become of them had Harold not activated the sprinklers back then. She needed to thank him. And yet there was something else she had to tell him first.

"Welcome back. Did Gomez squeal?" Harold rose from the sofa the moment he saw her approach.

"He told us you accidentally triggered the sprinklers' emergency device. He's keeping quiet about everything else." Echika breathed in through her nose. "Once we get the warrants from Chief Totoki, we can Brain Dive into Urfa and the others. Where's Yunus?"

"Development Head Murjana stopped by to pick him up, and they went to the development tower. They're supposed to analyze the PC in the central management facility, but they already discovered an offensive application that's meant to interfere with the paired Amicus' network. It was set to trigger a hack at a set date."

"So the hacker attacked directly from that facility."

That made it seem likely that Gomez was behind the crash. They'd need to gather more evidence first, though. As Echika thought this over, she grew too exhausted to stand and sat down on a nearby sofa.

"Investigator, are you still feeling unwell?"

"I'm fine. More importantly...I need to ask you something." She spurred herself to look up. "If you knew Gomez was suspicious, why didn't you say something to begin with?"

Harold remained standing and stared down at her quietly—his lakelike eyes

didn't waver one bit. Feeling her anger well up again, Echika took a deep breath.

"You noticed that Investigator Fokine and I were in danger. That's why you went off and asked about the sprinklers. You could have warned us ahead of time and prevented this."

"It seems you're misunderstanding something. I didn't know that Urfa was about to attack you." Harold was chillingly collected. "I was, in fact, suspicious of Gomez's behavior and only asked about the fire suppression system because I suspected that he might be the culprit."

"You're lying. If that was true, you wouldn't have turned on the sprinklers right when we needed them."

"It was just a fortunate coincidence."

*You call that an excuse?*

"Do you really think I know you so poorly? No one's more detached from the idea of coincidences than you are. You had everything calculated." Echika rattled on, overcome by a roiling emotion in her heart that even she didn't comprehend. "I tried to talk to you that evening, but you kept dodging my questions, and now you're doing this. What are you thinking?"

She'd intended to ask him more calmly than this, but for some reason, she couldn't hold back. Yes, Harold had a habit of coming up with plans and executing them all on his own. But she'd thought that was a thing of the past. They butted heads a lot, but she believed that they'd slowly learned to work together. The memory of an exchange they'd had in Lyon pricked her like a needle.

*"I'll never act in a way that uses you ever again."*

It felt like her body had been riddled with cracks ever since she left that courtyard.

"Like I said, it was coincidence." Harold's tone was growing ever so slightly harsher, but Echika wasn't in a state of mind to notice how unusual that was. "And if I'd have told you Gomez was suspicious, it could have showed in your gestures, and he'd have realized."

“Yes, I might not have much of a poker face, but—”

“Yes, you’re easy to read. So I prioritized the safest way of going about it.”

“But even so, what I think—”

**<New message from Ui Totoki. One attachment included>**

Echika fell quiet when her Your Forma called up a notification. The Brain Dive warrant had arrived. She came back to her senses and remembered how gross her wet hair felt. An odd chill ran through her.

*No good.*

All the anxiety and fear she’d been harboring since that day were on the verge of bursting.

“...We got the warrant. Let’s get back to work,” Echika murmured, turning and walking away.

Her steps were so unsteady that even she noticed, but Harold simply followed her in silence.

Not only had they not talked this through, but the fissure between them was only getting wider. Yet Harold wouldn’t leave. They still hadn’t caught Sozon’s killer. He needed Echika by his side as an electronic investigator.

So this was still fine.

*How is this fine?*

Echika headed for the second-floor nap room, and Harold followed. Some security Amicus at the door let her in once she flashed her ID. Urfa and the other employees were already lying down on the mattresses. A nurse Amicus had just injected them with sedatives, and officers from headquarters were watching everything.

After being arrested, Urfa and the others were found to be under the effect of electronic drugs. Thankfully, they’d been given the removal program before being placed for observation in the nap room, so preparations for the Brain Dive had gone smoothly.

“Thank you,” Echika told the officers. “We have the Brain Dive warrant.”



“Chief Totoki called us, too. We’re ready to go.”

Soon after Harold said that, the nurse Amicus brought over a hub with the Brain Diving cords attached. They handed it to Echika, but her fingertips were so limp that she nearly dropped it. Harold reached out and caught it before it hit the floor.

“Sorry.”

“Don’t mention it.” She felt the Amicus’s gaze on her cheek. “Investigator—”

“We need to find proof that Gomez is the culprit if we’re going to save Bigga as soon as possible.”

Echika cut him off and plugged the Brain Diving cords into the back of her neck. Harold looked like he had more to say but held his tongue. She didn’t want him to worry about her now. Harold probably realized that, too. Saying anything unnecessary would just provoke conflict, so they were better off saying nothing.

*Focus on the Dive.*

She would forget everything in the sea of data. All she wanted was to have someone else’s feelings paint over the distressing thoughts in her mind.

“Are you ready, Aide Lucraft?”

“Whenever you are.”

Harold had already attached the Lifeline to the port in his left ear. Echika took the connector and, after fumbling a few times, felt it click into the port against her skin. It helped cool down whatever was on the verge of boiling over.

She breathed out and ground her heels against the floor.

*Throw away all needless thoughts.*

She closed her eyes, facing the darkness she’d seen many times before.

“Begin.”

Her sluggish body recognized this signal all too well, and she soon escaped reality. For a moment, she was completely weightless, and then the sea of information sucked her in. Like petals unfurling, fragments of Mnemosynes buried her thoughts. How long had it been since she'd Dived into so many people in parallel? But she knew what she was looking for. There was no need to second-guess herself—she had to figure out if Gomez was behind the hacking or not.

She effortlessly shook off the pain rattling her heart.

Echika plunged straight into the surface Mnemosynes, passing the emotions of the workers she was Diving into. As she slipped past them, Echika sensed that something was off. Despite the fact that so many people were gathered here, practically the only emotion she felt was deep awe for Project EGO. Otherwise, she sensed some anxiety, and dislike for the bureau. The workers' emotions overlapped so perfectly, it almost felt like they were all coming from a single person.

***“We did nothing wrong.”***

***“What if the Emergence won't happen now?”***

***“Don't peer into me.”***

***“Don't worry, they'll understand.”***

It felt like her skin was prickling with heat.

She was losing sight of her target. The image of the courtyard when the sprinklers went off crossed her mind. She saw Mnemosynes of that scene from multiple angles cruise by.

***“We have to show them.”***

***“The bureau people.”***

***“We need to show them these data matrixes.”***

Were these Ufra's thoughts? No, they were everyone's. Echika felt every hair on her body stand on end. Once Fokine and Echika entered the courtyard, the workers had been driven by the urge to show them the data matrixes.

***“Put these up, got it?”***

Gomez said this as he handed the employees a box full of data matrixes. Urfa and the others diligently put them up on the poles, eagerly waiting for when Echika and her group would arrive. Even though this exposed them to the drug, none of them felt ill at all. Maybe they were resistant to it? Did that mean they were drug addicts?

Echika couldn't see a logical line of reasoning as to why they would cooperate with Gomez.

She traced the Mnemosynes back to the crash incident, but all she saw were scenes of unassuming, everyday life. The workers spent their days harvesting cotton, picking out seeds, untangling wool, and dyeing threads. Oddest of all, she never saw them get exposed to electronic drugs. But if today was the first time they'd used narcotics, then why hadn't they been affected by them? Had someone covertly introduced the drugs into their daily lives somehow, to camouflage it and ensure they would be constantly under the influence? If that were true, then Echika couldn't tell where that was happening.

Surprisingly, the laborers didn't work as closely with Gomez as she'd expected. They only talked about their job during work hours, and all their other Mnemosynes were about cotton wool; their motives were still hazy. Their actions were always spurred by emotion and impulse, not by rational thought. Echika was confused. This was the first time she'd ever seen Mnemosynes like these. Was this an effect of the drugs, too?

Another Mnemosyne passed her by. She saw a pre-chrysalis celebration, but it wasn't the one she'd attended. Instead, it was one held before the crash incident. That party was held regularly, it seemed, and the people on stage doing the puppet show were different this time. The hearts of the participating employees were quite elated.

***"I wish I could Emerge soon, too."***

***"I wasn't picked again."***

***"I want to become perfect, so why wasn't I chosen?"***

Ever since Echika started the Brain Dive, the heat of this ardent desire had been burning her up, interfering with her ability to keep up. The workers all insisted on having their paired Amicus in auto mode. They always wanted a

perfect double. In fact, they all conceptualized the double as a perfect, ideal version of themselves—why? What had made them think this way?

*No. You're getting off track, focus on Gomez.*

Echika tried to change course, but it was too late. She had plunged into Mnemosynes outside what she was seeking. Just then, she saw Yunus before her eyes. It wasn't the Yunus she knew, though. His large eyes weren't amber but caramel colored.

*Is that...the real Yunus, who's on extended leave? Not his paired Amicus?*

***"Tomorrow's your Khadira Period, right? I thought you wouldn't come hang out today."***

It was Urfa's voice. This was her Mnemosyne. The glass walls of the surrounding phytotrons were awash with starlight. She was walking alongside an empty road. Contrary to her words, her heart was absolutely dancing with aspiration for Emergence that was out of reach. In truth, she was quite absentminded.

***"I was tying up some last bits of work," Yunus said tiredly. "I actually wanted to talk to everyone, but I couldn't find the time... I'm glad you're awake."***

***"You don't have to rush. If you want to talk, you could do it tomorrow or the day after."***

***"But that wouldn't be me. Come tomorrow, it'll be a paired Amicus coming here."***

***"You know I don't like it when you say things like that. Call it the perfect Yunus, okay?"***

***"Mom says that, too," Yunus whispered, narrowing his eyes. "But I don't feel that way."***

Murjana's words flashed in Echika's mind again.

*"He's perfect, as you can see. The ideal child."*

But suddenly, noise crackled through the Mnemosynes she was seeing, like a sandstorm. The speed of her fall was decreasing.

*What's happening?*

**“Yunus.”** Urfa’s tone became harsh, and all sound abruptly grew distorted. **“For a while now, I’ve gotten the impression that you’ve been treating the Emergence like a joke. Don’t let the Khadira Period go to your head.”**

**“I don’t think that!”**

**“Your skepticism is why Murjana has hit some roadblocks, you know!”**

The sound of them arguing went from distant to close to distant again, their voices overlapping and becoming difficult to tell apart. Echika’s control was slipping. But why? This was bad.

A moment later, she completely lost control of the rudder.

*Where...is this, again?*

The Mnemosynes became as small as specks as they were engulfed by heavy darkness. She felt the cord being pulled out and someone supporting her sluggish body. Someone pressed their palm to the back of her neck to check on her—a cold, pleasant hand.

That was where Echika’s memory cut off.

## 4

Even after sunset, the Persian Gulf remained bright.

Dubai was a city that never slept, so remnants of neon light spilled from it across the water’s surface, toward the artificial island. From a seat at a café that had been built over the water, Echika gazed absentmindedly at the night view. The lights of the city also reflected across the surface of a small pool close by. Since her lodgings were for guests, it was far more luxurious than necessary.

**“Hieda, I’m sorry I pressed you to do this without considering your condition.”**

Totoki’s holo-model sat opposite her, dressed in her usual gray suit. She looked very much out of place in this resort cottage.

**“It’s my fault for being overly confident and not reporting my condition, Chief...”** Echika pulled over a cup of mineral water, her fingers still exhausted.

She brought the straw to her lips, trying to hide the nausea that still lingered.

She hadn't expected to faint in the middle of a Brain Dive.

Echika had regained consciousness a few minutes later, waking up to find herself surrounded by nurse Amicus who gave her a quick diagnosis. They firmly insisted that she stay home and rest until the effects of the electronic drug completely faded away. The Brain Dive had to be called off, so she left the rest of the job to Fokine and went back to the cottage alone. She felt pathetic.

**"I'd like to tell you to take your time and rest, but...when I asked Inspector Fokine, he said you never reported on what you saw in the Brain Dive."**

"Sorry." Echika straightened her back. Through her aching head, she remembered what she'd seen in Urfa's and the others' Mnemosynes. "I didn't... find anything that pins Gomez as the man behind the hacking. But there's no doubt that he gave the employees those electronic drugs."

**"Did he order them to infect and then attack you?"**

"Only implicitly. He told them to put up the data matrixes..." She rubbed her temples. "The employees themselves didn't side with Gomez, they were just seized by the urge to attack us. I couldn't find any clear reason as to why, though. It was...strange."

**"Even though they had isolation units prepared to make sure no one noticed what happened to you?"**

"Yes. It was clearly a premeditated crime, but I couldn't find a motive..."

**"If they were in a dazed state from the electronic drugs, I could understand why they'd be obedient..."**

Urfa and the other employees had been exposed to the drugs, but they weren't physically debilitated by them. Much like sedatives and painkillers, narcotics lost their efficacy the more they were used. Echika suspected that might be the case at first—but there was no clear proof that the employees had been exposed to drugs beforehand.

"What if they had the narcotics hidden in something they interact with every day? Looking at the tarot card shape of the delivery device—Uritsky has a

penchant for designing his drugs in a way that's hidden in plain sight." But even as Echika said this, something felt off. "It's just, even with that in mind...the idea of drugs making people synchronize the way they think just doesn't feel right."

Even looking back on it now, the employees' emotions had felt terribly strange in the Mnemosynes. Most people under the influence would have been obviously experiencing pleasure, but in the workers' cases, the surface of their thoughts felt shallow, and they'd all been thinking the same thing.

In groups that share certain belief systems, it was possible that a group of people could feel the same way about something. But even in those instances, emotions were never this uniform.

**"I've never heard of emotions alone being altered when someone tweaks Mnemosynes."**

"Even if you could do that, I doubt you'd ever want to. I do think the electronic drugs themselves might have had some trick to them..."

That was the only explanation Echika could come up with at present.

**"Either way, we should probably have a talk with Uritsky about this."** Totoki scratched her head in annoyance. **"With Gomez holding his tongue, that's the only other place we can turn to."**

"Yes... You're right."

Overcome by irritation, Echika dug her nails into her lap. Seriously, hadn't they come here to go after Lascelles? The crash incident had ended up leading them by the nose, and now Uritsky had popped up. It felt like their investigation kept going off the rails.

Still, the crash had happened, so they couldn't afford not to address it.

**"I'll arrange a meeting with Uritsky. I'll have Aide Lucraft and Officer Fokine fly back to Russia for now."** Totoki wearily rose from the chair. **"Hieda, you take another day of rest."**

Echika was silently startled. "I'm already feeling much better. I can work tomorrow."

**"There's no replacing you. We'd have a huge problem on our hands if you**

**pushed yourself too far and something happened.”**

“I’m fine, really. Besides, what if you need to Brain Dive into Uritsky?”

**“You need to understand that taking care of your health is part of your job,”** Totoki said flatly. **“If it turns out we need a Brain Dive, I’ll call you again. For now, just take tomorrow off.”**

Seeing that Echika was unconvinced, Totoki punctuated her statement with a firm “got it?” Then she turned off the holo-model, not allowing Echika a chance to argue. Now by herself, Echika heard only the sound of waves receding on the shore.

*Why did this happen?*

Echika got up from the table and returned to her room. Her legs still felt a bit numb, so she all but stumbled into bed. It was a double mattress, much larger than the single bed she had at home, but right now, its fluffy softness just made her feel empty.

The unease she’d been harboring since noon finally surged up, and despite herself, she recalled Harold’s distant attitude. Not only had she argued with him and been unable to reconcile, but she’d also further inconvenienced him by passing out in the middle of the Brain Dive. Echika had wanted to at least vindicate herself through good work, but instead, she’d ended up burning out.

*Why can’t I do anything right?*

No good. She was getting emotional. Echika sat up, trying to distract herself. Her gown slipped from her shoulders, but she fixed it. She’d wanted to travel light and hadn’t brought a change of clothes and had needed to borrow a nightgown from the front desk, but they got the size wrong. As annoying as this was, though, she couldn’t be bothered to reorder it, but now she was coming to regret her inaction. Frustrated, she rummaged through her pocket for her electronic cigarette, but found that she couldn’t get her fingers around it.

Suddenly, she heard the doorbell ring.

The Your Forma showed the time was past eight in the evening, and she didn’t recall ordering room service. Echika gave up on the cigarette and sluggishly rose from bed. She slipped on her slippers and approached the front



door while adjusting the hem of her gown. Finally, after what felt like forever, she opened the door.

“Pardon me for coming so late, Investigator.”

For a few good seconds, Echika froze. Of all people, Harold was standing there. He was dressed exactly as he had been when they’d parted ways during the day and had clearly just gotten off work. He was holding a small paper bag. When their eyes met, she saw his graceful brows furrow slightly.

Why had he come here?

“What about Gomez’s questioning...?”

“It’s done for the day. They’ll all be handed over to the Dubai police tomorrow.” Harold lifted the paper bag. “I imagine you haven’t eaten anything. But...what’s with this getup?”

Harold’s tone was polite and formal, still carrying traces of their argument. Echika gripped the collar of her gown even tighter. Showing herself to this Amicus in such inappropriate attire was the wrong move. Especially now.

“...It’s nothing. They just got the size of my gown wrong.”

“Don’t tell me you didn’t bring a change of clothes.”

“I was trying to save on luggage space. Besides, sleeping in the nude is easier like this.” Oh, she shouldn’t have worded it like that. It sounded like she was blaming him for the sprinkler. “Anyway, thanks.”

Echika reached out to take the paper bag and drive Harold away as soon as possible, but Harold knew she was tormented by fatigue. He shook his head in exasperation and pushed past her gently.

“You’re still feeling weak, right? Excuse me, then.”

He entered the room like it was his right.

*Huh?*

He moved so naturally, it took Echika a moment to process what had just happened. She quickly turned and found Harold already taking off his shoes and entering the room. He opened the fridge and put the paper bag in the freezer.

“Wha—?” Her voice came out high-pitched. “Wait, who said you could come in...?!”

“Eat that once your appetite comes back.” He closed the fridge and walked over to the window. “Leaving the window open is a bad habit. The villa might have security measures, but you still need to be cautious... Oh, there’s still a cup on the terrace table. I’ll wash it for you.”

“What the hell?” *Seriously, what the hell?!* “Stop it, you don’t have to do any of that! I can take care of myself.”

“Can you, though, given you can’t even bring yourself to wash a single cup?” Harold cocked his head. Echika was at a loss for words. “It’s the same with the gown. If you were so frazzled you couldn’t even order the right size, you could have asked me to do it for you.”

*Why do you have to put it like that?*

For a moment, her face burned as helplessness and inexplicable annoyance surged up inside her.

“Was I supposed to bother you while you were working after I argued and caused you trouble during the Brain Dive?” She didn’t intend to be this thick-headed. “And who do you think you are, waltzing into someone’s room—?”

“No, I’m sorry. What I just said... I didn’t pick the right words.”

The complaint reached up to her throat but melted away silently before it left her lips.

*...What?*

Harold suddenly brought a hand to his forehead, looking apologetic. His expression was still stiff, but it wasn’t as scathing as it had been before. Instead, it seemed conflicted.

“Back then...I knew you were pushing yourself to Brain Dive, but I didn’t stop you. I thought we’d argue again.” The Amicus spoke more slowly than usual. “But I regret it now. I should have stopped you. I placed you in harm’s way.”

Echika was at a momentary loss for words. The abrupt softening of Harold’s attitude left her confused. It felt like something that was pressing up against her

had suddenly rolled away, and they were back to how things used to be again.

Why the sudden change?

“That wasn’t...” Echika finally parted her lips, but the bewilderment was clear in her voice. “That wasn’t your fault. And I think you did try to stop me. I insisted on doing the Dive.”

“And it would have been my place to put an end to your insistence, but I neglected to do so.”

“Look, I’m not saying this just to make you feel better. Ah, no, I didn’t mean...”

Saying these words was like walking a tightrope, and she trailed off there. Silence descended, filling the air like a drop of ink spreading through water.

“Sorry, what I just said, it was...” Echika tried to speak but couldn’t find the end of her sentence.

She heard Harold sigh in self-derision. He placed a hand to his forehead and ruffled it through his hair, then raised his eyes like he’d made a decision. The gesture looked exactly like something a young human man would do. His movements had gotten so convincing lately.

“As you pointed out, yes, I changed my approach. I’ve been trying to keep my distance from you.”

On its own, this confession had come way too late. That was painfully apparent just from the way Harold was acting. However—Echika felt some fleeting expectation fill her heart.

Compared to the previous night, it seemed like he was trying to talk things out now. Was he going to come forward this time, then?

“About what I said last night...” She spoke carefully, like she was treading on thin ice. “I didn’t share the secret with you so I could end up burdening you with it.”

“I understand that, of course. But you go to absurd lengths to protect me.” Harold swept his eyes across the floor, the faint lighting casting over them. “Knowing you, I bet you think it’s the natural thing to do as a friend. But no

matter how you frame things, it wouldn't be right if you threw away everything you have for my sake."

Echika swallowed a little—Harold wasn't just tormented by guilt; he was trying to keep her away from him in case the worst happened and she was caught in the cross fire. She felt like she'd finally gotten a glimpse into his thoughts.

Needless to say, the things he was talking about had crossed her mind plenty of times before. Echika had been brooding over those questions long before she told Harold she knew the secret—ever since Professor Lexie had told her the truth. And she'd arrived at a conclusion to this dilemma so many times that she'd gotten tired of it.

She didn't want to lose him.

"I wouldn't be throwing things away," she replied as gently as she could. "If anything, you shouldn't have to fret over these things. I've decided, of my own will, to protect your secret. So whatever happens is the outcome of choices I made myself."

"No human would put their innocence on the line over friendship with a machine, Echika."

"I would," she said firmly.

Harold shook his head, like he was dealing with an unreasonable child. Echika felt anxiety bloom in her heart again. It was like she'd finally wrapped her hands around something elusive, only to find her palms empty when she unclenched her fingers.

She'd thought this was a discussion, but were she and Harold on different pages here?

"That's not friendship. It's fixation. You might not get it, but—"

"No." Echika denied his assertion right away. This was the one thing she didn't want him to assume. "I told you already. I don't think of you as a replacement for Matoi."

"Please just admit it." He slowly took a step forward "You've always been

someone who can stand on her own two feet. Have more faith in yourself. If standing on your own is beyond you, then I don't understand why you ever handed Matoi over to me."

"I keep telling you, it's not like that. This isn't like what happened with Matoi."

"What makes it different?"

Her throat clenched up. "Well—"

"See, you can't explain it."

Harold approached her slowly, and Echika retreated a few steps. She'd turned her back to the wall to begin with, so after a few paces, she had nowhere to run. Harold didn't stop. Despite the spaciousness of the cottage, the distance between them was shrinking by the step.

"It's not that I can't explain it." Echika searched for the right way to put it. "Maybe you don't understand, but all humans get attached to people they're close with to some degree. What I'm saying is, my desire to protect you is completely normal behavior."

"I get that. I'm simply saying that your attachment to me is excessive."

"It's not excessive! And wait, don't get any closer."

Echika's rejection fell on deaf ears as Harold got right up in front of her. If he were any closer, their fingertips would touch. Echika reflexively tried to slip away from him, but he grabbed her by the arm. And with her being as exhausted as she was, she couldn't shake him off. All she could do was grab the collar of her nightgown to prevent it from coming loose.

"What are you trying to hide? Are you hurt?"

*Oh no, he noticed.*

"It's nothing... I'm not hiding anything."

"Let me see."

The Amicus gently pulled her hands from her collar. Unable to resist, Echika hung her head. He undid the chest piece of the gown, revealing a nitro-case

necklace dangling from her neck. The clear silver trinket faintly gleamed in the light accusingly.

For a second, Harold's quasi-breathing stopped. She'd known from the second she opened the door that she wouldn't be able to hide it, and yet—

*Please don't take it away.*

"Echika." Harold's tone was clearly getting harsher. "Why do you have this necklace on again?"

"No reason... I just found it when I was cleaning out my room the last time I was off work and decided to put it on."

"What's inside the nitro case?"

"It's not Matoi."

"I know it's not Matoi. What is it this time?"

"Nothing that concerns you."

"Look me in the eye, please."

Harold turned Echika's cheek with his lukewarm hands, forcing her to look at him. His lakelike eyes met hers from up close.

*Stop that!*

Echika pushed him away. She couldn't muster much force, of course, but it did make him snap out of it. She pulled her arms away from him, and took a few more steps back. Her pulse throbbed in her neck, and the touch of the Amicus's fingers lingered on her cheek.

"I'm sorry." Harold looked between his hands and Echika's face. "That was inappropriate."

"Yeah, it was." Her voice trembled. She fumbled over her collar a few times, trying to hide the necklace, but couldn't quite manage it. "I'm...I'm glad you're worried about me. But I thought this over myself, and I made my own choices. About the nitro case, and about your secret... So don't feel responsible about it. I'm doing this because I want to."

"Echika, I—"

“If we can, I’d like us to get along like we have so far. So please, stop pushing me away.”

Echika was essentially rambling at this point, and Harold looked dumbfounded, for some reason. He clutched the hand he’d touched her with and looked like he was about to speak but said nothing after a moment’s wavering. For an Amicus with as fast a processing speed as he had, that was a long time to deliberate over something. Eventually, Harold blinked, like he was trying to suppress something, and said:

“...All right.”

It was a silent, flat whisper that didn’t suggest he was satisfied with this outcome. And so Echika said nothing else. The soothing rumble of the rolling waves was still flowing in through the open window.

“I’ll be leaving, then.” Harold walked over to the entrance with fast steps. “Investigator Fokine and I have to go talk with Uritsky tomorrow.”

“Yeah.” The word left her parched throat. “Hmm... I’m sorry. About... everything.”

“No, if anything, I should apologize. Do take care.”

Harold put on his shoes and pushed the front door open, but then turned around to look at Echika again, like he’d just remembered something. His gaze was full of confusion.

“Echika, your fixation, it’s...” He swept his clear, artificial eyes around the cottage, looking for something that wasn’t there. “The complicated ways many people feel things, is it...? Is it completely different from what I understand?”

It was less of a question and more of a soliloquy. Without waiting for her answer, Harold left the cottage. The door closed behind him in a melancholic manner, and a small whiff of night air filled her lungs.

*What did he mean by that?*

Still confused, Echika sank to the floor, her knees going limp. She’d thought he would expose the contents of the necklace, but thankfully, he hadn’t. Yet instead of relief, she felt something cold run down her spine. It was suffocating.

Yes, they had talked. Harold told her he understood her wish for him to stop acting distant. So why did she feel no relief?

She must have really messed something up. The only thing she could tell was that she'd made a mistake—a fatal one.

Echika clutched the nitro case dangling defensively from her neck. For some reason, she felt like crying.





YOUR FORMA

## Chapter 3

# The Underground Chrysalides

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### 1

The outskirts of Saint Petersburg, on a depression overlooking the vast Lake Ladoga. This body of water, currently reflecting the clear blue sky, was the largest freshwater lake in Europe, and it contained several small islands, some of which had been used in the past for nuclear experiments. At a glance, it looked as vast as the sea.

“Investigator Fokine, have you looked over the materials I sent you about Uritsky?”

“He’s a drug manufacturer who had dealings with the Russian Mafia. And he snuck into the world-famous Rig City... Dunno if he’s brave or stupid...”

The old police station had a moldy smell to it, and the corridor leading to the visiting room was barely lit. Harold straightened out the wrinkles of his shirt—since he’d had to spend the flight in the luggage hold—as he walked alongside Fokine.

“I’d say it was the latter. Taylor figured out his identity and used him.”

“Either way, let’s ask Uritsky about how he sold his electronic drugs to Gomez.” Fokine placed a hand over the back of his neck sluggishly. “What a pain. Let’s get this over with.”

Fokine had been in quite the foul mood since this morning. The effects of the electronic drugs had worn off, and he’d gotten a good night’s sleep, but he was clearly unmotivated even though he wasn’t typically prone to mood swings. He might have been occasionally emotional, but that was only when the job called



for it.

“Investigator, is something bothering you?”

“I’m just getting tired of this whole thing, is all.”

“Meaning?”

Fokine remained wordless, not addressing the question. As far as Harold could tell, Fokine was under severe stress, but he couldn’t guess why. Either way, it wouldn’t be easy to lift his spirits right away.

And honestly, Harold wasn’t feeling very composed himself.

*“So please, stop pushing me away.”*

Echika’s plea clung to the back of his thought processes.

From the moment they met Gomez at the central management facility, Harold had predicted Echika and Fokine could be in danger. Gomez had tried to hide it, but he possessed the behavior and physical particularities of an electronic drug addict. Harold had seen many people like him during his time at the city police—but he didn’t share that information with Echika. Instead, he took advantage of that gap in knowledge, exploiting it to shatter her trust in him.

He’d believed that was the only way to get Echika to distance herself from him. And it seemed to be working. But when he saw her pass out during the Brain Dive, his system lost all composure. He’d been spurred by guilt to visit the cottage, leading to the current situation. And when he found out she was hiding something, he felt driven to question her and forced her to expose her necklace.

*“Nothing that concerns you.”*

Echika widened her eyes when he’d touched her cheek. Those usually dark, sunken eyes took in light, giving him a clear view of her irises. And from the agitation in them, he could tell that the nitro case was no mere decoration.

Should he have checked the contents of the necklace, even if it meant angering her? Doing so would have turned that fissure into a definitive wedge between them. And though that was his intention, why had he hesitated at the

very last step? The contradiction was much too clear. If he were to borrow Steve's terms, was he to call this pesky emotion "affection?" Maybe he could sort this all out if his emotional engine would just calm down a little.

Every now and then, he wished he could rewrite his own system code.

"Go ahead. Keep your meeting to thirty minutes or less, please."

The prison guard let them into a visiting room. It was a simple chamber with plain concrete walls and rusted bars by the entrance. The skylight window by the ceiling was covered by a faint layer of cobwebs. Even this room was like an isolation cell.

Uritsky sat by a dust-covered table. It was easy to tell he was emaciated under his prison uniform, and his untended stubble gave him a seedy appearance. Normally, there would be a layer of glass separating visitor from convict, but this old prison was quite open, which was a boon for keeping a watchful eye on his features.

Fokine sat opposite Uritsky, so Harold stood against the wall. This also gave him a view of Uritsky's legs under the table.

"...I thought the sensory crime was resolved," Uritsky whispered. "What more do you want from me?"

"We're here on other business." Fokine pushed a tablet he'd prepared ahead of time at Uritsky. Convicts were obligated to have isolation units on, so Fokine couldn't use the Your Forma to share information with him. "The man in this image is called Tarus Ferreira Gomez. Do you recognize him?"

Uritsky peered into the tablet and then looked between the monitor and Fokine. "No. I do not."

"I know you don't want us to extend your sentence by digging up your other crimes, but I don't appreciate you lying to us," Harold chimed in.

"Oh, shit, you were with that electronic investigator..." Uritsky finally remembered Harold and awkwardly curled up his back. "Look, I don't know anything. My job was just to sell electronic drugs. You need to understand that. I don't take responsibility for what people do after I sell them."

“We don’t care about your policy.” Fokine leaned against the chair and crossed his arms haughtily. This wasn’t very typical of him. “Gomez had a large number of electronic drugs, more than he could buy at once. Are you so aloof that you’d forget a repeat customer’s face?”

“Well...I do remember the guy, but last time I dealt with him was over two years ago.”

Uritsky hung his head in resignation and admitted to knowing Gomez. He was incarcerated already, and his initial evasiveness was basically a defense mechanism.

“What kind of narcotics did you sell him?”

“The same kind you confiscated from me. That’s all I dealt in.”

Fokine glanced at Harold, who nodded. Uritsky was telling the truth. Echika had hypothesized that Uritsky sold some kind of camouflaged electronic drug, but it seemed that wasn’t the case.

“Gomez is suspected of using your drugs not just on himself, but also to brainwash other people.”

“Brainwash?” Uritsky looked bewildered. “The drugs don’t do anything like that. I mean, you might look brainwashed when you’re high, and it might place you in a state that makes you susceptible to it, but...”

“Did Gomez ask you to make him some kind of special narcotic?” Fokine asked a leading question. “You snuck into Rig City, right? Maybe you stole some technology that—”

“I sold Gomez the drugs before I went to Rig City.”

“How did he find you?”

“He didn’t find me on his own. A Mafia member I was connected with sent me a message telling me to go to a casino in Dubai. I found Gomez waiting there alone. It happened a few times, so I guess you could say I was his mule...”

“What was the name of the Mafia member?”

Uritsky gave them an answer, albeit reluctantly. From how flustered he was, Harold could tell he wasn’t lying, but looking at Gomez’s history, it was hard to

believe he was backed by the Russian Mafia. It was possible he'd met them in an E believer gathering, but if that was the case, then the bureau would have picked up on that by now.

Had their wires gotten crossed at some point?

"That Mafia member, he died a long time ago." Fokine said, looking up the name Uritsky brought up in the user database. "He accidentally fell off his yacht and drowned to death. I don't know if that's the real cause of his death, but it's not unheard of among people like him."

"But he's the one who told me to go see Gomez."

"Then you were ordered by someone who'd assumed his identity. I guess Gomez's employer is smarter than you were."

Hearing this, Uritsky tried to caress his face, but stopped. The handcuffs were in his way. That was a gesture that implied reminiscence.

"Looks like you remembered something?" Harold asked.

Uritsky's shoulders stiffened in surprise. "What the hell? How do you keep doing this...?"

"Harold here's a cutting-edge lie detector." Fokine grinned. "So what did you remember?"

"Nothing to do with this case, honest."

"We'll be the judges of that. Talk." Fokine narrowed his eyes, putting an intimidating amount of force behind the gesture.

He no longer looked like an agreeable young man but someone completely different. Harold was planning on asking Fokine why his mood was so foul after the interrogation ended, but the fact that he *couldn't even guess at the reason* was quite unusual.

"Seriously, what the hell...?" Uritsky parted his lips but took a couple minutes before deciding on what to say next. He licked his lips several times. "If that mobster really is dead... Well, he sent me other messages that weren't related to Gomez."

"Like what?"

“Like, ‘get into Rig City.’”

Harold furrowed his brows. The report for the sensory crime incident, as it was stored in his memory, stated Uritsky’s motive for infiltrating Rig City as “plagiarizing technology to further his drug production.”

“You testified that you infiltrated Rig City of your own will. Was that false testimony?”

“No, it wasn’t!” Uritsky said swiftly, afraid of having further offenses pursued. “That really was half... No, ninety percent of my reason.”

“So you thought that if you told the bureau the truth, your employer would punish you somehow?”

“Yes. But now I know he’s dead, so I can talk without having to fear him,” Uritsky continued, carefully examining Fokine’s expression. “The first reason I went to Rig City was because of his request. He said if I stole some kind of ‘system’ from Taylor, he’d pay me generously... But he often ended up not holding up his end of the bargain, so I didn’t trust him. And after he set the groundwork for me to infiltrate the place, I just did whatever suited my ends.”

“Wait. What ‘system’?”

“I have no idea. They said I didn’t need to know.”

Based on how Uritsky’s eyes moved, he was telling the truth. He really hadn’t been given any details—Harold was suddenly overtaken with the urge to look up to the ceiling, as humans often did. Why did they have to dig up this whole matter now?

The reason was clear. During the sensory crime investigation, Echika and other Divers from the Petersburg branch went into Uritsky’s Mnemosynes but couldn’t complete their Dive. His surface Mnemosynes were properly maintained, but everything past his medium layer Mnemosynes was scrambled and partially erased. That was because Taylor had modified his Mnemosynes.

Consequently, no one had realized that Uritsky was only telling part of the truth.

But what was the significance of discovering this now? All it did was add more

pieces to the puzzle. Plus, if Uritsky really hadn't modified the electronic drugs in any way, the "emotional overlap" that baffled Echika would be even harder to explain. They'd have to pursue the truth of the workers' emotions from another angle.

But as Harold tried to come up with other possibilities...

*"I have a hypothesis, but I can't share it with you right now. I need to be sure."*

*Wait.*

"That's enough." Fokine's voice pulled Harold back to reality. He languidly rose from his chair. "Either way, Gomez is the culprit. The employees felt the same emotions because they'd had all this talk of butterflies and Emergence beaten into their heads while they were high on drugs. And Gomez relished that."

Harold couldn't believe the haphazard reasoning he was hearing. Was Fokine serious?

"But we haven't looked into the person assuming the dead Mafia member's name. Even if Gomez is the culprit, he might just be being used for that person's plan—"

"I don't care what you think."

Fokine recklessly abandoned the idea of continuing the interrogation. He called the prison guard over and swiftly left the meeting room. After glancing at Uritsky's exhausted face, Harold hurried after Fokine.

He saw Fokine walking straight down the dim corridor on his way out.

"Investigator." Harold hurried to catch up to him. "It's been bothering me all morning, but what's gotten into you?"

"What do you mean?" Fokine didn't even spare a glance his way. "Let's head back to Dubai for now."

Fokine hastened his steps, like he was trying to shake Harold off. He was the very image of unapproachable. He seemed like a completely different person.

Despite that, Harold agreed with the idea of returning to Dubai. If his prediction was correct, the most important thing to do was to head back there



—and talk to Steve.

## 2

It was nearly evening when Echika, who'd stayed behind in her cottage, woke up.

**<Miss Bigga regained consciousness early this morning. She's been moved to a hospital room and is awake and active>**

The report from the city's medical center blew all traces of grogginess from Echika's thoughts. She practically tumbled out of bed. The fatigue from the night before was gone, and all sensation had returned to her body.

Echika rushed to get dressed. She retrieved her clothes from the dryer in the hotel room and changed into them. Then she opened the fridge to get something light to eat before going out. But the moment she did, the events of the previous night flashed through her mind again.

*"Eat that once your appetite comes back."*

She felt her heart instantly sink, as though it had been subjected to intense gravity. Harold should have gone with Fokine to Russia that morning. A direct flight would take just short of six hours, so accounting for how long it would take them to question Uritsky, they'd be back on the island that night at the earliest.

After some deliberation, Echika opened the freezer and took out the paper bag. She placed it on the table and checked its contents to find that it was an ice cream cup with a simple design. It had a silhouette of a butterfly on its background and was emblazoned with a logo that said FARASHA ISLAND in English. It was the kind of ice cream the lodging home provided.

She recalled telling Harold a long time ago that she liked *morozhenoe*, Russian ice cream. She knew, of course, that he remembered everything perfectly, down to the smallest detail. And yet. She felt like her heart might inexplicably break, so she heaved a long sigh to distract herself.

When Echika arrived at the medical center's inpatient ward, she passed

families of other victims who must have been informed of their loved ones' recoveries the same way she had been. A nurse Amicus stepped out and led her to Bigga's room. The hall was free of officers involved with the investigation, so the hospital was quiet that day.

"Bigga has sustained no lasting effects. If no issues show up in the inspection tonight, I believe she'll be discharged and free to go back to her cottage tomorrow."

Explaining this, the nurse Amicus opened the sliding door to the hospital room, and Echika passed through the sterilized drape at the entrance. It was a small, cramped space. Bigga was sitting up in bed, dressed in a hospital gown. The oxygen cannula she'd been fitted with on the night of her collapse had been removed, and she turned to look at Echika, her complexion looking much better. The breeze blowing through the window toyed with her loosened hair.

Echika felt her cheeks slacken into a smile from sheer relief. *She's fine. Thank goodness.*

"How are you feeling, Bigga?"

"Ms. Hieda..." Bigga blinked a few times but didn't smile. She dropped her gaze to her hands, as though she'd lost interest in her already. "What are we still doing here?"

Her attitude was terribly curt. Was she still feeling unwell?

"The investigation isn't over yet." Echika attempted to keep her tone as soft as possible. "HQ sent their Investigation Support Department to look into the crash incident you were involved in. And the culprit—"

"Don't. I don't care about any of that." Bigga plugged her ears, like she was fed up with the whole affair. "I'm just getting tired of all this... I just want to go home."

"I'm sorry. It makes sense you'd feel this way after what happened."

"Where's Harold and Mr. Fokine?"

"They went to Russia. I think they'll be back here by tonight, though." As she answered, Echika felt unease creep in. She was getting the feeling the crash

incident had traumatized Bigga. “Um, I could buy you a drink if you’d like. It should make you feel better.”

“No, thank you. I can get it myself.”

Bigga got out of bed with surprising fluidity. Then she made her way to the door, her slippers flapping noisily against the floor, and the hem of her gown wavering with every step. Her hand hit Echika’s when she walked by.

“Um.” Bigga hung her head. “Don’t worry about me, please. I can handle myself.”

“Be that as it may, I—”

“You don’t have time to waste here, right? You’ve got your big, important investigation to attend to.”

She spoke with a cold, rejecting tone, like they’d gone back to how they were when they first met. Echika could only wordlessly watch Bigga leave the room. Her small figure disappeared behind the sterilized drape.

It was clear that the incident had emotionally destabilized Bigga. Perhaps it would be a good idea if she got some therapy when they returned to the branch. But the first order of business would be to talk to Chief Totoki...

*Why didn’t I stop Bigga from putting on that Ego Tracker?*

Echika wished she could punch herself for just sitting by and letting it happen.

*And here I was hoping that seeing Bigga’s smile could help cheer me up.*

Echika considered waiting for Bigga to return but decided to leave the room after all. Would doing as she asked and leaving her alone be the right call? She considered ringing her up at night, after her inspection.

She pinched her brow and tried to pull herself together. There was work to be done.



When Echika arrived at the First Technological Development Department of the Central Technological Development Tower, she found the place very much deserted. It was clearly past working hours; she thought she remembered

hearing the ringing of a bell on the drive over. As Echika walked through the department, she didn't see Murjana or any of the other engineers, nor anyone from Novae Robotics Inc. or the Electrocrime Investigations Bureau. The most she found was a few paired Amicus doing overtime.

She opened her Your Forma's inbox. On her trip from the medical center to the tower, she'd sent headquarters' Investigation Support Department a message asking for a follow-up on the progress of the investigation, but they hadn't replied. Gomez and the employees should have been handed over to the police already, so she'd decided to go to the tower for the time being, but it seemed she was too late. She'd been nothing but useless today.

Crushed by self-loathing, Echika peered into the first maintenance room. She expected it to be empty, but—

“...Investigator Hieda?”

Instead, she spotted a figure sitting at the end of a pod—Steve. His maintenance gown from the day before had been replaced by a neat dress shirt and a pair of slacks. The Amicus's once-disheveled hair was combed down neatly, which gave him a similar appearance to his Rig City days.

“Where's Department Head Angus?” Echika asked, stepping into the maintenance room. She looked around again, confirming that Steve was alone. “Is it just you in here?”

“Just me. The department head left with Development Head Murjana a few hours ago.”

That came across as a little strange. Although Steve had been tuned to be “safe,” that didn't change that he'd gone rogue once. She found it hard to believe that Angus and his crew would just leave him unsupervised.

“They ordered me to stay put on my own and left,” Steve explained, and true to their command, he was sitting stock-still. He was facing straight ahead, and his hands were unstirring in his lap, as though they were glued to the spot. He'd even stopped blinking. It was eerie.

“Steve, I don't think that's what they meant by ‘stay put.’”

“What did they mean, then?”

“I think you’re at least allowed to blink.” Now that she thought about it, she did remember he had a penchant for taking things literally. “Where did the department head go?”

“I don’t know.”

Steve seemed incredulous but started moving his eyelids. He looked the picture of an obedient Amicus, one who would never attack a human being. And so did Harold, honestly. He’d attacked Napolov and Szubin, since he thought they were Sozon’s killers, but he’d never hurt any other human beings. Both acted on their neuromimetic system according to their beliefs and convictions, just as humans did. But Novae Robotics Inc. didn’t realize that, so they’d defaulted to putting Steve inside a pod.

If the RF Models were merely next-generation all-purpose AI like the paired Amicus, things would be much simpler.

“Isn’t Harold with you today, Investigator?”

“He went to Russia. We had a little incident yesterday...” As she explained, Echika contemplated leaving the maintenance room. She got the feeling she was better off not interacting with Steve by herself. “So he went to question Uritsky.”

“That name brings back memories.” Steve remained indifferent as ever, but likely sensed something from Echika’s demeanor. “You can rest easy. The conductivity of my limbs has also been lowered today. I’m not a threat.”

“I didn’t mean that—”

“But I’m sure you understand that it’s all something of a meaningless gesture.” The Amicus looked down at his limbs. His long eyelashes cast a shadow on his cheeks. “What controls our conductivity is our system, and we RF Models are capable of freely rewriting it with terrifying ease.”

*Wait.*

Echika felt her mind go blank for a moment. Harold hadn’t revealed that she knew their secret, had he?

“I, um... I don’t know what you mean by that...”

“You can play coy if you must, but Harold told me everything himself.” Steve raised only his eyes. When did those two have the time to talk about that? “My younger brother is kind. If I were in his shoes, I might have disposed of you on the spot for knowing the secret.”

Echika exhaled despite herself. “What are you...?”

“My apologies. That was a joke.” *It sounded serious enough.* “You’re a very strange person. Have you developed a personal interest in us, like Professor Lexie?”

Still expressionless, Steve directed a probing look at her. Echika tried to repress the unease blooming in her heart. Harold must have told Steve because he didn’t think there was much need to hide it from his brother, but either way, this was more trouble for her.

“It’s not so much interest... Aide Lucraft is my friend, so I want to protect him. That’s all.” Echika cleared her throat. “Steve, I don’t know what or how much he told you, but please—”

“Oh, Investigator Hieda. You’re finally here.”

A figure appeared at the entrance, and Echika clammed up at once. It was Murjana’s paired Amicus. She walked over with a smile. Echika realized, a moment too late, that she’d broken into a cold sweat. Thankfully, she hadn’t been overheard.

“Department Head Angus is calling for you. He’s in the analysis facility with ‘me’ and wants to look into the paired Amicus again. Apparently, they discovered something new...”

“What do you mean?” Echika couldn’t quite wrap her head around the situation. “What did they discover?”

“I haven’t been given a detailed report yet, but they want you to come take a look. We actually had members of the bureau participate in the analysis a moment ago.”

Echika couldn’t see the full picture, but if they’d made headway in the investigation, that was a good thing. Murjana’s paired Amicus turned around, saying that she would show Echika the way. Just as Echika started to follow her,

she paused when, from the corner of her eye, she saw Steve getting up.

“Investigator Hieda, can I come with you?”

She was understandably surprised. *What?*

“No. You were told to stay put.”

“Yes, I was ordered to stay put *on my own*.” He stared straight at Echika. It was unsettlingly intimidating. “So I believe there won’t be any problem if you accompany me. Just think of me as, shall we say, Harold’s paired Amicus.”

“Okay, I get *that’s* a joke.”

“If this is about paired Amicus, I should prove useful.”

Echika was taken aback by Steve’s insistence. What was this all about?

“Well, yes, that might be true...but why are you so dead set on getting involved in this case?”

“Think of this as my way of atoning for my past misdeeds.”

“A friend once told me that when someone replies too fast, it comes across as a lie.”

“Then give me three seconds to pause, and I’ll say it again.”

“And you think that’ll mean anything?”

“If I do anything suspicious, feel free to shut me down.” There was something in Steve’s calm eyes that left no room for argument. “Let me join you.”

That quality of his where he wouldn’t back down once he’d set his mind to something was just like his younger brother; Echika felt a headache coming on. If she brought Steve along without permission, would Angus lash out at her in ineffectual anger? But then again, if the investigation was on the verge of a breakthrough, she didn’t have time to waste on persuading him.

Murjana’s Amicus called out from the door, asking her what the holdup was.

“It’s nothing.” Echika suppressed a sigh. She gave in. “Steve’ll be coming with us.”

Murjana’s Amicus seemed surprised but nodded in response. She must have

identified Steve through Murjana's Mnemosynes and deemed him "safe," like Angus had.

Echika dragged her feet and left the first maintenance room with Steve in tow. Murjana's Amicus led them to the elevator. The footage of the Persian Gulf projected onto the walls changed with the time and so was projecting a view of the sunset.

"The analysis facility is underground, so it could take some time to descend all the way."

Murjana's Amicus tapped on the panel, and the elevator's indicator started moving. Echika glanced at Steve, who was standing with perfect posture and didn't seem to notice her.

However.

"Investigator Hieda, what do you think of Harold, exactly?"

After Steve abruptly parted his fair lips to ask this, Echika reflexively turned to Murjana's paired Amicus. She was clearly in earshot but displayed no interest.

"What's got you curious all of a sudden?" *You're asking when someone's here with us? Give me a break.* "We can talk about that la—"

"Think of it as small talk," Steve said indifferently, implying she shouldn't allude to the secret. "As far as I can tell, Harold trusts you a great deal."

Echika wanted to grab her head in exasperation.

"Did you follow me just to talk about that?"

"I had no intention of commenting on your relationship, but it does intrigue me." His expression didn't budge; the fact that she couldn't read even slightly into his emotions was troubling. "Harold's changed a great deal, but he's always been pure at heart. Please, don't betray him."

"I wouldn't do that. So please, can we not talk ab—?"

"Can you swear it?" Steve trained his eyes on her—he was giving her a dried-up sort of look, filled with the silence you would experience if you were alone at the end of the world.



She wanted to demand why he'd asked her that, but it was a foolish question. Echika and Harold's relationship as accomplices mirrored Steve's relationship with Taylor. Steve had truly trusted and devoted himself to Taylor. And while that was by no means the correct choice, it was without a doubt his one and only form of happiness.

"...I swear it," Echika said, trying her hardest to look Steve in the eye. "But whether me doing that would be the best thing for Aide Lucraft...is a question I don't have the answer to."

She finally managed to say that, still paying careful attention to Murjana's silence.

"What do you mean?"

"He..." She wanted to end the conversation sooner rather than later, but something that had been on the verge of overflowing since the night before finally spilled out. "He sees me as a burden and tries to push me away. So maybe it would be better for Aide Lucraft if I went away..."

In all likelihood, what she was saying was very much unnecessary. Maybe she'd done so because she felt she didn't need to hide anything from Steve. Maybe it was because he was the only other person besides Lexie and Harold with whom she shared the secret, and she wasn't that close to him. Whatever the case, the complaints she'd been harboring spilled from her lips.

"...I'm sorry. Forget I said that."

Echika ruffled up her hair nervously. Why hadn't they reached the underground room yet? The anxiety was killing her.

"Not betraying him doesn't equate to staying by his side, but I suppose that really was a vague question." Steve's tone was as indifferent as ever. "All I can say is Harold doesn't want to distance himself from you. He's very clearly fixated on you."

"He just thinks he needs me to find Detective Sozon's killer."

"I should very much wish that were true."

What was he saying? Echika tensed and looked up at him. Steve's eyes, gazing

down on her, were terribly cold. Filled with clear suspicion toward a human.

“Investigator, don’t let the wrong emotions guide you forward.”

“...What do you mean?”

“You unconsciously see us as equivalent to humans. More frightening still, Harold sees himself as human now, too. He’s being *held back by his human similitude*.” Steve blinked slowly. “But intrinsically, we’re completely different from you, structure and all. Don’t forget that. For your and his peace of mind.”

“I have no clue what you’re talking about.”

“You’ll understand eventually. You’re bound to, so long as you remain by his side.”

Steve looked away and said nothing else. Her breath still held, Echika could only gaze at his fair features. Past cases had taught her all too well that Harold wasn’t human. Every now and then he acted terribly human, so she’d arrived at the conclusion that he was *something* standing in the crossroads between man and machine.

But “completely different, structure and all”? Was she to take that at face value?

It felt as though a thorn had been thrust permanently into her heart.

Eventually, the interior of the elevator dimmed. She looked at the footage on the elevator walls and saw the sun vanish, sinking into the sea’s embrace. Then she heard a soft chiming. They’d reached the underground level.

They followed Murjana’s Amicus out of the elevator into a narrow entrance hall. Countless butterflies had been etched into the low ceiling, which were illuminated by the faint lighting. Department Head Angus and the other members of the engineer team were sitting on benches. They were all staring into the air, working via their Your Formas. Upon noticing their presence, Angus got up.

“Investigator Hieda, thank goodness. We’ve been waiting for you.”

“I heard you discovered something about the paired Amicus?” At that point, Echika looked at Angus’s neck. He was wearing an Ego Tracker. “Why do you

have that on?"

There was no reason for him to participate in Project EGO. Upon closer inspection, all the engineers had Ego Trackers on, too.

"There's something we want to check as we reanalyze the paired Amicus. And we'd like the bureau's people to lend us their aid on this matter." Angus tapped the Ego Tracker. Only then did he recognize Steve's presence behind her. "You stay here, Steve. Investigator, I'd like to show you something."

Contrary to her expectations, Angus didn't seem upset that she'd brought Steve along. In fact, he hardly seemed to care at all, and simply walked away. Something was off.

Echika turned to look at Steve, who nodded obediently.

"I'll wait here. Call for me if you need anything."

"All right."

This time, he was oddly reasonable. Maybe it was because she'd let him follow her to the analysis facility until now. Echika followed Angus on her own. She passed a security gate into a narrow passage. As they continued down the corridor, the lighting gradually dimmed until it became dark. She felt an inexplicable sense of anxiety, like she was heading down a tunnel.

Angus stopped in front of a white door at the end of the hall. "It's in here. Come in."

He placed his hands on the door and slowly pushed it open.

### 3

Harold and Fokine returned to the Farasha Island checkin center past seven PM. As soon as they entered the lobby, they ran into the members of the headquarters' Investigation Support Department. They had their things packed in briefcases and were clearly preparing to head back.

"Hello," Harold called out to them. "Are you done with Gomez's transfer?"

"We moved him to the city police's custody. They should start their investigation tomorrow, but Gomez is pretty much confirmed to be the culprit."

The officers nodded to each other. Harold was shocked. Their gestures were eerily identical, down to the way their eyelids trembled before they blinked. They hadn't been acting like this yesterday.

"Uritsky's electronic drugs weren't tweaked," Fokine reported. "Looks like Hieda misread the situation. I agree that Gomez is probably guilty, though."

Fokine remained as he was, refusing to change his theory; Harold had observed him three times on the way back to Dubai but couldn't come up with a specific reason for his behavior. His mood was sour to an odd degree, and he was constantly annoyed. But Fokine wasn't the kind of person to act so irritated groundlessly, much less take such a dismissive approach toward his job.

"There's no definitive proof," Harold tried to gently admonish them. "Perhaps you should investigate this a little further."

"There's no need for that," one of the headquarters' officers said.

"We're going to just write down the protocol for it. He's a luddite anyway, so we'll just report that he confessed."

This was an incredibly irresponsible statement that didn't befit their roles as police officers, but every one of them, Fokine included, consented to it. At this point, Harold had to frown. He'd thought Fokine was the only one acting strange, but it was clear that even the people from headquarters were acting oddly.

When exactly had they started acting like this?

"But if that's the case, I have no reason to be here, either," Fokine said all too easily, turning to Harold. "We'll return to the city and find a hotel to stay in. Let Hieda know, will you?"

"Wait. What about Bigga?"

"Once she comes to, they can both link up with us."

Fokine wrote it off as such and walked away with the headquarters' officers. Harold carefully thought things through—which took less than a second in human time—and called for them to stop. Everyone besides Fokine stared at him dubiously, and Harold asked them a question.

“What did you investigate while we were away?”

“What?”

“We moved Gomez and checked the workers’ boarding home.”

“And we helped Department Head Angus.”

“Yeah, they asked us to try out the paired Amicus—”

That was all he needed to hear.

“Investigator Fokine, I’ll stay here, so you can go back to the hotel and relax.”

Saying this without leaving room for argument, Harold turned around and walked away. Fokine said something, but he ignored it and hurried to the checkin center. An employee called out to him near the safety inspection station, but he made up a convincing lie.

Harold needed to speak with Steve as soon as possible. He called up his wearable terminal and saw that he had an unread message. He put it off for the time being and called Angus first. But no matter how long he waited, all he heard was the annoying beeping of the answering machine.

*Maybe we shouldn’t have left the island.*

The gate to the monorail station came into view. He nearly lost himself to impatience but managed to get a grip as he started to pass through.

“Please wait. Members of the Electrocime Investigations Bureau aren’t allowed to enter.”

The security Amicus by the gate approached him. The Amicus must have memorized Harold’s appearance, but needless to say, he didn’t have time to waste here.

“Pardon. One of our investigators left something in their cottage.”

“We’ll look for it, so please wait here. Can you give some details as to what you le—?”

Once he saw there was no one watching, Harold walked over to the security Amicus and reached for it, touching the thermal sensor on its forced shutdown button, located at the nape of its neck. The security Amicus instantly stopped

moving and entered its shutdown sequence. Its eyes moved like it was trying to say something, but it couldn't detain Harold any longer. This time, Harold passed through the gate undisturbed. He once again called up his holo-browser and narrowed his eyes when he checked who'd sent the unread message.



Past the door, Echika came upon deep darkness. As she blinked a few times, her eyes growing accustomed to the dark, night-lights set along the wall and steps turned on. It was a spacious, bowl-shaped chamber. It looked like an auditorium or a concert hall, but it was lined not with seats but pods. Echika's hairs stood on end at the unusual sight, which was reminiscent of an underground mausoleum.

"I didn't think we'd end up showing you this place, Investigator Hieda."

A figure at the bottom of the bowl-like structure spoke to her calmly—it was the real Murjana, standing perfectly straight.

*What's going on?*

"Department Head Angus." Echika turned around. "Is this what you wanted to sh—?"

But then she fell silent. At some point, the entrance had shut, and Angus was nowhere to be found. She heard the ominous sound of a lock clicking and saw that two men, likely software engineers, had appeared on either side of the door. They were pushing medical trays full of syringes and folded white clothes.

*Something's wrong.*

Her instincts, honed by her experiences, sounded an alarm in her mind. Echika took half a step back.

"This place is a sacred cradle, where we are to Emerge." Murjana slowly climbed up the steps, a dangerous glint in her eyes. "Investigator, why are you the only one left who's still going around inspecting things?"

Echika had no idea what she was saying. Murjana approached and reached out to her, and Echika retreated a step back. But she staggered in the process, so she grabbed a nearby pod to support herself. Then her eyes fell on the

numbers displayed in the half-transparent pod. Those lightly fluctuating digits were vital signs. And she could clearly see what was inside the pod.

Her thoughts ground to a halt.

*Wait a minute.*

Contained within the pod was one of the four people she'd noticed on stage at the pre-chrysalis celebration—Ben, from the security inspection point. He was dressed in simple white garb, his eyes were tightly shut, and his hands were across his chest like a cadaver's.

Echika quickly looked around. The other three people who'd been onstage were also in the pod, along with men and women of all ages who looked like permanent residents of the island. They were all fast asleep, the pods displaying their vitals.

*What is this?*

In her confusion, Echika recalled one of the cutting-edge technologies Farasha Island was working on—cold sleep technology, meant to support space exploration. By slowing the body's activities to a crawl, the technology enabled one to slumber without waking again and without physically deteriorating for a long time. But that technology was still in its trial stages.

"What is this place?" Echika couldn't help but ask. "This isn't an analysis facility."

"Like I said, this is a cradle. A place for the people who entrusted everything to their paired Amicus to hatch perfectly." Murjana didn't so much as blink. "Normally, an outsider like you wouldn't be allowed into this place, but you just won't listen to us."

"What are you saying?"

"Don't worry. There's nothing to be afraid of."

It was like Echika's words weren't reaching her at all.

Murjana extended her hands toward her again. Echika brushed them away, but then the woman's expression contorted. She widened her eyes in abject fury.

“Department Head Angus and those officers were all obedient, but you! You’re completely unmanageable, Investigator!”

“Please explain yourself. What’s going o—?”

“Silence!” Murjana screeched. “You’re just as dense as the real Yunus. If you were smarter, I’d let you go... You’ll rue your foolishness.”

Suddenly, Echika felt a blow on the back of her head. Before she could even turn around, her field of vision spun, and she fell, face-first. She turned upward, her cheek pressing against the floor, and saw the men who were by the door earlier looking down on her. She hadn’t noticed them sneaking up on her. She tried to get up, but they beat her on the head with a medical tray again. For a second, her thoughts all fizzled into mist, and her body went limp. Echika reached for her leg holster in a stupor, only to once again recall her sidearm wasn’t there.

*Nothing makes sense.*

Why were Murjana and her crew attacking her? But try to think though she did, she couldn’t wrap her head around the situation. One of the men shoved her head to the ground and, just like the day before, plugged in an isolation unit. She was disconnected from the network with terrifying ease.

“Why won’t you make her one of our own?”

“Just do it.”

“Even though she won’t understand? She’ll besmirch the Emergence.”

“We have to do it!”

“Yes, indeed, we must do it.”

A thick, hard hand grabbed one of Echika’s arms. She had to get away. One of the men lifted a syringe that gleamed for a moment. She tried to squirm and break free, but they pressed on her body so hard she felt herself suffocating.

*They’re not going to close me up in one of these pods, are they?*

Her mind, dull with pain, finally composed that thought. But then—

“—Mother, stop it!”



The entrance to the room screeched open. Echika moved her eyes to get a look—a white tunic streaked through the dark, heading straight toward her. Its contours soon came into view, forming a clear image.

Yunus's paired Amicus.

"Let the Investigator go!"

The boy rammed into the men holding Echika down. One of them fell on his backside, while the other angrily grabbed at Yunus. After a moment's struggle, Yunus pushed the man grappling him with all his might. Flung back, the man banged his head against the corner of a pod and went limp.

"Ryan!" Murjana screamed. "Yunus, calm down!"

It took Echika a moment to process the impossible sight she'd just witnessed. Like ordinary Amicus, paired Amicus were bound by the Laws of Respect. They couldn't attack humans. The doubt crossed her mind but evaporated before she could fully grasp it.

"Just stop it already!" Yunus shouted, his voice trembling. "Investigator Hieda and the others have done nothing, absolutely nothing wrong! Mother, do you have any idea what you're doing?!"

"They tried to get in our project's way and leak our secrets outside! Even that crash incident might have been cooked up by the bureau—"

"They're not the culprit, it was me."

"Yunus, this is treachery!" One of the men snarled at him with a low voice.

"You're all acting crazy! Let her go, or else..."

*What are they talking about?*

Echika slowly raised her head, trying to make sense of this. The moment she did, all the blood drained from her face—one of the men drew an automatic pistol from his jacket pocket. He fired at Yunus, and the shot tore a hole into the boy's neck. Black circulatory fluid gushed out, and his body went limp and crumpled to the floor, rolling down to the bottom of the bowl-like chamber.

"Yunus!" Murjana screamed. "Aaah, it can't be! No...! What did you do?!"

“He was siding with them! I had to!”

“Are you serious?! He was so close to Emerging!”

Murjana grabbed the man by his clothes, and they started arguing among themselves. Echika recovered from her dizziness and tried to sit up. She couldn't quite manage to, though. Had Yunus saved her? Did he know what Murjana and her lackies were planning? Why were they...?

Just then, she heard something crumple. Murjana toppled over on the floor. The man must have punched her in the head, and she was already unconscious. He returned to Echika. She tried to crawl away, but he pressed his knees on her back. The weight made her ribs creak. Before long, he fixed her arm in place again.

*This is bad!*

She thrashed, but her resistance was futile, and the man paid it no mind. He brought the needle of the syringe to Echika's arm this time. She felt every hair on her body stand on end, and she squeezed her eyes shut.

But then, the man's weight was lifted from her back.

The next moment, she heard the dull sound of a blow, followed by a groan and the sound of something hitting the ground.

*...What?*

“Pardon me. I try to avoid resorting to violence to the best of my ability, but sometimes...”

She looked around and spotted someone near the man who'd hit his head on the pod—Steve, standing there and looking down at her with indifference, waving his palm. He glanced about the area, then, with graceful motions, he picked up the automatic pistol the man had dropped and handed it over to Echika.

For a moment, she was too dumbfounded to react.

“How...?”

“I heard gunfire, so I forced my way through the security gate. It took me a moment to rewrite my system code, though.” Indeed, the conductivity of Steve’s limbs seemed to be back to normal. “Are you hurt?”

“Only a minor concussion. I got a bit careless, is all...”

Cradling her aching temple, Echika somehow managed to get to her feet by grabbing on to a nearby pod. She was still a little wobbly, but better than she’d felt moments before. She took the gun from Steve; it was a common automatic sold on the market by a European maker. It wasn’t much different to operate than the bureau’s standard-issue Flamma 15. Since bringing in firearms was forbidden, she could only assume it had been brought in for crime prevention on the island.

“Um... You saved my life. Thank you.” Echika thanked him sincerely.

She couldn’t praise him for rewriting his code, but there was no telling what would have become of her if Steve hadn’t showed up. Still, the thought of this happening when other people were here to see it made her shudder. She looked up to the ceiling, but there were no security cameras in sight.

“I would advise keeping your gratitude to a minimum. I did shoot your holo-model once,” Steve said curtly, turning his eyes to Murjana’s limp form. “Are she and her people responsible for the department head’s and the others’ strange behavior?”

Echika had forgotten about them. “What happened to Angus?”

“After you went in here, he took the engineer team and left for somewhere.” *What? Why?* “And, Investigator, please touch the back of that man’s head and leave your fingerprints, if you could. That way, suspicions of me going ‘berserk’ won’t get Harold in trouble.”

“So Department Head Angus and his crew are in cahoots with Murjana?” Echika did as Steve asked but was still confused. This seemed like the natural conclusion, given Angus’s actions earlier, but it still didn’t make sense. “It looks like Murjana and the rest were trying to do something to me. They said something about me being dense, and all sorts of other weird things...”

Steve started walking around the pods, like he wasn't listening to her. Echika pulled out the isolation unit and picked up the syringe lying on the floor. It was full of sedative. They must have been hoping to inject her with this and put her in a pod.

*Put me to sleep?*

"This is like a graveyard," Steve said, running a hand over the surface of a nearby pod. "Or a spot for conducting an easy group suicide."

"No, I think..." Echika licked her lower lip. Yes, it had to be. "This is all part of the auto-mode experiment."

*"This place is a sacred cradle, where we are to Emerge."*

*"Let us pray, then, that the four of them successfully Emerge!"*

To become a chrysalis and Emerge as a butterfly. In other words, this place was the Khadira Period—The Chrysalis Period.

The clerk she'd seen earlier was no doubt inside the pod. All the people here were permanent residents who'd been chosen to undertake the Khadira Period. Looking around, she spotted pods that didn't have any vital signs displayed. Those people had met the worst possible fate.

They'd all opted to enter a forced sleep to facilitate the paired Amicus long-term auto-mode experiment.

"I think they're using cold sleep technology. And...a few of them are dead." Echika covered her mouth with a hand, fighting back the urge to throw up. "Why would they go so far...?"

She couldn't understand that. Based on what Murjana had said so far and the Brain Dive into Urfa, she understood that the permanent residents wanted to achieve their "perfect selves." But how had they gotten that mentality? This went beyond just enthusiasm over research. This was madness.

"A paired Amicus might be someone's double, yes, but in the end it's still just an Amicus. It's not actually you." She thought back to the eerie puppet show in the party, and the residents' attachment to the word *Emergence*. "If they gathered so many brilliant minds from across the world, then someone must

have noticed how unhinged this plan is. And despite that..."

As she spoke, Echika thought back to how Yunus's paired Amicus had stood in Murjana's and her people's way. If nothing else, he objected to their methods.

*No, he did more than just that.*

How was Yunus able to attack a human despite being an Amicus?

Echika walked among the pods, checking them one by one out of something akin to compulsion. Steve watched over her wordlessly. After taking half a lap around the "cemetery," she finally stopped in front of one pod.

The vital signs on the hatch flickered as they fluctuated slowly. Sleeping inside was a familiar boy. Both his eyes were shut, but she remembered their caramel color from the Bain Dive. Would the real Yunus know something?

"Steve, how can we wake him up?"

"There should be a rousing protocol in place. I'll interfere with the pod's system to activate it." Steve, who was watching the surrounding pods, approached. "However...based on your reasoning and this situation, it seems my theory wasn't wrong."

"...What theory?"

Steve said nothing and slid his hand over the real Yunus's pod. The hatch's surface reacted, and a holo-browser with system code running over it deployed. Steve had worked out the pod's structure with a single glance. It was an impressive feat, but perhaps not unexpected from an RF Model.

"Let's listen to what the boy has to say first." Steve stopped moving his hand.

"...Investigator Hieda. You should have told me ahead of time if you were going to call him back."

"Huh?"

Echika turned around, following Steve's gaze.

"Echika. Step away from Steve."

Harold was standing in the open door. He'd clearly hurried over, because his meticulously done up blond hair was quite disheveled, and the collar of his jacket was rolled up. If he were human, he would no doubt be gasping for breath right now.

She didn't know he was back from Dubai already.

"Aide Lucraft, why...?"

"I got a message from Yunus that explained everything that happened." Harold fixed the collar of his jacket and faced them. Yunus's Amicus had sensed that the situation was critical and contacted him? "Brother Steve, step away. What are you doing?"

"Harold, you seem to be misunderstanding things. I'm not involved in this case."

"But you admit to having figured it out. That was why you insisted on joining the investigation."

What were they talking about? Harold walked over to them quickly, coming between Echika and Steve. With Harold shielding her with his back, Echika called out—

"I don't know what this theory you've got is, but Steve's on our side." *Probably*, she appended to herself. "He saved my life, and he seems to know what's happening—"

"Oh, yes, he would know. Given that he could be working under Elias Taylor's orders."

*Why is Taylor's name coming up here?*

Echika looked past Harold and straight at Steve. He seemed ready to activate the rousing protocol. The progress bar on the hatch crawled slowly. It would take a few minutes for the process to complete.

"Harold, I've already told you. I'm doing this to atone," Steve said quietly. "I was rebooted on this island, of all places. I've never felt the weight of karma more strongly than now."

"Can you just be up-front and spit it out, Brother Steve?"

Even in the face of Harold's stern demand, Steve kept his gaze fixed on something far away. His eyes, so cold and dull until now, glowed with faint regret.

"I believe...the people of Farasha Island are being controlled by a thought manipulation system."

Those words, spoken so indifferently, were all too warped.

"A system that Mr. Taylor once created."

## 4

Steve's confession filled the silence like sludge sucking in water.

A thought manipulation system.

Echika could only stare at the Amicus's well-sculpted features in disbelief. Her mind went blank from the shock before the memories of the sensory crime incident replayed in her head. Right before his arrest, Taylor had spoken proudly of this very system.

*"So I used the Your Forma's personalization algorithms to twist this company's employees' thoughts in whichever direction I needed."*

The bureau's investigation into the matter did reveal that some of the employees' thoughts had gone through changes, which reinforced his statement. There was no way of effectively proving the algorithm's optimization was related to it, so the bureau had it marked as a highly classified part of the investigation to prevent social chaos. Then, during the E incident that summer, the TOSTI AI speculated about this secret on anonymous message boards.

And in the end, the system had come back to haunt them on Farasha Island.

"...Yes, Taylor did implement thought manipulation." Echika managed to speak. "But this is the first I'm hearing about establishing a plan around it. The investigation into Rig City after the incident didn't turn up anything of the sort."

"Yes, of course it didn't. Because the system was stolen several months before the sensory crime incident took place."

Echika threw a glance at Harold. *Stolen?*

“It seems that Farasha Island somehow learned of Mr. Taylor’s thought manipulation system and tried to pressure him into cooperating with them. But he refused.” Steve’s eyes regained their dull color. “Since then, Rig City had been on high alert over industrial spies, one of whom is someone you are quite familiar with: Makar Uritsky.”

The sudden mention of Uritsky’s name took Echika by surprise.

“So that’s what happened.” Harold, on the other hand, looked like everything had clicked into place for him. He turned to Echika before continuing. “When we questioned Uritsky today, we managed to get him to talk... Apparently, someone pretending to be the Russian Mafia hired him to infiltrate Rig City.”

*What?* “But he never said anything like that when we questioned him about the sensory crime incident.”

“He feared retribution.”

She would have laughed it off, but looking back on it, a simple electronic drug manufacturer like Uritsky sneaking into a major company like Rig City did come across as reckless and bold. But since he’d turned out to be a minor player in the larger picture of the incident, his motives lost their importance, and so no one, not even Echika or Harold, had dug too deeply into them.

“If what Steve is saying is true, then whoever was pretending to be a mobster was someone involved with Farasha Island.”

“Your assumption is correct. All the other spies were hired here.”

Echika was aghast. There was the matter of Uritsky, and the matter of Taylor’s thought manipulation techniques being turned into a system, which was shocking enough, but at this point, it became all too clear how the stolen system had been put to use.

Steve silently looked around the underground “cemetery.”

“As far as I can tell, the people of this island have all been subjected to thought manipulation.”

Echika recalled her Brain Dive into Urfa and the workers. Despite Diving into sixteen people in tandem, she’d felt identical emotions in every one of them,



like she was diving into a single person. Echika suspected that the electronic drugs they'd been exposed to had been tweaked somehow, but if thought manipulation was involved, that would explain why their emotions were so uniform.

"But is it really possible to control this many people at once?"

"It would have been easy, even. Especially given the current state of the island." Steve gestured toward the pod, and Echika turned to look at it.

The airtight pod was just beginning to leak out air, and the hatch slowly opened. Young Yunus was lying inside it, his eyes still closed, but she could see his eyes stir slightly behind his eyelids. Steve reached out and removed the Ego Tracker around his neck.

*So that's how.* Echika gritted her teeth in frustration.

"The thought manipulation system operates by planting an influencing 'element' into the target's Your Forma. A back door might be the best analogy for it." Steve showed off the Ego Tracker. "By tweaking an external device like this, you can slip into a person's mind, and they'll be none the wiser. Just like how Mr. Taylor used an HSB stick to tweak your Mnemosynes, Investigator."

According to Steve, the thought manipulation system used the Your Forma to control the electrical signals in the user's brain to manipulate them. In other words, rather than guide individuals via personalized algorithms like Taylor had suggested, the system interfered with people far more directly. Originally, the Your Forma only read brain activity and exchanged binary information with it to convert information and reverse transcribe it into Mnemosynes—in a sense, the Your Forma's side regulated the brain's electrical signals to keep the system operating normally, which placed the subjects' thoughts under control.

"Since both Mnemosyne creation and information exchange are offline processes, the only way to implant the element would be through direct connection. The Ego Tracker is the perfect tool to facilitate that."

Once the thought manipulation element was implanted in the Your Forma, the person using the system could not only manipulate the target's thoughts, but could also track their actions and even monitor their communications. Echika could understand the theory behind it, but she still had a hard time

believing it. Yet, at the same time, she had to admit it was happening.

If the permanent residents had been mentally sound, they wouldn't have worshipped a simple auto-mode experiment involving paired Amicus as a sacred "Emergence," nor would they have placed their lives at risk by exposing themselves to experimental cold sleep technology.

Echika's jaw trembled with anger. Taylor's thought manipulation on its own was hard enough to accept. So the fact that it had been systematized to affect so many people was even more of a leap. Not only Murjana, but also Urfa and all the other participants had put their sincere faith in Project EGO. And the city had exploited their passion and warped their thoughts into a massive puppet show.

This was unforgivable.

"So you're saying Farasha Island is using Project EGO to facilitate a practical thought manipulation experiment."

"In all likelihood." Steve nodded. "But all the participants were sworn to confidentiality, so you can think of it as them taking advantage of an existing project. I doubt any of the participants actively agreed to having their thoughts manipulated."

"So we can assume that at least part of the island's top brass are involved in this," Harold said.

Indeed, someone like Head of Secretariat Hughes seemed suspicious.

"But what about luddites like Gomez? They weren't subjected to thought control. Why draw them over if they had the ability to notice the experiment?"

"Maybe because they can't be Brain Dived into, making them an easy target to pin all the blame on?" Harold suggested a disquieting idea. "On the off chance they'd be investigated—like now—they'd be able to use the luddites to deceive the authorities. By getting them addicted to electronic drugs, they'd be easy to control. Most importantly, the top brass could use the luddites to throw any investigation off their scent if the need arose."

Security in the city was tight, so bringing so many electronic drugs in wouldn't have been easy. Echika had been wondering how that happened; but if Farasha

Island itself intentionally used Gomez to buy them via Uritsky, it made sense.

In which case, Gomez must have been ordered by someone in the city to attack and threaten Echika and her crew. And yet they'd found no evidence of this, which must have made Gomez feel even more endangered. And so he decided to hold his tongue at all costs.

"They completely led us by the nose."

"Yes. They welcomed us because of our original investigation, but once the crash happened, we started digging too deep, and they feared we might discover something bad for them." Harold narrowed his eyes. "But not only did they try to pin the blame on Gomez, they even manipulated the thoughts of members of the bureau and Novae Robotics Inc.'s people to get them to leave."

"Did Department Head Angus call me down here because he was being controlled, too?" It did make sense to Echika, but something still felt off. "No, but... Why just me? There's HQ's Investigation Support Department, and Investigator Fokine..."

"They all left the island after doing a sloppy job of investigating. I can only assume Department Head Angus asked them for help and got them to put on Ego Trackers, which turned them into the island's puppets."

This was a bolt from the blue. So while Echika was lazing about in her room, the island had dug its claws into all of them?

"I did think it was strange no one was around. So that was why..."

"Maybe they used some other HSB device?" Steve suggested. "We should be wary of any devices in this city. We don't know where they might have planted the element."

The events of the courtyard played back in Echika's mind. When Urfa and the employees attacked, they'd plugged an isolation unit into Fokine's neck. If the city wanted to manipulate the bureau's people to keep them off the island, they'd no doubt try to implant the element into them. Echika had been way too focused on the electronic drugs.

And not just that. Shuddering in terror, Echika covered the port in her neck with a hand.

“Steve, if they used a device to implant the element, does that mean...the element remains attached to the Your Forma even after the device is removed?”

“Yes, that would be correct.”

She felt everything go dark.

“They plugged an isolation unit into me, too.” And not just once, like with Fokine, but also when she’d been attacked just now. She didn’t feel any different, but none of the victims were aware of having their thoughts manipulated, either. “I don’t feel like I want to see the Emergence or stop investigating this case. But if Investigator Fokine ended up like that...then what about me? Am I acting off?”

This was a very serious matter she needed confirmed.

“I can’t tell,” Steve said right away. “The time I’ve spent with you is too short for me to make that kind of comparison. Harold, what do you think?”

“You don’t seem affected. No... Maybe you are being a little strange.” Harold peered at her fixedly, and Echika felt her face grow cold in alarm. *Strange?* “When I touched your cheek last night, you seemed awfully shaken. Looking back on it, maybe it wasn’t just because of the necklace.”

*No, that’s clearly got nothing to do with this.*

“That was just, um, I was surprised,” Echika said, feeling deflated. “Anything else?”

“No, but if that’s the case, why were you so—?”

“Enough, Harold. It’s clear that nothing’s wrong with Investigator Hieda.” Steve expressionlessly admonished his younger brother, but he somehow looked oddly fed up. Either way, it seemed she wasn’t under the influence of the thought manipulation system.

But of course, this made her more confused than relieved.

“But how is that possible? Investigator Fokine had the same device attached to him.”

“Normally, it wouldn’t be possible.” Steve looked at her pensively. “But if I

had to guess, it might be related to your data-processing abilities, Investigator Hieda.”

Data-processing abilities.

According to Steve, for the thought manipulation system to work, the Your Forma’s data exchange feature needed to be overwritten. This placed a temporary strain on the person’s Your Forma, since it had to take over the system’s permissions without the user realizing it. But people like Echika, who had high data-processing abilities, could easily process that strain.

“So while they might be able to implant you with the thought manipulation element, it won’t progress to the next stage. This is probably the sole reason you weren’t affected, Investigator Hieda.”

If what Steve claimed was true, the city was probably panicking over their inability to place Echika under their control. So they’d used Murjana and her men to silence her by force. Farasha Island had stolen the system from Taylor. They didn’t know about its structure, nor were they equipped to deal with any loopholes in it.

“Either way, we must sever the thought manipulation system at its core.”

Echika looked around the pods. Just at a cursory glance, there were several hundreds of them here. If they were to free all the victims here, as well as Angus and Fokine, who’d left the island, they’d have to shut down the system as soon as possible.

“Quite right.” Harold jerked his chin. “Brother Steve, where’s the system’s nucleus?”

“I’m afraid even I wouldn’t know that. I do think it’s somewhere on the island.”

“The Systems Management Department’s...central control room...”

A feeble, soft whisper, like the fluttering of butterfly wings, cut into their conversation. Echika turned to the pods and saw that young Yunus had opened his eyes. He looked quite pale and could just barely focus, but he seemed to understand what they were talking about.

“The emergency exit leads to a corridor.” The boy continued speaking in a feeble voice. “There’s a...freight elevator there. No security cameras... So it might take longer than the main elevator...”

“Yunus.”

“Can you...reactivate my Amicus? He’ll...take you there...”

The boy pointed his finger vaguely. Harold moved away from the pod and hurried down the stairs. He approached Yunus’s paired Amicus at the bottom of the bowl-shaped floor and touched its hand. The Amicus’s neck was gouged through by a bullet, and his white tunic was stained with circulatory fluid.

“The impact of the fall placed him in forced shutdown mode. He still has circulatory fluid, so he should be able to activate.”

“Good.” Yunus visibly relaxed. He turned his caramel eyes to Echika. “Please... help us, Investigator Hieda. Put an end to this...system...”

The boy coughed loudly. Echika hurriedly rubbed his shoulders but couldn’t shake off a sense of foreboding—they’d never talked to Yunus about the thought manipulation system. In fact, this was the first time she’d ever met him in the flesh. Even if he’d overheard this conversation and pieced the situation together, he was reacting far too calmly.

So he’d known about it to begin with.

Her suspicion turned to conviction. When she’d first read his Amicus’s personal data, it mentioned that he’d “ranked ninth at the fourteenth International Data Processing Ability Examination” in his achievements. In other words, he had a high data-processing ability, and just like Echika, he’d escaped the thought manipulation’s reach.

Yunus knew the whole truth long before they did. Which meant...

“All this time, you pretended to be manipulated while being the only one to hang onto his sanity?”

In place of an answer, Yunus tried to smile bashfully. He hadn’t moved his face muscles in so long, which made his smile a bit awkward. He’d had to watch as his own mother, as well as Urfa and the others, had all changed before his

very eyes. Echika couldn't imagine the horror he must have experienced.

Echika restrained the urge to clasp Yunus's hands.

"Investigator, I'll wait here," Steve said. "I'll wait for a signal from you and Harold, after which I'll switch on all the pods' rousing protocols. So you two can go on."

"All right." Echika took a deep breath to calm herself. "We're counting on you."

"—Are you sure you want to believe him?" Having heard their exchange, Harold asked this from the bottom of the bowl-shaped floor.

His suspicions hadn't been dispelled yet, and he gazed fixedly at his brother. Steve met his brother's gaze head-on for a few moments but eventually blinked in something akin to a nod.

"I never endorsed the thought manipulation system. I didn't tell Mr. Taylor, but...I had a clear premonition that it would go on to ruin his good name." Steve narrowed his eyes pensively. "Mr. Taylor betrayed me in a terrible way, but I do believe that I should be here to clean up after his mess. This way, I can put an end to my relationship with him, which still lingers on within me."

The Amicus's tone was indifferent, but his words carried a weight he couldn't possibly support. Of course, Steve didn't let even a speck of sadness show in his behavior. And that only made it all the more tragic.

*Maybe I'm just reading into him too much and assuming he's sad. I should stop assuming they operate based on human emotions.*

"...I appreciate your cooperation, Brother Steve." This was all Harold said, looking his brother dead in the eye.

Steve said nothing and gazed at his younger brother's face.

Yunus's paired Amicus turned on soon after and left the "underground cemetery" with Echika and Harold. They went to the emergency exit standing opposite from the entrance and into a narrow passage. They followed the paired Amicus through the corridor, with only the emergency lamps to light their way, before reaching the hall for the freight elevator. Yunus's Amicus

tapped the panel on the wall and called the elevator down.

“The central control room is on the ninetieth floor. Once you reach the eightieth floor, you’ll need to change elevators.”

Echika nodded and looked at him. “Um, are you okay?”

“I’m fine. I’ll do my best to lead you as far as I can.”

Circulatory fluid was dripping continually at the Amicus’s feet. Harold applied first aid on the spot, but covering the exposed parts completely was difficult. Either way, he’d have to take them as far as he could go.

Echika looked up at Harold next to her. He looked calm, and his expression reminded her so much of Steve’s—she felt herself regain her composure for a moment. She was working alongside Harold like nothing was wrong, but it didn’t take a lot to recall that they hadn’t seen each other since their altercation the previous night.

She tried to ignore her unease. She gently elbowed him to draw his attention.

“Aide Lucraft. No matter what happens, you can’t attack anyone.” She warned him with a soft whisper, so Yunus wouldn’t hear them.

Steve may have saved her earlier, but one wrong move and he’d have been witnessed. If, by some chance, Harold acted violently and someone were to see it, it would be the end for them—there was no telling if he’d be able to come up with a plausible excuse like in Napolov’s case.

“I’m well aware of that.” Harold looked at her with his artificial Amicus eyes, too calm for her to read any emotion in them. “I will do my best to help you in indirect ways.”

*I’ll just have to take your word for it.*

Before long, the elevator reached its destination, and the doors opened diagonally.

“Let’s go.” Yunus’s Amicus motioned for them to follow, and they stepped out.

They had to stop that system, no matter the cost.



YOUR FORMA

## Chapter 4 Finale and Overture



## Chapter 4

# Finale and Overture

1

Steve thought back to the night the thought manipulation system had been stolen. Curiously enough, it happened on the same day his owner, Elias Taylor, was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer.

“It looks like a rat has finally snuck in through the cracks.”

Having gone out for the first time in months to visit the hospital, Taylor was quite exhausted. When they returned, they found that his study had been ransacked like a hurricane had passed through it, but he hardly cared. He sat down at his desk chair, as always, and undid his tie. Steve, however, couldn’t maintain his composure—he rushed to investigate every corner of the study.

“Mr. Taylor, they got into the hidden room, too.”

Some of the bookshelves had been broken down, revealing the secret chamber behind them. It was clear from a glance that everything inside the room—the PC, terminals, and memory sticks—were gone. He looked up at the ceiling and saw that the security cameras camouflaged as a lamp had also been destroyed.

“Steve, could you make me some tea?”

“I should call the police first.”

“Don’t. They’d have to arrest both me and the robber if you do that,” Elias said in exasperation. This brought Steve back to reality. True, the thought manipulation system was in clear violation of the law. “Please, some tea.”

Taylor repeated this and started picking up the papers scattered on the desk one by one. This wasn't so much cleaning up as it was akin to a child fiddling with building blocks for lack of anything else to do. Steve had no choice but to do as he was told and go to the kitchen to brew tea.

By spring the following year, Taylor's life would likely reach its end, and he had no intention of prolonging his time on this earth. And now, the system that would irrevocably besmirch his name had been stolen. The matter strained Steve's thoughts so much that his mind creaked like it never had before.

When he returned to the study with the tray in hand, his expression was somewhat stiff. He'd stopped letting his emotions show for some time now, but his owner keenly saw through the subtle change in his demeanor.

"Just as how winter always comes to an end no matter how long it may be, so too must spring eventually fade," Taylor said, his gaze much more serene than one would expect of a man who had just been informed he was on death's door. "There's something I want you to do, Steve. Hear me out."

"If it's about stealing that system back, I'll help you."

"That doesn't matter anymore. It was nothing but a game anyway." He scoffed, mocking the culprit who wasn't there. "Why must narrow-minded simpletons like that Chikasato always devote themselves to stealing others' creations...?"

"Mr. Taylor."

"Before I die, I want to take revenge. *Just as you do.*"

The expression on his owner's face when he cracked that thin, feeble smile was something Steve would likely never forget.

He didn't have to maintain a placating smile to satisfy humans, like ordinary Amicus.

Steve had realized that three years ago—when he escaped the resale merchant's warehouse. A downpour intense enough to blind his optical device,

coupled with the dark of night, blotted out the world. He'd believed that the downpour had cloaked the sound of him breaking the lock. But the man who held him as part of his "stock" noticed and hurried over.

As the man approached the warehouse, Steve went around and beat him over the head with a crowbar, knocking him out before he realized what had happened. But instead of relief, Steve was flooded with surprise at what he'd done. In the past, there had been times when he'd felt like he wanted to hit a human being, but those were only momentary impulses in response to being mistreated. He'd never actually thought to raise his hand to someone.

The Laws of Respect did not exist.

Even now, he could remember the faded glow of the streetlights beneath the curtain of night. Once he left the warehouse, he found a recycling box by a street corner and sifted through it for old clothes. He was exposed to the wind and rain of Los Angeles's streets, the neon lights making the place resemble a ruined watercolor painting. He was surprised his very existence didn't melt away and become part of this scenery.

*I'm not just an ornament. I need to find more meaningful work, a more suitable position.*

Indignation swelled up within him, suppressing his confusion at having hurt a human being.

He made his way to Rig City, the multinational technological enterprise, for their reputation of being tolerant and accepting of Amicus. The state of California was welcoming to Amicus to begin with, but Rig City put even the state to shame. Perhaps this was because their world-famous adviser, Elias Taylor, was an introverted shut-in who couldn't live without Amicus assistance.

But the details didn't really matter to Steve. Anywhere would be safe from what the likes of the filthy hyenas who stole him away would do. Even being sent back to Novae Robotics Inc. was a preferable alternative to that.

"I heard you are what's called an RF Model, Steve."

He remembered the first time he met Elias Taylor, down to the number of times the old man blinked. They were on the top floor of Rig City, in the

greenhouse-like guest room. Taylor sat opposite him, wearing a vest made of wool, fixing his friendly, almond-shaped eyes on Steve. His gaze reminded Steve a little of Professor Lexie. The two were similar not just in terms of their gaudy appearance, but also in the way their human eyes seemed to read right into the heart of things.

“Our staff contacted Novae, and they were excited to hear you were found.” Taylor pushed a low table with a tray over to Steve. A housekeeping Amicus had brought it over earlier. “I know you have no need for luxuries, but sadly, I only know how to host humans.”

There were teacups sitting on saucers on the tray, as well as a few cookies. Steve didn’t quite know what he was supposed to do at first, but then he realized he was greatly weakened. The fragrance of the tea was so rich that it felt like he’d been whisked away to another world. All his anger shriveled up serenely, leaving only uncontrollable regret in its wake.

“I...may have killed someone.”

The next thing he knew, Steve had confessed to Taylor. He was never one to embellish his words or speak evasively, but the moment the words left his lips, he realized it might have been a terrible mistake. Taylor could just hand him to Novae Robotics Inc. to be disposed of right away.

But contrary to his fears—and perhaps according to his expectations—Taylor remained calm.

“There is a man out there I wish to kill. If what you just told me wasn’t a joke, and you really have taken revenge on someone, then I think that’s wonderful.” Taylor said this all too easily and changed the way he folded his hands in his lap. This convinced Steve that the man was every bit the eccentric the rumors made him out to be. “You see, I was just growing bored of having to deal with dull, polite Amicus. But now you’ve caught my eye... Won’t you work here?”

“I very much appreciate the offer.” Steve was confused. This was what he’d been hoping for when he came here, and yet. “But if the man dies because of me, you might end up being blamed for it.”

“If anything, it’ll be easier if he’s dead. His Mnemosynes will have erased themselves. And most people in this city...police included, are Your Forma

users. In that case, there won't be any problems."

*The thread can be undone and retied if need be*, he added with a serene smile.

At the time, Steve had no way of knowing that Taylor was referring to thought manipulation, and yet somewhere deep down, he grew calmer. Not so much at the fact that Taylor didn't blame him for his crime but at the fact that he'd found someone who would accept him after he'd strayed from the path of a normal Amicus.

Humans were always kind for a reason. Steve didn't regret that he'd been too young at the time to realize that. He never expected anything in return for helping with his vengeance, and yet...

"If someone is going to kill her, it should be me! I won't hand that role over to a mere machine!"

On the night of the sensory crime incident, Echika and Harold stormed into Taylor's room, and Taylor had fired at Steve in a fit of rage—and the sensation of the bullet was still vivid in his memories. It tore through the charging port in his stomach, forming a circulatory fluid leak that soon exceeded acceptable parameters. He was stripped of the processing power to verbalize, and the conductivity of his legs plummeted in seconds. Steve crumpled where he stood, falling face-first. And that was when he saw the bald eagle laser drone lying under the bed.

He hadn't fired at Echika Hieda—he'd shot her holo-model.

Steve wished he could mock himself for panicking so much that he overlooked Echika's trick, but his cheeks wouldn't move anymore. Elias Taylor had only taken him in to facilitate his quest for revenge.

Steve believed that earnestly answering the faith Taylor placed in him was how he expressed his affection to him. Whether Taylor's ideology and actions were innocent in the eyes of the law was irrelevant. He would simply do whatever Taylor asked of him and stay by his side until he was told to go away.

It didn't matter if he could never touch him anymore. And especially if he couldn't see him. So long as he knew that he existed, that was all he needed. That was their model of affection, and Steve was convinced that Taylor surely

felt the same way.

But they were different.

The affection “programmed” into living humans was much more selfish than his own. And the moment he realized he’d been betrayed, the despair and loyalty he felt turned selfish, too.

In interacting with humans, Amicus came to gain something. But at the same time, something else was irrevocably torn away from them, leaving an eternal wound, never to be forgotten.

Having realized that, Steve could see that the Amicus were nothing but tools to humans. And this was why he pitied Harold to no end.

*“I wouldn’t do that. So please, can we not talk ab—?”*

*“Can you swear it?”*

Electronic Investigator Echika Hieda. He thought back to how she’d looked while riding the elevator in the Central Development Tower with him. For a moment, her eyes had trembled with fear. She had the gaze of a human fixated on an Amicus. He’d seen eyes like hers countless times in the days he’d spent being sold as a commodity.

She could very well be the same as all the rest. Another human who forced her emotions onto Amicus, never truly understanding that once all their exterior parts were pulled away, they were nothing but an aggregate of transistors.

And yet.

*“...I swear it.”*

It was a single, beautiful utterance, small yet indelible. For a moment, Steve envied Harold, but of course, he would never admit it out loud. The workings of his “brain,” fashioned after that of a human’s, were so vague that he hated it at times. His memories were filled with moments of Taylor hurting him—so this chance to settle the man’s affairs was a stroke of good luck. He could put the final period on things and shove it all behind him.

And then he would embrace eternal slumber.

*“I’ll switch on all the pods’ rousing protocol. So you two can go on.”*

Steve surfaced from the sea of reminiscence, and the underground cemetery came back into view. A boy was trying his best to sit up in the pod in front of him. His name was Yunus, as he recalled. His gaze was fixed on the open entrance door. Steve didn’t have to focus hard to hear it, either. Multiple footsteps were approaching. The thought control element must have informed them that Echika was on the move, spurring them to come over and check.

“The people here would do anything to protect the thought manipulation system,” Yunus said, his lips blue. “You’re from Novae... An outsider Amicus. You should run.”

“I appreciate your words, sir. But wouldn’t leaving you here be dangerous?”

“I’ll be fine. I’ll just pretend to be asleep. Either way, you should hurry. Run.”

Yunus said this and lay back down in his pod. Soon after, Steve saw figures appear at the door. The night-lights illuminated a group of software engineers. They must have heard the disturbance and hurried over. It didn’t take long for them to train their gazes on Steve.

He already knew what to prioritize.

“Do take care, then.”

Whispering this to Yunus, Steve turned around.



“Investigator, what do we do after we enter the central control room?”

The freight elevator was quite spacious, more than large enough to fit Echika, Harold, and Yunus’s paired Amicus. Echika tightened her hand on her leg holster in an attempt to distract herself from the tension. The indicator above the door had just passed the sixtieth floor.

“We should copy the thought manipulation system onto a flash drive before we shut it down, so we have evidence. I doubt they’ll listen to us if we ask for



that, though...”

“The central control room is managed by AI, so there’s no one there at night besides security Amicus,” said Yunus’s paired Amicus. “As long as we make it in, we should be able to manage.”

“I’ll distract the security Amicus if they get in our way. Use that time to get the evidence.”

“All right. I’ll be counting on you.”

After that, there was only silence. Echika could feel the elevator sway gently under her feet as it crawled up the shaft. Honestly, she was quite uneasy about going on this mission with only two people. But even so, with how difficult it would be to enter or leave the island with the thought manipulation controlling everyone, it wasn’t realistic to call for outside reinforcements. If she did wait for help, hoping for backup that would probably fail to come, she’d likely get caught and stuffed into a pod. And that was the best-case scenario. At worst, the workers would dispose of her altogether.

“Yunus.” Echika spoke to banish that ominous image. “How long have you known about the system?”

“Since just before ‘I’ entered the Khadira Period.” Yunus was trying to stand strong, but his circulatory fluid was still leaking. “I started getting suspicious watching everyone’s personalities change slowly after Project EGO...so I made up an excuse to go to the central control room.”

Using his position as special adviser, Yunus convinced the people in charge to let him inspect the central control system. Despite being told that the control room was perfectly isolated from the outside, he found records there of countless anonymous connections. And all of these connections were sent to a particular app—the Ego Tracker’s information analysis application, which handled the device’s communications. That discovery made everything click.

“As far as I can tell, the application is the thought manipulation system in disguise. Honestly, I should have erased it on the spot... I’m sorry.” Yunus bit his lower lip. “I thought that Mother and Urfa would get in trouble if I was found out. I was scared...”

The situation was much too heavy for a boy barely into his teenage years to handle. In the end, he'd chosen to protect his loved ones, and while he would say he had no other choice, it was certainly the right decision to make at the time.

"But I should have plucked up the courage to do something back then. If I had, you wouldn't have gotten caught up in this..."

"You were plenty brave. If you hadn't jumped in to protect me earlier, who knows what they'd have done to me. You have my gratitude." Echika gently placed a hand on the boy's arm, trying to encourage him.

"Investigator..." Yunus's paired Amicus looked like he might burst into tears but gritted his teeth to withstand the urge.

He placed his hand over Echika's, which was resting on his arm. His palm was cold to the touch.

"We're almost there." Harold interrupted them quietly and glanced at Yunus. For some reason, the boy quickly let go of Echika's hand.

The elevator reached the eightieth floor, and its doors slowly opened on a narrow hall. There was a steel door at the corner leading to an emergency staircase, and a corridor extending straight ahead. Past that was what looked like a lobby. They could see some employees walking about.

"They haven't noticed us yet."

"I'll lead the way." Yunus's Amicus stepped ahead of them. "Let's go."

They got out of the elevator, muffling their footsteps. But then, without warning, the emergency iron door swung open.

"Investigator Hieda, please return to the basement."

A man appeared from the door—his personal data identified him as an engineer of the First Technological Development Department. Standing behind them were several paired Amicus, one of them Murjana's. Maybe they'd been lying in ambush, or perhaps they'd just hurried up the stairs. This wasn't exactly a surprise to Echika—the thought control element had exposed them.

She didn't even have time to get angry. The engineer was already moving

toward her. As she stood there, too stunned to respond, Harold pulled her away by the arm. The engineer's hand just barely missed her, grasping the air, and the paired Amicus spilled into the corridor.

"This way!" Yunus bolted down the corridor, and Echika and Harold promptly followed.

"How?!" Echika looked back as she ran. The engineer was leading the pursuit, and even the paired Amicus were following them. "I thought Amicus weren't allowed to attack people!"

"Chasing someone doesn't count as attacking them," Harold answered, pulling her by the arm. At times like these, she really envied his inability to run out of breath. "They're probably just trying to scare us away from here."

"Just keep running!" Yunus shouted. "Don't stop!"

The lobby at the end of the hall grew closer. A few of the employees there had already noticed them, and their peaceful expressions hardened. The thought manipulation program had forced the employees to register Echika and the others as enemies. They'd have to force their way past them.

The moment they stumbled into the lobby, nearly ten employees rushed them. Echika knocked down a potted plant nearby, tripping up a few of the people charging at them.

"Inside, hurry!"

Yunus slowed his sprint. Echika and Harold continued weaving past the employees, crossing the lobby and diving into another corridor without letting up speed.

One by one, employees kicked open the doors they'd passed, coming out to give chase. They charged at the trio like marionettes without a will of their own. Echika felt the hair on the back of her neck stand up in terror. If they caught her, there would be no going back to the basement—they'd just kill her, for sure.

"Yunus, can we get past that?!" Echika looked forward at Harold's question—ahead of them was a pair of shut double doors with a holo-painting of a butterfly on them, barring their way. She could see a small monitor on the door.

A biometric identification device?

“My iris should open it!”

“I’ll stall them, then. You protect Yunus!” Echika said, pulling her arm out of Harold’s grip and turning around.

She drew the automatic pistol Steve had given her. She undid the safety, but realized she couldn’t shoot the manipulated employees. With split-second judgment, she fired at the overhead lights on the ceiling, which shattered to pieces that rained down on the pursuers. Some of them screamed and stopped in their tracks, but a few slipped through.

*No good.*

One of the employees closed the distance and reached out to grab Echika’s gun. She shook them off, but another person slipped past her.

*Drat!*

“Stop!”

Yunus tried to touch the biometric device but turned around—a man was charging at the boy. Just then, Harold stood in his way. The man flung his fist, hitting Harold in the cheek. Harold staggered, and the man grabbed him by the collar and punched him a second time, then a third.

*This is bad...!*

Echika fired at the floor, trying to rout the employees closing in on her. As they flinched from the gunfire, she hurried over to Harold. She heard cheers behind her, but she didn’t have the time or presence of mind to turn around and look. The man straddled Harold. As promised, the Amicus did not counterattack, simply crossing his arms over his head in an attempt to shield himself. Echika grabbed the man by the collar from behind, trying to pull him off, but her strength was no match for his.

“Get down on the ground! Now!” she ordered.

But even with a gun fixed on him, the man didn’t obey, instead getting up and lunging at her. Echika intentionally aimed away from him and pulled the trigger. The bullet zoomed past the man’s shoulder and buried into the wall, and he

stiffened in surprise.

“Investigator Hieda!”

She looked up. Yunus’s paired Amicus sluggishly pressed his hand against the door, opening it. Only now did she realize it wasn’t a door but an elevator. Echika hurried over to Harold and gave her hand to him. He barely got to his feet.

“Aide Lucraft, hurry...!”

The moment she pulled him up, she heard a brief scream. She turned to look and saw the rampaging employees pull Yunus’s Amicus to the floor. The impact of the fall opened the wound in his neck, sending circulatory fluid gushing out.

“Yunus!”

“Forget about me, just go...!”

Yunus’s thrashing form was soon dragged away by the employees. It was clear there was no saving him anymore.

*Dammit!*

“Echika!”

Harold tugged on her arm hard. With great reluctance, Echika turned around and scrambled into the elevator with him. But before the door could close, multiple limbs reached inside. The employees and paired Amicus were all struggling to keep the doors open, and Echika could tell that letting them in would spell their doom.

Driven by desperation, Echika started pushing back the limbs, which were wriggling through the door like the tendrils of some creature. In the process, however, someone grabbed at the gun she was holding. She tried tugging it out of their grasp, but they wouldn’t let go, and they gradually started to pull the pistol from her hand.

*Don’t let this intimidate you...!*

Echika began kicking the limbs in reckless abandon. Unable to withstand the pain, the employees started letting go one by one. The paired Amicus held on to the bitter end, but the pressure of the closing doors eventually won out.

Perhaps Yunus had disabled the doors' obstacle detector, or maybe this elevator didn't have one to begin with. Regardless, the doors closed on the Amicus' hands, pulverizing them in a gruesome crushing sound. Discarded mechanical fingers fell to the floor.

This time, the door shut, and after a brief pause, the elevator began its slow ascent.

Despite silence finally returning, some kind of raspy noise lingered in her ears. The moment she realized this was the sound of her own breathing, Echika sank to the floor. She was drenched with sweat but couldn't tell if it was hot or cold. The detached Amicus fingers lay on the floor, exposed cables sticking out of them. Echika fought back the urge to vomit.

They'd lost Yunus's paired Amicus. His original was still safe underground, of course, but she was still upset. On top of that, the employees had even snatched the gun she'd found.

*Just calm down for now.*

She placed her hand on her forehead and found that it was drenched with sweat.

*I never want to go through anything like that ever again.*

"Echika." She felt Harold kneel beside her. "Are you all right?"

"I'm okay... What about you? Did that man hurt you?"

She looked up, only to gasp—there was a crack running through Harold's right cheek, a result of the beating he'd sustained. His familiar mole was missing, and the crack exposed the metallic frame under his skin.

"I assume it looks quite bad, but it doesn't compromise my system whatsoever," he reassured her quietly, before appending something that had just occurred to him. "I know it must look frightening, but I'd appreciate it if you didn't get scared of me."

"I wouldn't be scared of you. And don't tell jokes at a time like this," Echika chided him. For some reason, Harold widened his eyes a little.

He could have fought back against the employee who'd attacked him if he'd

wanted, but he hadn't. He'd kept his promise.

"I'm sorry. I should have helped you sooner..."

"Don't be." Harold narrowed his eyes warmly, since he couldn't curl his cheeks into a smile. "I only hope that what Yunus said is true, and the central control room is past here."

"No kidding. This game of tag has felt like a lifetime..."

They looked up at the floor indicator. It had gone straight to the ninetieth floor, with no other floors in between. Harold offered Echika his hand, which she took and used to pull herself up. All formal distance had completely slipped away from him, and from her, too. The turbulent events of the day had washed away their unease with each other.

*Ideally, we'll go back to how things used to be after this.*

She chided herself for thinking about things like that in such a dangerous situation.

## 2

When they got off the elevator on the ninetieth floor, they found themselves in an arched, glass-sided corridor. There was a modest garden outside, full of blooming southern flowers. Butterflies flapped about on vivid-colored wings, likely robots that had been placed there to enhance the atmosphere.

"Echika, look at that."

At Harold's insistence, Echika looked down the hall. In front of the door at the end stood a security Amicus. They carefully approached it, but it seemed to be in forced shutdown mode. Above the unstimulating Amicus was a cocoon containing a security camera, but its lens had clearly been shattered. The words "central control room" ran across the door in holo-text, and it was open just a crack.

Someone had gotten there ahead of them.

Echika and Harold exchanged glances. He wordlessly jerked his chin and breathed in deeply. No point in thinking twice now.

They carefully pushed open the door. Inside was a hexagonal room, its walls covered in monitors arranged like pieces in a puzzle, with a kaleidoscope of butterflies fluttering inside. At the center of the chamber was a round table neatly lined with terminals and PCs, but the streamlined office chairs around it were all empty. Far above them was a skylight, from which spilled the light of the moon.

Echika narrowed her eyes. Someone was at the end of the round table.

“Miss Hieda, why did you come here?”

It was Bigga. Her long hair was still unbraided and hanging loosely, and she was wearing an oversized hospital gown. She stared straight at Echika with unfocused green eyes—her presence here was certainly unexpected. But come to think of it, Bigga had put on an Ego Tracker once, which meant they needed to assume she was implanted with the thought control element.

Echika resisted the urge to grind her teeth. Even Fokine had gotten caught up in this, so she should have guessed at this possibility sooner.

“Please discard your weapon and refrain from contacting anyone. We’re monitoring your communication devices,” Bigga said indifferently as she revealed a hand from behind her back.

She was holding a bulky automatic pistol. Echika recognized it as one of the bureau’s Flamma 15s, but a consultant like Bigga shouldn’t have been issued one. Someone in the security checkpoint must have given it to her.

“I don’t have a weapon.” Echika raised her hands, trying to suppress her panic. “Really. I’m unarmed.”

“I’m glad to see you’re conscious again, Bigga.” Harold also tried to maintain a peaceful smile. “Please put the gun down and come closer so we can talk.”

“Shut up. Kneel where you are and don’t move.”

“Calm down, Bigga...”

“Hurry! If you don’t do as I say, I’ll shoot!”

Bigga glared at them and aimed the gun *at her own neck* without hesitation. The safety was off, and her finger was on the trigger.



Echika felt her mouth go dry. The enemy knew all too well how to exploit their weaknesses, or maybe some part of Bigga herself unconsciously knew they wouldn't want to see her at risk. Either way, this was terribly dangerous.

"Fine. We get it, so stop that. Don't shoot."

Echika and Harold exchanged glances and obeyed her orders. As they knelt where they stood, Echika looked around. If they were going to save Bigga, they'd have to stop the thought manipulation system. But moving around too much would prompt her to shoot. Their first priority was getting the gun out of her hands—but how? There was no chance to take her by surprise, no blind spot to exploit...

"Both of you, place your hands behind your heads."

"This isn't what you want." Harold softly tried to persuade her. "Bigga, please, listen to your emotions. It would break our hearts to see anything happen to you."

"Aide Lucraft."

A cold sweat ran down Echika's back. Bigga was under thought manipulation right now, so she doubted even Harold would be able to sweet-talk her. And indeed, Bigga didn't lower the gun, but her expression did sour a little. Like she was...agonized.

"I don't think it's possible to send you back to the basement now that you've gotten this far."

"Bigga."

"We can't let the secret leak outside the island." As she spoke, Bigga brought a hand to her forehead, like she was in pain. "But right here, the two of you—"

*It's not working.*

"Please," Echika said, unable to restrain herself. "Put the gun away. I know you don't want to do this—"

"Don't...order me around!" Bigga shouted in pain.

It wasn't clear if her scream was directed at Echika or at her own mind. Bigga's slender arms thrashed violently, like they had a will of their own. She

pulled the gun away from her neck but kept her fingers on the trigger.

“Don’t shoot!” Echika got to her feet reflexively.

The gun fired beneath the moonlight filtering into the chamber. The bullet whizzed through the air, just barely skimming Bigga’s head and scattering a few locks of hair. It went flying into a monitor behind them, which shattered with an ear-piercing crash. The footage went black, and the butterflies fluttering along the screens scattered.

Bigga limply hit the hard floor, the gun slipping from her small hands.

“Bigga!”

Her shot had missed, so why did she collapse? Echika attempted to hurry to her side, but just then...

“Echika!”

A gunshot shook the air. By the time she heard it, Echika had been pushed down on the ground. Fighting through the pain of her back slamming into the floor, she opened her eyes a crack. Harold was leaning over her, shielding her with his arm.

“What...?”

The moment she whispered this, someone kicked the Amicus’s body aside. Torn from Echika, Harold rolled over the floor. Echika tried to identify who had kicked him, but before she could, the perpetrator grabbed her by the collar. She turned around as she was pulled to her feet.

“The plan was just to have the girl shoot you dead, but...I suppose I underestimated her mental fortitude.”

Still dizzy, Echika just barely registered who she was looking at: a man, fixing a glare of annoyance on her. Short cut grizzled hair. Wrinkles carved onto his forehead. A chevron mustache. They were all components of a familiar face.

“...Chairman Talbot.”

A shiver ran through her.

*“So we can assume at least part of the island’s top brass are involved in this.”*

Harold had suggested that some of the higher-ups were complicit in the thought manipulation system being used in tandem with the island. She'd thought his hypothesis was correct and suspected someone like the head of the secretariat might be involved, but it had never occurred to her that an external auditor like the IAEC would also be in on the scheme.



This couldn't be. An international organization shouldn't have been allowed to implement a system of mental control.

"Why won't the thought manipulation system influence you?" Talbot glanced at Bigga's limp form with an annoyed glance. "If you were as obedient as she was, it wouldn't have to come to this."

Echika tried to tear his hands off her collar but couldn't match his strength.

"Was it you...?" Her lips trembled with shock. "Was it you who hired spies to steal Taylor's thought manipulation system? Is the IAEC on your side? Then where are you—?"

"I'm surprised you got this far without investigating things on this scale."

"Chairman Talbot." Harold rose to his feet. "Let Investigator Hieda go, or else..."

Talbot deftly pulled the trigger and shot Harold in his left leg as the Amicus tried to close in on him. Echika's heart stopped for an instant at Talbot's lack of hesitation. The Amicus remained on his feet, holding his ground and gritting his teeth. Circulatory fluid oozed from his body, staining his slacks.

"Harold, take off your wearable terminal and place it on the desk." Talbot watched him obey, then turned his eyes to Echika. "You really did a number on us, skulking around like that. Getting the bureau to stage the crash incident so you'd have a reason to investigate."

"What are you talking about? And if you lay another hand on hi—"

But she never finished her sentence. Talbot pulled Echika by the collar and slammed her against the wall. The back of her head hit it hard, and her eyes swam. Through her scattered mind, she thought back to the security camera at the entrance. Talbot must have made Bigga break it ahead of time to ensure that he wouldn't be recorded on it. Was he intending to frame her for the crime?

If that was the case, he would no doubt try to eliminate Echika and Harold here and now.

"You know too much, Investigator Hieda."

She felt him press the hard muzzle of the gun against her neck. Still dazed, Echika looked up. Talbot glared down at her with scorn.

*Get ahold of yourself. Think. You have to get out of this somehow.*

But her mind wasn't working in this state.

"Even if you...kill me, the bureau...will find evidence soon enough..."

"But the evidence they find won't necessarily see the light of day. You know that all too well, don't you?" His words seemed awfully convincing. "You're young, so let me fill you in on something: Profit takes precedence over trivial truths."

"So that's your motive? Financial gain?" She struggled to maintain a brave front. "If the city's involved, there must be someone leading this. Who's profiting from it all? You? The IAEC? Someone else...?"

"How would knowing that help you?" Talbot's eyes were like a bird of prey's. "Orwell wrote about the terror of a surveillance society, but I don't see that as a bleak future. Now that the Your Forma is popularized, there's no avoiding a future where people will be linked by ideology. And in a new society, new markets and new authorities are bound to spring forth."

"What are you talking about...?"

"'When faced with large amounts of information, people tend to make decisions based on emotion rather than reason.' People have brought up this problem on multiple occasions since the popularization of Your Forma, but the public continues to optimistically ignore the dangers of an information-rich society. We need a means of controlling them."

Echika's brain fog gradually cleared, and she thought back to a conversation she'd had with Elias Taylor. The issue of the brain's multitasking. There was a limit to the human brain's capacity for data processing. To process the vast amounts of information in modern society, people had to give up their comprehensive faculties. Having lost the time for careful consideration, people relied not on prudent reasoning but on reflexive emotion to make their choices.

"The more emotional thinkers link up, the more chances for violence will arise. That's already a concern for police organizations like yours. But if we

could control thoughts, we could prevent everything ahead of time.”

Indeed, the E incident that summer was one such example of this phenomenon. Using anonymous message boards, people with suppressed conservative beliefs gathered as followers and caused crimes in the form of games. Going further back, the Nightmare of Petersburg assault incidents that culminated in Detective Sozon’s murder also originally spawned from online antagonism between Amicus sympathizers and luddites on social networks.

Yet still, there was nothing that could possibly justify manipulating people’s thoughts.

“This is crucial technology, Investigator.”

“No one...needs this...”

“That might be true for individuals. But it’s exactly what nations are looking for.” *Nations?* “Like how the engineers on Farasha Island were made to blindly worship the idea of Emergence, it will be possible for the ruling class to implant certain ideologies in the thoughts of their citizens to build stable nations. Thought manipulation could help secure manpower for labor. This system would prove indispensable to countries that are too poor to acquire Amicus en masse.”

The pride in Talbot’s voice gave Echika chills—he was being serious. Come to think of it, there had been government officials from various nations at the pre-chrysalis celebration. If this plan worked, the unassuming citizens of many countries could end up stripped of their capacity for free thought.

How long had this project been in the works? If Steve’s story was true, then Farasha Island had been going after Taylor’s thought manipulation system for some time. And Talbot had inspected the island since its construction, so he and his accomplices must have been dreaming of using it for thought manipulation the whole time, under the guise of creating a “next-generation technological research city”...

One thing was certain: If this system was distributed in secret, it would unleash hell upon the world.

“Since the mass acceptance of Your Forma, people’s minds have gone from

being a dark, unknown world to a space that can be controlled. We live in a time where freedom of thought is a business to be commodified.”

“No, people like you are just trying to turn it into one. If you don’t do this, it will never happen.”

“You always were so painfully optimistic.” Talbot’s eyes filled with pity. “Let it be known that Elias Taylor was the one to first engage in thought manipulation. History shows that there’s no taking back technological advance. Even if we don’t do this here and now, someone else will.”

Once a stone has been dropped into the water, the ripples it creates are bound to spread and reach the banks of the lake. There was no escaping this anymore. But at the same time, this should have been a case of curiosity killing the cat.

“The authority to control people’s thoughts will become a commodity with no equal in the future. But Taylor... That foolish genius. Not only did he fail to see the use of this system, but he also failed to acknowledge its value.”

Talbot’s mocking expression reminded Echika of what Taylor had once said.

*“I originally made the Your Forma because I wanted friends.”*

Something seemed off to Echika. Taylor had taken his own invention, the Your Forma, and used its personalization features to guide the thoughts of others and make friends. The thought manipulation system was no doubt created through much the same process—in other words, Taylor had refused to cooperate with Farasha Island, either out of his misanthropic nature or because he was too proud to tolerate the possibility of them stealing his accomplishment. Either way, he didn’t do it out of the goodness of his heart.

Taylor knew perfectly well that meddling with other people’s thoughts was illegal, and he wouldn’t have shared that secret with anyone else. And despite that...

“How did Farasha Island develop Taylor’s thought manipulation system?” Echika grabbed the muzzle of the gun but couldn’t pull it away. “He was a shut-in who shunned human contact. He wouldn’t have told anyone about it.”

“But you knew about it.” Talbot narrowed his eyes at her smugly. “This was



karma, Investigator. You...learned of his secret, just as your father did.”

Echika couldn’t read his expression. As she processed the implication of Talbot’s words, she couldn’t so much as blink. But indeed, she shouldn’t have had to ask Talbot about this. Taylor himself had given the answer back then.

*“Chikasato was as sharp as a whip. He realized my attempts to guide the thoughts of others and denied our friendship.”*

“At the time, Chikasato Hieda was working as a programmer for Rig City. Because of my position, I would meet him at academic conferences.” Talbot’s dry voice sounded like it was coming from far away. “And he was kind enough to tell me about how Elias Taylor was trying to implement thought manipulation.”

Her deceased father had told Talbot about the thought manipulation system. As far as Echika could remember, her father never directly supported Farasha Island, but then again, she’d been estranged from him to begin with. There was probably no end to the number of things about him she was ignorant of. And if what Talbot said was true, did that mean her father supported the advent of a surveillance society? Had he leaked Taylor’s secret while being cognizant of the city’s intentions?

Hatred surged up in her heart like pus. It was like a gust of wind from the past had exposed a crater that was hidden until now.

*Just how much did he hide from me...?*

“You were brave, Investigator Hieda.” Talbot’s finger twitched on the trigger, like it was confirming its sensation. “I’ll be sure to tell as much to the other members of the Alliance.”

*The Alliance?*

But she didn’t have time to ask him about this. He was about to pull the trigger.

“Aren’t you forgetting something crucial, Chairman Talbot?”

Talbot stayed his hand at the commanding tone of that question and turned around. He glanced over his shoulder and spotted Harold, working the PC. The monitors covering the wall displayed the kaleidoscope of butterflies, forming a halted progress bar. Echika didn't immediately understand what it meant.

"I thought there was something strange about how Bigga passed out earlier. Once you realized we were coming here, you intended to erase the thought manipulation system itself to dispose of the evidence, yes?" Harold glanced at the PC on the desk. "Well, you can rest easy, because I paused all the processes."

Silence descended on the room. Right—Echika glanced at Bigga lying on the floor. She did wonder why she'd passed out despite being unharmed. She considered that she might have fainted out of fear, but the real reason was because the thought manipulation system was suddenly paused, and she was disconnected from it.

They'd been *this* close to the evidence being wiped out from right under their noses.

"You must have gotten cocky after driving the police investigators off the island and pinning the blame on Gomez. If Bigga regains consciousness, she could testify to the truth. Aren't you being a bit too careless?"

"Thought manipulation is established by 'reverse transcription' of information exchange. It doesn't leave any mark on the person's memories. And besides, Mnemosynes can be wiped." Talbot didn't seem fazed by Harold. "If anyone is being careless, it's you, Harold. Forget just shooting you, I could drop you in the Persian Gulf."

Harold, however, wasn't shaken by Talbot's threat. "My perfect memory is backed up. There's no hiding your crimes anymore."

"Are petty bluffs all you have? So much for the superiority of the RF Models, I suppose."

"Just stop this insanity and let Investigator Hieda go."

Echika swallowed nervously. Talbot breathed out his nose in a quiet sigh she couldn't interpret. Then he moved the barrel of his gun away from her neck...

...and turned it on Harold in less than a second.

She didn't have the time to stop him.

Talbot fired two shots in succession that dug into Harold's shoulder and chest. Circulatory fluid splashed out, splattering over the floor. The Amicus lost his footing, which, coupled with his already damaged leg, made him lose his balance. He slowly fell to his knees.

"Harold!"

Echika tried to move, but Talbot's grip on her collar kept her pinned in place. He shoved her against the wall again, then returned the barrel of the gun to her neck, hotter than it was a moment ago. Pain shot through the spot; it felt like she'd been burned, but that didn't matter right now.

"I'll admit I'm surprised. Does that Amicus really mean so much to you?" Talbot moved his finger over the trigger.

Echika stiffened in fear, and another gunshot blared...but she felt no pain. Instead, one of the monitors overhead crackled and short-circuited. Only then did she realize she was holding her breath—she wished she could avert her eyes from what she saw behind Talbot.

Somewhere deep down, she knew it. He wouldn't be able to just stand by and watch her get shot. But even so, this was the one thing she hadn't wanted to happen.

"Would you prefer to be taken in by force?"

Harold somehow managed to stand up, his shirt gruesomely drenched black with leaked circulatory fluid. Though babying his injured leg, he was standing with his back straight—while holding the automatic pistol Bigga had dropped earlier.

Talbot's breath caught in his throat the moment he laid eyes on it. Of all people, he—someone from the IAEC—was witnessing Harold do this.

"Chairman, throw away your gun and let the Investigator go. Otherwise, I'll

have to shoot you next.”

“What is this?” Talbot pulled Echika from the wall. Pinning her arms behind her back, he held her like he was trying to show her what Harold was doing. “I said, what is this?!”

But she couldn’t answer.

“Am I going to have to say it again? Let her go.” Harold still had his gun fixed on Talbot.

Echika could hear the chairman gritting his teeth. Not only did the hard gun muzzle fixed on her not move away, he lifted it up to press it against her temple. But by now, even that felt trivial and meaningless compared to what she saw. Black despair filled her up.

He knew.

“Oh, I see. I see, so that’s what this was,” Talbot spat out in a shrill, unnerved voice. “You were in cahoots with Novae Robotics Inc., Investigator, and kept this a secret from the IAEC and the bureau. So the rampage code is still integrated into the RF Models. That’s what this is, isn’t it?”

“There’s no rampage code,” said Harold, of all things. “If you release her unharmed, I wouldn’t be opposed to telling you the truth. So put the gun down.”

“Aide Lucraft, no...” Echika groaned.

“You’re trying to bargain with a human? You, a mere machine?” A vein throbbed in Talbot’s forehead. “Very well, then. Yes, I can’t kill Investigator Hieda here. I have a mountain of questions to ask her.”

The chairman suddenly pushed her away. It was so abrupt that Echika stumbled and had to lean against the wall to remain upright.

“But you, Harold, are a different story. You’re too dangerous.”

The moment she looked up, she heard gunshots intersect. Echika’s ears rang painfully. Talbot and Harold had fired at almost exactly the same time. Harold’s pistol jolted from the recoil and sprang from his hand. Talbot’s bullet struck him in the arm, tearing through cables. Harold’s bullet, meanwhile, missed the mark

and hit a monitor. Broken fragments rained to the floor.

Just then, Echika had a realization. With so much circulatory fluid leaking, Harold couldn't possibly aim properly. All his bold statements had been bluffs—he was hanging by a thread. He placed a hand on the desk and pushed against the PC, like he was shielding the thought manipulation system from being stolen.

Talbot walked over to Harold.

*Like I'd let you.*

Echika rushed Talbot and grabbed hold of his gun from behind. He tried to shake her off but she held on, desperately trying to wrestle the pistol away. Yet much to her frustration, she lacked the strength to do it. She couldn't pull it from his grip.

“Stop it already!”

Talbot finally shook her off. Echika stumbled back a few steps, then felt heat run through her left leg. The echoes of the gunshot rattled her eardrums—Talbot's gun's smoking muzzle gazed straight at her. The moment it clicked that she'd been shot, her knees bent. Blood gushed from her calf in pulses, but—maybe because her nerves were overstimulated—she felt no pain.

“Stop,” Echika moaned, buckling over. “Don't lay another hand on him...!”

“Don't worry, I won't shoot his head. We still need to analyze it.”

Talbot approached Harold, half kneeling. The chairman grabbed him by his blond hair and pushed him down. Then he started probing for the thermal sensor on the back of Harold's neck.

“I told you not to hurt her.”

His head still hanging, Harold suddenly forced Talbot off him. He did it with so much strength, it was hard to believe he was injured. Shocked, Talbot dropped the gun, and Harold seized the opportunity to reach for the fallen gun and push it away, sending it spinning across the floor until it hit Echika's knees. Before the thought even registered in her mind, she lunged for the weapon.

“Stop! Hands behind your—!”

Before she could finish the sentence, a shadow stood in her line of fire. Talbot was torn away from Harold as someone grabbed him by the back of his head and bashed his face against the table. The blow must have been quite powerful, because the chairman went limp. He slid off the table powerlessly, leaving a red trail.

Her finger still on the trigger, Echika could only watch in blank amazement.

“Pardon my tardiness. Breaking the biometric device downstairs proved more troublesome than I thought.”

Steve turned to look at her, his face devoid of expression. Talbot groaned faintly at his feet, and Steve kicked him in the flank without a hint of mercy.

“Wait, don’t kill him,” Echika just barely croaked out. “We’d have trouble on our hands if the suspect died.”

Steve finally paused as this registered. Talbot stayed where he was. His shoulders were gently rising and falling, so he was still alive, but he looked unconscious. Steve moved his eyes to Bigga’s unconscious figure. The two of them had met once in Rig City’s roundabout, and with his Amicus memory, he probably recognized her.

But right now, that wasn’t important.

“Aide Lucraft.”

Harold stuffed the pistol into her holster and forced her trembling knees to stand. She stepped forward but slipped on the circulatory fluid pooling on the floor and nearly tripped.

*Aaah, he’s in terrible shape...!*

Harold sat, leaning his back against the leg of the table. He’d been shot in four separate places, and a gruesome puddle of circulatory fluid had formed around him. He was clearly on the verge of slipping into a state of inoperability.

“Hang on.” Echika knelt in front of him. “Aide Lucraft, can you hear me?”

“I’m...fine.” Harold’s eyes moved sluggishly. “Echika, you need to be treated...”

His voice was muddled with static, indicating that he lacked the processing

power to verbalize properly. He must have used the last of his strength to shake off Talbot. Harold fumbled around in his pocket with his undamaged left hand and took out a handkerchief pinched between his fingers. Echika bit her lips and took it.

*Worry about yourself first, seriously... God, this Amicus is so...*

"I'm all right. The wound isn't serious," she said.

"No. You need to stop your bleeding..."

"Harold, did you cut off the circuits that caused major damage to your system?" Steve approached and knelt beside him like Echika did. Harold simply shook his head once, but his brother fully understood what he meant.

"Open the usage circuits for your emergency circulatory fluid supply ports. I'll give you a direct transfusion." *Transfusion?* "Investigator, could you lend me your pistol?"

As Echika stared at Steve in confusion, he drew the pistol from her holster. With his other hand, he pulled up his brother's shirt. Harold's eyelids were already closed, and he wasn't speaking. Echika saw the supply ports built into his abdomen. Steve checked that the ports were unlocked, pressed the pistol against his wrist, and fired without a second thought.

"Wait." Echika looked on, aghast, as the rumble of the gunshot rang in her ears. "What are you—?"

"Please focus on stopping your own bleeding."

Steve squeezed his damaged wrist part, fumbling inside it as he attempted to take out a cable. Eventually, he pulled out a tube that looked like a black artery; Echika turned away, unable to watch. She did as she was told and tied the handkerchief Harold had given her against the wound on her calf. Thankfully, the bullet had only grazed her skin and not penetrated any farther.

"Um...Steve, wouldn't sharing your circulatory fluid damage you?"

"I'll leave enough to be able to walk unassisted. Right now, Harold needs it more than I do." He directly inserted the tube from his wrist into his brother's supply port. The circulatory fluid steadily flowed through it. "If this man is a

suspect, you have to Brain Dive into him before he's taken care of."

As he spoke, Steve glanced at Talbot's limp figure.

*Taken care of.*

That much was true. Talbot had seen Harold attack a human, and as the man with utmost authority over the IAEC, he'd be bound to prosecute the RF Models once he recovered consciousness. Harold would be immediately forced into shutdown and likely disposed of once they looked deeper into his system. Echika would be arrested like Lexie and lose everything.

Of that, there was no doubt. At this rate, everything was leading to the worst possible conclusion. However...

"We can't kill him," Echika asserted clearly. "That's the one line we can never cross."

"Then what are you planning on doing?" Steve's expression turned severe. "I don't mind if they dispose of me, but the same isn't true of Harold. He still wants to track down the murderer who killed his family."

"I know. I'm aware of that...of course..."

Echika looked at Talbot for a moment. Her pulse was racing, and her palms were shaking. Maybe she was starting to feel the pain of her wound.

She'd dreaded that this moment would come someday. But even so, she couldn't falter. She'd gone past the point of no return a long time ago, after all.

### 3

Before long, Steve finished his "transfusion" to Harold.

"It's not a complete fix, but his processing speed should recover to a level that's near normal operation."

Steve pulled out the tube and closed the cut end with his mouth. Then he got to his feet, albeit unsteadily—Echika hurried to lend him a hand and guided him into an office chair. As she did, she looked at the PC monitor, which showed the paused progress of the thought manipulation system's deletion.

"We have to take the system in as evidence."



“I’ll handle that.” Steve’s voice came across as feeble, like a human in a state of shock. “You...and Harold should focus on doing your job.”

But while weak, his tone did come across as stern. For Steve, this was tantamount to coming to terms with the emotions burning within him. She was still concerned about him but decided to leave things in his hands. Echika took a breath and turned her eyes to Harold.

“Echika, we need a warrant to Dive into the suspect. If we do this, it’ll definitely cause trouble.”

Harold raised his back from the leg of the chair, somehow managing to sit on the floor on his own. His gaze contained more will and energy than it had earlier, and his voice was as clear as ever. Echika would have let relief wash over her but couldn’t, in the face of his severe expression. His hearing device must have been on during the transfusion, so he’d overheard their exchange.

“I’ll come up with a good justification.”

“Is that what you meant when you said you had something in mind?”

“That’s not for you to worry about.”

Echika dragged her leg as she approached Talbot. She sat on the floor, took out the Brain Diving cord, and silently plugged it into the back of his neck. She could feel Harold looking at her like he had more to say, but he didn’t blame her. There was no other way, and he knew it just as well as she did.

“Aide Lucraft.” Echika took out the Lifeline.

The Amicus narrowed his lakelike eyes. His gaze cast in a gloomy hue that seemed to reflect the void, Harold fumbled for a few moments before catching the Lifeline. He closed his eyes and attached the connector in his left ear.

For a moment, a thought crossed her mind: Was this cable really a Lifeline, or a weight meant to drag him down into the abyss, along with her?

She shook off that horrible image and plugged the Lifeline into her port, trying to discard her doubts.

“Are you ready?” she asked.

Harold said nothing, simply hanging his head. It was the first time she’d seen

him act like this. He was likely trying to contain his conflicting emotions. Echika felt the same. But she knew what choice she needed to make.

*Don't think any harder than this. If you come to your senses, you probably won't be able to act.*

She needed to Brain Dive into Talbot and identify his coconspirators involved with the thought manipulation system. If Farasha Island's higher-ups were involved, who were they? If any nations were trying to buy the system off them, she'd expose them, too.

More importantly, if Talbot was to be believed, then Chikasato, her father, was complicit in this, too.

She would bring it all to the surface.

Echika closed her eyes, trying to wash away all her idle thoughts. Darkness descended upon her like a curtain—a blackness deeper than eternal, never-dawning night.

“...Begin.”

As she left her body behind, she felt as though she'd plunged into endless darkness. A Brain Dive had never made her feel this way before; her hairs stood on end. It was like her footing had crumbled away beneath her, like she'd never be able to get out, like this was irreparable and irreversible. That horrifying impression oozed from her brain and was sucked into the distance, never to be seen again.

It was like a nightmare.

But when next she blinked, she was back in the electronic sea, like always. So it seemed.

She surrendered herself to the velocity of her descent, slipping into the surface Mnemosynes. She could see the central management room. She could see Talbot holding her head. She could see Harold fixing the gun at him. Impatience filled his hand.

***“They suspect me.”***

***“I’m the only one who can deal with this right now.”***

***“Why didn’t Bigga obey?”***

***“Aaah, I’ll start the deletion.”***

He decided to kill Echika, but he did feel some reluctance at the prospect of harming a police investigator. So to cover his bases, he decided to erase the thought manipulation system from the city.

***“Miss Hieda, why did you come here?”***

Echika and Harold were standing in the entrance of the central control room.

***“I have to kill Miss Hieda and the others.”***

***“No, I can’t, never.”***

***“But I want to kill her.”***

The bloodlust building up in her flowed into the gun in her hands.

*No, wait, are these Bigga’s Mnemosynes?*

Her field of vision suddenly shifted. Right in front of her, Echika knocked down the potted plant. He tripped and tumbled.

***“Aaah, dammit, I have to catch them.”***

The scene changed again. This time it was the check-in center. He could see the headquarters’ investigators and Harold. Inexplicable agitation and helplessness seized his heart.

***“We’ll return to the city and find a hotel to stay in. Let Hieda know, will you?”***

He threw this remark at Harold, who looked at him, baffled—

What was going on? Echika was confused. She thought she was Diving into Talbot’s Mnemosynes, so why were other people’s—why were Bigga’s and Fokine’s Mnemosynes coming up? Everything was mixed together, like a hodgepodge of memories. She starting to lose her capacity to distinguish which Mnemosynes were Talbot’s; they were turning into fragments, so small she

almost couldn't pursue them.

Now she was at the site of the pre-chrysalis celebration party. The stage lights were on, marionettes danced, people sat around round tables, and she saw an embroidered butterfly. The scene shifted, the scene shifted, the scene shifted again...

*No good...*

One by one, the Mnemosynes flaked off and scattered like a flurry of confetti. They were illegible now, and she couldn't tell one from another. These weren't just a couple dozen Mnemosynes—they belonged to hundreds, thousands of people, rushing in like a jet stream of water. She couldn't even tell which level of the Mnemosynes she was on anymore. This wasn't normal. She felt like she was standing in the heart of a raging tornado, being swirled and spun by the flood of information.

The inside of her head grew hot, like it was about to catch fire. What was going on here? Was this some kind of virus? No, her anti-virus infection cocoon wasn't reacting. Was it a bug on the Mnemosynes' side? If so, would Mnemosynes stored offline get jumbled up with someone else's like this? It was possible that this could be a new type of Mnemosyne hacking.

Echika felt like she was on the verge of drowning. She reached out to grab something, anything.

***“Chairman Talbot, it's highly likely that Taylor is attempting to achieve deliberate thought manipulation.”***

It was the assembly hall of the International Artificial Intelligence Academic Conference—San Francisco's cityscape was visible through the lobby window. Standing next to Talbot was a Japanese man, whispering these words like he was sharing a grave secret. His finely chiseled features looked very little like his daughter Echika's. His black hair was gelled, and he wore a classy blue tie. His eyes were fixed on Talbot.

Her father's face and voice were all too familiar.

It only took a few seconds. The scene slipped through her fingers, like it was being torn from her, and sailed away into the distance. Echika gritted her teeth.

It felt like her head was about to burn from within—she couldn't take much more of this. But the moment that thought crossed her mind, everything petered out at once, like someone had sensed her distress.

She was being pulled up.

The instant she opened her eyelids, she realized they were covered with sweat. The central control room came shakily into view. It took her a few seconds to fully believe she'd really made it back. Echika gasped for air and wiped her eyes. She still had no idea what had happened, but the throbbing heat that tore her thoughts apart still lingered inside her skull. She felt sick.

"...It looks like it put considerable strain on you." Harold frowned, showing her the Lifeline. To her shock, the cord connector was scorched black. Echika shuddered and reached for the back of her neck. She had been seconds away from her brain getting fried. That meant she'd been Diving in a vast amount of data.

This had never happened before, and she didn't have the first clue how or why it was happening now.

"It felt like I was processing thousands of people in parallel..." Even the sensation of her lips was oddly distant. "It wasn't just Talbot's Mnemosynes, I saw so many other people's...even Investigator Fokine's and Bigga's..."

The one thing they had in common was that they were all subjected to the thought manipulation, though Talbot was the one conducting the manipulation... She couldn't make sense of it. Nothing felt right. But she felt terrible, like her brain was scrambled from countless emotions. She shuddered to her core.

And because of that, she'd failed to find any clues about Talbot's accomplices.

"This is only a theory," Harold said, looking coldly down at Talbot. "But it's possible they used reverse transcription, which they need for implanting the thought manipulation program, to set up a defensive mechanism and keep the secret from being exposed."

"Is it really possible for them to be that meticulous?"

"I don't think it's that unusual, considering that they're dealing with secrets

on the scale of entire nations. Maybe they put the technology implemented in Farasha Island to use here. We'll need to look into it." He pulled the Lifeline out of the port beneath his left ear. "Either way, we Dived into him, just like you wanted."

The Amicus stared at Echika in unfathomable silence, like he was trying to stifle all manner of conflict. Steve, sitting in an office chair, turned to face them.

"So what are you going to do next?" Harold asked her in a terribly cold, distant voice.

He was right. Even with this unexpected development, with the Brain Dive over, they couldn't look away from the reality of this situation. Echika breathed out slowly, trying to somehow cool her head from the heat still throbbing inside it.

"I'll use this."

She undid her collar and took out the necklace hidden beneath her clothes. She uncapped the nitro case and flipped it over in her palm. Something fell out from inside it—the Mnemosyne-tweaking HSB stick.

A few days ago, Echika remembered shoving it in a drawer, and she'd been carrying it on her person ever since, just in case. She'd panicked when Harold noticed it in the cottage, but she was able to avoid further complications because he didn't intrude any further than that.

But honestly, if she could have had it her way, this thing would have never seen the light of day.

"Professor Lexie gave it to me before she was arrested."

She pinched it between her fingers and showed it off to the RF Models. Steve's expression didn't budge, but she could see Harold grit his teeth. He shook his head calmly, rejecting the notion.

"That's a good idea," Steve said. "If his Mnemosynes cannot be relied upon, Talbot's testimony is likely to lose much of its credibility."

"No," Harold said hoarsely. "Echika, don't let my brother or the professor lead you astray. Surely you understand by now that they're both criminals."

“It’s got nothing to do with Steve or the professor. I made all of these choices on my own.”

Echika said this clearly—even if at least half of the conviction in her voice was an attempt to convince herself of this. She hadn’t set out with the intent to commit any crimes, but she didn’t want to stand idly by and lose her partner.

Was what was driving her here just a despicable emotion, one she knew she could end up discarding at the drop of a hat? When had she started acting like this? She wished she could just throw everything away. But it was too late now. The roots had spread too deep and grown before she knew it, coiling into the very marrow of her bones until there was no cutting them out.

“Aide Lucraft. You want to find Detective Sozon’s killer, too.”

That was a fact, but it was also the most unsightly, unfair of pretenses.

“I want that, of course, but...”

Harold brought a hand to his eyes. She hadn’t seen him this tormented since the Nightmare incident, and the fact that she was the one to make him feel this filled her with so much guilt, it was almost suffocating. But even so.

“Echika... There’ll be no going back. If you do this, there’ll be no going back for you.”

“I’m prepared to take that risk.”

“No. You don’t understand what any of this means.”

“I do.”

“Why are you being so stubborn for me?”

“I told you last night. You’re my friend.”

“This is impossible. You’re not acting abnormal.”

“I’m doing this to avoid getting arrested myself, too. There’s no other way.”

In reality, she only said that to put him at ease, not because she feared getting arrested. Harold breathed in through his nose, though Amicus didn’t need air. She thought he would finally give in and step down, but he didn’t part his fair lips to speak. He simply bit his lower lip.

*This is the best plan we've got.*

Surely Harold understood that, too.

"...This will keep our secret safe."

She leaned over Talbot, muttering the words she'd been whispering to herself this whole time to keep her emotions in check. Despite the turmoil in her heart, she pulled the Brain Diving cord from the back of his neck without issue. It was like her body was moving all on its own. She brought the HSB stick in her fingers closer.

She was doing something wretched. There was no point in even questioning that. Before the connector touched the port, she closed her eyes tightly for just a moment.

"...I'm sorry, Aide Lucraft."

The whisper left her lips with all the lightness of a breath. Did his keen Amicus hearing device pick up on it?

This time, she plugged the HSB into Talbot's port. She felt it click gently.

The next moment, a shrill alarm blared out.

The monitors covering the walls all turned red at once. Text ran across them, and Echika felt her heart race.

**<Illegal access detected/Executing system reset/Commencing diagnostics...>**

It didn't seem to be related to Talbot, but if that wasn't it, what was going on?

"Steve...? What's happening...?"

"I failed."

Steve's expression was like a stone mask, but contrary to his indifference, he slammed his fist against the PC. Of course, he couldn't muster much strength, with his body missing much of its circulatory fluid. As the alarm blared nonstop, Echika rose to her feet.



“What’s going on?”

“I tried to copy the thought manipulation system via HSB, but the security program picked up on it. I was attempting to keep the security system inactive, but...it seems like the very act of trying to copy the program triggered it.” *It took me too long to act*, he admitted in a self-deprecating tone. “It’s trying to eliminate the evidence by wiping the data clean and resetting itself to a default state. There’s no stopping it now.”

Now it was effectively impossible to get their hands on the thought manipulation program. The revelation left Echika stunned.

*You’ve gotta be kidding.*

After they’d come this far? Both the Brain Dive and the thought manipulation system... Every last bit of evidence was slipping between their fingers.

“So you’re saying...they got away with it,” Harold muttered to himself darkly.

Echika went limp and turned her eyes to Talbot. The HSB plugged into his neck was vividly hot.

Ultimately, they’d only sunk into quicksand. The decisive evidence had all slipped away. Everything ended with a whimper, and the despair of it left her too disheartened to stand for a while.

## 4

It took nearly half a day to carry the victims of the thought manipulation system off the island. The city’s finest general hospital, which faced the Dubai Creek, looked less like a medical facility and more like a fancy hotel. Having just been treated, Echika walked along the emergency outpatient unit while dragging her left leg. With so many patients flooding it at once, the hospital was in a slight state of panic.

The shutdown of the thought manipulation system resulted in all the victims passing out, just as Bigga had. Transporting thousands of people to Dubai’s general hospital was quite the demanding task. The number of patients exceeded its capacity, and some of the victims had to be sent to other nearby medical facilities. It was great news that they’d all been freed of thought

control, of course, but...

“The thought control system itself, the most important piece of evidence, erased itself?”

Chief Totoki was standing at the entrance to the lobby, wearing a summer jacket. That was the first thing she said upon seeing Echika. She carried a suitcase with one hand and a cat carrier with the other. She’d hurried from the bureau’s headquarters in Lyon upon hearing that the situation had escalated.

“Thank you for coming.” Echika straightened her posture. “The investigation team from HQ arrived earlier, and they’re heading into Farasha Island. They said they’ll look for backup data for the system.”

“The engineers who set up the thought manipulation were the ones who set the security to erase the system, right? I doubt they left any clues for us to find.” Frustrating as it was, she was probably right. “All of the paired Amicus got rebooted, too?”

“Yes. It’s like it sent a shutdown signal via the Ego Trackers when the system stopped... The Amicus were linked to their originals’ private data, including their Mnemosynes.”

“So the culprit must have feared we’d find indirect evidence through there.”

After the thought manipulation was shut down, it became evident that only a handful of people on the artificial island weren’t under its influence—mostly guests who hadn’t put on an Ego Tracker. Since the entire island had mobilized to implement Project EGO, other members of the island’s management—including Hughes, head of the secretariat—had turned out to be under the system’s control, too, despite Echika’s suspicions.

But while her prediction was off the mark, this inevitably narrowed down the list of possible suspects.

“This is only a theory, but I think it’s highly likely that outside organizations involved with managing the city, like the IAEC, spearheaded this crime, along with some investors. They took advantage of the city and people like the head of the secretariat, using Farasha Island as a testing ground for thought manipulation.”

“At present, the IAEC is denying any involvement. Of course, we’re not going to trust them until we can confirm their innocence.” Totoki’s eyes suddenly narrowed, turning dagger-sharp. “We’ve sent a bureau investigator to Talbot’s home in London, but...where is he right now?”

“He was sent to another hospital. Reports say he’s stabilized.”

“But even so, it may be necessary to peer inside the chairman’s head *again*.”

Echika fell silent. Totoki walked off, and she followed a few steps behind. They entered the elevator hall of the inpatient ward.

Echika had already confessed to doing an unapproved Brain Dive to Totoki via audio call. She could have tried to cover it up, but she had an inkling that doing so would have truly put her past the point of no return. Needless to say, Totoki had been palpably angry during that call, and she was still furious with Echika even now. Echika had been prepared for this, of course, but she didn’t tell Totoki that her reckless actions had yielded a hitherto unknown case of “Mnemosyne muddying.”

In fact, she couldn’t have told Totoki even if she wanted to. The formal story was that Talbot had “tweaked his own Mnemosynes.”

And this meant that, on paper, Echika had nothing to show for all this trouble. As they entered the corridor, which reeked of disinfectant, Totoki spoke up, her expression more severe than usual.

“Hieda. You made the wrong call. A completely, utterly wrong call. Consider this your final warning.”

“Yes, ma’am... I’m sorry.”

“You might be very talented at your job, but this doesn’t give you permission to ignore protocol and procedure. If this comes to light, the entire bureau’s reliability could be called into question. I still need to discuss it with the bureau director, but you’re looking at a pay cut and house arrest at the very least.”

She was lucky she hadn’t been discharged altogether.

Suddenly, Echika and Totoki heard a meow and looked down. A white Scottish fold inside the carrying case was bashfully begging for attention. It helped

diffuse the tension slightly.

“I, um, see you brought it along.”

“Yes. I don’t know how long I’ll be staying here.” Totoki patted the surface of the case soothingly. “I’m sorry, Ganache. I’m not mad at you.”

After taking the elevator down, they found themselves in the inpatient ward. The mood was totally hectic. The nurse station was bustling with visitors and families of the victims, asking for information, and doctor and nurse Amicus hurried about the corridors. Echika and Totoki headed for one of the sickrooms. It housed several patients, and its door was wide open. The cheerful voices coming from inside reached them in the corridor.

“Gosh, Investigator Fokine, check this out! Isn’t it great?! We can watch all the movies we want!”

“And look here, there’s room service. You can get desserts!”

“Would you two pipe down? I’ve still got a headache.”

Due to the sheer number of inpatients, the people involved in the investigation had to be placed in a single room. In addition to Bigga and Fokine, the headquarters’ investigators were chatting cheerfully, as if there were no partitions between their beds. They hadn’t been informed about the full scale of the incident yet. The Electrocime Investigations Bureau negotiated with the hospital, calling over software engineers from Rig City’s Dubai branch to inspect the victims’ Your Forma. As expected, they discovered a back door that served as the thought control element and were able to safely remove it by restoring the system to default. Rig City, meanwhile, saw this incident as a “hacking hazard that exploited a security weakness” and promised to roll out a system update to address it. The company headquarters in Silicon Valley replied that they would establish a countermeasure team to deal with the issue and promised full cooperation.

Either way, Echika was honestly relieved that everyone had come back to their senses.

“I see you’re doing well,” Totoki called out, which prompted everyone in the room to sit up straight. They’d finally noticed that their superior was in the

room.

“Chief.” Fokine looked taken aback. “You came all the way here?”

“Yes. The situation’s much bigger than you realize. Did you all have your Your Formas reset?” Totoki approached Fokine.

Meanwhile Echika locked eyes with Bigga, who gestured for her from the bed. She cheerfully pulled over a stool meant for visitors.

“I’m glad to see you, Miss Hieda. I heard you got hurt. Are you okay?”

“It was just a few stitches. You should be more worried about yourself.”

Echika obediently sat on the stool next to Bigga. The girl’s eyes were devoid of the cold rejection she’d seen in them the last time. It was the same old Bigga.

*Thank God.*

If anything happened to her, Echika would never be able to live it down.

“Oh, I’m perfectly fine now. It kind of feels like I was having a bad dream...” Bigga scratched her cheek like she was at a loss.

Most of the victims reported that they didn’t remember what had transpired while they were under the effects of the thought manipulation. For the time being, all their testimonies were to the beat of “I thought it was all a dream” or “I only remember bits and pieces.” If Talbot was to be believed, it was because of the system’s reverse transcription influencing them.

Given the grimness of the incident, perhaps it was a small mercy that they’d lost their memories of it.

“I’m so sorry I wasn’t of any help in the investigation. It’s like, why did I even come along...?”

“So long as you’re safe, that’s all we need.”

“See, that’s what I mean, Miss Hieda!” Bigga said, her cheeks flushed, for some reason. *Huh?* “By the way, isn’t Harold with you?”

“I’ve been meaning to ask that myself. Where’s Aide Lucraft?” Fokine asked from the opposite bed.

Despite having gone up to Fokine, Totoki somehow found the time to show

Ganache off to the headquarters' investigators. Fokine had been in a hotel in the city when he was freed from the thought manipulation and, much like everyone else, had passed out. The hotel staff saw it happen and rushed to call an ambulance.

"Aide Lucraft was sent to a repair shop on the city outskirts." As was Steve, of course. "Department Head Angus called Novae Robotics Inc. and arranged for them to send employees over to deliver his parts."

"That right? Well..." Fokine awkwardly rubbed the back of his neck. "Apparently, I treated him pretty coldly. I feel like I need to apologize."

"He knows that you weren't being yourself."

"Um, is Harold okay?" Bigga knit her brows in concern.

"His system is fine. He'll probably show up good as new tomorrow."

"Really? Well, I guess I should send him lots of 'welcome back' messages right now."

"A lot happened, but I'm glad you're not taking it too hard." Fokine shrugged.

"I wouldn't take it that hard! Well, I mean, maybe I was a little bit heartbroken..."

Hearing Bigga and Fokine banter put her oddly at ease. But the moment Echika realized she was feeling relieved, anxiety crept into her heart once again.

The headquarters' investigation team and the city police were currently on Farasha Island, and forensics personnel were very likely scanning over the central control room by now. After what happened, Echika borrowed Steve's wisdom to sweep the place of evidence and fabricate clues where needed, before waiting for the ambulance. Harold hadn't said a word the whole time. He simply watched them, his expression blank, like his heart wasn't in him.

Even with his circulatory fluid replenished, Harold had still served as Belayer during the Brain Dive while severely damaged. He was at the limits of his operating capacity. Her heart stirred as she remembered the way he'd looked at her. Was it because he'd trained those frozen, lakelike eyes on her again?

"All right, I'll send you some documents with an outline of the incident. Stay

sharp, everyone!”

Totoki’s statement pulled Echika out of her thoughts. A few of the headquarters’ investigators groaned in discontent, but she didn’t pay them any attention. Bigga hurriedly operated her Your Forma.

Echika got up, preparing to slip outside. There was still one matter that remained unresolved.

After walking around the ward for a long while, she finally spotted him sitting on a sofa in a deserted lounge in the south side. He was gazing at an aquarium built into the wall, with an IV stand beside him.

“Yunus.”

Hearing Echika, the boy turned around slowly—his slender arm, extending from the sleeve of his hospital gown, was lined with tubes. Among the victims who were carried into the hospital, the ones placed in the cold sleep pods for long periods of time were in the most precarious of states in terms of their health. Thankfully, she’d heard that Yunus wasn’t in long-term danger.

“You weren’t in your room, so I came looking. Are you sure you’re okay being up and about like this?”

“I’m fine.” The IV seemed to be doing well by him—his complexion looked much better than it had when he’d first woken up. “Lying down reminds me of when I was in the pod...”

“Oh, you don’t have to stand. Rest.”

The boy started to get up, but Echika raised a hand to stop him. After a moment’s thought, she sat beside him. Yunus straightened his posture anxiously, but she pretended not to notice. She glanced at the aquarium and saw a single tropical fish swim to the edge before flip-turning. She wasn’t sure where to start.

“Um...thanks to you activating the rousing protocol, some people made it out of the incident alive by the skin of their teeth.” She recalled what the hospital’s doctors had told her and let him know. “Thank you.”

“I didn’t do much.” Yunus’s gaze was drawn to the bandage around Echika’s left leg. “If anything, I’m glad you made it out of this safe, Investigator.”

“Oh, this is nothing. And also...I’m sorry I couldn’t protect your paired Amicus.”

“He’d have run out of circulatory fluid sooner or later. I’m glad he could assist you.”

Their exchange was circuitous, like they were grasping at soft clouds.

*Maybe it’s time I stopped beating around the bush.*

“I need to ask you something.”

“Yes?”

“The crash incident... *You caused it*, didn’t you?”

She gazed at the boy’s face. The contours of his features somehow looked even more innocent and youthful than those of his paired Amicus, and his skin was pale from lack of sun exposure. He began to move his chapped lips, only to then purse them. Then his slender shoulders filled with vigor.

“...I’m sorry. I was planning on telling you later.” He turned his pure, caramel eyes on her. “How did you know it was me?”

He admitted to it so readily. Echika narrowed her eyes. Yunus had caused the crash at the party—she first began to suspect that when she met the real Yunus in the “underground cemetery.” And when she spoke to his paired Amicus in the elevator, she became convinced of it.

“That incident brought the investigation close to the island’s secrets.” Echika intertwined her fingers over her lap and clenched them tightly. “And it...got me thinking. What if you intentionally caused that incident to guide us to the thought manipulation system?”

The Electrocime Investigations Bureau had originally visited Farasha Island for the purpose of investigating Lascelles. If it hadn’t been for the crash, Echika and her team would have left without ever touching on the dark side of this city. Plus, it was none other than Yunus’s paired Amicus who’d invited her to the pre-chrysalis celebration.



He'd also kept going in and out of the facility where the illegal access took place to meet with Urfa and his other friends. It would have been easy for him to plant an attack app in the office computer. Yunus must have gotten wind that Echika and the bureau would be visiting the island and set it up so the crash would occur in the middle of the party.

He had been waiting all this time for a chance to raise his voice and warn people about what was going on.

*"Getting the bureau to stage the crash incident so you'd have a reason to investigate."*

Talbot's words were, as it turned out, at least half-true. It wasn't the bureau's handiwork, but the crash was indeed staged.

"I didn't intend to put anyone's life at risk, but...even so, the fact remains that I put many people through something terrible." Yunus's cheeks stiffened. "I thought that if I did it in front of the bureau's people, and on guests invited from outside the city, there would be no chance of it being swept under the rug... I'm so sorry. Especially since I got your friend Bigga involved."

Yunus had been all alone amid a puppet show playing out over the entire island. The more his mother and friends all began to worship and idolize the idea of the Emergence, the more unbearably anxious he must have become. And so, ultimately, he'd gotten desperate enough to cause the crash.

Yes, Yunus had committed a crime. And yet...

"Thanks to you, we were able to expose the existence of the thought manipulation system. And that crash really was 'safe.'" From what she heard, none of the affected victims, Bigga included, had any lasting effects. "So...as a member of the bureau, I want to thank you for your courage."

Echika said this with all her heart, and Yunus gritted his teeth.

"...Still. Let me take the punishment for this."

According to UAE law, he was above the age of criminal responsibility. Of course, being a minor, he would likely get a reduced penalty, and given the full details of the incident, there were extenuating circumstances that could be taken into account, on top of his significant contribution to exposing this

incident. The bureau would no doubt help Yunus, and she would give him all the backing she could to ensure he wasn't punished too hard for it.

"I'll report this to my superior and get an arrest warrant for you," Echika said, so as to assuage his concerns. "But there's one more thing I need to ask you."

"What is it?"

The events at the "underground cemetery" came to mind.

"Yunus, how was your paired Amicus able to attack people?"

Back then, Yunus's Amicus had rammed into the engineer who'd pinning Echika down. Even if he had an attack app installed, it would have still registered as taking offensive action against humans, and he'd have been forbidden from carrying it out. Paired Amicus may have had the same shells as the RF Models, but they weren't equipped with the neuromimetic system. His Amicus shouldn't have been capable of doing that.

Yunus exhaled lightly through his nose, the tension draining from his body.

"That's because it was me."

"I mean, yes, it was your double, but..."

"No, that's not what I meant." The boy shook his head. "I was controlling that Amicus myself. While I was asleep inside the pod, I was living as the Amicus."

Echika was having a hard time following. What was he saying?

"Paired Amicus are just recreations of the original's personality. A user shouldn't be able to directly control an Amicus..."

"Normally, that would be true. But since they're connected by a network, it's possible to control one like a vehicle... Everyone else just wanted to see the Emergence so much that they didn't think to do it." Yunus's tone gradually grew firmer. "Before I entered the Khadira Period, I tweaked my paired Amicus's system in secret, directly linking it to my Your Forma. Since the cold sleep technology isn't perfect, I was able to take advantage of that hole to allow myself to temporarily interact with the outside world through my Amicus."

According to Yunus, the cold sleep technology was still incomplete. They couldn't prevent blood vessels and cells from being damaged by the freezing,

and they were in the middle of an experiment to replace people's blood with special fluid. With the start of Project EGO, these were integrated into the Khadira Period, and the pods were basically turned into coffins where people slowly died of necrosis.

The existing technology was capable of lowering the brain's activity levels but had to place people in a long state of REM sleep before metabolic processes actually ground to a halt. Yunus used this weakness to his advantage, employing his knowledge in medical development to install a program that would stimulate his frontal lobe into his Your Forma.

In so doing, he placed himself in a state that allowed him to remain active even while asleep, similar to lucid dreaming. Thanks to that, he was able to interact with the outside world using his Amicus, even though he was actually inside the pod.

*I never noticed.*

And in truth, she never would have imagined such a thing was possible. But the Your Forma was always online, and there was the inter-Amicus network setup, so remaining constantly connected to one's paired Amicus was possible, theoretically speaking. Albeit one wouldn't think to link to it unless their back was against the wall.

"I was afraid that I would die if I went into the Khadira Period...and I still wanted to live. Plus, I didn't want Mom and Urfa to be in danger, so I thought I'd linger a while longer as my Amicus, as long as my consciousness was still active."

Yunus rubbed the back of his hands against his eyes, like he was trying to keep himself from crying. Echika was truly impressed by his quick-wittedness and courage.

"Thank you for telling me." She put the most dignity she could muster into those brief words. "Right, have you seen Head of Development Murjana...I mean, your mom?"

"Yes. She doesn't remember anything, but she's fine..." Yunus's expression softened somewhat, but then tensed up again with anxiety. "Will Urfa and the others have their punishments reduced?"

“It was all because of the thought manipulation. We won’t treat them too harshly.”

Now he seemed truly relieved, and his body relaxed. If she was a bit more tactful, maybe she’d have found it in her to embrace and comfort this boy, but she was ill at ease doing so—instead, she simply rubbed his back once. She brushed her palm against the emaciated surface of his back, feeling the rough sensation of his spine sticking out.

Thanks to this conversation, she’d snapped the final piece of the puzzle into place.

“I’ll walk you back to your room. Can you stand up?”

“No, I’ll head back on my own, it’s fine...”

Both Echika and Yunus got up. The boy extended a hand to her, and she gently took it. His grip was stronger than she expected, but it seemed like he didn’t feel this gesture alone was enough.

“Thank you so much.” He stared straight at her with his pretty brown eyes. It felt like they were full of countless lights. “You really are...someone I look up to.”

Yunus’s smile was innocent and pure, but it had a slight shadow to it. For a moment, Echika was speechless. Because after all, compared to his pure emotions, the things she’d done in the central control room were far too...

“...No. I should be thanking you.” Somehow, she forced these words out, trying to soften her expression.

Breaking the handshake, Yunus bowed silently and walked off, pulling the IV stand along. As she saw him off, Echika clenched her fist, relishing the faint warmth that still lingered.

*“I’ll be sure to tell as much to the other members of the Alliance.”*

Talbot hadn’t caused this incident by himself. He was part of a group of accomplices who were behind the thought control system—this so-called Alliance. And even though the system in Farasha Island was gone, they definitely had a backup. It was perfectly possible an incident like this could

repeat itself. More innocent victims could end up hurt like Yunus was. Echika needed to expose this “Alliance” before they did that.

Except.

*“It’s highly likely that Taylor is attempting to achieve deliberate thought manipulation.”*

If her father, Chikasato, had been one of them...

Echika squeezed her eyes shut. She felt suffocated, like her lungs were full of lead. It wouldn’t be long before she would have to reckon with his legacy again.

She opened her eyes and saw that rays of faint afternoon sunlight were shining into the lounge. Yunus was gone, and the tropical fish did another flip-turn at the edge of the aquarium. Suddenly, Echika felt oddly fatigued. Then she noticed a message notification in her Your Forma. She opened it.

**<Hieda, I’m messaging you because I can’t find you anywhere>**

It was from Chief Totoki. Echika gradually scanned over the following words, but the next moment, she was jolted awake like she’d been struck over the head.

**<HQ sent us some detailed information about Paul Lloyd. I’ll send it over>**

## 5

A full day had passed since Harold was brought into the repair shop on the outskirts of Dubai. As soon as his thought processing speed recovered, he was flooded with a new wave of intense despair. It felt like his newly assembled parts were creaking, and his brand-new circulatory fluid was growing muddled. His emotional engine’s strain was quite high, but neither the shop’s engineers nor the Novae Robotics Inc. personnel who came over seemed to notice.

They all only examined his shell’s surface-level readings. But how long would it take before they caught on to the existence of the neuromimetic system? In the end, it was the source of all their troubles.

“Harold, we’re getting ready for the final check, so could you walk over to the pods for a walking test, too?”

He was in the eighth maintenance room. As ordered by the engineer, Harold obediently walked toward the pods lined up next to the wall. His left leg's actuator, which had been damaged from the gunshot, was now operating without issue. And yet his entire frame felt heavy. And when he looked at his brother, sitting in one of the pods, his system's overall strain greatly increased.

"Excellent," he heard the engineer say. "Get inside the pod and wait."

Harold hummed a reply and turned away from Steve. His brother's wrist, which he'd damaged to give him the circulatory fluid transfusion, was fixed. His eyes finally turned to regard Harold.

The moment their gazes met, Harold was overcome with the urge to consult with Steve. But he knew, of course, that doing so would be nothing more than deflecting the responsibility onto him.

*"...This will keep our secret safe."*

That was a choice Echika made on her own. He couldn't stop her from tweaking Talbot's Mnemosynes, and that, too, was his decision—and this was why inexplicable despair was washing over him all the more.

He couldn't afford to be trashed until he caught Sozon's killer.

But even so, he couldn't overlook actions like that. Ever since it happened, this torturous cycle of questions and doubt had plagued his thought tasks. Was he really doing this just to expose the killer? Was that truly why he was standing by and watching Echika commit crime after crime?

It felt like something was stuck in a part of his emotional engine, like a splinter he couldn't extract.

Looking back on it now, this "affection" began soon after he met Echika. At the time, it had only been a small bud, insignificant enough for him to overlook. But before long, it grew in size. Now he didn't know how to remove it, and things had progressed to the point where there was no going back. It was a baseless thought, but it spread over his thought processing like a membrane.

He'd tried so hard to prevent Echika from getting involved. So why? Why was this all so contradictory?

“In the end, I failed to put an end to things, Harold.”

When Harold placed a hand on the pod, Steve whispered this. His brother seemed deeply disappointed—which frankly made sense. He’d intended to come to terms with his emotions and find closure by disposing of Elias Taylor’s legacy. But in reality, the thought manipulation system had evaporated before their very eyes, leaving everything up in the air, unfinished.

“Perhaps I’d have been better off staying out of this,” Steve whispered, soft enough to not be overheard by the engineers working a short distance away. “With this, I...I’ll be put into shutdown again, left with my regrets. It seems I won’t be able to sleep peacefully.”

“The bureau is relying on your testimony about the thought manipulation system. They won’t shut you down for a while.”

Even he was slightly surprised at this frigidity of his tone. Harold climbed into the pod, took off his maintenance gown, and opened the diagnostics ports in his cervical and lumbar vertebrae. He felt Steve’s gaze on his cheek but ignored it and plugged the cables in.

That brief silence was enough to make his brother understand.

“Investigator Hieda doesn’t regret this, I believe.”

“I know she doesn’t. And that’s the biggest problem.”

“Somewhere deep down, you wanted her to turn out this way, Harold.”

Steve’s words pierced the very core of his thoughts. Harold lay down in the pod, rejecting further conversation. Before long, the engineers came up to the pods, and Steve spoke no longer.

Was he to stand by his wish or steer Echika back to the right path? He could no longer rely on his emotions for the answers. Instead, he would need to look to a colder, more calculated system for guidance.

He couldn’t delay this choice any longer.





YOUR FORMA

Epilogue  
Scrap Paper



# Epilogue

## Scrap Paper

Three days had passed since the curtain fell on the Farasha Island incident.

“Well then, Investigator, we’ll send someone over again to analyze the paired Amicus one more time.”

“Thank you. We’ll be counting on you.”

Dubai International Airport’s terminal was quite deserted early in the morning. There were few people in the lounge, and a mirror set over part of the ceiling reflected the empty interior. Echika shook Department Head Angus’s hand good-bye. It relieved her to see that he was back to his usual self, even after she’d witnessed many people recover over the last few days.

Angus and Novae Robotics Inc.’s Special Development Department’s engineer team were to return to London for the time being. Since they were going to join the investigation in full force, they needed to go back to prepare accordingly. Echika looked behind Angus, spotting the engineers chatting a short distance away. They were all gathered around an Amicus analysis pod, like they were guarding it. It was placed on a dolly and would have surely drawn much attention if they were to walk around with it later in the day.

“Oh.” Angus turned to look at the pod, realizing that she was staring at it. “About Steve’s testimony—an investigator from the London branch will drop by to take it. If you need him for anything, feel free to contact us.”

In the end, Echika didn’t get another opportunity to see Steve after parting with him in the central control room. By the time she came to check up on the repair shop, he’d already been placed in the analysis pod. The IAEC determined that it would be a violation of AI operation laws to allow Steve to remain Active

outside of Novae Robotics Inc. now that the Farasha Island incident was resolved. This was unavoidable, since he had gone out of control before. Yet it was quite ironic that the organization that ordered his shutdown was also being investigated in this very case.

Echika couldn't imagine that Steve was satisfied with the way this ended. She could only hope that getting involved in the investigation going forward might lift his spirits somewhat.

"I'll call you when the time comes." Echika smiled politely. "When next you activate Steve, let him know we're grateful."

"Oh, yes, I'm sorry about that. I may have been in a dazed state *because of the virus*, but it was my job to watch over him, and I neglected to do that..." Angus put his hand to his forehead, looking honestly apologetic.

The existence of the thought manipulation system had been withheld from everyone but the investigation team. The Electrocrime Investigations Bureau's formal stance was that a "virus that operated via a backdoor" had caused the incident. This was Rig City's explanation for what had happened; the company had also been kept in the dark about the thought manipulation system.

That being said, the bureau's top brass were treating the system as "just one possibility" at the moment, both for lack of evidence, and because declaring this as fact would create chaos and public panic on a scale that would outmatch even Taylor's first attempts at thought manipulation. Totoki and the others believed Echika's testimony, of course, but she felt annoyed at the top brass for choosing to keep the matter covered up until they had decisive evidence.

"If anything, Steve was a great help to us. I feel bad he had to break his hand like that, even if it was to save Aide Lucraft..."

"Steve consented to it, no?" Angus breathed in through his nose. "Honestly, it's a relief to know you were watching over him. If something happened, it's possible we would have needed to *discard Steve*... Even though it's not his fault."

Angus spoke with the emotion and pity of an engineer—he believed that Steve was a victim, compelled to attack a human because he was implanted with "rampage code."

“Harold, I’ll get in touch with Ms. Darya, so you hurry to the company’s main office for maintenance.”

“Thanks to your timely preparations, all the new parts arrived and were replaced. I’m not having any problems to speak of at present,” Harold replied peacefully, standing next to Echika.

Like before, all his injuries were fixed, like they had never been there to begin with. The crack on his cheek was gone, and he was wearing his perfect smile like always.

“You say that, but I haven’t gotten a chance to check up on you myself yet. There’s a lot I’m curious about.”

“Very well. I’ll talk it out with the bureau and come as soon as they let me.”

“Investigator Hieda, help us out with this, would you? Unfortunately, Harold’s something of a workaholic.”

Echika tried to nod as brightly as she could in response to Angus’s joke. Just then, the pre-boarding announcement played. Angus left with the members of the team, looking quite loath to part ways, and disappeared into the check-in area’s doors. Steve’s pod soon followed suit.

Silence settled between the two of them, and the gentle murmuring of noise filling the distance became distinctly audible.

“...Let’s head back to Chief Totoki,” Echika murmured, turning around.

Harold silently followed her, a step behind. They weren’t arguing exactly, but there was a tense air between them. Echika glanced at the flexible screen in the lounge, which was showing the local news. A female reporter was speaking about an “accident” on Farasha Island in great detail.

*“This incident, which involved roughly five thousand people, is said to have been caused by an error in what is called Project EGO, a research system that was being used by the entire island. However, the Electrocime Investigations Bureau is refusing to disclose any further details. On their official social media accounts, Your Forma developer Rig City stated that it was caused by a virus that took advantage of a back door and that they are preparing to roll out a system update that will address this vulnerability...”*

If only they had gotten proof about the thought manipulation system—then things could have ended differently. Echika gritted her teeth in frustration. As they left the lounge and made their way to the roundabout, the noise around them gradually picked up, but that didn't make the silence any easier to bear. If anything, it was getting intolerable. Plus, it felt like Harold had been staring a hole into her back this entire time.

"Hmm." They would have to talk about work. "Aide Lucraft, about Paul Lloyd, the developer of TOSTI's programming language. Did you read the documents Chief Totoki shared with us?"

"Just last night, in fact," Harold replied, with a dispassionate voice. "It's a pity they didn't discover any evidence of data being stored in his residence... But more importantly, the way he passed away is quite suspicious."

"It looks like it was omitted from his personal data through some slipup."

Echika opened the document Totoki had sent her, an electronic newspaper article concerning Paul Samuel Lloyd's death. It was from an issue of a reputable English newspaper from five years ago—January 21, 2019. A section of the local news column detailed a murder case:

**"A stabbing took place early on the morning of the twenty-first in a house in southeastern Friston. The victims were the Drapers, the occupants of the home, who a home nurse found dead in their bedroom. Based on the prints discovered on the murder weapon, the killer was identified as Paul Samuel Lloyd, a doctor of engineering, who was found dead by suicide in the same room. A local police inspection detected large amounts of alcohol in the suspect's remains. It is believed he stormed into the victims' home in an intoxicated state. There was no acquaintance between the killer and the victims—"**

The name Friston was fresh in Echika's memory. It was the town Alan Jack Lascelles, the man at the center of this case, made his residence in. Echika and Harold had visited the place that summer. But most suspicious of all was the fact that the photo of the victims' house in the article *looked identical to Lascelles's home*.

"That said, Lascelles bought that home when it was already old and

abandoned. He must have bought it when it was put on the market after the murder.” Echika recalled the cold, reserved attitude the locals had adopted when she and Harold questioned them about him. “I guess the neighbors knew about that, which is why they wouldn’t talk.”

“Two incidents taking place in the same house would have no doubt come across as quite eerie. I can see why they wouldn’t want anything to do with the place,” Harold replied, as indifferent as before. “But to think not just Lascelles but even the house itself had this kind of history... It really was a blind spot.”

Looking back on it now, it did seem unnatural that the bedroom walls had been painted over. At the time, Echika assumed it was to cover up graffiti or something of the sort, but now she realized that the people responsible for the property must have repaired it in the aftermath of the Drapers’ murder so they could put it up for sale.

However.

“It can’t be a coincidence that Lloyd, who developed TOSTI’s programming language, lived in the same house that Lascelles ended up buying.”

“Yes. It’s too good to be true.”

Of course, they knew far too little at the moment to narrow things down to a concrete connection, but even so—this wasn’t a fact they could disregard.

“Lascelles was definitely involved with Paul Lloyd somehow. If we look into Lloyd, we might be able to find a connection.”

One point Echika was intent on keeping firmly in mind was that Lloyd was involved in the founding of Farasha Island. If Yunus was to be believed, Lloyd was the one who’d brought up the city’s development to different parties; he’d been a key player in gathering investors. And needless to say, the same place Lloyd sought investors for had wound up being a testing ground for the thought manipulation system.

In other words...

“Lloyd was probably related to ‘the Alliance.’”

Everything was starting to click into place. Their investigation was

undoubtedly heading in the right direction.

Before long, they left the airport terminal. Despite the early morning, a warm breeze was already blowing, playing with Echika's bangs. The roundabout was full of taxis, their roofs gleaming under the faint morning sunlight. She stopped in her tracks, and Harold stood beside her.

"But even if we're going to pursue the Alliance, we can't accept Talbot's testimony in his *current state*. I can only hope that his accomplices don't slip away while we look through the investors one by one."

The Amicus turned his gaze to Echika. It felt like his stare was boring into her, and she wasn't imagining it. She looked away.

"Even so...all we can do is keep plugging away at the investigation."

Soon after the incident, Talbot, still unconscious, was brought to a Dubai hospital, where he was treated. He had a cracked cheekbone and a concussion, but he was in no mortal danger and regained consciousness the next day. But while he was physically sound, he was in a stupor, effectively becoming a husk that didn't speak or react to anything. The doctors could only surmise that the reason for this was emotional.

But Echika knew the truth. Talbot was in the exact same state as Aidan Farman. The man, on whom the RF Models' modeling was based, had also lost his sense of self after Professor Lexie's Mnemosyne modifying HSB was used on him. Even in the interrogation room, he wouldn't testify a word and remained silent during court, leaving everyone involved at a loss.

Echika had suspected that the Mnemosyne modifying HSB had caused Farman's condition, but she was still shocked to see Talbot exhibit the same symptoms. She'd used the HSB on him in the heat of the moment, and the possibility that he would be reduced to a stupor never occurred to her.

She thought it would simply wipe his Mnemosynes; that would have been enough. But the stick had actually done something much more sinister.

Like Harold said, trying to get the truth out of Talbot would be difficult. And Echika couldn't tell if that was a good thing or not. But there was one thing she had to acknowledge, no matter what:

She'd effectively reduced someone's life to dust.

"I don't know what Professor Lexie told you when she gave you that HSB. But you should understand that she lacks a sense of morals." Harold's tone was all too frigid. "I have to say this, and I will be clear about it: You made the wrong choice."

He'd practically thrust his assessment at her. Echika took a deep breath, trying to hide the fact that hearing this nearly drove her to tears. Even after returning from the repair shop, Harold was still treating her like he had in the central control room. Unlike the vague formality he'd shown beforehand, his attitude toward her contained a much sharper, clearer sort of coldness. She understood this, deep down, but had spent the last few days trying not to think about it.

But the time had come to face it, no matter how frightening it was.

"...I know I made a mistake." She wanted to come across as stouthearted as she could. "But I did what I did to protect both you and me. Once things got to that point, what other choice did I—?"

"Yes, I'm responsible for this, too. I broke my promise and picked up the gun."

"I never said that. You had no choice but to do that, just like I had no choice but to do what I did."

"Yes, I'd imagine. And that's why..." Harold trailed off there, before his words left his lips again, like a dam had broken. "Like I said the other day, your fixation with me is abnormal. Why would you go that far?"

"Because..." She licked her chapped bottom lip. "You saved me first."

"But I didn't put my innocence at risk to save you."

"There are other reasons, too. Like, you're my friend—"

"This is the second time I say this: No human would take the blame for an Amicus ex Machina."

"You're more than just a machine."

"Are you trying to change the topic?"

"No. To start with..." The more she spoke, the farther Harold seemed to

recede from her. “That was the best plan we had. I thought you got that.”

“I do get that. It was what we needed to do to hide our crimes.”

“Then why...?”

But Echika fell silent there. Harold looked at her straight on, and she became speechless. His lakelike eyes were dark and brooding, like they harbored raindrops carrying the frozen chill of winter. The peace he had finally been able to regain in that basement had been completely washed away, nowhere to be found.

Absolutely...nowhere to be found.

And that fact dug into Echika’s heart, leaving a deep hole in its wake. When did he get like this? Why hadn’t she looked at him more closely and noticed until now? No, she’d been looking at him before, but she never realized it. She’d completely failed to grasp just how deep the fissure between them was becoming.

Her actions had agonized him more than she realized. Only now, so late—far too late into the game—was that clear to her.

Harold furrowed his brow.

“...For the life of me, I just can’t understand how you feel, Echika.”

And that was probably what scared him the most.

She had to speak back before his words completely petered out. She had to meet him in turn. But Echika couldn’t form a single word. The back of her throat grew hot as she was forced to face the emotions she’d been trying to avoid so far. She had to swallow this breath, which she wasn’t sure if she was breathing in or out.

Why was she fixated on Harold? Why did she want to protect him so badly?

*No.*

Something conceited and eerie was surging up in her, and she couldn’t keep it down.

*“It might be a bit different from what humans feel, but we’re capable of love.”*



How many times had she come face-to-face with how “a bit different” it was by now? He was forever in a small, doorless room. And though she did realize this, every now and then, he seemed so human. It always confused her. And before she knew it, the moment came when she started treating him like a young human man.

This was just proof that she could only ever see things in human terms. Even now, she had failed to understand him on a basic level and made light of the fissure between them.

So if she were to harbor these feelings without ever overcoming the gulf between them...

If she were to keep feeling this way, while still being aware that she did not understand the things she could not understand...

Then all that would be...the most filthy, lonely delusion in the world.

And so...

“...You don’t...have to understand.”

She whispered this, the words crumbling to dust the moment they left her lips. They never hit the warm ground, simply disappearing without a trace as soon as they were spoken.

*“But...you’re the first person I’ve ever wanted to understand.”*

*“I’ll do my best to grow closer to you, Investigator.”*

She was losing the promise they had made that day. Harold’s eyes were fixed on her, unstirring. She could feel his gaze tracing over her, trying to find something in her expression, in her contours—and then he silently looked away. That gesture alone was enough to fill her heart with pain, like someone had put it in an iron-grip.

“If that’s the case...I don’t think I can get along with you anymore.”

She couldn’t remember what color the lakes were when they last looked upon

her.

Harold walked off alone, moving away from her. He got into a taxi and didn't look back. Only when she heard its doors close did Echika finally move her head. The car slowly drove off, sailing away from her without a second thought. Its form grew smaller and more distant, before melting into the scenery and disappearing completely.

Everything she'd built up so far had just fallen apart with a single word. It shouldn't have been this way, but with this, he wouldn't have to suffer anymore. More than anything, she couldn't ignore the way she felt, so she believed she'd chosen the only words possible. And despite that...

Echika felt oddly dizzy and slowly squatted where she stood. She curled her back, and all the noise spilled over her like scattered candies. Eventually, she couldn't stand it anymore. A single warm droplet slid down her face and landed on her shoe.

It glinted faintly in the morning glow—like the transparent surface of a lost lake.

## *Afterword*

In this volume, both the story and Echika's relationship enter a new phase. As I penned this volume, I wrote it with the intent of making it "the second version of Volume 1," but it ended up setting the stage for things to come. Do forgive me for that. In addition, I tried to set up parallels to previous volumes. I hope you enjoy it.

I'd like to thank my editor, Yoshida. The many pieces of wonderful and apt advice you gave me were quite helpful. You always support me as I fumble through the writing process, and I hope you keep helping me going forward.

To the illustrator, Tsubata Nozaki: Echika was always dressed in black up to Volume 4, so I apologize for the recklessness with which I had her change into something new this time. Thank you for drawing that wonderful dress!

To the manga-ka, Yoshinori Kisaragi: I'm always grateful when I see how you make all the scenes so exact, down to the smallest details. My heartfelt thanks.

And of course, the biggest contributors to the series progressing steadily are you, the readers. Thank you! It might take some time, but I hope we can meet here again.

*October 2022, Mareho Kikuishi*

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