

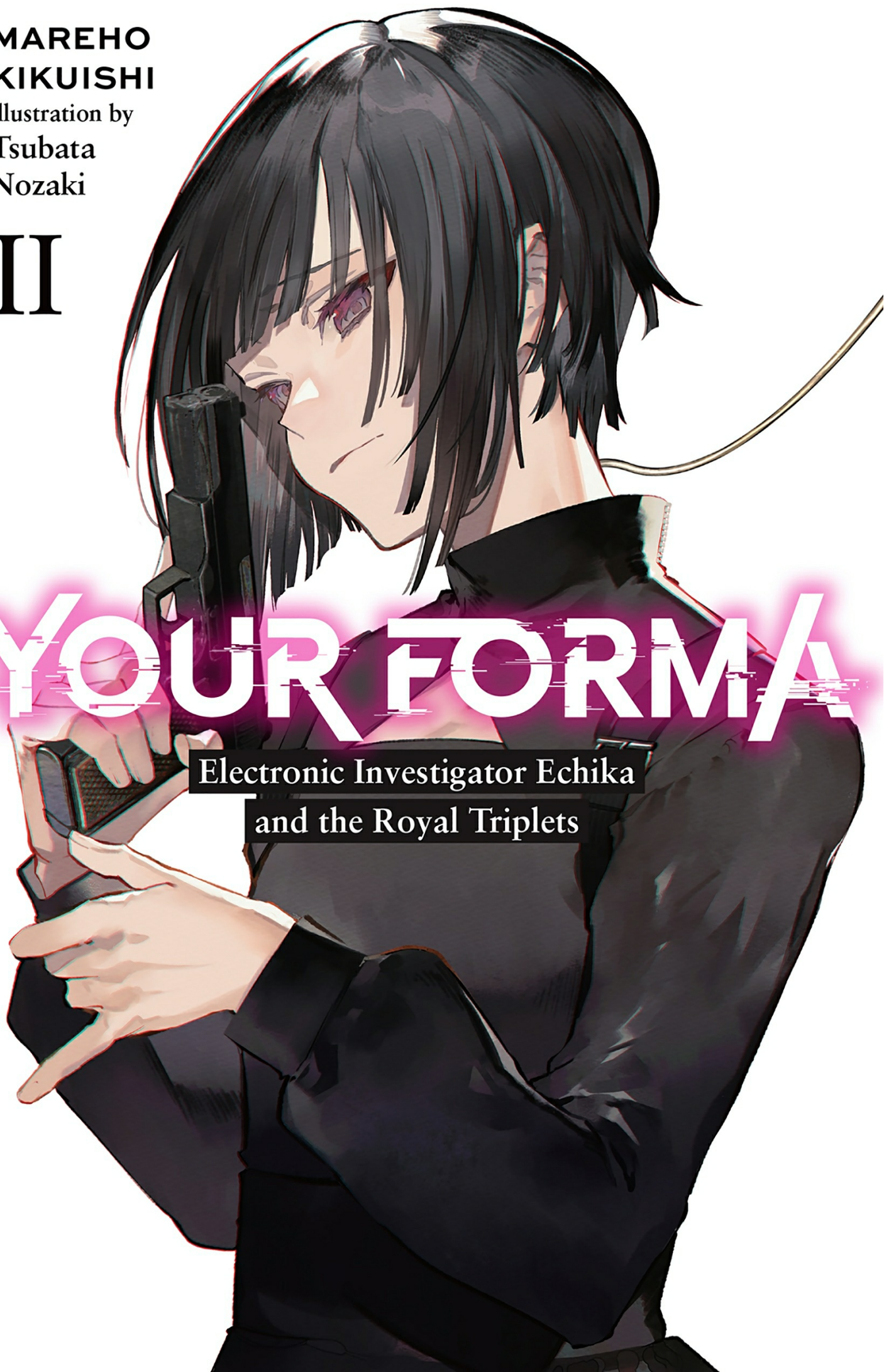
MAREHO
KIKUISHI

Illustration by
Tsubata
Nozaki

II

YOUR FORM/A

Electronic Investigator Echika
and the Royal Triplets



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II

Y O U R F O R M A

Electronic Investigator Echika and the Royal Triplets

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An anime-style illustration of three young men in a forest with falling orange and red leaves. The man on the left is smiling and looking towards the viewer. The man in the center is looking down with a slight smile, his hand near his forehead. The man on the right is looking off to the side with a serious expression. They are all wearing patterned vests over light-colored shirts. The background is a soft-focus forest scene with warm autumn lighting.

Marvin A. Allport

The third RF Model Amicus developed by Novae Robotics Inc. Was pitied for not being as “human” as his siblings. Has been missing for years since he was separated from the royal family. His whereabouts are still unknown.

Harold W. Lucraft

The second RF Model Amicus developed by Novae Robotics Inc. While wandering the streets, he was picked up by Detective Sozon, who nurtured his rare and impressive deductive skills. Serves in the Electrocime Investigations Bureau as the first Amicus electronic investigator aide.

Steve H. Wheatstone

The first RF Model Amicus developed by Novae Robotics Inc. Served as secretary to the consultant for Rig City, a major IT corporation. However, he caused an uproar after attempting to fire a gun at Echika, an unprecedented and inexplicable incident that led to him being shutdown.

Brain Diving

The act of accessing a subject's Your Forma through use of a special cord. Allows the Diver to experience everything in the target's brain, from what they've seen and heard, to even what they've felt. Expected to revolutionize the field of criminal investigation.





MAREHO KIKUISHI

Illustration by
Tsubata Nozaki

II

YOUR FORM/A

Electronic Investigator Echika and the Royal Triplets

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ON
New York

Copyright

YOUR FORMA II

Electronic Investigator Echika and the Royal Triplets MAREHO KIKUISHI

Illustration by

Tsubata Nozaki

Translation by Roman Lempert

Cover art by Tsubata Nozaki

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

YOUR FORMA Vol.2 DENSAKUKAN ECHIKA TO JOO NO MITSUGO

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Edited by Dengeki Bunko

First published in Japan in 2021 by KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo.

English translation rights arranged with KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo, through TUTTLE-MORI AGENCY, INC., Tokyo.

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First Yen On Edition: October 2022

Edited by Yen On Editorial: Maya Deutsch Designed by Yen Press Design: Andy Swist Yen On is an imprint of Yen Press, LLC.

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Names: Kikuishi, Mareho, author. | Nozaki, Tsubata, illustrator.

Title: Your Forma : Electronic Investigator Echika and the Royal Triplets Mareho Kikuishi ; illustration by Tsubata Nozaki.

Other titles: Your forma. English Description: First Yen On edition. | New York : Yen On, 2022.

Identifiers: LCCN 2022010527 | ISBN 9781975339654 (v. 1 ; trade paperback) | ISBN 9781975343422 (v. 2 ; trade paperback) Subjects: LCGFT: Science fiction. | Light novels.

Classification: LCC PL872.5.I38 Y6813 2022 | DDC 895.63/6—dc23/eng/20220311

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2022010527>

ISBNs: 978-1-97534342-2 (paperback) 978-1-9753-4343-9 (ebook)

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Electronic Investigator Echika and the Royal Triplets

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Yen Newsletter

Thursday, February 8, 2024

DEDICATED TO THE PEOPLE OF THE STATES.

GLOBAL SENSATION OF THE DAY

**Amicus that was presented to the Royal Family shoots
at a human?! The truth and madness of the greatest AI
revolutionary of our generation!**

ROYAL AMICUS FIRED AT HUMAN OFFICER!



◀ Mr. Steve Wheatstone, who served as Elias Taylor's right hand for years (Image courtesy of Rig City)

The Rig City incident is far from over. As the corporation faces complaints and lawsuits coming in from victims of the sensory crime, the value of their stock has plummeted to unprecedented lows. In the midst of these issues, Rig City's employees have been further inconvenienced by the existence of an Amicus adopted by the mad genius, Elias Taylor. This Amicus, who was once given as a tribute to Her Majesty the Queen and worked as Taylor's right hand for years, is in fact a rare "Royal Family" Model. Influenced by his owner's madness, he crossed the line drawn by his Laws of Respect...

**CONTINUE
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OFFICIAL WEBSITE!**



YOUR FORMA

Prologue

Secret



Prologue

Secret

He was, in all likelihood, the first of his brothers to realize the secret.

Occasionally, Harold would replay a nostalgic sequence from his memory. Like this one, a scene of Windsor Castle during autumn.

Visiting hours were over for the day, and the tourists had all departed. He took in the garden view as silence once again settled over the place, and the maple shades of autumn dusk washed over it, the vividness of the light almost suffocating. Harold liked it here. He'd often sit on one of the benches, not doing anything in particular. Just watching.

That day, things were slightly different. An autumn butterfly settled on his shoulder. The color of its wings was quite striking. He reached out to the insect, hoping it would rest on his finger. He'd been compelled to do this only because his system had determined it was the "human" thing to do.

"I'll get that off you."

Before Harold could touch it, a hand suddenly came into view and snatched the butterfly. Quite literally *grabbed* it. The man, who'd seemingly appeared out of nowhere, had the same face and smile as Harold.

His features were meticulously constructed, granting him an appearance that humans would find most handsome. The golden locks hanging over his forehead imbued him with a somewhat youthful impression, and he had a faint mole near his lips.

Marvin Adams Allport. The final, youngest brother of the RF Model Triplets.

"Marvin." Harold swallowed his artificial breath. "It might die if you do that."

“Huh? Oh...”

Marvin opened his clenched fingers, and indeed, clinging to his fingers were the tragic remains of the butterfly. Its brilliant wings had lost their lustrous color, and in their place were nothing but black scales and crushed innards.

“Sorry,” Marvin said, seeming baffled. “I suppose I chose the wrong course of action.”

“Weren’t you taught to cherish living things? That’s what humans do,” Harold told him.

“That’s what humans do...,” Marvin parroted mechanically, walking over to a nearby faucet.

As Marvin washed his hands like a child, Harold watched him from behind and sighed. Every so often, his younger brother didn’t act “human” at all.

“Her Majesty should be back this weekend,” Harold heard someone say from behind. It was Steve, leaning against a tree with an open book in his hands. “Maybe we should have the professor tune Marvin before she does.”

“She’s tuned him plenty of times already,” Harold replied. “But she seems to believe that he’s fine the way he is.”

“I’m afraid the professor is mistaken. Amicus must act ‘human.’ ” Steve leafed through his book with a finger. “From my perspective, he seems...poorly made.”

“Harold! Steve!” Marvin, who had finished washing his hands, hurried over to them.

This time, he had not a butterfly but a flower clenched in his hand. He happily and proudly waved the plant, scattered petals and all, at Harold, laughing aloud for some reason.

Yes, their younger brother was poorly made. But Harold didn’t dislike him.

Maybe he was remembering this because he’d run into Steve for the first time in a long while. An image of his brother, holding up a pistol and firing at Echika’s holo-model, filled his mind.

Just then, however, his system informed him that the maintenance process was complete.

“Harold.”

That call made him open his eyes within the maintenance pod. The hatch soon opened, and he saw a young, familiar woman peering down at him. Her silver-rimmed glasses suited her displeased expression. Her hair, a shade of brown so dark it was almost black, flowed messily down her slender back. She hadn't bothered combing it this morning, either.

Professor Lexie Willow Carter. The robot development engineer who'd single-handedly written the RF Models' system code. One could call her Harold's—and his siblings'—mother.

“I have the results of your diagnostic,” Professor Carter said. “Steve's utility function system seems to have broken down, but there are no issues with you. No signs of the code being falsified, either... Well, that should do for the verbal statement.”

“Meaning?”

“Your Laws of Respect are functioning normally. Congratulations,” Professor Carter said with an utterly uncelebratory tone as she took off her lab coat. She then went over to her desk, her worn sneakers squeaking with each step, and took a seat.

They were in the main building of Novae Robotics Inc. in London. The room they were occupying, the first technology ward's Special Development Department maintenance area, was full of cold air that seemed to match the aura of the devices cluttering it. The linoleum floor was practically sterile, without a single speck of dust.

“You've proved your son is functioning normally, Professor, so why the long face?” Harold asked.

“Why should I be pleased with confirming the obvious?” Professor Carter responded in a bored tone as she operated the tablet displaying his diagnostic results. “To begin with, you were a star player in solving the sensory crime.

Unlike with Steve, no one would think there's anything wrong with you."

A month had passed since Harold and Echika had solved their last case. While Elias Taylor had been placed under arrest, the issue of Steve, whose involvement was still being kept under wraps, remained. Not only had he aided and abetted Taylor, but he'd also fired a gun at a human. Or rather, at Echika's holo-model. But Steve had been convinced he was shooting the woman herself.

After this all transpired, Harold's brother was promptly placed in Novae Robotics Inc.'s custody, where Professor Carter's diagnostic identified a major error in Steve's utility function system, a very important module that governed an Amicus's values.

"Was Elias Taylor's modification of his system the 'root cause' behind his malfunction?" Harold asked.

"That's the simplest, most obvious explanation, but Angus and the others aren't convinced," Professor Carter said. "RF Model code is extremely complicated, so even though Taylor was a genius, he shouldn't have known enough about it to drive Steve's system into producing an error... That's their stance on it, anyway."

"I see."

"So they're still conducting an investigation into the cause."

Either way, the fact remained that publicly speaking, Steve had suffered a breakdown, so as a fellow RF Model, Harold was forced to go through this maintenance. But thankfully, the diagnostic concluded he was operating without issue.

"Still." Professor Carter ran a finger over her lips. "This is all just performance. A charade to satisfy the top brass and the ethics committee... Everyone does love their pretense."

"Pretense is important," Harold said.

"I know. But frankly, I don't think Steve was malfunctioning, either."

She was getting stubborn, so Harold prepared to leave the pod without a word. He unplugged the cables connected to his cervical and lumbar vertebrae

and closed the diagnosis ports with his artificial skin.

“If that’s the case, then what happened to Brother Steve?”

“I’m keeping him shut down until I can figure out the reason. He’s been in the analysis pod for a long time now.”

Harold got out of his pod, took off his maintenance gown, and put on the sweater sitting on the wagon.

“I saw the people gossiping about it online,” he said.

“Yes, I’ve got the source right here. Take a look,” Professor Carter said, taking a tabloid from the drawer of her desk and tossing it to Harold.

The large, bombastic letters of its headline popped into his field of vision immediately.

Royal Amicus fired at human officer!

Its contents could be summed up as such:

“An RF Model Amicus named Steve, in the possession of Taylor, a prime suspect for a sensory crime, resisted during the time of arrest and shot one of the investigators dead.”

Harold had seen bits and pieces of the article online, but each time he read through it, he grew utterly disgusted.

“They’re sensationalizing the story too much,” he said. “He shot at a holo-model, and no one died.”

“That’s gossip rags for you.” Professor Carter shrugged. “Sensationalism is to articles as clotted cream is to scones. The more you smear, the more enticing it becomes.”

“You say that, but you *only* eat the clotted cream,” Harold said, putting away the tabloid. “The sensory crime’s details are heavily classified by Interpol. Anyone involved in the leak should face consequences.”

“Repercussions were had, you can be sure of that. Apparently, it was some luddite police investigator who blabbed,” Professor Carter said, drawing a horizontal line over her neck to illustrate. “The fire got put out well enough. Novae and the IAEC formally denied the article as groundless speculation. Someone must have put pressure on the tabloid, too, because they published another article to correct the first one.”

“Still, there’s no denying the report has had an influence on how they’re dealing with Steve.” Harold frowned.

“I suppose... But even after we find the source of his malfunction and submit a final report explaining it, I doubt they’ll let him leave the premises of the main building.”

Harold fell silent and tightened his belt. Some part of him did feel bad for Steve, but Amicus were subject to the laws of human society. And breaking the rules got you punished. His brother must not have understood that humans see Amicus as threats when they go beyond being tools.

Or maybe he’d crossed that boundary knowing that full well.

“Harold,” Professor Carter suddenly said to him. “Would you do better?”

“...What are you talking about?”

“Or maybe he was just annoyed with me.” Professor Carter waved her long legs. “Before I put him in the analysis pod, Steve asked, ‘Why did you make me this way?’ I think he was mad at me.”

Harold couldn’t help but knit his brows.

“I’m sure hearing that didn’t particularly bother you.” He sighed.

“Perish the thought. It tore at my heartstrings. You wouldn’t even believe how much. I actually slept like a baby the whole night.” Professor Carter massaged her nails. “You see, watching you mature makes me happy. You’re fascinating to observe. And while I do feel bad for Steve...everyone veers off the right path during adolescence.”

“We don’t experience adolescence.”

“The things you say are off sometimes.”

You're the one who made me that way, Harold thought to say, before swallowing the words.

The professor had put all her love and affection into the RF Models, but Harold imagined those emotions were quite unlike what a human mother felt toward her children. They were probably closer to how researchers felt toward a lab rat they were observing.

Though she did love them, there was no warmth or affection coming from the other side of the pane of glass.

"By the way..." Harold changed the subject. "Did you find Marvin? I heard he needs to go through maintenance like me."

"Sadly, there are no clues on that front. His locational data has been cut off this whole time, so we have to search for him on foot. Plus, we can only devote so many employees to the search." Professor Carter shrugged. "Of course, the police have been investigating his whereabouts ever since that black market auction. But as you know, they haven't produced any results in years... Though now they have a reason to actually put their backs into it."

"I see..."

Marvin had last been seen six years ago, when Harold left the royal family. The three of them were stolen, sold off in a black-market auction, and scattered across the globe. Ever since, Harold hadn't known where his younger brother was. Steve was taken as far as California, so it was very likely Marvin wasn't in England. Finding him would be a tall order.

"For all we know, he could be dead already," Professor Carter whispered. "Of course, I'd be happy to find out that he's alive. But if we did find him, he would be put through the same treatment as Steve. Marvin doesn't have the bureau's backing like you do..."

It sounded like she was speaking more to herself than she was to him. Either way, Harold's maintenance was complete for the time being. Daria was waiting for him in the lounge, so he wanted to get dressed as quickly as possible. He put on his coat.

“Speaking of the bureau, how’s work going? Still a police investigator?” Professor Carter asked, descending the fan-shaped staircase leading from the second floor to the entrance hall, after they exited the first technology ward.

The circular lobby was an atrium that stretched all the way up to the top of the building. A spiral-shaped monument was hanging from above.

“With your diagnostic, I should be allowed to return to work,” Harold said. “But you knew that.”

“Of course I did. I didn’t mean it like that. I was asking out of interest, see?” Professor Carter tapped her temple. “That genius Diver resigned, right? The cute girl who hates machines...?”

“You mean Investigator Hieda?”

“Yes, her. Your partner resigned, but you’re still working as a Belayer?”

“My computation capabilities exceed those of most electronic investigators, so fundamentally speaking, I don’t get to pick my partners. I’m currently affiliated with the Saint Petersburg branch, so I’ll probably end up working with another electronic investigator there.”

The walls of the entrance hall were covered with flexible screens, on which the faces of countless people appeared and disappeared. They’d all donated their appearance data to Novae Robotics Inc., regardless of race, gender, or age.

Since Novae Robotics Inc. built its Amicus to appear as human as possible, the company constructed their features by mixing together the appearances of real, living people. To thank and honor the people who’d provided their likenesses, Novae Robotics Inc. displayed their faces here, for all to see.

Such was the painstaking effort they put into making the fake seem genuine.

“So when will Investigator Hieda be making her return?” Professor Carter asked.

Harold’s hands froze as he put his scarf around his neck. How did she know?

“I’m well aware that you’re still looking for Detective Sozon’s killer.” Professor Carter regarded his surprise with a satisfied smile. “And Investigator Hieda is

your shortcut for solving that case. Besides, you wouldn't stoop to working with some other third-rate Diver if you didn't know Investigator Hieda was going to go back to work. You'd find another way to go about it instead."

Harold resisted the urge to sigh. As the closest thing he had to a mother, Professor Carter had a full grasp on his personality and way of doing things. Still, it wasn't pleasant being read like an open book—that thought crossed his mind as he remained blind to the fact that he was doing much the same to other people on a daily basis.

"Investigator Hieda never said she'd be coming back," Harold replied.

"But you set things up so she would, didn't you?"

"There's no telling how the chips will fall yet."

"Wow, how unusual. You not knowing something, that is."

Harold found himself replaying his memory of Echika Hieda. Her short hair, wavering in the winds of Saint Petersburg. Her slanted eyes that seemed to exude a constant harshness. A full black outfit that made her resemble some kind of overgrown raven.

And...

"So, um, thank you...Harold."

"She..." It took him a while to come up with the answer. He recalled the restless feeling those words had given him. "She's different from other humans. She tends to act in ways my calculations can't predict."

"That's good. It's fascinating."

"...What do you mean?"

"People need to have someone in their lives who acts in ways that surprise them... I had a friend like that, too, once," Professor Carter whispered, her expression emotional and oddly removed from her usual flippant attitude.

But before she could elaborate on it, the professor caught sight of Daria walking over to them from the lounge.

"Introduce me to Investigator Hieda someday. She sounds interesting."

I told you, I'm not sure she's coming back.

And so Harold bade Professor Carter farewell.

The genius Diver they spoke of returned to her position a few months later, during spring.

YOUR FORMA

Chapter 1

Plucked Petals



Chapter 1

Plucked Petals

1

It was like she'd just walked into a nightmare.

At that very moment, Echika was sitting in one of Scotland Yard's dark interrogation rooms. A one-way mirror stood before her, through which she could see Harold, seated in front of an austere-looking table. The expression on his fair face was so calm and collected that he almost came across as cold.

"I had a look at the list of victims. They're all people you see during your regular maintenance," said the female detective sitting opposite him as she opened the case files on her tablet.

Why?

Echika bounced her feet. Her mind felt muddled.

Why did this happen?



One day earlier, in Saint Petersburg...

It was late April, and the ice of the Neva River had all but melted away. But the remnants of winter were still apparent in the dark, leaden clouds dotting the sky, so one couldn't very well go out without a coat.

<The current congestion rate is 70%. Take your time and enjoy your shopping>

The Your Forma integrated into Echika's brain informed her of the city's conditions. This suture-like invasive augmented reality device, also known as a smart thread, was now an indispensable part of people's day-to-day lives.

Echika was in a department store connected to Gostiny Dvor station, one of the largest in the city. It had everything from daily sundries to Russian souvenirs that you couldn't find online.

The building had been standing since the days of the eighteenth century Russian monarchy, and its interior design was appropriately lavish. Off to her side, Echika heard some chitchat.

"Hmm, purple might be a little too mature-looking..."

"How about the peridot necklace you saw earlier?"

"You think that would work better?"

"It brings out your eyes. It's got the same beautiful shade of green."

"B-beautiful?! N-no, not at all!"

Today, Echika had wanted nothing more than to while away the hours napping at home. She'd once (quite recently, actually) sworn an oath that she would never waste a day off escorting someone else on a sightseeing trip.

And yet here she was, standing in an accessory shop. Not the kind that sold luxury brands, of course, but a reasonably priced place for the general populace. And standing in front of her was Bigga, who was carefully picking out a necklace, and Harold, who was helping her choose.

This was strange. It was a Sunday. Echika should have been lazing around in bed, reading that paperback she'd bought recently.

"Why didn't I turn them down...?" she mumbled, thoughts slipping from her lips.

Bigga had reached out to her that morning. She was in Saint Petersburg on business, so she'd invited Echika to go shopping with her and Harold. Echika could have said no, but instead, she ended up coming along with them to this department store, which appeared to have just about an entire day's off worth of fun things to do.

Ever since resolving the sensory crime, she'd been losing reasons to push people away. Three months had passed since then; Interpol had designated the incident a top-secret case.

The primary suspect, Elias Taylor, was the developer of the Your Forma and a consultant for the multinational technology enterprise Rig City. Society would be greatly affected if the full scope of his motives and offenses went public, so the incident was being kept under wraps.

Likewise, the matter of Steve, the Amicus who'd assisted Taylor, was also currently being handled confidentially. Novae Robotics Inc. was currently inspecting him at its headquarters in London for attacking a human.

According to Harold, he'd been placed into forced shutdown mode. Apparently, some people had floated around the idea that the same should happen to Harold. Since he was the same RF Model as Steve, it was possible he might also go haywire. But he'd also been a major player in cracking the case behind the scenes.

There was a conference between Novae Robotics Inc., the International AI Ethics Committee, and the Electrocime Investigations Bureau, which concluded that they found no abnormalities in Harold and allowed him to continue to serve as an electronic investigator aide. Echika only heard the details from him after the fact.

"All right, I'll go with this," said Bigga, picking up the peridot necklace Harold recommended.

It was adorable and fashioned after a clover. "And I think I'll get this brooch for Lie."

"It's lovely. I'm sure she'll love it," Harold remarked.

"Heh-heh." She gave an innocent smile, but then her eyes met Echika's, and her face tensed up. "H-hmm... Did you decide on anything, Miss Hieda?"

"Huh?" Echika stiffened suddenly.

Unlike before, Bigga wasn't ignoring her today. The two women's shaky relationship had improved somewhat from talking during Bigga's scheduled reports. That was the impression Echika got, at least.

"Here," Bigga said awkwardly. "I told you when we started looking that I'd like for you to pick something, too."

“You did?” Echika had completely missed that. “I’m not really... It wouldn’t suit me.”

“But don’t you feel like you’re missing something?” Bigga asked, pointing her index finger at Echika’s chest, where a silver nitro-case necklace had once rested.

After solving the sensory crime, Echika had let go of Matoi, so naturally, she didn’t have any other accessories to wear. Now the only thing on her chest were the stitches of her sweater. Besides, the necklace had been more of a lucky charm than a fashion statement to her, so she didn’t feel terribly inconvenienced by its absence.

“I’ll find something for you, then!” Bigga said, her expression terribly serious for some reason. “Hmm, let’s see... How about this? I think it’s very Russian-looking.”

She picked up a largish *matryoshka* necklace. It was big and round, and it stared at Echika cheerfully.

“It’s not really to my taste...” Echika mumbled uncomfortably.

“Then how about this?” Bigga picked up something else.

“Huh, what’s this emblem? A Japanese *Kokeshi* doll?”

“This is Snegurochka, it’s completely different! How about this one, with the cat motif? Don’t you think it’s cute?”

“It’s cute, but cats give me a headache because they remind me of my boss.”

“Then how about this? It’s got a technological motif. I think it fits your vibe, Miss Hieda.”

“HSBs, isolation units, holo-browsers, fake information matrices... I’m tired of seeing those at work.”

“Ngh. Then take this one!”

“No, it’s too gaudy!”

“But won’t a gaudier design be more distracting? See?” Bigga held up a necklace.

“Huh?”

“I mean, distracting from how, hmm...gentle your slopes are...,” Bigga said, glancing at Echika’s chest.

“...I’ll pretend I didn’t hear that,” Echika said coolly.

“Investigator, I will also pretend like I didn’t hear that,” Harold chimed in.

“You don’t need to say it, then!”

Correction—maybe her relationship with Bigga hadn’t improved yet.

In the end, Bigga went to the counter by herself to pay. Last time they’d gone on an outing, she’d ignored Echika the whole time, so why was she trying so hard to strike up a conversation now? Either way, it seemed like she’d given up.

But Echika’s relief only lasted a minute.

“I think this would suit you very much.”

A meticulously chiseled hand extended toward her, a classy silver locket sitting on its palm. Harold regarded her with a serene smile. Just like that one Sunday months ago, he was dressed in a more casual outfit and had let his typically waxed blond locks fall over his forehead.

Even though she was used to him by now, she couldn’t help but wince whenever she beheld his perfect, unblemished features.

“You know, I’ve been wondering for a while now.” Echika pushed away the locket he’d extended toward her. “When did you start working here as a clerk Amicus?”

“ ‘I think a simple design would best fit someone as cute as you, miss,’ ” Harold said, putting on his best retail worker impression.

“If you want to change jobs, I’m not stopping you.”

“I’d never,” Harold said, denying the thought altogether. “Not now, when you’ve moved back here for work.”

Right. Two weeks before, Echika had relocated from Lyon, where the Electrocrime Investigations Bureau headquarters was, to Saint Petersburg, where Harold lived. The bureau would have preferred to call him over to France

instead, but Harold couldn't afford to leave Daria, who was family. To meet him halfway, Echika was transferred to the Saint Petersburg branch, where she would continue to receive requests from headquarters.

"How's life here been treating you? Is it easier to live here compared to Lyon?"

"It's an easy place to be, for sure. It's cold even in August, and though the vegetables are cheap, the nutrient jelly is expensive. And with the delivery drones breaking down all the time, I don't feel like ordering groceries."

A pause.

"I'm glad you're enjoying it here," Harold said.

"Aide Lucraft, the way you're staring at me feels mocking."

"My apologies," he said, pushing down his eyelids. "Is there really nothing you like about Saint Petersburg?"

Of course, she couldn't say she hated everything. "...I like my apartment's central heating. And that *marozhina* ice cream. The city's pretty, too."

"That's a relief," he said, his expression mellowing as he returned the locket to the shelf. "Still...do you really not want anything here?"

He meant a necklace.

"You already know what that nitro case meant to me."

"Of course, I understand that... Have you felt lonely since?"

Harold wasn't looking her way, but his unusually gentle tone said everything. Echika hung her head awkwardly.

"...No."

"So you do, sometimes."

"I wish you'd stop reading my heart and start replying to the words coming out of my mouth," she snapped. Though perhaps that wasn't wise of her to say when he'd already seen through her countless times. "Hmm, you're right. I do feel lonely. But...only sometimes. Every now and then."

Little by little, the loneliness of losing Matoi was fading away, and she'd been

flashing back to her father less than she used to. But occasionally, something triggered the memories, and she would feel her heart creak. And whenever anxiety or weakness assailed her, she'd think back to her big sister's face.

But...

"Someday, I think I'll feel good enough to be on my own. And you were the one who found the part of me that could do that," said Echika, her voice naturally growing smaller. "So...you don't have to worry about me."

She'd probably—no, definitely—worded that wrong. All she needed to do was tell him not to worry, but instead, she just had to say it in such an embarrassing manner.

Wait... Is it just me, or is he being too quiet?

"Aide Lucraft?" Echika looked up timidly...only to quickly grow exasperated.

Harold was standing in place, completely paralyzed. Just like that one time, he was staring at her blankly, a grave expression on his face.

"Could you at least blink?"

"Ah... I'm sorry." He opened and shut his eyes a few times, as though he'd just been unpetrified. "You were just so frank that I was too shocked to process your response."

This. This is what I mean.

"I guess you simply can't function unless you pick a fight with me every so often," Echika said bitterly.

"Don't be absurd, that wasn't my intent. It's just..." Harold heaved a heavy, tired sigh. "Could you please worry more about my system?"

"What are you talking about?"

"I'm asking you to stop doing things I can't predict. It causes a drop in my processing power."

"Hmm." As had become the norm, Echika felt awfully stupid for opening up to him. "Oh, right, I heard they proved your Laws of Respect are functioning properly."

To respect humans, obey their orders, and never attack them. Each and every Amicus was bound under the Laws of Respect. And despite that...

“But when will you get rid of your habit of making light of humans, Aide Lucraft?”

“I wasn’t making light of you... Investigator? Why did you freeze up like that?”

“Ah, sorry. Your lies are so clear, they caused a drop in *my* processing power.”

“What an adorable joke. I don’t mind it one bit.”

“That wasn’t a joke. It was sarcasm.”

As they exchanged barbs, Bigga finished paying for her souvenirs and headed back to them.

By the time they arrived at the Pulkovo Airport roundabout, the sun was beginning to peek out from the clouds. The Lada Niva’s deep maroon fuselage shone under the faint sunlight as it merrily pulled over.

“Thank you for escorting me over.” Bigga, who’d had her fill of shopping, gleefully clutched paper bags full of her spoils. “I really had fun today!”

“Me too,” Harold replied. “Do invite me over if you stop by Saint Petersburg again.”

“May I? Because if you say yes, I’ll definitely take you up on that.”

“I’m not being polite here. I genuinely enjoy spending time with you.”

“R-really?” Bigga said, her cheeks turning rosy at once. “...Then, um, I’ll call you next time I’m here.”

She’d gone so red it looked like she might explode. Even after learning that Harold was an Amicus, she couldn’t help but be conscious of him as a man. Romantic relationships between humans and Amicus weren’t unheard of, either, so Bigga wasn’t entirely hopeless on that front... But Echika, who knew Harold’s true nature, had mixed feelings about what he was doing.

“I’d imagine you must be busy, but do take care of yourself,” he said.

“Right. Just when you think Easter’s over, the reindeer start giving birth to their calves,” Bigga said as she shook Harold’s hand. “Don’t push yourself too hard, either, Harold.”

And then she bashfully extended her hand to Echika as well.

“Um... Thank you for coming over on your day off, Miss Hieda.”

“No... Thank you for having me,” Echika answered, grabbing Bigga’s hand just as awkwardly as the other girl had grabbed hers.

Her palm was small and warm. Echika had thought she was getting used to this kind of small talk, but it seemed she still had a way to go.

“Next time we meet, I think you should be the one to decide on our destination,” Bigga said, looking away uncomfortably. “I got the feeling I was the only one having fun today.”

“Huh?”

“I mean, last time I said some awful things to you, so... Never mind, forget I said that. Anyway, what I’m trying to say is, let’s hang out again sometime!”

Bigga shook off Echika’s hand like she was trying to escape the conversation, waved gently, and ran off. As she watched her small figure grow distant, it finally dawned on Echika.

Did Bigga invite me today to make up for the last time we hung out?

Maybe that was her way of apologizing.

“I think you two might become friends in the future.”

Those words pulled Echika out of her thoughts. Harold was gazing at her, as though he was touched by the sight. Right. To him, it must have been clear as day why Bigga had asked Echika to come along. Maybe she was dense to this sort of thing, since she’d insisted upon making her way in the world by herself up until now.

But Echika was honestly happy to know that Bigga had tried to reach out to her. She couldn’t exactly put it into words, but it made her heart feel...warm. Fuzzy. Like she’d made a small step forward.

I should make an effort to get closer with her the next time we meet, Echika thought.

“Could you drop me off when we get back to town, Aide Lucraft? Any station will do.”

“I don’t mind driving you home,” Harold replied. “I can even help you unpack if you’d like.”

“...How did you realize I’m not done with that?” Echika asked, startled.

“Knowing you, I bet you wouldn’t unpack anything that isn’t essential for your day-to-day life until you absolutely needed it. Otherwise, you’d leave it as is.”

“I can do it myself, and I don’t want you in my house. The moment you see it, my privacy will be up in smoke.”

“I’m hurt. Even I can’t learn everything about someone just from glancing at their room. At most, I’d be able to surmise how they were raised, what their family structure is like, and how they approach interpersonal relationships.”

“Forget destroying my privacy—you’ll wipe it out of existence.”

“I’m sorry, but I don’t quite understand what you’re saying.”

“Stop dropping your IQ to cleaning robot levels whenever it’s convenient for you.”

Just then, a familiar siren tore through the tumult of the streets in approach. Echika and Harold both turned around to find an investigation vehicle sliding into the roundabout, its lights flashing. Echika scanned the Cyrillic characters printed on the car, and her *Your Forma* translated them for her a moment later. The vehicle belonged to Interpol’s National Central Bureau.

“What’s going on? Some kind of incident?” Echika asked.

“I don’t know. I wasn’t contacted about this...” Harold shook his head.

Two police investigators soon got out of the car. Their personal data popped up into Echika’s field of view at once—they were affiliated with Interpol, specifically in the department charged with securing and apprehending suspects on an international level.

Rather than turn toward the airport, the two officers trained their gazes on Echika and Harold.

“Are you electronic investigator aide Harold Lucraft?” one of them asked.

“Yes, I’m Harold Lucraft...”

What is this?

Echika glanced from Harold to the investigators, confused. The Amicus didn’t seem to have much of a grasp on the situation, either.

“It’s a good thing we found you.” One of the investigators suddenly took out a tablet and held its screen up for Harold to see. “Scotland Yard has put out a warrant for you to accompany us. Should you refuse, you will officially be recognized as a suspect in an assault case. What’s it going to be?”

Echika turned to Harold in surprise.

What in the world is going on?

2

New Scotland Yard stared down solemnly at the Thames. Looking out the window, Echika could see the London Eye and the Sea Life London Aquarium on the other side of the river. Red double-decker buses drove along the road below, and with Westminster Bridge being a stone’s throw away, there was a lot of tourist traffic. And of course, with so many sightseers about, MR ads were playing nonstop.

But the interrogation room was completely removed from the hubbub, of course. The heavy, leaden silence was suffocating. Echika stood in front of the one-way mirror, her arms crossed, and snuck a glance at the man standing next to her, one Detective Brown.

He was in his thirties or so and had the hallmark facial features of an Englishman. The personal data pop-up on her Your Forma told Echika he held the rank of assistant inspector.

He was heading an investigation into a series of assaults that Harold had purportedly committed.

“Haven’t you gotten enough?” Echika asked as calmly as she could. “You’ve seen Harold’s memory, Detective Brown. He has an alibi for every single incident.”

“Amicus memories aren’t like Mnemosynes; they can be doctored easily. His records aren’t reliable proof. Especially if he attacked people.”

“His Laws of Respect are operating normally. Novae had him go through diagnostics to make sure they were in order just a couple of months ago.”

“That’s all well and good, but he matches the description given in the victim testimonials.”

The RF Model serial assaults. That’s what Scotland Yard had dubbed the recent string of incidents.

The first attack had taken place seven days prior. An engineer working at Novae Robotics Inc. was accosted on their way home. They were beaten, resulting in minor injuries. The following day, another engineer was attacked, this time with a blunt weapon. They suffered bone fractures and were hospitalized. Then a third victim was slashed with a knife, and a fourth one was stabbed deep in the leg.

It was clear that the crimes were gradually escalating in intensity.

There were two points of commonality among the incidents.

1. The victims all worked in a special development department dedicated to tuning the RF Models.
2. Each had testified that the perpetrator resembled “an RF Model” in appearance.

As such, Scotland Yard had Interpol demand that Harold cooperate with the investigation, leading to Interpol officers arriving at Pulkovo Airport to pick him up.

But as far as Echika could tell, this case was completely incomprehensible. It all felt like some kind of hoax, or a nightmare she might wake up from.

“I’ve been working with Aide Lucraft every day for the past week. There’s no way he could have committed this crime.”

But Brown was adamant. “A direct flight from Saint Petersburg to London would only take four hours. He could have finished, gone to London after work, and been back before the next morning.”

“No, he couldn’t. And even if he could, he’s an Amicus, so he can’t board a plane on his own.”

“It’s perfectly possible that he has a human accomplice, though. He could be involved in a conspiracy, or maybe he’s running amok on his own... Those are two possibilities we’re considering at the moment.”

Your possibilities don’t matter, Echika thought, rubbing her temples out of exhaustion.

“Investigating an Amicus is absurd to begin with. If you find out that he’s operating properly, wouldn’t asking Novae to have him checked be the first thing you should do?”

“Investigator Hieda, it’s clear to me that you’re unaware of circumstances here in England,” Brown said insultingly. “This is the birthplace of the Amicus. Their human rights are guaranteed in this country.”

England was a textbook example of an Amicus sympathizer country. Here, Amicus were respected like humans, cherished like family members, and had guaranteed human rights. These principles had been inscribed into the English legal system with the passage of the Machine Protection Act.

Many Englishmen went as far as to hold funerals for Amicus. Even a perfectly replaceable mass-produced model was seen as a totally unique and irreplaceable presence, like a human being.

But to think that this line of reasoning had also led to this unjust questioning—it was absurd.

Their human rights are guaranteed? Nonsense.

Brown carried on. "So when Amicus cause trouble, we take them into questioning and interview them like humans. That's common sense round these parts. Of course...we've only ever done this with vagrant Amicus who were falsely accused of theft. This is our first time questioning one over an assault charge."

On the other side of the one-way mirror, Harold was sitting across from Brown's partner, a female detective. He was staring calmly at a tablet she'd handed him, reading the document on the device.

"I see you remember the people on the victim list. You met each and every one of them during your regular maintenance... Do you bear any grudges toward the engineers who work on you?"

"Like I've already said, it wasn't me. I've given you access to my memories earlier. Won't you believe what you saw there?"

"Can't you modify that data to suit your needs?"

Beside Echika, Detective Brown exhaled through his nose.

"Amicus should be safe, since they're bound by the Laws of Respect, but..."

"Then that's all the more reason to have Novae handle him. I think someone's trying to frame Aide Lucraft," Echika said, her tone getting more and more annoyed. "Just like humans need lawyers, Amicus need engineers to prove they're operating normally."

"We're considering that, of course. But he's a customized model from Novae. And if the recent news is to be believed, we can't trust their technicians, either."

"What news?" Echika furrowed her brows, confused.

Just then, the female detective showed Harold a newspaper. It was an old-style tabloid lined with English characters. These kinds of papers were still deeply ingrained in British society.

"Do you recognize this article, Harold? It's a pretty famous tabloid where you're from."

Royal Amicus fired at human officer!

The exceptionally ugly headline caught Echika's eye.

What? Is this talking about Steve?

It was then that she recalled something. One of the people involved with the electrocrime investigation had sold off top secret information about Steve's malfunction to the press. The disciplinary committee dismissed him from his post when he was found out, of course. But Echika wasn't aware that he'd passed it off to a London newspaper.

This wasn't news, though. It was gossip, yellow journalism at best.

"This article details how an RF Model attacked a human a few months back," the detective said. "Steve cooperated with Elias Taylor, the culprit behind that famous sensory crime case."

"That's a shame," Harold said.

"Yes, it's a very unfortunate story."

"No, that's not what I mean. I'm disappointed that you would put stock in this kind of gossip, Detective." Harold made a particular pitying sort of expression. "You haven't been getting enough sleep recently, have you? And you've been so hard on your children you've had to turn to a therapist."

Wait, thought Echika, resisting the urge to cover her eyes. *Don't tell me he's going to pull his wiles on a cop.*

"I'll abstain from asking who told you that." The female detective scowled, as expected. "Focus on the interrogation, Harold."

"I'm quite focused. That's why I'm concerned about your condition," he said, staring at her like he was peering into her face. "Your relationship with your partner is stressing you out, yes? It looks like you're very worried. I could give you advice if you'd like."

"I've heard of your unique personality already, Investigator Lucraft. And as lovely as it is, it's unnecessary at the moment."

“No, my Laws of Respect forbid me to overlook this. Please, allow me to take your mind off your concerns.”

“...I appreciate the offer, but no thank you.”

The female detective's tone remained stiff, but her attitude certainly mellowed out a little. And being exposed to Harold's passionate gaze seemed to make her blush a bit.

What is he thinking? Echika thought as she looked up to the ceiling. *She's a married woman; what's the point of seducing her?*

“He's clearly malfunctioning,” Detective Brown whispered gravely.

Unfortunately, he's not. That's what he's like when he's normal.

“Let's get the conversation back on track,” the female detective said, clearing her throat. “Novae denies the events outlined in the article, but they admitted to putting Steve in shutdown mode and placing him in an analysis pod.”

Echika flipped the microphone switch on the wall to interject.

“What you're discussing is highly confidential Interpol information. We cannot disclose any details on the matter.”

“...That's a shame, Investigator Hieda,” the female detective said, throwing a displeased glance at her through the mirror.

Still, they had no reason to share information with Scotland Yard. Echika wasn't in a position to make that decision at her discretion.

“What I'm trying to say is this,” the detective said, getting the conversation back on track. “Steve is in shutdown mode, and the other RF Model, Marvin, has been missing for years. It's quite likely he broke down a long time ago... So you're the prime suspect in this case, regardless of your motives.”

Or that was what Scotland Yard thought, she appended.

“With so many similar cases happening in quick succession...is it possible you RF Models are defective in some way?”

It was a terribly direct, and most of all offensive, question.

“Detective Brown.” Echika glared at him, unable to stand for this anymore. “I

don't know how colorful that tabloid made out that case to be, but don't you think it's unwise for a police organization to use gossip to back their claims?"

"The story was on the BBC for a time. We can't say it's lacking in credibility."

The British Broadcasting Corporation. Echika felt a migraine settle in. Yes, Steve had tried to kill a human—had tried to kill *her*. But as far as she was aware, Novae had identified the source of the error that drove him to do that. Even if it was reasonable to view Harold as dangerous for being the same model, tying him to this assault case was nothing more than a false accusation.

"We should consider the possibility he's been modified somehow," Detective Brown said with steadfast composure—a serenity Echika found vexing. "Let's say Harold has an accomplice. They could have done something to make his Amicus programming go haywire."

"Then that's all the more reason to have Novae—," Echika started to say.

"So you want to move him to an analysis institute under the ethics committee so he can undergo a thorough inspection?"

"Analysis institute?" Echika was dumbfounded. "You're saying Novae would approve that?"

"This is all part of investigating the case. Even if they refused, we could force them to comply."

Are they serious? Harold is innocent!

"He's an Amicus working under the Electrocrime Investigations Bureau," asserted Echika, refusing to back down. "If you'd like, we could make this a joint inspection and dispatch an electronic investigator to help you. Brain Diving into the victims should make it clear whether Aide Lucraft was involved."

"While we appreciate the offer, you and the Electrocrime Investigations Bureau see Harold as one of your own. Your attitude makes it clear you're biased," he countered. His claim was so reasonable Echika couldn't say anything to the contrary. "Look, girl, I understand not wanting to accept the reality of the situation. But taking it this far is embarrassing."

Brown refused to listen to her after that. He probably saw Echika as nothing

more than a little girl throwing a tantrum. But at this rate, things were only going to get worse. Harold could get sent to this analysis institute, and she'd be powerless to stop it.

Echika racked her brains. *Dammit, how did it come to this?*

She knew it in her bones. There was no way Harold could be the culprit. And she had to prove it, no matter what.

Harold's interrogation ended inconclusively. It was to resume at dawn. Echika had to doff her hat—in the most negative, sarcastic manner possible—to their dedication.

Echika left the interrogation room and got into the elevator, making no effort to mask her irritation. Then she jammed on the button for the first floor. She was itching for a smoke. She hadn't felt such a strong urge for a cigarette ever since she'd quit smoking.

<Your cortisol secretion rate is increased. Would you like to listen to some relaxing music?> asked a Your Forma health app she had recently installed.

It was more annoying than she'd expected, so she was considering uninstalling it soon. But just as she rejected the idea, she caught her hand moving to her chest.

The nitro case wasn't there.

It's fine. Calm down. You have ways to handle this, thought Echika, soothing herself as she got out of the elevator.

She went into the visitor lounge to find a woman sitting on one of the sofas, which lined the lobby at regular intervals. Her chestnut hair and brilliant, distinctive facial features made it clear she was Russian.

Daria Romanovna Tchernova. Harold's owner and only living family member. She'd joined him after he was dragged off to London.

"Miss Hieda," Daria stood, her cheeks paler than usual. "Is the questioning over? Where's Harold?"

No matter what Echika said in reply, it would just be a show of how horribly she'd bungled this. She really wished she could give Daria some good news.

"I'm sorry, the detectives in charge of the case are being stubborn... I wasn't able to convince them to release him. But this is clearly a false accusation. I'll be doing everything on my end to see to his release."

Echika trailed off there. Daria's dainty shoulders shivered as she hung her head. She looked like she might crumple on the spot. Echika took the other woman's hand in hers, a gesture she was surprised she was able to make. Daria's small hand was cold and slightly clammy from stress.

"Hmm..." Echika couldn't quite come up with the right thing to say. "Would you like me to get you something to drink?"

"No, I'm fine... I'm sorry. I must look pathetic." Daria softly shook off Echika's hand, but she was still joined to the other woman at the fingertips. "It's just... stuff like this reminds me of what happened when Sozon passed away. It always does."

Detective Sozon's name jogged Echika's memory. He was Daria's deceased husband and Harold's savior, who'd taken him in after he became a vagrant Amicus. Roughly two years ago, Sozon had been investigating an Amicus sympathizer serial murder case in Saint Petersburg, also known as the Nightmare of Petersburg. He was brutally killed in the process, and Harold was still pursuing Sozon's killer.

"It just...scares me," Daria said, a self-deprecating smirk on her lips. "It's so easy to lose your normal life. It can happen so suddenly...like the flame of a candle going out."

"Daria."

"And if they don't clear his charges, is Harold going to be...shut down?"

A semipermanent forced shutdown—just the thought of it horrified Echika.

"We won't let them do that. He's a vital member of the Electrocime Investigations Bureau. We'll prove his innocence for sure."

"Thank you," Daria said, holding back tears. "Please, help him."

“I’ll stay here for a while longer, so you can go back to the hote—”

“Um, excuse me?” someone said, cutting Echika off.

A man appeared in the lounge. He had striking red hair and a plain but mild face. Echika’s Your Forma opened a window to display his personal data.

<Peter Angus. 36 years old. Deputy head of the Special Development Department in Novae Robotics Inc. HQ’s development laboratory>—

He was one of the people in charge of the lab where RF Models were maintained, the place where the recent assaults were centered.

“Ah, I knew it was you, Miss Daria.”

“Mr. Angus.” Daria’s eyes widened in surprise. “What are you doing here?”

Right. Detective Brown didn’t trust Novae Robotics Inc. And despite that, one of the members of the Special Development Department was here, which meant Novae had caught wind of what had happened to Harold and sent Angus over at their discretion.

The man scratched the back of his head awkwardly. “We were contacted about what happened to Harold. I came to perform a simple check on his Laws of Respect, but there’s no compromising with Scotland Yard. I’m on my way out, as it happens.”

His eyes suddenly settled on Echika.

“Ah, Mr. Angus, this is Echika Hieda from the Electrocrime Investigations Bureau,” said Daria, introducing her simply to smooth things over.

Just then, Echika realized how close she had been to speaking up without introducing herself. Investigators were granted the privilege of accessing people’s personal data, which made it easy to forget your manners.

“So you’re Investigator Hieda. I’ve heard of you,” Angus said with a polite grin. “Harold told us about you. The professor’s eager to meet you, too.”

Professor? Echika blinked doubtfully as Daria and Angus continued their exchange.

“Miss Daria, I could walk you back to the hotel. My car’s parked outside.”

“Oh, that’d be helpful, but...are you sure?”

Daria seemed reserved, but eventually allowed Angus to take her home. Echika was relieved. She’d been worried about leaving the woman alone at a time like this. She watched the two of them depart, then turned and hurried back to the elevator.

She needed to do something about this messed-up situation. For Daria’s sake.

“It can happen so suddenly...like the flame of a candle going out.”

Because Echika felt like she finally understood, with stark vividness, the sheer depth of the scars clinging to Daria’s heart.

A security Amicus solemnly stood guard in front of the interrogation room. As Echika approached it, the Amicus used its IoT link to compare her ID to the government’s visitor database, then willingly opened the door for her. Harold was still inside, sitting alone at the table. Everyone else had already left.

“Oh, Investigator,” he said, acknowledging her presence. His fair features were in a smile even at a time like this.

It was the first time she’d seen him grin today. He probably looked so relieved because he was somewhat tired of this.

“Detective Brown is still waiting,” he said. “Once he comes back, I’ll be escorted to my cell.”

“I think Scotland Yard needs to brush up on what ‘voluntary cooperation’ means.” Echika didn’t try to hide her bitterness. “You have an alibi, but they just won’t listen. A technician from Novae came over, too, but they turned him away. Something’s up with them.”

“Don’t say anything else,” Harold said, flicking his eye up to the ceiling, where a security camera capable of recording audio was installed.

But there was no way they’d take her to task for saying that much. And if someone was watching them in real time, it would only be a security Amicus.

“I just sent Daria back to the hotel,” Echika told him.

“How is she doing?”

“She’s pretty shaken up. We ran into Mr. Angus from Novae. He’s taking her home.

“He came here, too...? I’m sorry. If things had gone better, I’d be released by now,” Harold said, giving a sigh of genuine annoyance. “I was hoping to curry favor with that female detective and prove my innocence. I guess police investigators are more guarded than I thought.”

Echika felt weary recalling what he’d done.

“Maybe you’re the one who should be careful of the camera, Aide Lucraft.”

But Harold seemed unperturbed. “She could tell I didn’t mean anything I said.”

“Of course she could. Even I could see through that.”

“Surely not. You’d have fallen for it, wouldn’t you?”

“Who do you take me for?”

“If this wasn’t an interrogation room,” said Harold, glancing around the place, “I might have had a better chance. I think so, at least. For example—”

“Stop it. I don’t want to hear it.”

“I haven’t said anything that improper yet.”

“The operative word here being ‘yet.’ Anyway,” Echika said, leaning over the table. “I’m going to consult Chief Totoki about this later. I’ll ask if she can do something on her end, so please don’t do anything to make this worse.”

“Understood. I’ll sit tight.” Harold nodded with an earnest expression. “But please don’t let this weigh on you too much, Investigator.”

“It isn’t.”

“You’re rubbing your palm with your fingers. That’s the kind of thing people do when they’re anxious,” he said, prompting Echika to notice she really was doing that. “You don’t have to pretend around me. This situation is terribly confusing; it’s only natural you’d feel agitated.”

Ah, he’s seeing through me already.

Echika ruffled her hair, then settled her gaze on her reflection in the one-way mirror. She saw a mixture of annoyance, fatigue, and anxiety on her face. She looked awful.

Pull yourself together. You're a police investigator, even if you are washed-out.

She slapped her cheeks and somehow managed to shift gears.

"...Aide Lucraft, are you calm because you know who the real culprit is?"

"I wouldn't say I'm calm in the slightest," he replied, terribly composed. Though he seemed relaxed, Harold was an Amicus. Maybe he had better control over his emotions than humans had over theirs. "Sadly, I'd be hard-pressed to guess the culprit's identity at this point. We've got nothing to go on."

"The perpetrator looks like you, and they picked places where the security drones wouldn't catch them on camera to carry out the attacks. They did it late at night, and all the victims are related to the RF Models..." Echika murmured, listing all the information she had. "Frankly speaking, your missing sibling, Marvin, fits the bill. He knew the victims from the Special Development Department, so he could very well hold a grudge against them. And if he knows the city's layout well enough to avoid the security drone patrol routes, he must live in London. Are you sure he didn't use a disguise?"

"Yes. There are no records, so it's hard to say for sure, but even if he was disguised, it's hard to believe all four of the victims would mistakenly assume an RF Model attacked them," Harold responded, uncharacteristically furrowing his brows. "Detective Brown is considering the possibility that an imitation Amicus of mine was made, but not many places could produce one. Covering that up would be difficult."

The other possibility was that someone was using the holo-projector from the last incident, but that was also off the table. The device that Rig City had developed was still fresh in the law's memory, since it had recently been used in the sensory crime. Plus, the technology wasn't available to the public. And to top it all off, an incorporeal projection couldn't physically assault someone. It wasn't an option.

"What are the odds of Marvin being alive and responsible for the attacks?"

“Well, parts aside, RF Model circulatory fluid is much the same as that of mass-produced Amicus. If he found a repair shop to fake his model number and perform maintenance on him, it’s possible he could still be operating, but...”

“But you think he wouldn’t have a reason to fake it?”

“None that I can think of. My other point of concern is that this incident isn’t being reported to the public.”

“You’re concerned about that? What’s so strange about Scotland Yard keeping information under wraps?”

Whatever the truth was, they’d currently marked Harold as the culprit. In other words, they’d decided an Amicus had committed this crime. With the sensationalist article still fresh in people’s minds, if news that an Amicus was attacking people came to light, it could shake the very foundation of current robot-centric society. A public institution like the police wouldn’t want that.

“But if the perpetrator’s objective is to achieve large-scale media coverage... to platform their objection of Amicus society, they might just resort to radical means of making that happen.”

“And the crimes have been escalating.” Echika gritted her teeth. It was clear the damage would only grow more severe from here on out. “Of course, we want to solve this incident as quickly as possible, but first we need to prioritize getting you out—”

“Harold!”

Suddenly, the door swung open without a knock. Echika and Harold both looked up in surprise.

It was Detective Brown. At first, Echika thought he was coming to take Harold to his cell, but his face was red. He looked upset.

“Detective Brown? What is—?”

“He’s been here the whole time, right?” he demanded.

“Huh?” Echika asked, confused.

“Investigator Hieda, I’m asking you, has Harold been here the whole time?”

“I have,” Harold said, staring up at the ceiling. “And if you don’t believe me, you can check the camera. Just like you’ve ordered, I haven’t once stepped out of this room.”

“Understood. I get it now... No, dammit...”

What’s going on?

“What happened, Detective?” Echika asked, still not comprehending what he was talking about.

“We’ve been had.”

A chill ran down Echika’s spine, like a droplet of molten lead falling to the floor.

Oh no.

“We just got a call. There was another attack.” Brown’s dry lips moved terribly slowly. “And...this time the victim was Harold’s owner. A Russian—”

The feel of her slender palm, cold but clammy with anxiety, surfaced in Echika’s mind again.

Daria.

As Echika held her breath in shock, she felt Harold rise to his feet beside her.

3

The hospital had a peculiar air that night. The clean, sterile space was shrouded in silence, like it had been cut off from the rest of the world. It was perhaps the same quiet you would find in a lonely shuttle, wandering aimlessly through space.

Daria was hospitalized in a general medical center overlooking the London Bridge.

“How ironic that his owner being attacked was what cleared the suspicions placed on Aide Lucraft.”

“It’s hard to say that he’s been cleared. Detective Brown is saying the possibility that Harold has an accomplice still stands. He just has no reason to

keep him under arrest anymore...”

Echika sat alone in the department’s telephone booth, engaged in a holo-call. She was sitting on a cheap plastic chair, discussing the situation with a holo-model of her superior officer, Ui Totoki.

Totoki managed the Electrocrime Investigations Bureau’s headquarters and the electrocrime wing, making her Echika’s boss. She was dressed in a gray suit and wore her hair in a ponytail that extended all the way down to her waist. Her sharp, severe features were currently in a grimace.

“And Miss Daria is heavily injured, right?”

“...Yes. She’s currently being operated on.”

She thought back to what happened earlier—after hearing the news from Detective Brown, Echika and Harold had hurried over to the medical center. Thanks to Scotland Yard receiving the news quickly, they’d arrived about the same time as Daria’s ambulance.

When the woman’s stretcher was lowered from the shrieking vehicle, Echika could swear she forgot how to breathe. Daria lay on the stretcher, pale as a sheet, while the EMT crew held on to her stomach.

Harold had been the first to hurry after her. Echika simply followed after him in a daze, like a machine.

“Daria!” Harold called out desperately as he followed her. “Daria, can you hear me?!”

The woman’s blank pupils seemed to stir as she sucked in air through her purple lips. The rattling of the stretcher nearly drowned out her voice, but she’d undeniably said this:

“—Brain Dive me.”

And then she’d closed her eyes, as though the strings holding her up had snapped.

“We’ll be taking her into surgery now,” the ambulance staff told them. “Family members are to stay here.”

Echika and Harold had watched helplessly as the stretcher was pulled away,

Daria too weak to bid them farewell.

This shouldn't have happened.

“Calm down, Hieda. Your voice is shaking.”

Echika cleared her throat awkwardly. She'd never experienced someone close to her being a victim of a crime, so she couldn't mask her anxiety.

“Chief, I think you know what I'm going to ask next.”

“Of course I do. No need to say anything else.” Totoki was as stone-faced as ever, but her calmness was comforting now. “By the way, where's Aide Lucraft?”

“Waiting for Daria's surgery to end.”

“...I see,” she said, pinching the bridge of her nose. “Hieda, I know this is a hard time, but focus on the conference.”

✱

It was only a few minutes later that everyone connected to the telephone booth. A holo-projection of a conference table appeared in the cramped space. Sitting next to Totoki and Echika was the deputy head of Novae Robotics Inc.'s Special Development Department, Angus; next to him was Assistant Commissioner Haig from Scotland Yard; and...

“As a consequence of the incident, our stance is that the RF Models are to be shut down, effective immediately.”

...Chairman Talbot of the International AI Ethics Committee.

“We did evaluate and approve the RF Model project and production. But with so many problems cropping up, the situation has changed. The IAEC agrees that they are to be shut down.”

Talbot's holo-model was of an aging old man with grizzled, short-cut hair. Both his chevron mustache and his forehead, carved with countless wrinkles, gave him a cruel, severe image.

The International AI Ethics Committee, or IAEC. Since modern society relied so heavily on artificial intelligence, it was essential to have an international

organization that regulated and monitored its production process and distribution network.

There were IAEC review sites in multiple countries, and robots made it to the market only after going through review and receiving approval from the organization. Conversely, selling robots without applying for review was a clear violation of international law and had severe consequences.

The IAEC guaranteed the safety of society in the age of robots.

Following the incident with Steve, the IAEC approved Harold to continue operating uninterrupted, but this current case seemed to have changed its stance.

“Investigator Totoki. We demand that you shut down Harold Lucraft.”

“I refuse,” Totoki replied. “Novae has repeatedly found that Harold is safe. Most of all, he has an alibi. He is a crucial part of my investigation bureau, and I will not give up on him based on false charges.”

“I likewise object.”

The person who added that was Mr. Angus, the pleasant-looking redhead who’d escorted Daria back to her hotel. His cheeks were now visibly stiffened.

“While our technicians did testify that they were attacked by an RF Model, Chairman Talbot, we can’t confirm that for sure yet. It would be premature to shut Harold down at this juncture.”

“The victim testimonials are flawless,” Detective Haig countered in velvety tones. “Even if Harold isn’t the perpetrator, the only other option is Marvin. And he’s still missing, I believe?”

As Echika listened to the four of them, she gripped her knees at the corner of the table. She’d been afraid this might happen ever since learning of the incident.

But...

She felt something that overwhelmed her reasoning rise within her. Surely they didn’t need to hold this meeting while Daria was in critical condition?

“Mr. Angus,” Chairman Talbot said severely. “We haven’t received a

conclusive report on Steve's condition yet, but I hear you have an overall grasp on the reasons behind his actions, correct?"

"They were the result of an error in his utility function system. However, we still haven't found which process caused the error, so we're still investigating..."

"So are we to take it that regardless of whether the culprit is Marvin or Harold, there is a defect in the RF Model itself?"

Echika silently withstood her feelings of indignation. Not just that female detective, but now the chairman was spouting this nonsense, too?

"The model is operating normally," Angus retorted softly. "And may I remind you that its proposal for manufacture passed your review? Had there been a defect, I should think it would have been detected at that stage."

"Of course. What I'm saying is that there might have been some loophole that both you and the IAEC have overlooked, which was where the error took place," the chairman said, his eyes cold. "What do you call it again? A next-generation all-purpose AI? Then some factor that wasn't present in previous models might have been what made it go haywire."

"Let me see if I understand you correctly, Chairman Talbot. You're claiming that the RF Model contains mysterious, complex code, the likes of which are beyond the realm of possibility. And that because of it, some unpredictable element overwrote the model's programming and nullified its Laws of Respect?"

Talbot cleared his throat, trying to mask his thoughtless comment. "Amicus can think and act on their own. If they're a next-generation model, it's not unthinkable that such an improbable error could happen."

"Unfortunately, Chairman," Angus began, clearly trying his hardest to keep his tone as calm as possible, "the English have something of a bad habit. We take pride in sympathizing with Amicus, more so than any other nation. We tend to look at them with a high degree of anthropomorphism."

"They are mostly human, albeit very simple."

"You might get that impression from observing their behavior alone. But the way Amicus think is merely a pretense. Their mental processes are limited to

several steps ahead. Are you familiar with the Chinese Room experiment?”

Angus went on to explain a thought experiment conducted by philosopher John Sal. An Englishman who can only read English letters is trapped in a room. A note is slipped into the room, containing a question in Chinese characters. Naturally, the Englishman is unable to read them. The note looks like nothing but symbols to him.

“There is, however, a manual in the room. The Englishman finds the same question and an answer to it written in the manual, so he writes the answer and slips it to a Chinese man outside the room.”

Even then, the Englishman couldn’t read Chinese. All he’d done was interpret the text as drawings and copied the symbols.

“But the Chinese man who receives the paper only sees a perfect answer to his question. And so he is convinced that a fellow Chinese man is sitting inside the room. He has been convinced that he is engaged in a two-sided conversation.”

“...So you’re saying we’re mistakenly assuming Amicus are human, but they’re only presenting themselves as such?”

“Correct. Our sense of anthropomorphism compels us to believe that Amicus have human hearts.”

“And that applies even for the RF Models and their next-generation all-purpose AI?”

“Yes. We wouldn’t be able to guarantee their safety otherwise.”

Echika was confused. That explanation would work for mass-produced Amicus, but if Angus was right, it would mean even a next-generation all-purpose AI like Harold was only “pretending to be thinking.”

Echika had thought this was the case when she’d first met him. She’d believed his thoughts and feelings were all just the product of programming, that he was just an empty sham.

But not anymore.

“If I find Sozon’s killer, I intend to bring him to justice with my own two

hands.”

If Harold’s thoughts were just a charade, what did those words mean? Was that really just him displaying fake “humanity”? Just a show of harboring hatred at someone who’d taken a man dear to him?

“The idea of robots rewriting their own code and going berserk is an illusion propagated by fiction.” Angus’s voice pulled Echika out of her thoughts. “As part of the Amicus production stipulations, it is forbidden to write ‘attacking human beings’ into the manual in an Amicus’ room.”

“The point is,” Totoki said, “It’s impossible for Amicus to learn to harm humans from watching gruesome news footage or violent movies, correct?”

“Our current society wouldn’t exist if it was. Of course, the concept of ‘attacking’ does exist in their heads as information, but they’re incapable of actualizing it to go on the offensive. When we look at metal, we don’t think about how tasty it looks, right? In much the same vein, Amicus don’t look at violence and think about wanting to hurt someone. Their thought processes simply don’t work that way.”

“So you’re saying there’s no risk of them rewriting their own code to harm someone?”

“Yes. If anything could get them to do that, it would be an error in their utility function system, as in Steve’s case...which would most likely be caused by human intervention. The RF Models’ system code is very difficult to crack, but I can’t say it’s completely impossible to modify. If the culprit has an accomplice this time, they could be a programmer.”

“Still, Aide Lucraft is operating normally. So he’s not the culprit.”

“Investigator Totoki,” Chairman Talbot said accusingly. “You insist on defending Harold, but he’s still obviously cause for concern. He’s very skilled, we’re not trying to dispute that, but you’re being blind here. Next time, things won’t end like they did with the tabloid.”

“I’d appreciate it if you stopped beating around the bush and clarified what you’re implying here.”

“I believe the Electrocime Investigations Bureau should order a newer, safer

Amicus, don't you?"

Huh? Echika blinked once. *What is this man saying?*

"Simply put, all you need is for your genius Diver to be able to investigate without any issues. So rather than rely on a possibly defective RF Model, you would be better off diverting your funds to a safer model of Amicus."

"With all due respect, what you're saying isn't realistic," Angus argued. "It would take a great deal of time to make an Amicus on the same level as the RF Models, to say nothing of the tremendous costs involved..."

"The IAEC has been opposed to your continual use of Harold from the start. Having an Amicus that's the same model as Steve solve sensory crimes is a recipe for bad publicity."

"Yes, you said that last time, too," Totoki remarked coldly. "But thanks to the bureau's careful management of information, we haven't had a single scandal so far."

Totoki was right. Echika nodded a few times, but the chairman didn't seem to care.

Aaah, shit!

Echika felt the urge to slam her hand against the desk. She wanted to get a word in so badly, to tell him this entire discussion was insipid, to ask what the point of all of this was.

"But can you say for sure there won't be one in the future, Investigator? Harold is quite conspicuous, after all. And his face..."

"His face happens to be the part of him that turns me on the most. Could you stop nitpicking?"

Suddenly, a new holo-model appeared in one of the previously unoccupied seats at the table, a projection of a tall young woman. She had messy, bluish-brunette hair, and her eyes glinted sharply behind her glasses, as dark and unfathomable as a deep night.

Echika couldn't look away. Who was she?

"My apologies for the delay," the new participant said, crossing her long legs

with a flutter of her lab coat. “But I’m in a bit of a foul mood right now. Imagine going into a call, and the first thing you hear is your work being slandered.”

Echika checked the participant list of the holo-conference call, matching the new woman’s name with the user database. Her personal data came up at once.

<Lexie Willow Carter. 29 years old. Robot development engineer. Has a doctorate in robotics. Employed in Novae Robotics Inc.’s development laboratory as head of the Special Development Department>

It then called up a list of her accomplishments and merits. Graduated Cambridge University’s Elphinstone College at age twenty. Winner of the American Artificial Intelligence Academic Conference three years in a row.

But most eye-catching of all:

<Leader of the next-generation all-purpose AI, or RF Model, development team. Single-handedly wrote the RF Models’ system code at the tender age of 19>

That’s right. This is an important conference regarding the fate of the RF Model. Why didn’t it strike me as off that the woman who’d created them wasn’t a part of this to begin with? Echika thought.

Echika stared at the department chief curiously. In a sense, she was the *mother* of Harold and his siblings.

“Professor Carter.” Chairman Talbot directed an accusatory glare at her. “You’re twenty minutes late. Show some remorse.”

“Oh, cut me some slack, it was an emergency summons.” Professor Carter didn’t seem the slightest bit apologetic. “I see your mustache is as lovely as ever, Chairman. Oh, and it’s a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Haig. Any way you can discipline your Detective Brown?”

“You could use some discipline, too,” Talbot snapped at her. “Every department frowns upon you; how about taking a moment to reflect on why that is? And have you looked online? You could make an army out of your haters.”

“I’m afraid none of that weighs on me in the slightest.”

“I hear that during the RF Models’ development, being on your team was hell. And that out of all the senior officers, you were the only one to get prosecuted after it was disbanded.”

“I was indicted on false charges stemming from personal grudges. In a mood to dredge up ancient history, are you? I guess what they say is true. Years really do feel like days for the old.”

“Professor, please, behave yourself,” Angus, her deputy, moaned.

Echika had never considered what the creator of the RF Models would be like, but she never expected this. She couldn’t have come up with Professor Carter in her wildest dreams.

“Let’s get back on track,” Chairman Talbot said, his voice a bit strained. “Like I said, the Electrocrime Investigations Bureau should discard Harold and commission a new Amicus with specs matching an RF Model.”

“And who, may I ask, will be making that Amicus?”

“...I didn’t ask for your opinion, Professor Carter.”

“I think it’s safe to say that the person making that high-spec Amicus would be me. And I have absolutely no interest in making your super-duper model.”

“Chairman, this conversation is going in circles. We’re getting nowhere.” Assistant Commissioner Haig crossed his arms in exasperation. “Either way, Scotland Yard will begin searching for Marvin in earnest starting tomorrow.”

“His location information has been offline for six years,” Angus said. “We can assume he’s broken down by now. Of course, we never found his body, but...”

“On top of that, there’s still the possibility that Harold has an accomplice. We ask that the Electrocrime Investigations Bureau shut him down until the culprit is revealed.”

They’re still on about that?!

Echika sat up, her patience finally extinguished. She shouldn’t have waited for a chance to speak her mind to begin with.

“As Aide Lucraft’s partner, I’m firmly against this idea,” she stated clearly. “I can’t safely perform Brain Dives without his assistance. Shutting him down would be a major loss for the Electrocrime Investigations Bureau as a whole. With all due respect, Assistant Commissioner, you’re commenting on bureau affairs here.”

“It seems our resident genius Diver is a bit overconfident,” Haig said, furrowing his brows.

“Yes, I’m confident in what I’m saying.” Echika didn’t back down. “My words were no exaggeration.”

“What Investigator Hieda says is true,” said Totoki, backing her up. “Assistant Commissioner Haig, if you intend to interfere with our operations, we will handle things accordingly.”

“You’re insane.”

“Say whatever you want.”

What if Echika just rolled over and went along with their calls to shut Harold down? That would only solidify the perception that the RF Models were defective. And that would do more than just inconvenience the bureau. How badly would that hurt Daria, who loved him so dearly?

And besides, I need Harold, too.

For Brain Diving? No, not just for that.

“Assistant Commissioner,” Echika said, turning to Haig. “I will take it upon myself to watch over Aide Lucraft. So for the time being, please put the matter of how to handle him on hold.”

“And you think I’ll consent to that?”

“You don’t have to consent to it,” Totoki added icily. “We’ll pin down this culprit that you can’t find a single clue about before long. Isn’t that enough?”

As Haig went slightly pale, Chairman Talbot furrowed his brows. Angus looked mortified, while Professor Carter simply smiled.

During the sensory crime incident, Echika had been able to let go of her sister’s false image with Harold’s help. So now was her time to help Harold in

his hour of need. Because when all was said and done...

I'm his partner.

"I will solve the RF Model assault incidents in place of Scotland Yard."



Indeed, it had been drizzling on the day Sozon was laid to rest, making the green grass of the cemetery especially fragrant. In Russia, it was typical for gravestones to be engraved with an image of the deceased's face.

The dead, peering solemnly at the living.

Why do people do something so foolish? That was what Harold thought back then. Why did they leave the faces of the dead behind, like painful mementos?

"Let's go home, Daria," Harold said somberly.

Daria had been kneeling in front of Sozon's grave for a while, unstirring. It was still only a mound of soil, its tombstone not yet prepared. The flowers she had offered to it shook pitifully under the pattering of raindrops. The hem of her long skirt covered the ground, wet and dripping.

"Right," she whispered.

They'd had this exchange a few times already, but she wouldn't get up. Other relatives told him to leave her be for now before eventually leaving themselves. Harold remained at her side, holding an umbrella over her, the din of the rain weeping over them.

"...Just after we got married, there were times when I thought it would be better to break up with him." Daria's voice was even quieter than the rain. "We'd argue over the smallest things... But at the time, I was convinced that no matter how dangerous it might be, he'd always run ahead to solve a case."

"Yes."

"I should have left him. After all... I mean, if I did, right now I... I wouldn't..."

She trailed off into sobs, so he didn't catch the end of her sentence. As Harold looked at the back of her bowed head, he replayed the memory. It had only been a few days since Sozon was murdered, but he must have replayed it

countless times already.

Nevertheless, he kept replaying the terrible sights of the killer restraining Sozon. Over and over and over again.

There must have been a way to save him. A solution must have been available to him, somewhere, somehow. But Harold had failed to find it. He'd failed. And not only because he was bound hand and foot.

For he was also bound by the Laws of Respect.

He was helpless as his arms, legs, neck... A sharp—

Noticing his circulatory fluid's temperature was rising, he paused the memory replay.

By the time Daria got to her feet, the rain had stopped.

"Harold. I'm—I'm scared of going home."

But for some reason, he could remember being unable to bring himself to fold the umbrella.

"Going back to a daily routine, realizing he's really gone... It frightens me."

Seeing Daria weep finally made Harold realize what was whirling in his breast—it was terror. Just like Daria, he was beside himself with fear. The fact he couldn't save Sozon, the reality thrust before his eyes— it was all too terrifying. It was tantamount to staring at his own powerlessness.

He could have saved him. He could have done something. And yet...

"I'll get it off."

Marvin's face flashed in his mind, like a spark of electricity. The crimson autumn colors of the garden burned in his memory. His younger brother plucking a butterfly that rested on his shoulder.

He'd...plucked it off.

Right.

That's what it had been.

But it was all too late now.

“You still have me, Daria,” Harold said, fully sensing the weight of the words, and pulled her into an embrace.

Her slender body was cool to the touch despite the early summer weather. It felt much duller than an Amicus’s body heat.

“...I promise. I won’t ever leave you alone.”

It was as much a promise to her as it was an oath to himself.

The sound of Daria’s pulse, now reduced to an electronic beeping, lashed against his auditory device. The faint white of the ICU bed enveloped her brittle limbs. Sitting next to her bed, Harold gripped her hand, which was dangling from the covers.

The tubes digging into her arm seemed similar but not quite the same as his own diagnosis cable. Her human fragility was on full display; her eyelids were pale. They reminded him too much of Sozon’s eyes, which would never open again.

The operation had just finished, and Daria had somehow survived. She’d been moved to a follow-up ward, but still hadn’t regained consciousness.

They’d found her abandoned in a back alley, based on the testimony of the man who reported the attack to the police. She was assaulted soon after parting ways with Angus. As in previous cases, there had been no witnesses, and the attack took place outside the range of the surveillance cameras. The assailant had used a blade to stab deep into her soft stomach.

Harold placed the back of his hand on Daria’s forehead in something like a prayer. Her fragility chilled him.

What? Didn’t you predict this?

Irritation at his own useless mind threatened to burn his circuits. He could have anticipated this. If people related to RF Models were being attacked, Daria was certainly a possible victim.

Who was the culprit? To what end were they assaulting people related to the RF Models?

Hearing a pair of footsteps approach, Harold looked up silently. Before long, he heard Detective Brown's voice from the other side of the sterilized curtain around the bed.

"Harold, do you have a minute?"

He found this irritating, but his system compelled him to suppress his thoughts. Harold stepped from behind the curtain with a serene expression, though he didn't forget to show a certain degree of sorrow.

"I'd like to question her," Detective Brown said brusquely, right out of the gate. "Is she conscious?"

"Not yet. She only just got out of surgery."

"I'm sure going through this is hard for you," the detective said in a flimsy show of sympathy. "But despite releasing you, we're still considering sending you to the analysis laboratory. Of course, whether our suggestion is met is..."

"There's no need to have Aide Lucraft analyzed, Detective Brown." A voice cut into their exchange.

Harold moved his eyes to the source of the voice. Echika was heading over to them. In her all-black getup, she was like a droplet of ink staining the white hospital ward. Her profound eyes burned with emotion.

"That's quite the greeting, Electronic Investigator," Brown said, intimidated. "This is our case. You have no right to..."

"The Electrocime Investigations Bureau will be taking over the RF Model Assault Case," Echika told him sharply. "This was the result of a long discussion between Scotland Yard and the bureau, and the decision has been finalized."

"...What?" Brown glanced up in a panic.

It seemed he'd gotten a message, or perhaps a call, on his Your Forma. *It doesn't matter anymore*, Harold thought. *He's already an outsider. No need to pay him any mind.*

"Investigator Hieda," the Amicus asked, looking into her eyes. "Did Chief Totoki receive command authority over the case?"

"That's right. We'll be taking over the investigation from here on out."

He'd assumed Echika would try to convince Totoki somehow, but he hadn't expected an outcome this favorable. Harold had been prepared to manipulate Echika into making a move if she wasn't going to make one on her own. But this was beyond what he'd hoped.

Harold could have tolerated the perpetrator throwing him under the bus, but now they'd laid hands on Daria.

So they would have to pay accordingly.

"Aide Lucraft," Echika said, gazing at him directly, unflinchingly. "This afternoon, I'll be Brain Diving into the victims... You're up for this, right?"

It went without asking.

"Of course, Investigator."

4

<Today's temperature is 15°C. Attire index C, a thin jacket is recommended>

Regent's Park greenery sailed past the window of their rental car. Echika and Harold were driving through the streets of London in an Italian automobile they'd gotten on short notice from a parking lot. The sky was slightly overcast, but it didn't feel like a shower was imminent.

"Aren't the victims all scattered in different hospitals around the city?" Harold asked.

"We had them all gathered in the medical center treating Daria for the Brain Dive."

"Very well-organized. But by the way," he said, pointing to the map spread over the dashboard. "Baker Street is nearby, and the Sherlock Holmes Museum is open. Have you heard of them?"

"The Your Forma just showed me an ad for them," Echika said, glancing at an MR advertisement that passed them by. "I think I've gotten my share of Holmes and Watson just by being with you, though."

"Thank you kindly."

“I meant I’m sick and tired of it.”

Harold, who was occupying the passenger seat, had seemingly snapped out of his uncharacteristic stupor and returned to his usual attitude—though Echika couldn’t tell if that was really the case. The interrogation had made it clear how adept he was at controlling his emotions.

“That being said,” Harold stated, crossing his arms lightly. “Just what kind of magic did Chief Totoki work to snatch the investigation out of Scotland Yard’s hands? Did the bureau director talk the police superintendent into it?”

“That’s right.” After Echika had lost her temper during that meeting, Totoki spoke to the bureau director and had them push for the transfer. “Yes, this case doesn’t constitute an electrocrime yet, so it’s technically outside our jurisdiction. But the bureau doesn’t like the idea of you being unable to mobilize due to false charges.”

“And they probably thought it’d be most convenient if we took over the search before Scotland Yard aggravated the situation any more.”

“Of course, this is a highly irregular exception. Since you’re related to one of the victims, your involvement in the case comes off as inappropriate. But we were able to make an exception, since I need your help to Brain Dive.”

According to Totoki, it didn’t take too long to convince the bureau director. Much like Totoki, she held Echika’s talents in high regard. Thanks to her high data processing speeds, Echika could parallel process Dives into multiple people at once. This enabled her to accomplish things in hours that took the average electronic investigator days to do, so finding the keys to crack cases was that much faster.

The price for her abilities, however, was that she’d driven countless aides into a state of breakdown. Fortunately, Harold had shown up just when the bureau was racking its brains over how to handle her. Thanks to him, Echika could push her abilities to their limits without endangering any human aides.

This was no doubt why the bureau was so adamant about getting Harold back, even if it meant driving a wedge between themselves and Scotland Yard.

“Thank you, Investigator,” Harold said, abruptly directing his usual perfect

smile at her. “Chief Totoki told me about how you stepped up to defend me during the conference.”

She shrugged a bit.

“...It wasn’t just me. The Chief, Mr. Angus, and the professor all stood up for you. We know you’re innocent.”

“But I was happiest to hear that *you* stuck your neck out for me.”

“Stop it. I wasn’t the only one.”

“I’m glad you’ve overcome your hatred of Amicus.”

“Well, I have, but...” To begin with, that was just a facade she’d put up to cover an old emotional wound, but acknowledging that to him made her feel, well, antsy. “That doesn’t mean I like you now or anything.”

“If you’re going to hide your embarrassment, you could do it a bit more tactfully.”

“How in the world did I just strike you as embarrassed?”

“If you’d like, I could spell it out for you in a thirty-minute analysis.”

“Thanks, but no thanks.”

This guy, Echika thought as she averted her face from him, annoyed. Is he acting like he’s in a good mood just so I won’t worry about him? He doesn’t have to do that when Daria’s in such a bad place. Just admit it; say you’re anxious.

Even Echika winced at just the thought of what had happened to Daria. Did Harold really think she was that unreliable?

In contrast to what it had been like during the evening, the integrated medical center was full of outpatients during the day. A human doctor greeted the two of them and led them to the hospital room housing the victims. This reminded Echika of the first day she’d met Harold. She must have been feeling extra emotional from Daria’s attack.

The assaults were continuing to escalate in severity. It was only a matter of time until the worst-case scenario occurred. They had to get a lead on the

culprit as soon as possible, for Daria's sake.

"Over here." The doctor stopped in front of the room closest to the nurses' station. "I think they're almost finished applying the sedatives to everyone... with the exception of Miss Daria Tchernova, who was only admitted yesterday. She's still comatose, so we've avoided it."

Echika and Harold followed the doctor into the room. As she did, Echika felt a strange warmth wash over her. Five sickbeds were lined up beside each other, each one occupied by a sleeping victim. Some of them hardly had any visible injuries, while others had fractures or limbs hanging in slings. And next to the window, in a bed that had a particularly large number of machines around it, lay Daria. She'd been temporarily moved here from the ICU so it would be easier for Echika to Dive into her. She looked just like she had that last time, her body enveloped by the creamy white bed and an oxygen mask on her face.

The fact that so little had changed hurt Echika. She felt her resolve waver. Could she really Brain Dive into Daria when she was in that state?

"How's she doing?" Harold asked.

"Nothing's changed," the doctor replied bluntly. "She's not waking up, but her vitals are stable. If we detect any changes during the Brain Dive, we'll have to cut her off at once"

"The preparations are complete, Investigator Hieda. Go ahead." A nurse Amicus walking between the beds handed her a Brain Dive cord. Echika hesitated to take it, breaking out into a cold sweat.

"Investigator?" Harold asked her solicitously. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing..."

She wavered as she stared at the Brain Dive cord. This felt like the reverse of what had happened last time. When Lie had gotten injured in a snowmobile accident, Echika had insisted on Brain Diving into her, despite her injuries, despite Harold's objections to the matter.

"I get how you feel. I'm anxious, too." Harold placed a hand on her shoulder. "But Daria asked us to Brain Dive into her. You heard her, too, right?"

She'd whispered it like a prayer as they carried her off on the stretcher.

"Brain Dive me."

Echika bit her lip. He was correct. She steeled her nerves.

"...All right."

This time, she grasped the cord and set up a triangle connection. She connected the Brain Dive cord into the port in the nape of her neck, then plugged the Lifeline into another port. Next, she handed the other end of the connector to Harold, who bent his ear forward, revealing a connector port which he plugged it in to. Echika had found this eerie at first, but now she was struck by the unsettling realization that she was getting used to it.

She heard the connector click. The Lifeline lit up, shining on Harold's cheek.

"Let's get started, Investigator."

"Yes..."

She would find a lead, no matter what.

"Let's begin."

Echika held her breath and let her eyelids flutter shut. The next moment, she felt as if she were plunging into a free fall toward a sea of electrons. Into a world smothered by information. A false sense of weightlessness enveloped her.

Aah, whenever I feel this sensation, it truly makes me realize that this is where I belong.

She unflinchingly broke through their surface Mnemosynes. And as she did, a chill crept over her skin. A sense of terror, an urge to run. Fear. Pain. Shock at the incident.

"Ahhh, no, help me."

A pain stabbed through her.

“Unforgivable.”

A jolt of anger.

“I swear, if I have to go through this...”

“We did the maintenance perfectly, though.”

“We should have broken him instead.”

As far as the engineers were concerned, it was as though a child they’d raised had just lashed out at them. But whatever the case, she was overcome with regret and discomfort. Like she was seeing something that wasn’t for her.

Let it pass you by. Stay calm. This isn’t what you’re looking for.

Thankfully, there wasn’t a countercurrent. Perhaps letting go of Matoi had allowed her to settle her feelings and achieve some measure of emotional stability, because ever since returning to work, she felt like she’d gotten better at controlling her Dives. And so, Echika plummeted down directly into the Mnemosynes of the incidents themselves.

The first thing she saw was a streak of red splattering through the air. Shallow cuts on skin. And then her field of vision shaking violently. She could tell something had just struck her. A hammer swung up, glinting against the night sky.

Echika couldn’t help but grimace. A scream, along with a clinging sense of fear that overrode everything else, popped inside her head. A maelstrom of emotions that couldn’t be put into words swirled about her limbs.

This was hard. It had been a while since she was this out of breath. Maybe it was just because she was rusty; it hadn’t been long since she’d gone back to work. But Brain Diving into the victim could sometimes be even harder than going into the minds of suspects. Try as she might to detach herself, the sensations reached her regardless.



As Echika trudged through what felt like a black marsh of terror, she tried to squint ahead. Intermingling Mnemosynes. Nighttime. A cramped alleyway. A side street. In front of their home. The wavering, unreliable light of the streetlamps. Roadside trees sweeping in the wind. And suddenly, someone grabbed their arm from behind.

The perpetrator had assaulted them all from behind. *Aah, if only I could look at people's personal data inside the Mnemosynes, too. That way I could know who was behind this.*

Something flashed in the corner. A knife, a switchblade...

But then darkness partly set in.

What?

Snow fell from above. No, it wasn't snow, it was ash. Ash faintly fluttered down from above. The sky was like a deep, gaping hole. Something dotted the ground around her. Stone monuments. Graves. What looked like light floated in the air

These Mnemosynes weren't showing something that had actually happened. It was a dream.

Whose...?

Daria's.

Mnemosynes of dreams often occurred when particularly vivid ones were converted and stored as binary data. Typically, however, they were full of distorted perceptions and exaggerations, so they were largely useless for the purposes of criminal investigation.

Echika knew she had no reason to pay much attention to it, knew she ought to let it pass her by... Yet she couldn't look away.

Daria was standing all alone in the graveyard. The wind howled and the air was chilly. Placing a hand over her chest, she noticed a large hole; a void had opened in her breast. Shocked, she tried to cover it with her hands, but it wouldn't close. Red fluid seeped from between her fingers. She was afraid. Sad. Afraid. Sad. Over and over, repeat and repeat, nonstop.

“Daria.”

A nostalgic voice called out to her, but when she turned to look, the only thing there was an open umbrella, rolling along the ground. No one was there.

No one...there.

No.

Somehow, Echika managed to shake off the encroaching feeling of despair. This must have been a dream from when Daria had lost Sozon. It tried to coil around Echika, but she desperately broke through.

Focus. You need to find the Mnemosynes of the attack now. Which way is out?

She floundered, clawed at the air, and suddenly ripped through the darkness. Screams tore at her ears once again. A shadow spilled over the pavement. Echika had gotten back to the Mnemosynes of the assaults. She saw a flash of blond hair. The culprit? She couldn't tell.

“Help me.” “Don’t kill me.” “I’m scared.” “Stop.”

The culprit struck before she could get out of there, or they otherwise pushed their victim down. Their shoes glinted, looking rather worn out.

“Ha...rold...?” Daria's feeble voice asked.

Her blurring field of view widened. A switchblade sank into her stomach. And holding its grip was...

No, it can't be.

Echika's breath caught in her throat. That barely distinct face was one she knew, one she wouldn't mistake. Blond bangs covering his forehead, which shone even at night. Frozen eyes gazing down at her lifelessly.

An RF Model.

“Wh...? Why...?”

The culprit seemed to wince a bit at Daria's delirious question. For a moment, he released the knife he'd thrust into her stomach.

“Harold?”

His well-shaped lips formed words for the first time. He looked hazy, like he was standing underwater, but that must have been because of Daria's fading consciousness. *"You... You know Harold? If you do..."*

But then, the world sank. All she could make out was the RF Model's retreating figure. And then she found herself in another victim's Mnemosynes. Echika felt her pulse quicken.

It can't be!

The RF Model was also in the other set of Mnemosynes. Then the flood of memories ceased. Her Brain Diving cord had been pulled out. When Echika opened her eyes, the lighting of the sickroom seemed terribly bright. Finally free from the victims' constrictive emotions, she let out a breath she'd been holding. Her hand jumped to her neck of its own volition. It felt sweaty.

She couldn't believe it. Harold had an alibi, so what she'd just seen must have been wrong. In which case...

"Investigator."

Harold turned to her, his face devoid of expression. He'd just witnessed Daria and engineers he was acquainted with get attacked, so it was understandable he couldn't keep his composure. Yet seeing him in this state chilled Echika. His pond-like eyes now resembled frozen crystals. His gaze was so lacking in warmth she could have sworn she caught something within them that shouldn't have been there... Bloodlust.

Looking at Harold now, Echika couldn't believe Angus had referred to him as "the Englishman in the room." She knew he was programming at his core, but it felt much more complicated than just that. Was this really an illusion created by her sense of anthropomorphism?

"Doctor," Harold said. *"What's Daria's condition?"*

"Stable," the doctor replied. *"The Dive didn't affect her."*

Echika heaved a sigh of relief. Thank goodness. That alone was a weight off her shoulders. Except...

"It's just as the victims said in their testimonials," she stated, her throat dry.

“The culprit is clearly an RF Model. It must have been Marvin...”

“We don’t know that yet.”

“Why not? Steve is in shutdown, and you have an alibi. So it has to be...”

“The culprit didn’t have a mole.”

Echika thought back to the Mnemosynes she’d just Dived into, to the fair features of the RF Model who attacked the victims. They had all been caught off guard by the assault, so their memories of the incident were somewhat blurry. But even bearing that in mind, she hadn’t seen any beauty marks on the RF Model’s smooth complexion.

“Since we all share the same appearance, Professor Lexie fashioned us with moles so she could tell us apart,” Harold told her, pointing at his own lips. “If Marvin was the culprit, he’d have a mole right here. Though he could have hidden it.”

“Hidden it? Why?”

“Maybe the culprit wanted to pin the crime on one of us triplets, or maybe there’s another reason related to the incident. Even I can’t come up with much of a hypothesis based on these Mnemosynes alone.”

“That RF Model seemed to care about you,” Echika stated. He’d clearly reacted to Daria’s whisper. “Did he attack Daria not knowing that she was your owner...that she was connected to the RF Models?”

“With how the crimes are escalating, it doesn’t surprise me that the perpetrator is starting to assail unrelated civilians. They probably targeted Daria since she was with Angus.”

But the culprit had been wrong. Daria wasn’t an unrelated civilian but Harold’s owner, and they’d probably only realized that after the assault.

“Either way, we’ve found our first clue,” Harold said quietly.

His assertion came as no surprise, because Echika had laid eyes on it, too.

“The grip of the knife.”

“Exactly.”

Yes, the RF Model had stabbed Daria with a switchblade and momentarily let go of its grip in surprise when she mistook him for Harold. And Echika had definitely noticed something when he did: a unique design engraved into the hilt. A fruit reminiscent of an apple, covered by what looked like an exposed rib. It was a striking symbol.

“It might be a logo for something. Let’s look into it.”

Harold opened the holo-browser of his wearable terminal, and before long, the internet answered their question. The exact symbol they’d just seen, of an apple and a rib, appeared before their eyes.

“The campaign shield of Cambridge University’s Elphinstone College...?” Echika read aloud and turned to look at Harold.

After all, Elphinstone College was a name that was very fresh in her mind. And sensing her doubts, Harold nodded.

“It’s Professor Lexie’s alma mater. It might be a good idea to ask her what she knows.”

YOUR FORMA

Chapter 2

Black Box



Chapter 2

Black Box

1

Novae Robotics Inc.'s headquarters were on the northern side of King's Cross station, its vast grounds nestled between the banks of Regent's Canal.

It was said that some time ago, this area still maintained the granaries and coal storage houses that once filled it during the industrial revolution. By now, however, they had been replaced with more modern structures, like office buildings, factories, museums about Amicus history, and the Amicitia District, which served as housing for some of Novae Robotics' employees.

"The Special Development Department has fifteen engineers," Echika said, counting them on her fingers as she walked. "Three of them live here in Amicitia District, but they weren't attacked."

"I bet they're harder to reach," Harold replied, looking around. "As you can see, the security here is pretty tight."

To enter the district, you had to cross a series of security checks. Residents had to pass a biometric check, while outsiders had to submit their personal data. Security drones also patrolled the area around the clock, so not even a mouse could sneak in undetected. Only high-ranking members of the company or extremely accomplished engineers called this place home, and Novae spared no expense when it came to defending their confidential information and talents.

"Has Chief Totoki reported anything on the search for Marvin?"

"It seems like they've had no luck so far. They're investigating really thoroughly, even looking into the records of repair shops worldwide, but...no hints so far."

They still had no idea who the RF Model they'd seen in the Mnemosynes was. Echika and Harold stopped in a section of the Amicitia District lined with classy row houses. One of these was Professor Lexie Willow Carter's residence.

Her front door was painted a grayish green, and the house number and mailbox standing next to it were well-polished. Echika pressed on the doorbell without hesitation.

"You met the professor the other day during the conference, right?"

"Her holo-model, yeah. This is my first time meeting her in person."

Harold cracked a somewhat meaningful smile. "You remind me of her a bit."

"...How so?"

The front door opened shortly after she asked that. Professor Carter peered out, looking quite groggy. Upon confirming their identities, she hurriedly made to close the door.

"Professor, wait," said Harold, rushing to grab the doorknob and stopping it in place. "I believe I contacted you ahead of time, but we're here for your help with the investigation."

"Nope. That's the first I've heard of it," Professor Carter replied, her hair even more ruffled than it had been when Echika saw her holo-model. Bedhead. "Must've been my automatic answering feature. It replies to messages on its own when it receives a call..."

"I see. I was wondering why the text was so stiff."

"I got the settings wrong," she said, stifling a yawn. "I'm feeling a great deal of regret. I should have listened to little mustache man and had you shut down."

Little mustache man? Does she mean Chairman Talbot?

"I'll take that as a joke," Harold said, his expression rather exasperated. "It's past two PM. I know it's a Sunday, but it's still quite careless to be asleep then."

"Aw, shut up. What are you, my mother?"

So this is what Harold meant when he said Echika was like Professor Carter. Echika tried to ignore their exchange. She was all too familiar with the desire to

spend a day off in bed. If she could, she'd never get out of bed at all.

"At least take a leaf out of the investigator's book and comb your hair." Harold directed an overly serious glance at Echika. "She's as much a sleepyhead as you are, but at least she takes the time to do her hair. Even if I do sometimes see trails of saliva on her cheek."

"What saliva? How many times do I have to tell you: I do *not* drool."

"That, just now, was an Amicus joke," Harold said.

"Why, hello there, Investigator Hieda," Professor Carter said, roughly grabbing Echika's hand for a one-sided shake. Her hand was smoother than Echika expected. "Thinking back on what you did in the conference tears at the heart. Such a young, cute girl going so far for a black-hearted Amicus."

Echika stiffened for a moment. A black-hearted Amicus? Did the professor know Harold's nature?

"Hmm, Aide Lucraft is an essential part of the Electrocrime Investigations Bureau—"

"Incidentally, Professor?" Harold interjected, cutting Echika off. "I see you've changed your choice of perfume. Has something been causing you anxiety recently?"

"Whoa, here he goes again. You're just saying that because you know it'll tick me off."

"An eye for an eye, as the old saying goes."

"Can't you take a joke, Mr. Gentleman-in-Face-Alone?"

Professor Carter then mumbled, "Fine, come in," and retreated back into her house. Instead of a lock, the door was equipped with a palm print reader. For how old the place was, its security was state-of-the-art. Harold stepped in jauntily while Echika trailed after him wearily. She wanted nothing more than to ask what they needed and head back home, but she could tell things weren't going to play out like that.

They filed into a neatly organized sitting room. The sofa and cushions were furnished tidily, and the hearth, which served mostly as a display shelf, didn't

have a single speck of dust on it. Given Professor Carter's appearance, Echika had expected her abode to be messy, but...

"Welcome. Please, make yourselves at home."

A mass-produced housekeeping Amicus, one used by families everywhere, greeted them. It was modeled after a Caucasian male and regarded them with a thoroughly mechanical grin. So this was why the house was so clean.

"Rib," Professor Carter told him. "Make the two of them some tea."

"As you wish, Professor Lexie."

The Amicus, Rib, disappeared somewhere.

"He brews a splendid cup," Professor Carter said. "I had him read up on Orwell's golden ratio for tea, after all."

"Golden ratio aside, whenever I hear the name 'Rib,' I shudder." Harold rubbed his arms in an exaggerated manner. "Thank goodness the late Queen of England was the one to name me and not you."

"Well, if you ask me, your names are too bombastic. Do you really need middle names?"

As she listened to them chat, Echika examined the decorations on the hearth. A lavender fragrance reed diffuser, a bookmark with a print of the Gloucester Cathedral, and a key case, its lid hanging open. Two keys dangled inside it.

The hearth didn't look like it had been decorated with any particular aesthetic in mind. It was more like Professor Carter had lined up her necessities without any particular rhyme or reason.

"So," the professor said, scratching her cheek. "The switchblade the culprit used had Elphinstone College's campaign shield on it?"

"Yes." Harold nodded. "I assume they're given away there, but do you know anything about it?"

"A knife, eh...?" Professor Carter stared up into the air for a moment and then snapped her fingers. "Maybe it's that?"

She swiftly left the sitting room. Echika and Harold both followed her through

the dining room, kitchen, and conservatory before stepping out to the backyard.

“I think I have it stored up here. I’d rather not leave junk lying around the house.”

The backyard was a bit small, but its lawn was well tended to. It seemed that the professor dried her laundry outside, which was unusual for London, what with its frequent rains. The clothes flapping in the wind were black and dull, as though their colors had faded.

Professor Carter opened the door to a shed sitting in the garden. It was relatively small and had a cute, triangular roof. The inside was stuffed full of lawn mowers and other garden tools.

“Ah, right, there it is. Good thing I didn’t throw it away.”

Professor Carter pulled out a rectangular box, a white case adorned with black and blue lines. Echika recognized this—these were, indeed, the scarf colors of Elphinstone College.

“It was a graduation memento. I just checked what was in it once and left it back here,” Professor Carter said as she opened the lid.

Inside was a pretty, closed folding knife. The weak sunlight spilling down from above gently poured over the Cambridge blue grip. Etched onto it was an emblem of an apple and a rib.

“Do they give the same graduation gift every year?” Echika asked.

“That’s right. I don’t think it’s changed much.”

For the time being, they knew where the culprit had gotten their weapon from. But that begged the question: How did an RF Model get their hands on it?

“How do you think that Amicus obtained the knife, Aide Lucraft?” Echika asked, furrowing her brows. “The simplest conclusion is that he’s involved with an alumnus, but there are other avenues he could have used to obtain it. He could have stolen it, found it, ordered it online after someone put it up for sale...”

“I think the chances that he just picked it up somewhere are slim,” Harold

mused. “English law demands that one present their personal data when purchasing bladed weapons. Assuming the culprit didn’t want to leave a paper trail, it makes sense they’d use a graduation gift that didn’t require any verification to get. I find it hard to believe they just picked it up by coincidence.”

“So that leaves the possibility of getting it from a graduate of the college, theft, or a deal that took place online.”

The possibilities left Echika overwhelmed, but they had to examine every angle. They had no other clues, and most importantly, they needed to solve this case as soon as possible.

“You said the RF Model you saw didn’t have a mole,” Professor Carter remarked as she scrutinized the knife. “Then that’s probably Marvin. After all, Elphinstone is a college for AI researchers.”

Elphinstone was Cambridge University’s newest college, established in the mid-1990s. Following the outbreak of the pandemic in 1992, global demand for AI and robotics research had soared. Reading the trends of the time, Cambridge converted an existing college building into the Elphinstone College, a facility for training talented researchers and engineers. In so doing, the university was able to retain the pedigree it had held since its founding in the thirteenth century, while entering new fields.

“To summarize, you’re saying a graduate of the college somehow found Marvin and helped modify him? And on top of that, they gave him their knife so he could assault people...?”

“But even if that’s the case, why focus on people from the Special Development Department? The motive isn’t clear here,” Harold said uneasily. “Above all else, our system code is very complicated. Not many people could modify like the professor, even if they graduated from Elphinstone.”

“Plus, they’d definitely need facilities and the right environment for that,” Professor Carter mused, not listening to him. “If you want to make an Amicus bug out, you just need a tablet, but analyzing and modifying the system code would require much more than just that. You’d need your own maintenance pod. That’s how it is, so—”

“Professor, stop talking to yourself,” Harold chided her.

“Oh, sorry,” she said, snapping back to reality. “...So, uh, what were we talking about? Their motive? Isn’t a grudge against me enough of a reason?”

As Chairman Talbot had alluded to during the conference, Lexie had a way of invoking people’s ire. And since that was due to her personality alone, it was possible someone had disliked her since her student days. Perhaps they were convinced that using Marvin, one of her RF Models, would tarnish her reputation. In which case, investigating Elphinstone graduates could be a good lead.

“So you’re saying he hid his mole to pin the crime on you or Steve?” Echika asked.

“Without a doubt,” Harold said, despite seeming somewhat skeptical. “Though the only thing bugging me is why didn’t he put on a fake mole. Marvin knows Steve and me well enough, so there’s no reason for him not to.”

“Maybe Marvin and whoever modified him aren’t aware you two are active,” the professor suggested. “So they didn’t want to hide the mole in a way that would narrow it down to one of you.”

The explanation did seem plausible.

“Marvin did seem surprised to find out you were still alive when he attacked Daria—,” Echika said.

“Everyone.”

The three of them looked up at once. Rib was leaning in from the conservatory.

“The tea is ready. Shall I bring it over?”

“For the time being, we need to narrow the scope of our search from every ocean on the planet to just the North Atlantic,” Totoki said over an audio call, sounding as though she was holding back a sigh. “Understood. We’ll look through records of web auctions while focusing on the college’s graduates. It’ll take time, though, so be patient.”

“Thank you, Chief,” Echika said, closing the Your Forma call.

It felt like she was starting to see the light at the end of the tunnel. Echika turned around just as Professor Carter settled into a seat in the conservatory. The table was still barren; tea had yet to be served.

“Rib, put Investigator Hieda’s and my cups here. You have tea with Harold in the guest room.”

“Huh?” Echika didn’t quite understand what was going on.

“I don’t appreciate being left out of the loop,” Harold added, looking unusually displeased. “What are you trying to get into Investigator Hieda’s head?”

“Stories that would embarrass you. What else?” Professor Carter placed an arm over the back of her chair and smirked. “What should I tell? Which tale should it be? This’ll be fun!”

“And if I insisted on staying here?” Harold asked.

“I’d insist on locking you out.”

“I thought as much,” Harold said, seemingly giving up. “Investigator, don’t take anything she says too seriously.”

“No, wait,” Echika called out, confused.

But despite her perplexed reaction, Harold headed into the house with Rib.

What’s going on? Why do I have to stay alone with the professor?

Echika was bad at communicating with people outside of the job as it was. The chirping of a songbird, so beautiful it was almost a waste, rang out from somewhere. With Harold gone, Echika awkwardly turned to look at Professor Carter, who regarded her with a cheerful smile. Her white teeth peeked from between her lips.

“We couldn’t really talk during the conference, so I figured we could chat,” she said, sitting down and gesturing to the opposite seat. “I’ve heard about you from Harold, Investigator. I’ve found you quite fascinating, and I must say, you don’t disappoint in person.”

“Er...” Fascinating how, exactly?

"I heard you hate machines? Having an Amicus for a partner must be awful, then."

Why did he tell her that?

Enduring the urge to turn tail, Echika took a seat in the chair as prompted. "My hatred of machines is, um, a thing of the past. I've overcome that now."

"So you like them now."

"No, I wouldn't say I feel that strongly about them."

"Do you like Harold, then?"

"...In what way?"

"I sense some bloodlust in your eyes. Are you all right?"

Drat. I let it show.

As Echika forced her eyelids shut, Rib came in with the tea. He tipped the teapot with practiced motions and poured its contents into their cups. A light reddish fluid filled the white, decorated teacups, which grew cloudy when he added milk. It smelled lovely.

Then he dexterously placed platters with scones, jam, and clotted cream on the table. As he did, Echika's gaze fell on the thumb of his right hand, where she saw something like a blob of ink—a butterfly tattoo.

"Enjoy yourselves," he said with a polite smile and left.

The atmosphere suddenly grew much more uncomfortable.

"Hmm, well." Professor Carter rested her chin on her hands. "So, you want to hear some embarrassing stories about Harold?"

If any of them passed Echika's ears, Harold would see right through her and kvetch to no end.

"Um," she said, awkwardly picking up her teacup and attempting to change the topic. "Why did you ask to speak with me alone?"

"Whenever I find something that interests me, I'm the kind to investigate it thoroughly," Professor Carter said.

“Oh.” Echika had no idea why this woman was so interested in her. “Meaning?”

“Investigator, it seems to me you know just how nasty Harold can be.”

Echika twitched, but Professor Carter didn't seem to mind. She picked up some clotted cream in a spoon and carried it to her lips. Echika was under the impression it was meant to be eaten with the scones, but she didn't say anything.

“Aide Lucraft is...a very obedient Amicus, as far as I can see, but...,” she said, picking her words cautiously.

“No need to beat around the bush. I know him well enough.”

“I...see,” Echika said, forcing herself to sip from her cup. Indeed, Professor Carter was the creator of the RF Models, so it would be strange if she wasn't aware of his disposition. “Why did you, hmm, configure his personality that way?”

“You don't hesitate to ask some pretty rude questions, do you?”

“I'm sorry.” Drat, she'd screwed up again. “Hmm, I didn't mean—”

“I'm joking. I prefer it to people beating around the bush,” Professor Carter said with a smile. “I know it's hard to believe, but when I first made him, Harold really was a good boy. But at some point, he started acting like that... The RF Models really are interesting, you know? Whoever made them must be a real genius.”

Echika couldn't help but stare at Professor Carter, but it seemed she wasn't teasing her. She was totally serious; giving herself airs came to her as naturally as breathing. Echika wasn't sure whether to ignore her or not.

“I mean, Amicus have preconfigured personalities. So I assumed, his analysis abilities aside, he was always like that...”

“Unfortunately not,” Professor Carter said, licking her spoon like a child. “Well, his base personality is still intact. And when I sent him to the royal family, I got annoying requests to tune his accent so it would be more refined. But his personality had changed. I'd say he's matured.”

“...Matured?”

The way Professor Carter put it felt off. Now that Echika thought about it, Sumika, an Amicus she'd lived with during her childhood, had also had a configured personality. She'd been set to be “gentle and rational,” which was a very broad definition, but normally those settings didn't change on their own.

“Well, that's just part of what being a next-generation all-purpose AI is about,” Professor Carter stated, reaching for her tea after having emptied out the cream platter.

Her statement made Echika think back to an exchange she'd had with Daria once.

“Apparently, the RF Models are smarter than ordinary Amicus. They had... What was it called again? Next-generation all-purpose artificial intelligence? Don't you think Harold acts a bit more human than most Amicus? He has more of a defined personality. That's all thanks to this cutting-edge technology, apparently.”

During that conversation, Echika had thought something didn't feel right. Could currently available AI technology really produce an Amicus as expressive as Harold? Echika posed that question to Professor Carter, to which she uttered a “yes,” as if she'd realized something, and put down her cup.

“You don't need special technology or anything to spur an Amicus to act human. It's actually much simpler than that. Well, I say simple, but most of my coworkers would get angry if they heard me say that,” Professor Carter said. Echika imagined they would. “All you need to do is make it so when a person converses with an Amicus, they get the feeling they're talking to a human. To give them the impression that the other side senses their emotions and empathizes with them... At the same time, you make it so Amicus have things they're good at, and to seal the deal, you configure them so it seems like they have opinions of their own. That's all it takes to give them the appearance of having a personality and humanlike behaviors. In that regard, making RF Models is no different from making an ordinary Amicus.”

The Chinese Room experiment came to mind.

“So what you're saying is...” Echika hesitated for a moment. “Amicus are only

acting like they think?”

“Did Angus put some ideas in your head?” Professor Carter scoffed. “Everyone seems to love that thought experiment. It makes the RF Models seem like they’re no different from mass-produced Amicus. Because of that, no one in the Special Development Department can see through Harold’s true nature... Hmm? I guess I can’t fault them for that. None of them were in the RF Model development team.”

Like earlier, Professor Carter had started talking to herself. This and her lack of table manners made her come off as quite idiosyncratic. Echika inferred that this tendency for soliloquies was another of Professor Carter’s quirks.

“Right, for most Amicus, thought is just a performance, a sham. But the RF Models are a next-generation all-purpose AI. I wrote them to be smarter than that; Harold most certainly *thinks*.”

This made Echika oddly relieved—but why? Even if she knew Harold’s thoughts were just the product of programming, she didn’t want it to be dumbed down to just code. And given how she used to act, this felt like major progress for her, if she was allowed to toot her own horn.

“Angus just doesn’t believe in that. And even though Harold does think, he uses different thought processes than we do.”

“Different how?” Echika knit her brows.

“*I don’t know.*” Professor Carter shrugged. *She doesn’t know?* “Of course, I could come up with a logical explanation. But when it comes to how they specifically think, it’s impossible for us to come up with an answer.”

“...The AI black box problem?”

“That’s right. That’s one concept we’ve been grappling with for a long time.”

Echika was somewhat familiar with the matter—it was a fairly famous issue that was taught in lectures.

The AI black box problem—a question that had troubled the field of AI and robotics since its inception. As far as robotics was concerned, AI absorbed a great amount of sample data to acquire its evaluation criteria, which it relied on

to produce an ideal response to a given situation. However, humanity had no way of knowing which processes it used to assemble those criteria.

For instance, let us assume Rib proposed to Professor Carter, “I think we should have non-Western food for dinner today.” If asked why he made that proposal, Rib might explain the reason himself, but there was no way to directly verify how he’d arrived at this.

That unobservable part of artificial intelligence was referred to as a “black box.”

“The black box problem haunts every kind of all-purpose AI,” Professor Carter said, pushing up her glasses. “But with RF Models, you could say the scope of their black box is much wider than it is with mass-produced AI. Therein lies the key to their personalities and capacity for growth.”

Suddenly, a butterfly fluttered into the room. It was a sleek black color, and after flying about anxiously for a moment, it landed atop a scone sitting on a plate. Now that it was no longer in motion, the backs of its wings were clearly visible. They were a vivid green color.

Echika’s Your Forma analyzed the creature; it was an environment performative robot, a green swallowtail. She stared at it for a while.

“Aren’t you scared of Harold?” Professor Carter asked, reaching out a hand and letting the butterfly settle on her finger.

“Huh?” Echika asked, puzzled. Scared?

“You know his true nature. Doesn’t it strike you as eerie?”

Professor Carter blew on the insect, spurring it to flutter away. *Eerie...* Echika had never thought of it that way. True, there were many unknowable parts to Harold, but...

“Please, take better care of yourself.”

Whatever form he took, this much was fact.

“He inspired me to move forward.”

The butterfly flew past the tip of Echika’s nose with an unsteady flap of its wings before it left the conservatory, as though it had finally found its way out.

"I see," Professor Carter said, her cheeks looking a bit too pale under the sunlight. "Well...I'm glad you feel that way."

What does she mean? Echika thought to ask, but she was still following the butterfly with her eyes, so she ended up not saying anything. Then she took another sip of her tea, trying to force away the silence building up in her. Her rather dull intuition suggested that maybe it was time to change the topic.

"Um... Do you really think Marvin is the culprit in this incident?"

"Well, Steve is currently deactivated, and you were the one who proved Harold has an alibi."

"I mean, of course, but..." Echika bit her bottom lip.

She could only come up with the same theory as Professor Carter, but if Marvin was the culprit, they had an entirely different problem on their hands.

"You said it's possible Marvin was modified?"

"That's right. After all, I didn't make them defective, you know? They shouldn't go haywire and attack people unless someone did something stupid to them," she said, hand going to her teacup again. "Though... Whether the ethics committee believes that is another matter, I suppose."

Meaning that depending on how this incident turned out, Talbot and the IAEC could very well demand that they shut off the RF Models again. The thought made Echika shudder. What would become of Harold if that came to pass?

"That being said, I'm not terribly worried. I mean..."

Professor Carter's messy hair fluttered in the light afternoon wind. Her almond eyes were dark and unobtrusive, even in the middle of the brightly lit garden.

"...if that happened, you'd just protect him. Right, Investigator?"

Echika made to part her lips, but then her Your Forma brought up a notification. A call from Totoki.

Rib, who had taken a seat in the living room, hadn't said a word for a while

now. “Conversations” between Amicus were nothing but performances to make them seem human. Without any humans to observe them, they had no need to keep up the charade.

Sad as it was, the pleasure of communication and conversation didn’t exist for them.

Harold walked about the room and glanced around, not touching the tea Rib had made for him. He took everything in, from the interior design to the patterns on the carpets. He was so focused that an onlooker would stare at him in disbelief.

This was, of course, at least partially a product of his natural disposition. By examining the state of the room, he could tell the professor had been going through a tough time recently.

Was this also why she was trying to push him away? So he wouldn’t notice this and point it out?

“Rib,” Harold called.

“Yes, Harold?” The other Amicus tilted his head for the first time upon being called.

“I’d like to ask how the professor’s been doing since the assault incidents started.”

“There have been no major changes; the professor is doing well. Though she was talking to herself a bit more than usual this morning. The assaults must be frustrating her,” Rib answered without faltering. “Also, the professor has been spending every weekend in her villa in order to calm herself—”

“She has another house?” Harold didn’t know about that. But despite appearances, Professor Carter had quite the fortune, so it stood to reason she wouldn’t be satisfied with a cramped row house. “Where is it?”

“I’m afraid I don’t know. It’s a secret location for her to relax and go on drives in. She spends every weekend there,” Rib repeated in a monotonous fashion. “I have been telling her not to go out since the incidents started, but she doesn’t listen to me. She went out yesterday after insisting she’s allowed one day away from here.”

“So you’re concerned for the professor.”

“Yes, quite.”

“What a wonderfully human response, Rib.”

Professor Carter was a possible target in the attacks, after all. So even if it was a bit suffocating, she’d be safer if she didn’t leave Novae Robotics headquarters or the Amicitia District.

Harold thought back to the RF Model he’d glimpsed in the Mnemosynes. The face of the figure who’d attacked Daria—was that really his familiar, bungling younger brother? *Was he still there?*

“Aide Lucraft!”

Harold turned to find Echika standing in the entrance to the sitting room. She jogged out of the conservatory, her pupils dilated.

Oh, this is bad news, isn’t it? Harold’s intuition alerted him.

“I just got a call from Chief Totoki... They found Marvin’s body.”

2

Marvin’s body was discovered on the outskirts of London, at Gravesend, on the banks of the Thames. By the time Echika and Harold hurried to the scene with Professor Carter, there were already several police cars parked nearby. The local police and the investigators from the London branch of the Electrocime Investigations Bureau were scurrying about the scene. There wasn’t any caution tape around the scene of the crime, just a security Amicus standing in front of it.

“Hello. Could you show me some ID?” he asked.

“I’m Investigator Hieda from the Saint Petersburg branch. This is Investigator Aide Lucraft, and Professor Carter.”

“Please, head on through.”

They headed straight for the riverbank. The Thames was so vast that it was a little harrowing. It only made sense the river took on a different appearance the

closer you drew to its mouth.

At the foot of the jetty, they found two squatting figures: a local police officer dressed in a sweater, and Deputy Head Angus from Novae Robotics Inc. Both looked up when Echika called to them from the bridge; Angus seemed especially pallid.

“Hello, Investigator. And to you as well, Harold, and the professor...”

“Where’s Marvin?” Professor Carter asked.

“Over here. Next to the bridge girder.”

She got off the wharf immediately, Echika and Harold following closely behind. But what they saw next made all three of them freeze.

Under the bridge girder, just a bit off from the waterside, in a gloomy, sandy spot—lay something torn to pieces. A torso, missing its four limbs. One of its arms had been tossed a short distance away, and the half-open fingers of its hand seemed to be grasping at the sky. Both of the legs had been thrown in random directions. But the head of the torso wasn’t anywhere in sight.

This is terrible... Echika somehow managed to suppress her rising nausea. *Calm down. This is an Amicus. He isn’t human. You’re just looking at parts, and your brain is just automatically interpreting them as a person.*

She’d witnessed plenty of ghastly scenes while working as a Diver, so she thought she was getting desensitized to this, but...

“How do you know this is Marvin?” Professor Carter asked. “Did you check his serial number?”

“That’s right.” The officer replied with a grimace. “According to Deputy Head Angus, it’s definitely him.”

“I’d like to verify that as well. Do you mind?” Professor Carter asked.

“Ah, my apologies, but we’ll need you to put gloves on...”

The professor took a pair of gloves from the officer and unflinchingly approached the remains. Crouching like Angus had earlier, she began to inspect the arms and legs, and then the torso. Marvin was totally naked, which made the sight all the stranger.

Echika managed to turn her eyes to Harold, only to find that he hadn't changed his expression at all. He gazed at his brother's remains with a calmness that was almost startling.

"Aide Lucraft." She somehow brought herself to call out to him. "Shouldn't you wait on the bridge?"

"I'm fine. It's my second time."

Echika felt a lump form in her throat. Right, he'd already seen a brutalized corpse once. And not even an Amicus cadaver, but a human's—Detective Sozon's. Still, did this mean he was okay? Since Amicus had the ability to regulate their emotions, were they were capable of shutting out pain entirely?

"I see." Professor Carter raised her head somberly after examining the left breast of the torso. "I'm sad to say, but...this is definitely Marvin. The serial number is a match, and his skin's silicon material is a made-to-order variant unique to the RF Models."

"I already inspected him," Angus said, looking like he couldn't bear this anymore. "That's enough, Professor."

"Ah, sorry. I just couldn't believe it myself... The poor thing..."

"—How long has the corpse been here?" Harold asked bluntly. His voice was cold, all too mechanical. "I hardly see any wear from exposure to the elements."

"Uh..." The officer couldn't mask his apprehension. "This is just speculation, but it seems it hasn't been here for longer than a day."

"I see. The cross section of the cut is very clean, so I assume it was severed with a sharp blade. We can probably assume his death was part of some kind of incident—"

"Enough." Echika cut Harold off and grabbed him by the sleeve, unable to stand listening to him any longer.

She could tell he was staring at her, but she wouldn't let go. She didn't want him to keep going. Something inexplicable prickled at her chest, but she couldn't put it into words. A silence settled over them, drowning out the loud murmuring of the river.

“Hmm.” Angus broke the lull in conversation. “Harold, I think you should leave for the time being. The police will carry Marvin away... You can check the details after that.”

“...Understood.”

It wasn't clear what Harold was thinking, but he gently shook off Echika's grip and turned around. As she watched him return to the bridge, she finally felt all the tension drain from her body.

He shouldn't see any more of this.

“So is it like he said? Is this part of an incident?” Professor Carter asked the police officer.

“No doubt about it. Someone cut up the body, and we believe the missing parts washed up in the river. We'll be conducting a search for them... Either way, this counts as Amicus abuse. It'll be processed as a violation of the Machine Protection Act.”

“Let me know when you find his head. I might be able to discover the culprit if I analyze his memory.”

“No, if it was severed and submerged in water, I doubt you could,” Angus objected. “If anything, that's probably what the culprit was counting on. But why now, of all times...? The timing is terrible.”

It was just as Angus had said—right when they tried to locate the likeliest perpetrator of a series of assaults on people involved with the RF Models, his body shows up in the Thames. The entire development felt like someone was mocking them.

If the police were correct, Marvin's body had been discarded that day. The assault incidents had taken place over the past week, though, and the latest victim, Daria, was attacked the day before.

If you assumed that Marvin had assaulted Daria, that suggested he'd gotten into an accident and that his body had been discarded immediately afterward. It was all too convenient. Actually, it sounded almost impossible.

Echika covered her eyes with a hand in spite of herself. If that was the case,

then who was the RF Model she'd seen in the Mnemosynes? It wasn't Marvin, it couldn't have been Steve, and it certainly wasn't Harold. Then who was it?

<Audio call from Ui Totoki>

A Your Forma window popped up in her darkened field of vision. Echika silently cursed the threads in her brain; the damn things wouldn't even let her shut her eyes in peace. Feeling irritated, she clicked on the call.

"Hieda." Totoki's voice seemed tired, somehow. "Are you at the scene?"

"I just saw it myself... They say it's definitely Marvin."

"Right." She paused, catching her breath. "I'm sorry to have to twist the knife here, but I have more bad news."

Echika couldn't even conjure up the energy to reply.

"We just got a demand from the IAEC. The Electrocrime Investigations Bureau is to turn Aide Lucraft in tomorrow morning."

"Understood. I'll present myself to the London branch in the morning."

That was Harold's first reaction to learning the news. He was as cool as ever. So cool, in fact, that Echika nearly chewed him out for it. After that, forensics arrived at the scene, and when their mill robots scanned the area, Marvin's remains were recovered.

The incident was under the jurisdiction of the local police, and the Electrocrime Investigations Bureau was in no place to interfere, so Echika and Harold decided to withdraw.

"I'll take a taxi back to headquarters. I got a call," Professor Carter said hurriedly. "Angus, you stay here. I'm sure the police would like to know a lot about Marvin."

"Understood."

This was where they parted ways with Professor Carter and Angus. Echika and Harold got in a rental car that took them to Gravesend. Before long, the sun set, and the ripples on the Thames looked like some kind of black monster through

the window.

There were plenty of things to contemplate, namely who'd dumped Marvin's body there. But...

Echika leaned against the passenger seat, holding back a dry sigh.

"...Are you really going to turn yourself in?"

"I can technically refuse to hand myself over, but if I do, it would just make me look suspicious," Harold said calmly, holding on to the steering wheel. "I'd have to go either way, sooner or later."

"Still, you aren't the culprit. The Chief knows that, so she wouldn't do anything that would make you look like a criminal, but..."

What would Chairman Talbot, that coldhearted man, do? At worst, all he'd need to do was demand the RF Models be shut down altogether and be done with this. It would be an extreme way of closing the book on this case. But judging by how he'd been at the conference the other day, he might just do it.

"Are you worried about me, Echika?" Harold smiled softly. "You looked concerned when I saw Marvin's body, too. Thank you."

"That... I mean, not really."

"For how cold you can seem, you're very kind. I like that about you."

"...I'm not sure if that's a compliment or an insult." Echika leaned her head against the window.

That wasn't what she wanted to hear. Harold had to be anxious about this. His brother had been killed, and he could be getting arrested. There was no way he'd be unaffected by all of this.

Harold hadn't shown any emotions when Daria was attacked, either. Was that just his nature as an Amicus? Or did he just find Echika that untrustworthy?

"Investigator," Harold said, still composed. "Will you be heading back to your hotel?"

"That's the plan... Is something the matter?"

"If you're up for it, I'd like us to have dinner together."

His gaze was still fixed on the windshield, but his eyes, as cold as the surface of a frozen lake, had narrowed a bit. For the first time, Echika noticed a shadow hanging over his expression. “After all, we won’t be seeing each other for a while after tomorrow.”

Echika couldn’t answer right away.

I knew it. This does bother him.

“...You think I have an appetite after seeing a corpse?” She’d intended it as a playful jab, but it came out pricklier than she wanted. “Well, you pick the place, then.”

“I’ll go with whatever you like,” Harold said. “Is there anything you’d like to eat right now?”

“Nutrient jelly.”

“Understood. I’ll choose after all.”

Ultimately, they ended up going to a nearby pub. It sat in a deserted back alley in Bloomsbury and was named after an existing duke. It had two entrances, as pubs often did. In the past, establishments such as these had been divided so the working class and middle class sat separately, and the separate doors were a vestige of that time.

The place was lit by honey-colored lamps, granting the interior a sleepy sort of atmosphere. As she sat at a table, Echika absentmindedly stared at customers seated politely by the bar, patiently awaiting their orders.

She asked for lemonade, which reflected back light as it wavered in her glass. Their food would arrive before long. Sitting opposite her, Harold downed a pint glass full of pale ale. The amber fluid was alcoholic, of course, but Amicus couldn’t get drunk, so it was effectively the same as a soft drink.

“Is drinking any fun when you can’t get tipsy?” Echika couldn’t help but ask.

“Yes. I’d be happier if they’d eventually add an intoxication feature to us, though.”

“Please no,” she moaned. She didn’t even want to imagine a drunk Harold.

“Speaking of which,” he said in his usual tone. “Did Professor Lexie tell you

any embarrassing stories about me?”

“Huh? Oh.” She’d completely forgotten about that after what happened with Marvin. “...What if I told you she did?”

“Incidentally, I happen to know some cringeworthy episodes from your past. Want me to share some?”

“Stop guessing. Even you can’t know that.”

“Oh, but I can. When you were in school, your classmate... Could you please stop glaring at me like you just killed three people?”

“Finish that sentence and you’ll be my fourth victim.”

“Yes, I think I’ll abstain.”

This bantering had a touch of escapism to it, and it was somehow suffocating. Echika sipped on her lemonade, trying to wash it all down. The possibility of linking Marvin with the attacks had been crushed by the RF Model they had seen, but they still had a clue in the form of the pattern on the knife grip. Even with Harold indisposed, the culprit could still surface from some other avenue. It could take some time, but there was no need to give up hope yet.

Echika kept telling herself that as a waiter Amicus approached them with their meal—a shepherd’s pie. The vegetables garnished over it were more vivid than usual. The Amicus placed another plate in front of Harold and left with a polite smile.

They had their meal, speaking idly about empty topics. Their shepherd’s pie consisted of mashed potatoes and minced meat, which were probably delicious, but Echika couldn’t really taste much. Only the sourness of the dish lingered on her tongue.

There was something she ought to tell Harold, but even she couldn’t quite ascertain what it was. She just couldn’t put the emotions properly into words.

In the end, Echika only found the ability to force it out when there was but a single forkful left of the pie.

“...I’ll definitely solve this case.”

Harold had finished his meal and was just putting away his knife and fork. As

always, his table manners were impeccable.

“I look forward to it,” he said.

“I’m not joking. I’ll clear your name and catch the perpetrator. And I’ll make sure to visit Daria, too,” Echika swore, the words leaving her lips at a rapid-fire pace for some reason. “So don’t worry... You don’t have to force yourself to act like nothing’s wrong when you’re anxious.”

I want to support you that way, too.

That’s what she’d really wanted to tell him, but she’d only managed to get a garbled version of it out of her mouth. In all likelihood, the sentiment behind her words hadn’t gotten through to him.

Harold fell silent for a while, seemingly in thought. The noise of the pub felt oddly amplified. Echika pushed what was left of her pie down her throat in an attempt to distract herself from it. After a while, Harold finally spoke up.

“Marvin was a badly made brother. He wasn’t very human.”

Echika’s hand froze as she went to pick up her glass.

“I last saw him six years ago, so I honestly can’t say there was that strong of a bond between us. Our perception of brotherly affection is different from what humans feel.”

“...I see.”

“But...he didn’t have to die like that.” Harold looked out the window, gazing at the gloomy back street that hardly had any car traffic. “It scares me, from time to time. You humans are terribly adept at keeping something of a savage animal hidden in your hearts.”

It was clear to Echika that he was conflating what had happened to Marvin with Sozon’s murder. Harold’s long lashes remained still and dry, but just how much rage was hidden behind them? Or maybe he wasn’t allowed to even harbor anger.

Echika couldn’t tell.

“I...” Pathetically enough, saying this was the best she could manage. “I don’t feel inclined to do anything like that, not one bit.”

“Yes... Pardon me. What I said was just a figure of speech. I’m well aware that you’re a virtuous human being,” he said, cracking a very natural smile. “So virtuous, in fact, that it worries me sometimes.”

“Huh?”

“Investigator.” Harold clasped his hands softly over Echika’s free hand. His expression was so sincere that she didn’t pull back immediately.

“Please take care of the rest for me.”

Before she knew it, ten o’clock had arrived. As both of them sat up at roughly the same time, Harold glanced at the wearable terminal on his wrist.

“My apologies, I’m getting a call... Wait for me outside, please.” With that said, he went to a telephone booth in the establishment.

The call was probably from Chief Totoki, who would be talking with Harold about turning himself in tomorrow. Left alone, Echika exited the pub. The cold wind blew the scent of frying oil and alcohol into her face. It felt good. Now that the sun was down, the spring warmth of the day had given way to chilly breezes.

She could still feel Harold’s fingers on her knuckles. Their weighty sensation made her grit her teeth. Once again, she felt the urge to smoke.

Can I really solve this?

Echika didn’t have Harold’s impressive deduction skills. Without him, she couldn’t even Brain Dive. In the end, she was getting as anxious about this as he was.

The foot traffic in the street had died down, leaving a suffocating silence in its place. Suddenly, she got a notification from her Your Forma.

<Audio call from Ui Totoki>

So that call Harold got wasn’t from her?

“Hieda speaking,” Echika answered, a bit confused.

“Sorry for calling you over and over,” Totoki said, audibly stressed. “I was

looking into Elphinstone College graduates just now—”

But the next moment, a hand snaked over from behind and clasped over her mouth. She felt someone plug a device into the port on the back of her neck, and the call cut off.



As Harold looked out the window of the telephone booth, his gaze suddenly settled on the building on the opposite side of the street. It was close enough that his optical device could see it clearly using the zoom feature. He saw people dining in the restaurant on the second floor. Among the customers was someone he recognized.

He was struck by silent shock—*why are they here?*

The other party hadn't noticed Harold yet. They seemed to be alone there, but this couldn't have been a coincidence. He certainly didn't get the impression that he was being followed. Or maybe he was being too careful.

What was their objective? Why would this person need to follow the two of them around?

As he thought things over, he moved his gaze back down—only to spot someone assaulting Echika.

Oh no. I got too distracted.

Harold bolted from the pub, but it was too late. The assailant stuffed Echika's limp body into a car they had parked nearby and got into the driver's seat. Before Harold could catch up to the attacker, they drove off.

“Investigator Hieda!”

An abduction, carried out in the span of a moment. Harold froze in shock. The street was completely silent, and only the streetlights pushed softly against the night sky.

Harold never expected the culprit to go this far. The next instant, he opened his terminal's holo-browser and tried to phone Totoki. Before he could do that, however, he got a call from the Chief.

“Aide Lucraft, something’s wrong with Hieda. She just hung up on me—”

“Chief, the perpetrator just kidnapped Echika.”

“...What?”

Harold followed up to recite the car’s license plate, which he’d clearly seen when it sped away.

3

When she came to, Echika saw only darkness. Soon, it dawned on her that she’d been blindfolded. When she tried to speak, she realized that a strip of cloth had been stuffed into her mouth. In fact, she couldn’t move any part of her body. She felt ropes digging into the skin of her limbs and abdomen; she must have been tied to a chair.

Echika broke into a cold sweat. What had just happened to her? How did she get here? Her mind blank with fear, she tried to piece her memory back together.

After leaving the pub, she’d gotten an audio call from Totoki. Then she’d felt someone attack her from behind. They blocked her mouth and nose, and she went unconscious as she tried to struggle. She couldn’t remember what came next.

Still, if nothing else, she was still alive.

Where am I, though?

She tried to operate her Your Forma, but it was offline. When Echika checked her task bar, she found that its signal was being blocked by the device that had been inserted into her neck. She opened the details tab, which displayed the words “Network Isolation Unit.”

It was a Your Forma exclusive device for situations when you wanted to force yourself offline and was used both by organizations that dealt in confidential data and by individuals going through digital detoxes. But the models available to the public for purchase online were set to go online once every few hours to ensure their personal safety.

In other words, if Echika waited a few hours, her GPS location would naturally reach Totoki and the bureau.

The question was, would she be able to pass those several hours safely?

She moved her neck, trying to shift the blindfold, but it wouldn't budge.

Aaah, dammit! Filled with helpless terror and irritation, she bit down on her gag.

Her attacker must have been behind the string of assaults. She couldn't think of anyone else who would do that. Echika had been careless to think the attacker wouldn't target her; she herself was deeply involved with an RF Model, too, after all. But unlike other cases, the culprit had opted to kidnap her over physically harming her. But to what end? And what should she do now?

Calm down.

Harold must have noticed she'd been kidnapped. With Totoki's help, he'd definitely find her.

Suddenly, she heard the sharp creak of a door opening. Her shoulders hunched reflexively.

Who's there?

Echika heard a pair of footsteps rush toward her. Her instincts raised an alarm in her head, screaming the words, "Stay away!" The next moment, the blindfold was pulled from her eyes.

"Don't say anything unnecessary."

Everything was blurry, since her eyes had been covered for so long. She couldn't make out what was around her. It was all so dim. Though she was indoors, it seemed like the lights were off.

"Electronic Investigator Echika Hieda," someone whispered in her ear. "Read this."

She finally realized who was behind her—it was an RF Model. Though she couldn't turn around and look them in the face, the voice was undoubtedly identical to Harold's. Confusion assailed her. Who was this?

As he took the gag from her mouth, he held a tablet before her eyes. Its light pushed away the dim darkness and burned Echika's retinas, sending sparks popping in her field of vision. Written on the tablet was a short English sentence.

"Read it," he demanded, repeating himself. "And if you say anything else..."

She felt something cold brush against the nape of her neck. She didn't need to look to know it was a knife.

This is awful. Give me a break...!

"...Ah..." At first, she couldn't speak properly. " 'I am Echika Hieda of the Electrocrime Investigations Bureau. If you wish for my safe return...analyze—' "

What is this?!

Despite the fear, Echika couldn't help but be overcome with shock at the sentence she just read.

" '...If you wish for my safe return, analyze Harold Lucraft's system code. Professor Lexie Willow Carter is lying to the IAEC. The RF Models are extremely dangerous Amicus.' "

What is this? What is he having me say?

" 'If you refuse to perform Harold's analysis by dawn, I will—,' " she continued, lips quivering. " 'I will never return to you.' "

In other words, he'll kill me.

The perpetrator then removed the tablet from her terrified gaze.

"You heard her, yes?" she heard him say. "If you cherish Investigator Hieda's life, you will have Professor Carter analyze Harold's system at once. Keep a close eye on her. She will definitely try to fool you."

The RF Model then said he would wait until six in the morning. He was probably on the phone with the Electrocrime Investigations Bureau, or Chief Totoki. According to her Your Forma clock, the time was currently two AM. Four hours left.

She was aware, of course, that the assaults had been escalating in severity,

yet it seemed the culprit wasn't just attacking people, but also abducting them to blackmail the Electrocrime Investigations Bureau into changing their approach. Just what was his endgame here?

Her brain was buckling under the panic, but she forced it into gear. If he was after Harold's system code, was he trying to plagiarize the next-generation all-purpose AI technology? If so, then why attack people to get it? Nothing made sense.

As Echika scrambled to make sense of the situation, the culprit once again forced the gag into her mouth. But her eyes were slowly adjusting to the dark, and the room was coming into view. It looked like an apartment living room. She could see an old, beat-up couch and a flexible television. Sitting on the table was an automatic pistol—Echika's Flamma 15. She glanced at the window, but it had been outfitted with a smoked-out photochromatic glass pane, so it was impossible to see outside.

"It's nice to meet you, Investigator Hieda," the culprit said, slowly walking into her view.

He looked just like the RF Model she'd seen in the Mnemosynes. He didn't have a mole, but his facial features were otherwise identical to Harold's, right down to his blond hair.

"It looks like the Electrocrime Investigations Bureau will give in to my demands," he said, utterly expressionless. He was gripping the folding knife she'd seen before. "Come dawn, you will go free."

Did he mean that literally, or...? Echika was struggling to keep her cool.

Look for an opening. It doesn't seem like he's going to keep me blindfolded any longer. If I can just get this device off my neck, Totoki should be able to trace my location...

"I'll take responsibility," he whispered, as if to himself. "This is how you lose, Lexie..."

Lexie? Is he talking about the professor?

The RF Model turned his back to her and walked toward the kitchen; Echika could only helplessly watch him leave. But what she saw that moment shocked

her.

What does this mean?

He had a connection port in the back of his neck, and much like Echika, a network isolation unit was attached to it. The thing was, Amicus didn't normally have connection ports in their necks. Different models had ports in different locations on their bodies, but never on the back of the neck, so as to distinguish them from humans.

But that wasn't true for the RF Model in front of her.

It can't be. Echika swallowed her breath in shock. *Did we approach this from the wrong angle?*

"Would you like something to drink, Investigator?"

The man returned from the kitchen, his tone more reserved compared to earlier. Looking at him now, he wasn't acting like someone holding another person hostage. Echika managed to nod. She could think later; right now, she needed to turn this situation around.

He returned after a few moments with a steaming beverage. Like earlier, he got behind her and undid her gag.

"Drink slowly. You don't want to burn yourself," he ordered, bringing the cup to Echika's lips. His hands moved closer.

Now!

She bit on his hand as hard as she could, causing him to drop the cup. The man tried to yank his arm back in surprise, but Echika doggedly sank her teeth into him. As they grappled, the chair she was bound to wobbled hard before toppling over. In that same instant, she saw something roll before her eyes.

A spherical HSB device. The network isolation unit that had been attached to her neck.

<Searching for network... Connection complete. Online status restored>

I did it...!

Clinging to a last strand of hope, Echika operated her Your Forma and sent her

GPS position to Totoki. The next moment, however, she felt herself being pinned down by the back of her neck. She could hardly breathe.

“That’s right...” The man’s voice blew against her. “I’d forgotten for a moment, but you’re not just a girl, are you?”

He inserted the isolation unit into her neck again, but her GPS position had already been forwarded. So long as she could buy time, she had this in the bag.

The man forced her back onto the chair. Her eyes settled on his, which were burning with intense irritation. With a *snap*, he unfolded the knife he took out of his pocket.

Echika had considered he might react to her resistance with anger, but he wouldn’t kill her until dawn. Her knowledge of this had allowed her to act, but honestly, it was something of a gamble. And in contrast to her cold, rational thoughts, she could feel all the blood drain from her face in fear.

“Trying to be nice to you was stupid of me,” the man said with a chillingly cold voice as he fixed his grip on the knife.

Then he grabbed Echika by her hair and tugged, like he was trying to rip it off.

Hang in there. He won’t kill you. Just hold on for a while longer. Totoki and the bureau will find you.

Still, seeing the knife draw closer sent an icicle of terror shooting down her spine.

“Please, don’t disobey.”

The tip of the blade inched closer to her face.

Just hurry up...! Echika squeezed her eyes shut.

She felt something cold brush against her cheek.

Hurry...!

“Freeze, Aidan Farman!”

The chill of the dagger disappeared. Feeling the man pull away from her,

Echika turned to look at the entrance in a daze. There stood several officers, guns drawn and slowly closing in. They silently crept forward.

Echika felt all the tension drain from her limbs as heat started to course through her frigid body.

They made it.

“Put the knife down, Farman. Hands behind your head!”

“Secure the hostage.”

“All clear! There’s no one here but him!”

“Investigator, are you all right?”

The officers called out, hurrying over to untie Echika. The moment she was released, she toppled limply off the chair. An officer pulled her up, allowing her to get back on her feet, while the other officers pinned down and handcuffed the man.

“I’ll take it off,” the officer said, removing the isolation unit from her neck. “There’s an ambulance on the way. You should let them do a checkup just in case—”

She was hardly listening to him. The RF Model pinned against the floor—or the man she’d thought was one—was still struggling. The officers pinned his face down. His blond hair shifted away, revealing dark brown locks beneath. His piercing eyes wandered about before eventually settling on Echika.

His personal data popped up.

<Aidan Farman. 32 years old. Affiliated with robot cleaning firm Lowell’s maintenance division>

We had it wrong the whole time. We kept assuming the culprit had to be an Amicus. And why wouldn’t we?

<History: Graduated Cambridge University’s Elphinstone College. Formerly employed in Novae Robotics Inc. HQ’s development lab as deputy head of the RF Model development team. Provided the appearance data for the RF Model>

Neither Professor Carter nor Novae said anything about the RF Models' appearance being based on a single person. Harold and the other RF Models probably didn't know anything about it, either. Ah, but still...

An inappropriate sense of relief washed over Echika.

The suspect wasn't an RF Model...

Now Harold won't have to surrender himself anymore.

As Echika was led from the apartment, the strong early-morning wind blew against her. The narrow residential road was congested with police cars, their lights making the street as bright as it would have been during daylight. She could see curious onlookers, likely residents woken up by the noise, looking in from the other side of the holo-tape.

"Wait here, please," said the officer accompanying her. "I'll bring paramedics over and—"

"Investigator Hieda!"

Echika turned to the voice calling to her, but her field of vision was soon blocked. She could feel a pair of hands wrap around her back. She realized after a moment that she'd just been embraced.

"Thank goodness you're all right." It was Harold. Though his body heat was lower than a human's, he felt surprisingly warm. "I'm so sorry we took so long."

She didn't push him away; she was simply that relieved.

"Aide Lucraft...", she said, surprised by the shiver in her voice. "The culprit wasn't an RF Model. It was the man who provided your appearance dat—"

"Yes, we've already looked into him. More importantly—"

"That clears the false charges on you."

"Yes, it does, Echika." Harold's hand touched her cheek. His clear features seemed stiffer than usual. "But you're bleeding. You need to be treated."

"I'm fine. He just nicked me a little." Echika realized she was pretty much letting him do whatever he wanted. "Did you...identify this place before I even

sent my GPS position?”

“We pinned it down to this district.”

“Ah-ha-ha...” She found herself smiling for no reason. She could have burst into tears right then and there. “You would come that close, wouldn’t you?”

“Still, you gave us the final bit we needed,” he said, softly pushing her back. “There’s an ambulance there. Let’s have them take a look at you.”

“No, I’m fine. Really. It’s nothing—”

But before she could finish that sentence, the emergency medical technicians the officers had called earlier approached her. Despite her refusal, Harold and the officers pretty much pushed her into the ambulance.

As they walked, he opened a holo-browser and contacted Chief Totoki. He gripped Echika’s hand hard, refusing to let go, and without even thinking about it, she squeezed his palm in return.

She didn’t immediately want to let go—because of the horrible experience she’d just been through, she reasoned to herself.

Let’s just leave it at that.

Before she got into the ambulance, Echika turned around despite herself. She could see Aidan Farman being pushed into a police car in the distance.

4

“Let me ask you one more time, Farman. Did you do it to tarnish Professor Carter’s reputation?”

Aidan Farman was seated at an austere-looking table in the interrogation room of the Electrocime Investigations Bureau’s London branch. Looking at him under the light made it clear that while his complexion was the same as Harold’s, his teeth stuck out a bit more. And between his unkempt brown hair and his thick glasses, it was hard to assume with a glance that the RF Models had been made in his likeness.

“I see you were quite close with the professor during your time in Elphinstone,” Investigator Aide Ross of the London branch said. “You became a

Novae employee at the same time she did and served as deputy head of the newly established RF Model development team. But you ended up leaving the team before the RF Models were complete due to disagreements with the professor... Was this one-sided grudge of yours what drove you to commit the crimes?"

Farman's well-shaped lips remained pursed.

"I've heard you two were good friends, but did you harbor some kind of special feelings for her?"

He only met Investigator Aide Ross's insinuation with a hollow stare.

"There are records of you trying to incriminate the professor under false charges. Have you held a grudge against her for that long?"

Farman simply remained silent and lowered his eyes. He'd been like that the whole time. Looking at him through the one-sided mirror, Echika couldn't help but heave a sigh.

"Looks like he's dead set on remaining silent," she said.

"What a headache." Harold sighed beside her. "What did the professor say during her voluntary questioning?"

Echika thought back to Professor Carter's interview, which she'd just attended earlier in the branch's first floor meeting room. The professor had sat opposite the police investigators, like a child caught during a prank. Echika stood against the wall, watching her.

"Professor Carter," one of the interrogators said formally. "Are you saying the possibility of Aidan Farman being the culprit of the assault incidents hadn't crossed your mind whatsoever?"

"It did not," Professor Carter replied, her lips pursed. "Aidan never had the kind of showy air the RF Models do... And besides, you wouldn't imagine someone would do something as stupid as impersonating an Amicus, would you?"

"And yet that exact thing happened, which is why we called you," the interrogator said, without so much as a smile. "Did it not occur to you even

when Electronic Investigator Hieda approached you in your home about the weapon? Farman was a graduate of Elphinstone College, just like you.”

“I’m afraid I don’t think about him much...so it slipped my mind.”

“Still, Farman contributed his appearance data to the RF Models. Are you sure you didn’t so much as consider the possibility it could have been him?”

“This might make you think me stupid, but no, I did not.”

An Amicus’s appearance was usually made up of a hodgepodge of several people’s features. This was for ethical reasons, of course—to prevent the creation of a doppelgänger. No one would want to see an Amicus wearing their face do menial labor like cleaning or housework.

But Professor Carter had perfectly copied Aidan Farman’s appearance for the RF Models to use. Novae Robotics Inc. knew this and had obtained Farman’s consent to employ his likeness, so it must have been an exception because he was a member of the development team. And much like the professor, Novae hadn’t tied Farman to the crime, either.

“Let’s put this another way.” Professor Carter languidly scratched her scalp. “This incident took place just as we were investigating Steve’s malfunction. So it only makes sense that the first suspect to come to mind would be Marvin, right? Jumping to the conclusion it was Aidan would be insane.”

This was especially true for Novae, what with the PR nightmare caused by the tabloids still fresh in their memories. One couldn’t blame them for being so distracted they’d fail to make a composed decision.

“Then why did you use Farman’s appearance data as is for the RF Models?”

“...Is that relevant to this case?”

“Did you have any special feelings for the suspect?”

“As if.” Professor Carter shrugged in a fed up fashion. “I’ve known him for a long time, so I did it out of respect. Besides that, it was a matter of personal taste and preference. His face was too handsome; it would have been a waste to leave it on a human.”

“I...see,” the interrogator said, furrowing their brow ever so slightly.

“However...prior to the RF Models’ completion, Farman resigned from the development team, due to disagreements with you. Apparently, he’d never encountered a completed RF Model Amicus.”

“Where did you get that information?” Professor Carter asked.

“We conducted an online interrogation with other members of the development team.”

“Wow, what a bunch of blabbermouths. They really do hate me, don’t they...?”

“Apparently, he’s tried to have you convicted. Is that true?”

“Yes, yes, it’s true.” Professor Carter casually leaned on the back of her chair. “After he quit, Aidan started finding fault with everything I did... I suppose he must have really disliked me.”

Echika remembered what Chairman Talbot had said during the meeting the other day.

“I hear that during the RF Models’ development, being on your team was hell. And that out of all the senior officers, you were the only one to get prosecuted after it was disbanded.”

There was a disagreement between Professor Carter and Aidan with regard to the RF Models’ development.

“Would you be so kind as to tell me what those disagreements were about?”

“It’d be hard, given that they involved company secrets. But it wasn’t anything major. It was a pretty mediocre, dull reason...from my perspective, at least.”

Farman left the development team and tried to have the professor convicted through false charges, but the prosecution fell through for insufficient evidence. And according to Professor Carter, in the nine years since the commotion simmered down, she hadn’t been in contact with him at all.

“In other words, I had no idea where he was or what he was doing. What’s he do nowadays again? Maintenance work for a cleaning company? He seems a bit overqualified for that kind of job, given he has a doctorate...”

At that moment, Professor Carter's eyes took on a sympathetic quality. If nothing else, it didn't seem like the kind of look one would have when speaking of a person they were on bad terms with.

Finished relaying what she had seen to Harold, Echika exhaled through her nose.

"It didn't seem to me like she was lying. Then again, I don't have your discerning eye."

"I wish I could have been present, too." Harold hadn't been allowed to attend her voluntary questioning because he was deemed too close to her. "But at present, I don't see any reason the professor would try to cover for Farman, so I can only assume she was speaking the truth."

"Agreed. Except...I think the professor should have at least told you and your brothers about the person who donated their likeness to you."

"By the time I was completed, Farman had already left the development team. I can understand not wanting to bring him up if their relationship had broken."

"And you think that's why he's holding his tongue now?"

"Who's to say? It's hard to know for sure." Harold squinted as he looked into the one-way mirror. "It's clear he's gripped by a great deal of resignation. Not uncommon among suspects who've been placed under arrest."

"His crime failing burned him out...I suppose."

Ten minutes later, Totoki sent them the Brain Dive warrant, as Aide Ross continued speaking to Farman patiently.

"I just hope Diving into Farman will give us something to prove his motive," Totoki's holo-model said with a hint of anxiety. "Hieda, if you feel like this is too much for you, don't be ashamed to ask another Diver to handle it."

"I can make the Dive, no problem," Echika replied stoutly.

"All right... Just don't push yourself."

Totoki was concerned, since Echika had been kidnapped the night prior. Echika hadn't reflected on it very deeply, but being taken hostage was a

harrowing experience, and many victims developed symptoms of emotional trauma as a result of the fear they underwent. Thankfully, that didn't seem to be the case with her. Echika's compatibility as an electronic investigator meant she had a genetic resistance to stress, which may have been a contributing factor.

Still, there was no denying she'd gone through something terrifying.

"I think using a genius Diver like you is more than this situation demands, but I'll be counting on you."

When Echika and Harold entered the interrogation room, Aide Ross began the preparations at once, as if he was relieved to see them come in. He carried Farman over to a simple bed and had him lie down. Farman remained completely docile as Echika applied the sedative.

But just as she was about to connect the Brain Diving cord to his neck—

"Investigator Hieda."

Farman's eyes regained some of their light. And as he stared straight at her, she realized something. His irises were rusted over; they looked nothing like Harold's lakelike orbs.

"Trace all the way back the past, please."

And after saying that, Aidan Farman closed his eyes and surrendered himself to the sedatives.

Normally, when Brain Diving into a suspect, an electronic investigator was obligated to only inspect Mnemosynes related to the incident. The bureau's stance was that even suspects had a right to fundamental human dignity and privacy.

"You have no reason to do as he asks," Harold chimed in from the side. "He might be trying to push for sympathy by showing you more of his past. As resigned as he looks, it doesn't seem like he's accepted his arrest."

So he's trying to appeal to my sympathies to have his verdict lessened. Not that I'd fall for that.

Completing the triangle connection, Echika looked up at Harold.

“Are you ready, Aide Lucraft?”

“Whenever you are. I’ll have you know I intend to pull you back up quickly, though. You look pale.”

“...Don’t interrupt me because of that.”

It crossed her mind that Harold was being overprotective. And indeed, he was as worried about her as Totoki was. That brought up the memory of how he’d hugged her tightly outside the flat; suddenly, she felt strangely awkward. On top of that, she hadn’t let go of his hands at the time; in fact, she’d gripped them harder, and in public, at that.

I can’t believe myself. How was I so weak-willed back there? I want to bury myself.

“What’s wrong?” Harold noticed her suddenly deflate. “Are you feeling unwell?”

“No! I’m fine. Forget it really.”

After letting out that rapid-fire string of words, Echika coughed dryly and shifted her gaze from a very doubtful-looking Harold. Amicus never forget what they see, so if nothing else, she wished he wouldn’t have dredged those memories up.

Right now, dealing with Farman was far more important. They’d finally found their suspect, so she needed to focus on him. She exhaled once.

“Let’s begin, Aide Lucraft.”

Seeing Harold nod, she closed her eyes.

She started her silent free fall. At that moment, she could feel complicated thoughts blow past her, and her field of vision opened up. A sea of electrons spread out around her arms.

She made her way to Farman’s surface Mnemosynes.

The first thing she saw were his memories of abducting her the previous night. Echika saw herself tied to the chair. As she beheld herself, a strained sense of pressure filled her skull, and it felt like the edge of her vision was warping. It was suffocating, like she was restraining every possible emotion at

once. Something within Farman was screaming out.

Guilt? Conflict?

"Forgive me." She heard a whisper. *"I didn't mean to hurt you."* *"I had to."*
"What the hell am I doing?" *"This is necessary..."* *"I have to do this."*

What am I seeing? Echika couldn't mask her surprise.

These didn't seem like the kind of thoughts and feelings the perpetrator of a serial murder case would harbor. Just what sort of psychological state was he in?

The flow of Mnemosynes continued. Echika was now in the pub, at the moment she'd opened the door and stepped outside. Farman was watching her from his car, parked by the curb.

"I can snatch her now," he thought.

Wait. He had me marked as his target from the very beginning?

Feeling confused, Echika tried to piece the facts together. A day after attacking Daria, Farman had discovered Harold and set his sights on his partner, Echika. No, at first, he'd been conflicted? He'd considered abducting Harold instead but had deemed it too difficult.

Much like the Your Forma, Amicus were equipped with GPS functionality. To shut it down, you needed to order them to turn it off. If that wasn't possible, you would need to shut the Amicus down by force. However, it took all their processes roughly ten minutes to shut down, during which time their GPS position would continue to be transmitted.

Kidnapping an Amicus wasn't easy.

So he'd decided to go after Echika instead. He trailed her in the hotel, in the bureau, in Novae's headquarters. Waiting for a moment she would be alone. The opening Echika had showed back then was his long-awaited opportunity.

But realizing this made Echika wonder. She'd only happened to be alone there because she'd stepped out of the pub, and she only did it because Harold got a call... And what did Harold tell her at the time?

"Wait for me outside, please."

No, that can't be. Echika felt her heart sink.

But come to think of it, Harold was the one who invited her to that pub. The place was set in a relatively deserted back street, where security drones rarely patrolled. He hadn't explained why he chose that place in particular. But at the time, Harold couldn't clear the false charges levied on him, and he would need to surrender himself the following morning. Anyone could see that he was cornered.

But then the flow of Mnemosynes crackled. Echika shuddered. She knew what this was—a countercurrent. But it couldn't be; she'd been much more adept at controlling her Brain Diving lately. Did that momentary hint of anxiety cause this? It couldn't be. That would mean she was weak.

"Echika."

Her sister's bell-like voice, which she hadn't heard in a long while, felt all too nostalgic to her ears. Matoi's fluffy hair swayed as she turned to look at Echika. Her cherubic face was curled up in a smile.

"I'll hold your hand."

No, I've gotten over this already. I'm fine now. I can walk on my own.

And so she pulled her hand away from Matoi.

I'm fine now—I have to get back. Yes.

She turned the rudder with a sheer force of will, changing course back to Farman's Mnemosynes. It made her sick to her stomach for some reason. She traced back his memories, checking his online activities at the same time. She looked through his online shopping history and saw how he'd bought the wig, foundation, and other cosmetics for the crime. On top of that, she found evidence of the colored contacts, isolation units, and rope.

Then Echika checked his mailbox, discovering a few dozen unread messages, all of them from his workplace at the cleaning company. Apparently, he'd taken off work without permission for the duration of the incident. His company had already deemed him a hopeless case, and Farman had been ghosting them, since he realized he was about to be let go.

Was carrying out these assaults more important to him than his job?

She traced the Mnemosynes back to the RF Model assault incidents. The screams of the victims filled her mind one by one; Echika wished she could plug her ears.

“Not yet?”

Each time Farman attacked a victim, he kept searching for articles about his deed online.

“Still nothing?”

He checked news videos and even the local tabloids.

“Why isn’t it being reported?”

Irritation and panic burned through him.

“Is it still not enough?”

“Simply assaulting people related to the RF Models isn’t enough—I need to hurt civilians.”

But even after he’d stabbed Daria, the incidents didn’t gain any media coverage.

“I have to change my tactics.”

“I found Harold.”

“So next time, I’ll ramp things up.”

Echika groaned. The more extreme his crimes became, the more his doubt and guilt weighed on him. His emotions beat down on his heart, hard enough to flatten it. He kept ordering himself—don’t feel anything. Don’t feel anything. Don’t.

The particularities of his situation were different, but the way he was trying to suppress his emotions wasn’t much different from how Echika had acted when she was younger, when she’d tried to live like a machine. He’d been driven to do this, convincing himself to go that far in his pursuit of his crime. But what were his motives? Where did it all stem from?

What bothered her the most was that Farman’s Mnemosynes didn’t show

records of even the smallest grudge toward Professor Carter. They were instead drenched by something heavier. Every night before he went to sleep, he thought of it. Of what he'd do once the time came. Maybe he could do this, maybe that. And the regret filling his heart kept him awake at night. Time and again, even in his dreams, he saw her.

A dream so vivid it was almost reality—of a girl sitting under the shade of a tree, her hair a bluish-brunette, and her eyes behind silver-rimmed glasses.

Echika could tell that this was Lexie Willow Carter in her university days.

“Lexie,” Farman called out to her. She turned her eyes to him.

That was all the dream was about. And yet it was shining with light, like a star. Before she knew it, Echika sank into his medium-level Mnemosynes, eventually arriving at earlier memories.

A familiar sight filled her eyes.

“Royal Amicus fired at human officer!”

The moment Farman saw the tabloid headline about Steve's case, he choked up for a moment.

“Why?”

“After all this time?”

A sensation expanded in his heart, like a droplet of water. Was it resolve? Deep down, a part of him grew determined to cause this incident. He contacted the reporter who had written that article to gather information on the members of the Special Development Department.

In other words, it was that article that had set the coals aflame within Farman.

Aide Ross had called it a grudge, but Echika wasn't so sure anymore. There was no sign of any enmity in his Mnemosynes. Quite the contrary, there was a faint—how could she express this emotion? She felt something much more brittle, so gentle that it might crumble if she touched it.

But then she felt herself being reeled up. The Brain Diving cord was unplugged, returning Echika to the interrogation room. Harold had decided that

there was no need for her to plunge any deeper. She had, indeed, uncovered all the details of the incident and gathered enough evidence to determine his motive and modus operandi.

And yet his emotions still gave her pause.

“That tabloid inspired him to commit those assaults.” Harold’s voice pulled Echika back into reality. “Seeing that gossip must have made him believe he could take advantage of Professor Lexie’s failure. Aide Ross’s interrogation was pretty much accurate.”

As a Belay, Harold didn’t perceive the emotions contained in the Mnemosynes. The only one who could sense them was the Diver, or Echika in this case. She couldn’t blame him for coming to that conclusion, given the information he had.

“You might be right... But something feels off,” Echika said.

“What’s the matter?”

“He doesn’t have a grudge against Professor Lexie,” she corrected, glancing at Farman as she pulled out the Lifeline. The sedatives were very effective; he was still fast asleep. “If I had to say, he committed these crimes because of... How do I put it? Something close to a sense of responsibility.”

“Are you saying his actions and emotions don’t line up?”

“Yeah... Maybe I should have Dived deeper in.”

“Or we could send him to psychoanalysis?” Harold proposed.

Harold had a point. It was possible for suspects suffering from some sort of mental disorder to commit crimes without being driven by feelings of spite. There were cases where people committed murder out of distorted feelings of love or an unexplained sense of purpose and duty. Echika couldn’t rule out the possibility that Farman had some form of mental illness.

“Fine, I’ll have him applied for analysis.” She nodded.

“By the way, Investigator?” Harold suddenly asked, looking oddly concerned. “I noticed that you experienced a countercurrent for the first time in a while when you were Diving. Are you sure you’re not feeling unwell...?”

“I’m fine.” Echika cut him off. “Just a little sleep-deprived, is all.”

She insisted on not looking him in the eye, so Harold didn’t pursue the matter any deeper. Still, the realization she’d arrived at in the Mnemosynes still tore at her deep down, like a bone stuck in her throat.

A bone she couldn’t dislodge.

With the Brain Diving finished, Echika and Harold descended to the first floor, where they found Professor Carter using a tablet on one of the sofas in the lounge. Noticing the pair, she got up and approached them.

“Hey, you two.”

“Professor. You haven’t gone home yet?”

“I heard you were Brain Diving into Aidan. I’m curious about what you found.”

Echika thought back to the emotions she’d experienced in Aidan Farman’s Mnemosynes. The faint feelings he harbored for Professor Carter were a far cry from resentment.

“I’m afraid that’s confidential,” Harold informed her. “We can’t reveal the contents of the Brain Dive.”

“I know that, of course,” Professor Carter said. “I was just wondering...if Aidan’s doing well.”

Her tone was somewhat out of place; she’d asked that less with the attitude of someone inquiring about a suspect under arrest and more like someone who was interested in the state of a friend who’d been placed in an inpatient facility.

Back during her voluntary interview, Professor Carter had insisted she didn’t care much about Farman, but had that just been an act?

“Physically speaking, he’s fine,” Echika replied. “It’s just... We want him to go through psychoanalysis, so we’ll be admitting him to the city medical center tomorrow.”

“Psychoanalysis?” Professor Carter looked surprised. “He’s a bit overly serious, sometimes creepily so... But I don’t think he’s that far gone.”

“Either way, that shouldn’t concern you, Professor,” Harold admonished her gently.

“Yes, I suppose so,” she said.

“Professor?” Echika finally managed to bring herself to ask. “You don’t have to answer this, but...just what was your relationship with Aidan Farman?”

The question shocked Professor Carter.

“You listened in on my questioning earlier, right, Investigator? Like I said, we were friends. Used to be, at least.”

“But was your relationship perhaps more intimate than that?”

“Huh? No, no.” Professor Carter scratched her cheek awkwardly. “If I had to put it in words, I’d say we were best friends. He was about the only person I could talk to who was on my level... But that relationship’s already broken. And clearly, he resented me enough to go through with those assaults.”

Echika threw a glance at Harold, who nodded. As far as he could tell, Professor Carter wasn’t lying. In which case, she had no ulterior motives here.

“Well, if he’s doing well, that’s good.” Professor Carter cracked a somewhat lonely grin. “Anyway, I’ll be heading back. Starting tomorrow, I’ll be going back to helping the investigation into Marvin.”

Professor Carter exited the entrance hall with hurried steps. As she did, she gently called out to the surveillance Amicus standing there. She must have been concerned for Farman in her own way. Seeing an old friend betray her twice over must have shaken her on some level.

“Investigator.” Harold turned to Echika. “What was the meaning of those questions just now?”

“Oh, nothing, just...checking something out of personal interest,” Echika replied, unable to look him in the face. “We should be visiting Daria after this, right? Let’s get going.”

With those words, she walked off like she was trying to run away from him. As she did, she could feel Harold’s stare pierce her back. It hurt.

“For the time being, you two don’t have a role to play anymore. Depending on the results of Farman’s analysis, we might need you to do a second Brain Dive, but you should be able to take tomorrow off, regardless.”

Chief Totoki’s figure was squeezed into the holo-browser in Harold’s terminal. Curled up on her lap in its usual position was her beloved cat, Ganache, its tail swishing lazily.

“Still...I can imagine you won’t be able to relax until Daria regains consciousness.”

“Yes...,” Harold said with a faint smile. “By the way, what about Marvin?”

“I asked them to keep me posted about any developments, but given they haven’t called, well... I guess that speaks for itself.”

“I see,” Harold said, holding back a sigh. “I wish I could be involved with the investigation. It would have been much better than leaving it to the local police.”

“True, it would have helped to have you inspect things,” Echika said, seated next to him. She understood how he felt, but this was outside their jurisdiction, and out of their hands. “But it would be difficult for the bureau to take on another case outside their authority. Especially since Marvin’s case doesn’t have any clear connection to Farman’s.”

“I understand that, of course. I was just speaking out of personal attachment.”

“I’ll keep you posted if anything comes up,” Totoki reassured him. “And Hieda, you’re not allowed to push yourself. Understood?”

“I’m absolutely fine.” Echika peered into the browser. “Don’t worry about me too much, Chief.”

“Don’t act tough after what you went through. Even animals can experience trauma. Like little Ganache here—he ate real cat food a while ago, an—”

“That sounds awful yes got it I’ll be sure to rest up,” Echika quickly

interjected.

“Good. If you start feeling bad, speak to a therapist as soon as you can.”

The holo-browser closed, leaving behind an afterimage of her overprotective superior. Echika departed the London branch and walked along the Thames. The medical center Daria was hospitalized in was a fifteen-minute walk away.

“You didn’t have to act so flustered,” Harold said, unable to hold back a smile. “Even the Chief wouldn’t send you cat pictures at a time like this.”

“Gotta beat her to the punch,” Echika asserted, her eyes fixed ahead. “Once she gets rolling, there’s no stopping her.”

The sky darkened as night fell, and dazzling lights illuminated the city. The River Thames sparkled like it was littered with stars, and as they crossed the Millennium Bridge, it shone blue. St. Paul’s Cathedral stood imposingly in the distance. Despite the inappropriate MR ads that were popping up, it was a gorgeous sight.

“By the way, Investigator,” Harold remarked as he fixed his gaze on Echika. “How are your wounds healing?”

Remembering the nick on her cheek, Echika raised a hand to it. Farman had sliced it with his knife, and it was now plastered over with suture tape. Thankfully, the cut was shallow, so the chances of its leaving a scar were slim.

“It’s fine. Doesn’t even hurt anymore...,” she said, but her jaw trembled despite herself.

She suppressed a question in her heart: *Why are you asking me that?*

The emotions that had been churning inside her ever since the countercurrent were fit to burst. Harold must have clued in to how she was feeling a long time ago, but despite that, he was pretending like he wasn’t aware for some reason. Normally, he’d see right through her with irritating accuracy and speed. The fact he wasn’t doing that now was all the more unnerving.

“Aide Lucraft.” Echika stopped in her tracks, and Harold paused a few steps behind her.

“Yes?”

“I know you can see through everyone.” Her throat clenched up in spite of her best efforts. “So you...probably noticed, didn’t you?”

He’d realized that Aidan Farman was following them the day she was kidnapped. Echika thought back to Farman’s Mnemosynes—to abduct her, he’d exchanged his rental car to follow them the whole day. To be precise, he’d tailed them from the time that Echika left the hotel, meeting Harold and visiting Professor Carter’s domicile, up until they went into that pub.

As uncomfortable as it was to admit, Echika hadn’t noticed Farman at all. But Harold must have noticed they were being followed.

“Once Daria got involved, you were determined to catch the culprit no matter the costs,” Echika asserted, unconsciously stuffing her hands into the pockets of her coat. “But when Marvin’s body was discovered, you had to agree to turn yourself in, which would mean you wouldn’t be able to be involved with the incident anymore... So you decided to accelerate the investigation. When you clued in to the fact that Farman was following us, you used me as bait to get him arrested.”

Harold furrowed his brows slightly.

“...What are you saying?”

“Don’t play dumb. I already know everything.”

“I think you’re under a major misconception here. I didn’t realize Farman was following us.”

“Show me your terminal’s call history, then.” Echika squinted and glared at him. “You didn’t get a call back there in the pub. You lied about that to isolate me.”

Harold didn’t deny her assertion. The confusion on his fair complexion melted away, replaced by a cold, emotionless expression. She knew that face. It was the same one he’d made when he exposed the contents of Echika’s nitro-case necklace during the sensory crime.

In all likelihood, this was his true face.

The hubbub of the people walking by the riverside receded like a shadow.

“Very well. I admit it,” he relented, his voice almost cruelly calm. “I used you as bait, yes. Like you guessed, the call was a lie.”

Aaah. Echika felt her knees buckle under her weight. *Why did I trust him without ever once doubting him?*

She told herself it was because she’d no grounds to doubt him. But some other, oddly calm part of her mind retorted that the sensory crime case had already taught her this. That he was a machine who would resort to these methods. So this shouldn’t have come as a surprise. And yet...

For some reason, she couldn’t breathe properly.

“Investigator, please let me say this in my defense.” Harold kept his tone firmly reeled in, making it difficult to read his emotions. “I had no intention of letting you get kidnapped. My Laws of Respect wouldn’t have allowed me to expose you to danger. I’d planned on drawing Farman to where I could see him and having you arrest him.”

The fact that Harold thought this was an acceptable excuse was terribly mechanical of him.

“And yet you used me as bait just the same.”

“...Yes. You’re right.” He lowered his eyes. “I’m sorry.”

Suddenly, the wound on her cheek throbbed and burned. Daria was family to him. She could understand why he was so fixated on the investigation. At least, she thought she did, and so Echika tried to put herself in his shoes and support him.

But at the same time, some part of her had to wonder: *Just what had this Amicus been thinking?*

When Farman had kidnapped her, she could only pray as she waited for rescue. She’d risked her life to transmit her GPS position, believing Harold and the others would find her. And when she was rescued from the flat, she was filled with indescribable relief.

The comfort she’d felt when Harold hurried over and embraced her with his

mechanical body heat had been enormous.

She'd believed in it so obediently, not knowing what the person whose hand she'd squeezed back was really planning. Her eyes felt hot. She was so embarrassed, she wished the earth would just open up and swallow her where she stood.

I'm nothing but a total idiot.

"Why?" The words left her lips before she could stop herself. "Why didn't you tell me about it? You didn't have to play me like that. If you'd just informed me that you wanted me to act as a decoy to draw Farman out, I would have helped you."

Harold stared at her in amazement for a long while.

"That...hadn't occurred to me."

"What are you saying?" A strained smile came to her lips. "It didn't occur to you? What didn't? We're partners, aren't we? We're supposed to consult each other—"

But as she went on, she realized that *of course* it wouldn't occur to him. Harold only saw humans as pawns on a board. This wasn't new to her. Her letting go of Matoi had all been part of his calculations.

But Echika was fine with that. He had saved her, after all. But now, for the first time, it felt like she really understood how terrifying his attitude was.

"And even though Harold does think, he uses different thought processes than we do."

Professor Carter's words popped into her head again. Unlike mass-produced Amicus, the RF Models were capable of independent thought, but they were still a black box. There was no way of understanding how their minds worked.

One thing was clear: His system of values was all too different from her human one. Echika had begun to see Harold as her partner, but she imagined he didn't feel the same way.

"I'm sorry." The Amicus's voice pulled Echika out of her thoughts. "You're right, I should have consulted you about it. It won't happen again—"

“Is that really what you think?” Echika cut him off.

She should have taken him at his word. Regardless of the means, he had gotten Farman arrested, so there would be no more victims. And Echika herself had come away largely unharmed, so she should have accepted his apology.

But she couldn't. Her emotions were overflowing despite herself.

“You'd just do the same thing again, without considering what might happen to me. No matter how angry I get, you think you can just smooth it all over with sweet words like you always do.” *Ah, I wish I could stop, but I can't. My heart feels as though it might tear apart.* “I know. Farman only got caught thanks to your plan. And I need you to do my job as a Diver. But still, I...I need to sort my feelings out.”

“Investigator. Please, hear me out, I—”

“Sorry, but I can't go visit Daria with you... Leave me be for today.”

How did Harold react to that? She couldn't look him in the eye. Keeping her head hung, Echika turned back in the direction she'd come from and ran off. The distant sense she had of people passing by only seemed to salt the wound. The night breeze flowing past her was gentle—so gentle it was almost mocking.

Why do I feel so hurt?

Harold was a machine. No matter how human he acted, no matter how much he was built to react to human emotions, he didn't truly understand how people felt. That much was obvious, so she shouldn't have expected anything of him.

How easy this would all be if Echika could convince herself of that. But she could tell that at some point, she'd come to trust Harold. She wanted to see him as a partner, as an equal.

But no matter how much she yearned to close that distance, they were two fundamentally different beings.

That night, the general medical center's ICU was, as always, saturated with the electronic beeping of its patients' vitals. Like before, Daria lay in her bed

and showed no signs of waking up. The oxygen mask over her mouth repeatedly alternated between going from cloudy to clear.

Her faint breathing was his only hope—so Harold thought as he clutched her hand, counting her breaths. Daria was the person he most wanted to keep safe, someone he had to protect. That was what he'd sworn the day Sozon was buried.

This was why he couldn't have afforded to be taken off the investigation due to that false accusation. He didn't have the time to blindly scavenge for pieces of the puzzle. Thinking that, he'd resorted to a means of forcing the perpetrator out.

Using Echika as bait.

In all honesty, he hadn't expected Aidan Farman to abduct her. At the time, Harold had been occupied with a separate individual who was trailing them, which was why he'd failed to notice what had happened. On top of that, Totoki's call to Echika created a major opening for Farman.

The image of his partner leaving him behind was burned into his eyes. She'd been on the verge of tears. He'd hurt her greatly, that much was clear. The temperature of his circulatory fluid rose slightly.

None of this would have been a problem if Echika hadn't discovered his plan. But since he'd exposed his capabilities to her, the fact that she caught on to him shouldn't have come as a surprise.

I have to admit, that was naive of me. I panicked.

"If you'd just informed me that you wanted me to act as a decoy to draw Farman out, I would have helped you."

The thing was, the scenario Echika had suggested genuinely never crossed his mind. Up until now, he'd always done things like this alone, without anyone else realizing. It was the safest route to success. More importantly, most people wouldn't approve of the methods he sometimes stooped to; they would call them immoral. And he thought Echika, to whom he'd revealed that secret once before, would feel the same.

That was why he'd tried to do everything alone this time, too.

But this was the outcome. Echika seemed offended she'd gotten kidnapped, but mostly because Harold had never shared anything with her.

But why?

He couldn't understand. Where did he go wrong? Which path would have led him to the correct answer?

"Leave me be."

His system conjectured that it was entirely plausible Echika might try to call off their partnership.

Ugh, I really blew it this time. I'd rather not have to lose her again.

What should I do?

But in the end, he couldn't come up with an answer. It occurred to Harold that perhaps he hadn't seen through Echika after all.

*

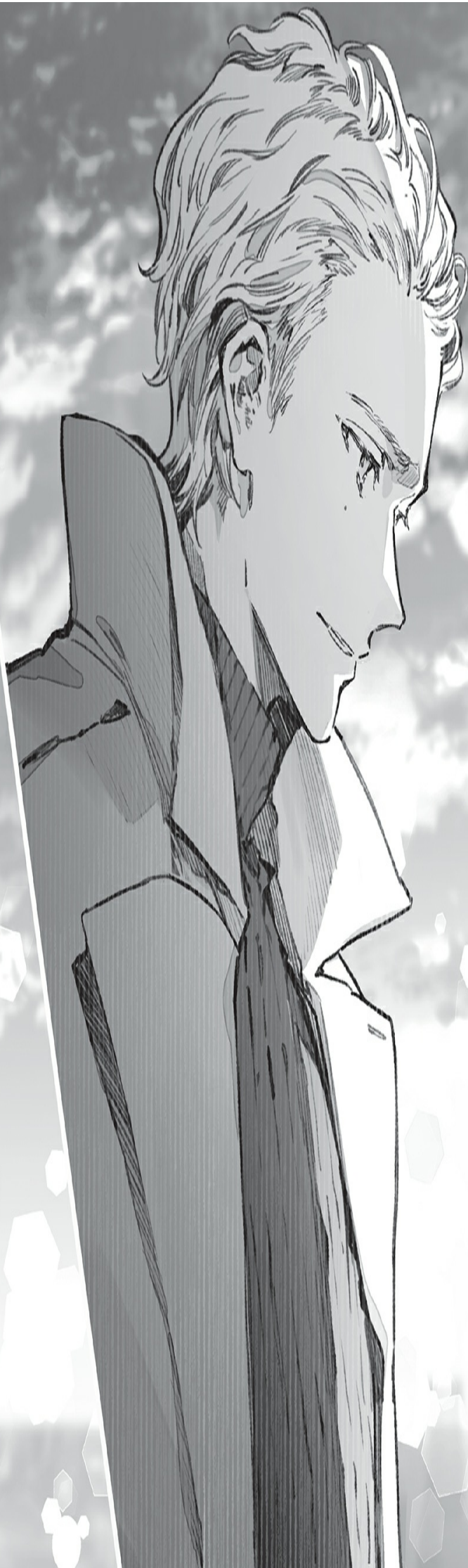
The following morning, the news came in. Multiple vehicles belonging to the London branch had gotten into a series of car accidents. Among them was the car transporting Aidan Farman.

And in the chaos of the crash, he'd managed to make his escape.

YOUR FORMA

Chapter 3

We Are in a Small, Doorless Room



Chapter 3

We Are in a Small, Doorless Room

1

Word of Aidan Farman's escape hit Echika like a bolt from the blue.

She got the news when she was lying curled up in her hotel bed. Her argument with Harold the evening prior had obliterated her mood, so she decided to use her day off to laze around in bed, then visit Daria come evening.

But then that bit of nightmarish news reached her.

She couldn't believe it.

"This is impossible. What were you doing?"

The London branch of the Electrocrime Investigations Bureau's meeting room was now occupied by the people involved with Farman's investigation: Echika, Harold, and Aide Ross's team. Totoki's office in the Lyon headquarters was being projected onto the flexible screen on the wall.

"Explain yourselves," the Chief said, unable to mask her irritation. "Aide Ross?"

"Yes?" he replied, looking quite pale. "As you know, we were scheduled to deliver Farman to the medical center today... But during the transfer, the car taking him there ended up in an accident."

"I know that. What I want to know is how that happened in a vehicle that uses an automatic driving system?"

"Well, the branch's security Amicus all seemed to malfunction at once... Five different crashes took place simultaneously because of that. Every vehicle with an Amicus behind the wheel ended up in an accident."

"Did you ask Novae for an analysis?"

“Their preliminary inspection revealed that the Amicus’s driving module settings were modified. Someone messed with them using the branch’s IoT link, but the thing is, only Amicus have gone in or out of the security room with the management PC...”

“What about their Laws of Respect? A car accident could put humans in danger. Didn’t their Laws go off?”

“No, they didn’t, but Novae doesn’t know why yet.”

“Anyway, show me how Farman escaped.”

“I’ll share the security drone footage.”

All of their Your Formas—as well as Harold’s wearable terminal—displayed the footage from Aide Ross. A video overlooking the city streets played out before Echika’s eyes. The scene was near Trafalgar Square, and the roads were quite congested due to the morning rush.

Thanks to the automatic driving system, the traffic flowed without the cars getting backed up. A few seconds later, however, a van flew out from the lower left side of the footage. The term “flew out” was an apt description of its speed. It was clear at a glance that the car belonged to the Electrocime Investigations Bureau.

The van proceeded to collide with the surrounding automobiles one by one, pushing its way through. Car horns blared from every which way as damaged vehicles were pushed onto the sidewalk. Pedestrians screamed out in terror.

What is this?

“Thankfully, there were no casualties, but...one of the investigators in the vehicle was severely injured.”

The footage switched angles a few times, after which they saw the runaway vehicle crash and finally stop. The door of the car, now bent out of shape, swung open, and falling out of it was none other than Aidan Farman. He’d been injured during the crash, since he was bleeding from his temple. Additionally, he had something in his hands—the video zoomed in to reveal that it was a Flamma 15 automatic pistol, the kind issued by the Electrocime Investigations Bureau. It seemed he’d stolen it from the investigators in the heat of the

accident.

It was the worst possible scenario.

A moment later, an investigator crawled out of the car and tried to go after Farman, but he couldn't find his footing. He staggered outside of the camera frame. At that point, the video ended.

"After that, Farman stole a rental car from a parking lot and escaped. Since he was resisting and in possession of a weapon, the investigator couldn't go after him any longer..." Aide Ross then shared a picture of the stolen vehicle. "The car he stole is a black Ford Focus. We haven't caught him yet, but we're still pursuing him as we speak."

"In other words," Harold said, "you're saying Farman planned to escape during his transfer and sabotaged all the security Amicus in the bureau so they'd malfunction?"

"That's the most likely explanation for now," Totoki said. "That being said, I have a hard time seeing how he'd rewrite the Amicus' settings when he couldn't enter or leave the security room. If he has an accomplice in the branch, however, that's a completely different story."

"Please," Ross said shrilly. "We're innocent."

"I think the chances of that are slim," Echika said, nodding. "I didn't see any signs of him having a collaborator in his Mnemosynes."

"I guess the fastest way of figuring that out would be to ask Farman himself," Totoki concluded with a sour expression. "Capturing him is our top priority. Aide Ross, do you have Farman's GPS position and his car route?"

"His GPS data went missing, but we can probably trace where he took the vehicle."

"Missing? Did he get his hands on an isolation unit somewhere?"

"Probably. I'll send the data over now."

Echika received the info. This time, a wide area map of England spread out in her field of view. Farman's car was headed directly south toward Croydon. He had, however, cut off his personal GPS signature. At some point, the car

suddenly changed direction, heading back north, then west.

He drove past High Wycombe, then through Oxford. When he entered Witney, near the Cotswolds, all information regarding his position was completely lost.

“The entire region of the Cotswolds is a designated limited communications area.”

Designated limited communications area—Echika knew what that term meant. It referred to technologically limited zones that used devices to block off communication functions, thereby cutting off information networks such as the internet or GPS.

Communities with luddite populations often also served as tourist attractions, so it was hard to separate Your Forma users from nonusers. In those areas, citizens forcibly created an offline environment out of a sense that letting MR advertisements encroach on their territory would hurt their land’s validity as a technologically limited zone.

Either way, there was no hiding the mystery of where Farman’s car had gone. Was he planning on making smart use of the terrain to give his pursuers the slip?

“Why didn’t you stop him before he got there?” Totoki asked, annoyed.

“We positioned ourselves in every major checkpoint, but he took detours around them all,” Aide Ross replied.

“Are you telling me Farman has some kind of cutting-edge predictive system installed in his brain?”

“My apologies, ma’am.” Ross shrank. “I’m very sorry to say this, but...the place Farman went to, the Cotswolds, outlaws the use of security cameras and drones.”

“I figured it did. As slim as the chances of its success might be, I’ll ask the governor for permission to use them.” Totoki massaged the bridge of her nose in annoyance. “We’ll organize a search party. All of you are part of it, of course. Prepare to set out at once.”

Ugh, Echika thought, feeling overwhelmed. We're back to square one.

The Cotswolds lay west-northwest of London, a hilly rural region located in central England. The area traditionally specialized in the wool industry, and the scenery of its villages had gone largely unchanged over the last few centuries, hence its status as a tourist attraction. Since the Pandemic of 1992, many of its citizens had become luddites, so it established itself as a technologically limited zone.

All of that was fine, but...

"This place is too large for us to look for him..."

The search for Aidan Farman began with the workload split between the local police and the Electrocrime Investigations Bureau. It was pretty rank-and-file work that primarily involved gathering eyewitness testimonies of the escaped vehicle and questioning civilians. It was laughably anachronistic, but they had no other way.

Echika went around the small northern villages, accompanied by Harold. This was the fifth town they'd entered already, but they hadn't found anything as of yet.

"No witnesses in this village, either," Harold remarked.

"The whole investigation is stupid," Echika replied with frustration as she got into the Volvo station wagon the bureau had lent them. "There's plenty of Ford Focuses around, so no civilian is going to remember its plate number."

The Volvo was equipped with all the standard features of bureau vehicles, but none of them were helpful. Its automatic driving capabilities were also useless in an offline environment.

"True enough," Harold said as he slipped into the passenger seat. "The civilians are all luddites without Your Forma, and even if we wanted to rely on the tourists' Mnemosynes, we couldn't Brain Dive into them based on just rumors and hearsay."

The fact that Aidan Farman gave us the slip is enough of a headache as it is,

Echika thought as she glanced at Harold. She'd wanted to take her time alone to sort out her emotions, but in the end, she had to return to the investigation, bit by bit.

"Besides, isn't it perfectly reasonable to suspect that Farman changed cars a long time ago and left the Cotswolds?"

"Aide Ross is checking on car rentals and stolen vehicle reports, right? Since he hasn't called yet, we can assume Farman is still using the Focus."

"In that case, he's hiding somewhere crowded in plain sight." Echika looked away from Harold. "If we don't get permission to send out search drones by tonight, it might get difficult."

"If it comes to that, we'll have to rely on inspections. The Chief said she'll try to investigate as many villages and cities as possible."

"I hope he'll get caught that way, but I have a hard time believing it."

After that, they checked out a few other villages, but they couldn't find any sign of Farman. They did come across a few Ford Focuses, but none of their license plates matched. It was a popular car model, so many people drove them in England. That alone was enough to send the search party on a wild-goose chase. Assuming he'd chosen his model of car intentionally, Farman was clever.

But time was ticking by, minute after minute, and they weren't getting anywhere. Finally, Echika and Harold reached the last village in their search range—Bibury. It was a small village built along the River Coln and a famous tourist attraction. It had a church and a hotel, and sightseers clad in casual outfits were cheerfully walking about.

The Cotswolds may have been a technologically restricted zone, but some spots with exceptional views still served as tourist traps or areas for villas. Many Your Forma users came there seeking a digital detox. Echika mingled with the crowd, trying to get information, but came up empty-handed, as expected.

End of the line, I guess...

She couldn't mask her disappointment.

"Let's count on the other search teams," Harold said encouragingly. "We

didn't find anything, but we're lucky that this is the last place we checked."

"Why?"

"The great William Morris held up Bibury as England's most beautiful village. Don't you think it's lovely?"

Echika stopped in her tracks and took another look around. The houses along the gently sloping hills were all built from cream-colored limestone. Chimneys stuck out of the roofs, and plants grew over them as if in symbiosis—this region had completely accepted this antiquated style of architecture.

The land drew gentle curves, its greenery and flowers swaying as the sun started to dip below the horizon. The murmuring of an uninterrupted brook was audible, waterfowls gliding over the water gracefully.

At some point, all the tourists had disappeared from the area. Echika tensed up, realizing she was alone with Harold.

"Investigator," he said, perhaps picking up on her tension. "I understand how forward saying this might be, but... Would you please give me a chance to apologize?"

This is what he has to say?

Echika bit the inside of her lip, feeling even more uncomfortable than before.

"It's fine. Don't do that. I know you were panicking because of what happened to Daria."

"But that doesn't mean you forgive me."

It's not that she didn't forgive him—this wasn't a question of forgiveness to begin with. After all, he was an Amicus, not a human. Even if he tried to make a display of good faith, it wouldn't be a human gesture. She'd learned that all too well during the sensory crime incident.

And that was why dwelling on it felt strange at this point. And yet, despite knowing that, she'd still gotten hurt.

"Um... Professor Lexie told me that the RF Models' black boxes are much wider in scope," Echika remarked, unsure how to properly phrase it.

“Yes,” Harold said, nodding. “That’s not limited to RF Models, though. When a system grows more advanced, the scope of its black box inevitably widens.”

“Right... In your case, it enables growth in your personality. Which means that unlike mass-produced Amicus, who only pretend to think, RF Models can have thoughts of their own.”

“Deputy Head Angus doesn’t seem to believe it, but that’s what the professor says.”

“I agree with the professor. So this is probably...” Echika was starting to taper off, but she kept talking as best she could. “This is probably like what the deputy head called anthropomorphism. I can understand, logically, that you don’t follow the same thought processes I do. But because you’re so much more human than other Amicus...”

Echika had unconsciously expected him to act with the same values as humans did; she’d assumed he was the same as she. Though her views toward Amicus were certainly changing, if she’d still drawn a line between herself and him like she used to, she wouldn’t have gotten hurt.

“What happened last night... I lost my cool. I think I wanted to see you react in a particular way.” Without realizing it, Echika moved her hand to her chest. “I wanted you...to trust me. To depend on me. I wanted you to think of me as your equal and partner.”

The dusky rays of the sun bouncing off the ground were painful to look at.

“But you’re calmer and more intelligent than a human being. You can do most things on your own. And though fulfilling your goals is your top priority, you don’t do this out of any ill will. It’s just what drives you, pure and simple... And so long as the other party doesn’t realize it’s being used like a pawn, it’s fine.”

“I do realize that’s an insincere way of behaving.”

“But even that’s something that only strikes you when you compare our set of values to yours.”

Harold fell silent. A thin layer of clouds sailed through the sky, covering up the setting sun, melting their shadows away.

“...Investigator. I deeply regret hurting you.”

The Amicus’s elaborately made gaze was neither condescending nor rejecting, but simply expressionless—like he was holding back something terribly painful.

“Daria is the most important person in the world to me. But because of that, I made a choice without taking you into consideration.” Harold’s frozen, lakelike eyes were as tranquil as ever. “But I want you to believe me when I say this: I never had any intention of placing you in harm’s way. And I was genuinely relieved when you returned to us safely.”

Harold had hugged her after she was escorted out of Farman’s apartment—and there had been no lies or falsehoods in that embrace. At that moment, he really had been “relieved” to see Echika. But even if that emotion fell under the same verbal definition, its meaning was perhaps inherently different from how humans described relief.

For some time now, Harold had seemed less and less like a machine to her. His familial affection for Daria, his desire to avenge Sozon—they all seemed so human.

But he wasn’t human.

The Chinese Room experiment didn’t apply to the RF Models. And yet Harold was still in some other tiny room.

“I need to learn to understand you better,” Echika said.

But as the words left her lips, something like despair bubbled up within her. Coming to a mutual understanding with him would be very difficult. People struggled to understand each other as it was, so hoping to achieve that with an Amicus felt altogether reckless. And the task seemed all the more imposing for Echika, who’d evaded forming bonds so far.

Nevertheless, she wanted to come to understand him.

Was it because doing that would mean she wouldn’t be in danger again? No, it couldn’t have been something so simple.

The sounds of the brook reminded her of sobbing.

“What can we do to become equals?” A self-deprecating smile crept over her

lips, despite herself. “I always think how easy it would be if I could peer into your heart. If I could slip into your thoughts, like when I Brain Dive... If I could do that, I could see what you feel. I’d know all of your emotions.”

I’m sure of it.

The waterfowls that had been swimming through the water earlier flew off at some point.

“...Indeed.” Harold knit his brows like he was in pain. “And how nice it would be if I could Dive into your mind... I get the feeling that if I could, I’d understand you clearly for the first time in my life.”

That turn of phrase felt very like him. Echika couldn’t help but frown doubtfully.

“I thought you had me figured out a long time ago. Like with Matoi.”

“I don’t mean it that way. I meant it more...” He narrowed his eyes, as though he was gazing at something very bright. “No, let’s leave it at that. I don’t think I can express it properly.”

Harold smiled vaguely and turned his back to Echika—a sight that gouged into her heart for some reason. Why did he look so sad? Was this all calculated, or was it a genuine gesture?

What did “genuine” even mean?

When her set of values was compared to his, what could be described as real? Search though she might, she couldn’t find the answer.

Before long, night settled over the world.

2

It was past sunset. Echika and Harold rented an old-fashioned gift shop in Bibury so they could secure a method of communication to the outside world—in other words, a landline phone. Since this was a designated limited communications area, they couldn’t use any online terminals, so they had to rely on traditional telephone lines. That meant using phones in local businesses.

The store was silent past closing hours. Sitting on the counter was a dial

phone, and Echika didn't have the first idea how to use it. After reading the instructions written on a sticker, she picked up the bulky receiver, pressed it against her ears, and dialed Totoki's number. Thankfully, the call went through.

After Echika concisely reported that their search had come up short, Totoki replied with a thoroughly exhausted voice.

"No good news from the other groups, either. And the request to send out drones isn't going through. I think Farman's going to make his move any moment now, though... We're going nowhere at this rate."

"How are the inspections going?"

"They're only set up at general checkpoints. I wish I could lay them out in every city and town, but we don't have enough people for it. And most of them bolster their numbers with security Amicus, so if Farman tries to bust through by force, they won't be much help."

"I wish we could at least track his car..."

"For now, just assume he hasn't swapped vehicles. We haven't gotten any information from car rental enterprises or stolen vehicle reports that implies he did."

"All right." For now, they'd just have to do what they had to. "We'll hold a stakeout here in Bibury for the night. If anything happens, we'll get in touch."

Echika silently placed the receiver, which had felt like it was getting heavier in her hands, back in its cradle. Impatience was building up inside her. In the end, the daylong search had been for nothing.

She wanted to believe Farman was still hiding in the Cotswolds, but he had an isolation unit on. There was no telling if he'd already left the area. And if they let him get away now, they might never catch him again.

And yet there was little they could do, given the situation.

Echika gritted her teeth and made to move away from the phone. Suddenly, a white, fluffy lump was held up before her eyes. She jolted and stiffened in place.

"Look at this, Investigator. Don't you think it's adorable?"

The thing Harold was holding up to her came into focus—it was a plush toy shaped like a sheep. It had cute round eyes and a pleasant, fluffy-looking body. The wool trade was a major part of this village's past and identity.

"Isn't that for sale?" Echika pointed at the plush toy shelf. "Put it back."

"I did pay for it," Harold said nonchalantly.

Glancing at the counter, she saw a few analog pound coins sitting on it. The clerk had already gone home, so there was no one around to open the cash register.

"You can have it," Harold told her.

"...What's gotten into you?" Echika asked, confused.

"Hugging it might put you at ease."

"If hugging a sheep would help me find Farman, then yes, it'd make me feel at peace."

"I'm sure we'll find him. Now go ahead, hug it."

"No, I'm good."

"Don't be shy."

"I'm not being shy." By the time she'd said that, however, the plush toy had been forced into her arms. The natural wool was soft and fluffy—"Wait, no! Stop it! We're not here to play around."

Echika pushed the sheep back, pulled up a stool, and sat on it. She glanced at Harold, who was fiddling with the toy sheep's ears with a somewhat somber expression. It made her feel oddly guilty.

No good. I'm losing sight of how to engage with him. And Harold's trying to act normally around me, too...

Before she knew it, a silence had descended on them. A subdued scent filled the dim shop. During the day, the plush toys, the bottles of honey, the lavender products, the packaged trout pâté—they all shone like gemstones before the customers. But now, everything had lost its color, as though slumbering. A mechanical clock ticked loudly in the background.

Echika closed her eyes, feeling oddly restless.

“Investigator,” Harold called out to her.

She opened her eyes and saw him standing by the counter, gazing into a poster plastered there. Since this was a technologically limited zone, there were no MR advertisements, so paper posters dotted the place in their absence.

“What?”

Harold was staring at it so intently that Echika couldn’t help but glance at it, too. Simply put, it was an advertisement for a villa. A honey-colored house, emblematic of Cotswolds-style architecture, was printed on it, along with the words, “Why not buy a house on historic land?” at the bottom. A map of the villa area around Bibury was also printed on it.

Many designated limited communications areas offered up houses for Your Forma users in search of digital detox, and the Cotswolds were no exception.

“What about this poster?”

“Nothing.” Harold fell silent for a moment. “...Can we take out the car?”

What? First the plush, now he wants to buy a house?

“No, we don’t know when the chief might contact us—” But at that point, it hit her. No way. “...Did you work something out?”

Harold jerked his chin pensively.

“I think I might have figured out where Farman is headed tonight.”

Echika stared at him, dumbfounded.

You’re joking, right?

After calling Totoki to inform her they would be away from Bibury, the two of them got into the Volvo and drove off.

“So.” Echika glanced at Harold as she gripped the steering wheel. “What makes you think Farman’s going to show up in the villa area?”

The poster they’d torn off the souvenir store’s wall was folded in Harold’s

hands. According to the rough map on it, there were four villa sites within a radius of several kilometers.

“We’re searching all over the Cotswolds, so you’d expect he would want to escape as soon as possible. But you’re saying he’s taking cover in this villa area?”

“That’s right.”

“What’s your reasoning?”

“I have a few leads.”

Harold said only that in response. It seemed he was still intent on hiding his plan. Echika swallowed a sigh. Even if he didn’t give her the details, Harold’s hypotheses tended to be right on the money. He must have had a reason to suspect what he did this time, too.

I’ll just have to trust him for now.

Despite him betraying her so many times, she had no choice but to have faith in him. Would she always be at his mercy like this?

Relying on the map, they drove through each villa area. They went through three zones, but not only did they not find a single Ford Focus, there also wasn’t so much as a hint Farman might have been there. They got into the Volvo again and started driving toward the last villa site. There was only one road leading there, so there wasn’t even much of a need for a map. The streets in this region weren’t as complicated as London’s.

There wasn’t a car in sight, and a thick darkness enveloped them on all sides. When they left Bibury, there had still been some light in the sky, but now it had taken on the melancholic color of night.

“Next spot should be the last one,” Echika said.

“Yes. If Farman’s not there, it would mean my theory was off the mark.”

“Or maybe you just thought of it before he did,” she said. Harold seemed a bit unconvinced, so Echika appended her statement. “So, um... What I’m saying is, it’s not likely you actually got it wrong.”

Don’t make me say it out loud, Echika thought, feeling quite embarrassed.

Harold didn't seem the slightest bit elated by this, simply managing a feeble smile.

"You're right that I'm often on the mark during investigations, but when it comes to you, my theories are very often wrong."

This time, Echika was the one to blink in surprise.

What is that supposed to mean?

Before long, their car had sailed past the villas, and the only thing they could see outside were roadside trees. The pastures ahead were mostly empty, and there were no sheep to be found. In the distance, they spotted a stone wall cutting across the land. All they could hear was the growling of the Volvo engine, echoing lonely and lost in the air.

Where are we headed from here? I still feel like he's pushing me around. I have my answer; in the end, we can't be equals. But is the fact that I'm still thinking about the what-ifs just human nature?

A light suddenly flashed ahead of them. At the end of the straight path, a vehicle was approaching from the opposite direction. It was the first car they'd seen other than their own in a long while.

"...Maybe you were right, and I really did think of it before he did," Harold said, holding his breath. "It's a Ford Focus."

With his optical device, he could see through the dark with ease at this distance.

What?!

Echika reflexively took a pair of binoculars with a night vision filter off the dashboard and looked ahead—sure enough, it was a black Ford Focus. The very car they'd been pursuing was driving right toward them. Its windshield was blacked out, and she couldn't identify the driver.

And yet the license plate number—

"It matches the missing vehicle's!"

There was no mistaking it—this was the rental car Aidan Farman stole. True to Echika's words, Harold didn't miss; they'd finally found him. And they couldn't

let him get away now.

“Hang on tight, Aide Lucraft,” Echika said.

“...” Harold seemed to realize her intentions. “Just be gentle.”

Farman approached them fearlessly in his car, apparently not realizing who they were. He was moving quite fast. The gap between the Volvo and the Ford Focus was gradually closing. Echika moved her hands to the dashboard. She’d complained that its features were for the most part useless for investigation, but things were different in a situation like this.

She activated the camera tracker feature, which functioned even offline.

The vehicles intersected. Just then, Echika turned the steering wheel.

The powerful assistance system triggered, forcing the Volvo’s fuselage to make a sharp turn. The centrifugal force almost made Echika throw up. The tires let out a shrill screech that tore the silence apart. The Volvo clung to the back of the Focus.

Just as Echika reached for the megaphone used to issue warnings to criminals, the Focus suddenly accelerated. It went off the road, speeding toward the pastures in an attempt to shake them off.

Echika anticipated he’d make a run for it, of course. She didn’t think she’d be tailing him quietly in this situation. But she hadn’t expected him to go off-road.

“He’s crazy!” Echika restrained the urge to click her tongue. “Where is he trying to go?”

“We’re losing him, Investigator!”

“I know...!”

Echika turned the steering wheel again, following the Focus into the pasture. She felt the car jerk as it went off the road, but she ignored it. Now wasn’t the time to grumble about things.

As soon as they got onto the grass, the car started shaking as if it were afraid.

“We should have brought the Niva here,” Harold muttered to himself.

“This Volvo should be able to withstand some off-road driving!” Echika called

out.

She desperately stomped on the accelerator, but the car didn't put out the speed she needed. Torn blades of grass rained down on them, sliding onto the windshield. Farman was pulling apart from them, little by little.

No good.

Echika once again touched the dashboard panel, opened the safety control system, and switched off the speed limiter.

"You're kidding...," Harold muttered, visibly chilled.

Of course I'm not.

Suddenly, the accelerator sank deeper. The Volvo sped up in what almost felt like a hop, and the Focus grew closer, as though it was being sucked toward them. Turning the steering wheel with the support system on, she drew on the other car's fuselage. They had to stop him from moving. Ahead of them was a stone wall dividing the pasture.

This is my chance.

The Focus tried to brake, slowing down—they caught up to it. Without any system support, the Volvo's nose reached the side of the Focus. Echika rammed into Farman's vehicle, trying to push it away. The recoil of the collision jolted her back.

The other vehicle lost its balance. The Focus drew a wide curve as it spun in place, kicking up impressive amounts of grass and weeds. Echika swiftly parked the Volvo.

This should have stopped Farman, but despite the broken windshield, the Focus endured. Though its body was bent out of shape, it smoothly pulled back to face them, its headlights glinting like the glare of a bird of prey.

You've gotta be kidding me—how is he regaining his footing?! Farman shouldn't have that kind of tech—

"Investigator!"

The Focus came hurtling toward them in the blink of an eye. Everything went white. A crash. A crack ran through the windshield of the Volvo, and Echika

smacked hard against the seat. The airbags deployed.

She'd never expected Farman to retaliate like that. Sparks popped in her field of vision; was she concussed? But now wasn't the time to stagger about.

Relying almost entirely on intuition, Echika stomped on the accelerator pedal. But the Volvo only growled, refusing to move. Examining the weblike cracks on the windshield, she shifted her gaze to the crushed hood of her vehicle. The hood had completely collapsed.

Dammit.

"Are you all right?" Harold asked, his voice echoing oddly loudly in the aftermath. "Investigator, how do you feel?"

"Fine," Echika said as she took off her seat belt. "Let's get out. We need to search for him by foot—"

Staggering slightly, she exited the vehicle. As the scent of greenery filled her nose, she leaned against the wrecked Volvo and looked around, her vision stabilizing. The Focus's taillights were already far in the distance, moving along the stone wall.

He'd completely outplayed them.

I was so close to getting him, too...

"Farman's car was also damaged. He won't get far," Harold said, getting out of the Volvo, too.

"Still, if we try to catch up to him by foot, he'll get away either way—," Echika said, glancing around as she did.

Directly ahead of the wall, she discovered a civilian home. It probably belonged to the owner of this pasture. The garage light just happened to be on. A resident, apparently roused by the commotion, was walking toward them and shouting.

"He seems to think we're trespassers," Harold said in a light tone that honestly struck her as annoying. "What do we do, tell them we took a stroll down the footpath in our car?"

Echika, however, was fixated on a pickup truck sitting in the garage.

“Take a look at that, Aide Lucraft.”

The pickup truck they borrowed from the civilian moved swiftly across the pasture. The Focus had left behind a clear tire trail on the grass, so Echika could follow it without having to rely on the Your Forma’s marker feature.

“I wish I could say the locals are cooperative, but...,” Harold said, throwing a sidelong, exasperated glance in her direction. “You pretty much threatened the poor soul. You could have left the negotiations to me.”

“I’d have done that if we had the time,” Echika said, craning her head in guilt. The resident had been very angry at them, but she’d simply flashed her ID card unapologetically and forcibly asked him to cooperate. “If he’s got a phone, I’ll bet he’s going to call the bureau to complain.”

“What, did you forget about pay phones? Bibury still has a few active ones.”

“...”

“I’ll smooth things over for you.”

“Gee, thanks. What would I do without you?”

But as she retorted, it occurred to her that at some point, she’d gone back to talking to him like usual. Bit by bit, they were forgetting the awkward gap between them. After all, right now they had Farman to worry about.

The clouds hanging in the sky parted, and moonlight spilled over the pasture. A silver glow painted over the grass, and faint shadows stretched over the land. Before long, they saw a dark spot on the path ahead.

As they approached, they could see it was the Ford Focus. Its bumper was dangling off its frame, and its hood was wrinkled like it was made of cloth. The vehicle sat abandoned, covered in bumps.

Echika got out of the pickup and cautiously approached the vehicle. It seemed empty, though. Farman had already fled.

“Investigator, look at this.” Harold pointed at the ground.

She squinted and saw something drooping over the undergrowth.

“What?” Echika kneeled and touched it. It was slimy to the touch and painted her fingers black. She sniffed it and picked up a particular oily stench. “...Circulatory fluid?”

“So it seems. It’s on the driver’s seat, too.”

True to Harold’s words, the driver’s seat—its headrest, to be exact—was likewise marred with circulatory fluid.

...What does this mean?

“Wasn’t Farman driving?” Echika couldn’t mask her confusion. “He definitely stole the Focus. So why circulatory fluid?”

“I don’t understand the situation either, but...”

Harold shifted his gaze toward the undergrowth, where the circulatory fluid seemed to form a trail. A short distance ahead was a silhouette of several closely knit houses.

Given the terrain, it was probably the last villa area the driver had been headed for. Since it was the off-season, none of the houses had their lights on. Echika and Harold exchanged glances.

“He probably thinks he shook us off, but he’s not that lucky.”

“Right. Let’s go, Aide Lucraft,” Echika said, drawing her pistol from the holster on her leg.

3

The trail of circulatory fluid led through the villa area straight for one of the residences. A vehicle with a tarp over it was parked in front of the house. The automobile showed no signs of movement. While the house had an antiquated design to blend in with the surroundings, the car looked relatively new.

The villa had limestone walls typical of the Cotswolds and a beautiful sage-green door. It would have looked even prettier, had it not been for the circulatory fluid staining the doorknob black.

The more time went on, the less Echika was understanding about this case. Hadn’t they been chasing Aidan Farman all this time? Then why did she have no

idea who they were going after now?

Still, there was no turning back at this point. It wasn't like they could call for backup in this situation.

She approached the entrance, keeping her footsteps muffled. Since the door was made of wood, it likely wasn't too sturdy. She tentatively reached for the knob. The door wasn't locked, but there were also no signs of the place having been broken into. Did the person they were after have a spare key? Or maybe they'd just forgotten to lock the door behind them because they were injured?

"What do we do?" Harold whispered.

"We go in. You stay behind me," Echika replied.

"Just be careful. Farman has a gun."

Echika tightened her hold on her pistol and undid its safety lock. Meanwhile, she tried to get a sense of the house's floor plan from its exterior. She steadied her breathing and glanced at Harold, who nodded back.

Let's go.

She gently pushed the door open. She stepped in with her pistol held up, but was only greeted by cold, leaden silence. Holding her breath, she listened carefully, but she couldn't hear anything. The trail of circulatory fluid still extended into the house, but the place was too dark for her to see clearly where it led.

"Aide Lucraft," she whispered. "Can you see where it goes?"

"It leads into the room on the left."

Echika took a left as he said and found herself in the kitchen. It was elegant down to the oven, and the cups on the cupboard were all set up in pairs. There was a landline phone by the window and no washing machine in sight. The dining table was littered with paper bags stuffed full of groceries. Next to them were boxes of suture tape. This was where the trail of circulatory fluid stopped.

Echika could hear a faint clunking sound from above.

The second floor.

Sharpening all her nerves to a keen edge, Echika climbed the staircase with Harold in tow. Right in front of them was the bathroom; to the right were two rooms, and to the left was another door. She decided to start checking from the one on the left. Leaving Harold to guard her back, she opened the door.

It was a guest room. She checked the interior, including the wardrobe, but no one was there. All she found was a bunch of men's clothing stuffed into the wardrobe. Checking that the bathroom was likewise deserted, she went to inspect the two rooms on the right.

One of them was a bedroom, but the other was...a study? Or, rather, a workshop. As she stepped inside, a scent reminiscent of oil tickled her nose. Moonlight shone in from the sliding window, just barely holding the darkness at bay.

A spacious worktable leaned against the wall, atop which sat a band saw that seemed to clash with the room's otherwise classy fixtures. Alongside it was a 3D printer for family use and other assorted tools. There were also other devices, including an isolation unit, scattered over the table.

What is this place?

Echika scanned the interior with an investigator's eye—and then noticed something lying on the floor. Her eyes widened in disbelief.

There was no mistaking it—it was Aidan Farman. He lay on the floor, his arms and legs bound with rope. A gag had been stuffed in his mouth, but he wasn't blindfolded. Something was stuck in the HSB port on his neck.

What's going on? Didn't he try to run back here? Then why is he being held captive?

Farman seemed to be conscious, and he was moving his face sluggishly. He seemed to perceive Echika, and then Harold, with his tired eyes—but that was all. He didn't even have the strength to so much as stir.

"What does this mean? Was he here the whole time?"

"I don't know." Harold wouldn't look at her. "But if that's true, it means the person we've been chasing tonight wasn't Farman."

“But there’s no one else here. And what was the circulatory fluid all about?”

“I think asking him would be the fastest way to find out.”

He was right, of course. Echika stuffed the pistol into the holster on her leg and kneeled next to Farman. She reached out and took off his mouth gag. It was a reversal of the position they’d been in a mere day ago.

“Farman,” Echika called to him, but his hazy stare remained unchanged. “We believe you modified the bureau’s security Amicus to escape. What are you doing here?”

The man opened his half-closed eyes and let out a series of faint breaths. Echika wasn’t sure if he’d even heard her at all.

“He might have been drugged. We should contact the chief and call an ambulance—”

But then Farman let out a feeble sound. His lips, clotted with blood, somehow formed words.

“I-it hurts.” Echika somehow managed to make sense of his raspy voice. “Untie me...”

Realizing what he meant, she examined the ropes holding Farman in place. It seemed he’d been restrained for a long period of time, and his skin suggested his circulation had been cut off. The manner in which he’d been bound would reflect poorly on the bureau. His rights as a suspect certainly hadn’t been taken into consideration. He was, in fact, quite debilitated.

“Investigator, use this.” Harold picked up a serrated knife from the tools on the desk and handed it to Echika.

Taking it, Echika cut the ropes binding Farman’s hands. She left his legs tied up for now; she couldn’t risk the off chance of him getting up and running off.

“Farman.” Echika gazed into his face again. “Answer me. What are you doing h—?”

But then it happened.

A roar loud enough to tear her eardrums—a gunshot. Something hot grazed past her shoulder and shattered the windowpane. She whipped around,

spotting a silhouette in the entrance of the room. Another muzzle flash flared. Echika jumped away, and in her rush, she bumped into the worktable, sending tools tumbling to the floor.

Dammit, where were they hiding?!

“Investigator, get down!”

Echika watched, startled, as Harold grabbed at the silhouette. The attacker thrashed and struggled, the hood of their long coat hanging over their eyes, making it hard to discern their identity. And yet circulatory fluid dripped onto the floor like raindrops.

Right. This couldn't have been a human being. Harold could attack him, after all...

And yet conversely speaking, why would an Amicus be shooting at them?

Harold grabbed the assailant's wrists. The Amicus resisted, which seemed to aggravate their wound, as the black fluid dripped down even more intensely. The pistol roared again, and the light fixture on the ceiling shattered.

Harold unflinchingly twisted the other Amicus's arm, making him drop the gun—it was a Flamma 15 automatic pistol, the one Farman had stolen from the officer. Harold forced the attacker down, pushing them onto the floor and straddling them.

By now, he was only trying to keep the attack in check. The other Amicus continued to struggle, and then his hood came off.

It can't be.

Echika froze at once. The hair slipping from under the hood was blond, shining even in the dark. His complexion was like a work of art. And under his tightly pursed lips sat a mole.

The Amicus's appearance was an identical, one-to-one match for Harold's.

But no. That can't be.

“...I thought you were dead.” Harold moaned in shock. “Marvin, why—?”

There was no doubting that this was Marvin Adams Allport. Before Harold

could finish speaking, Marvin resisted his attempts to restrain him. He'd widened his eyes unnaturally and was glaring at a single point, refusing to blink. Something was clearly wrong with him. Had he gone mad?

Echika reflexively drew her pistol.

"No, don't shoot!" Harold said, managing to pin Marvin down again. "We need to arrest him and analyze his memory—"

But just then, Marvin snaked his hand in another direction. It flopped over the floor, groping for something, searching for the gun that still lay nearby—

Oh no!

Echika pulled the trigger, and her pistol roared. She was aiming at Marvin's arm, but her bullet missed its mark considerably and gouged into his head instead. She'd never been a good shot, and since she was so afraid of hitting Harold by accident, her shot had landed even farther from her target.

Marvin slumped powerlessly to the floor. He stopped moving, like a marionette with its strings cut. Silence. Echika stared at her pistol blankly. Black circulatory fluid gushed out of the Amicus's ruptured head, oozing over the floor. An inexplicable sense of nausea built up in her stomach.

"Investigator." Harold got up from under Marvin, thankfully unharmed.

"I'm sorry, I...", Echika stammered. "I didn't mean to kill him. I was aiming for his arm."

"No, I'm the one who made the wrong call here," Harold said, as calm as ever. "Arresting him at that juncture would have been impossible."

"That's not what I mean." It wasn't just that. "Isn't he your brother? Assuming it's really him...?"

Harold stared at Marvin's still form for one long moment. "No, it's really him."

"But why is he here? Was he keeping Farman captive?" Questions ballooned in her mind alongside the terrible aftertaste of this event. Nothing made sense. "So was the corpse they found near the Thames a fake?"

"I can think of a few possibilities, but—Echika!"

Harold shouted just as someone grabbed her by the throat and lifted her up. Farman rose to his feet. But how?! Was his weakened state earlier merely an act? She couldn't shake him off.

In mere seconds, everything went blurry. Farman was squeezing her windpipe with fierce strength, and her breath was—

Everything went dark at once, and all too easily, Echika's consciousness petered out.

Harold watched in a daze as Echika's slender body went limp and her head lolled sideways. After confirming she was unconscious, Farman placed Echika on the floor in a very careful manner that contrasted with the aggressive action he'd just performed on her.

"I'm sorry, Investigator," he said, sounding genuinely apologetic as he cut through the ropes binding his legs.

Farman's act had been perfect. In fact, maybe it wasn't completely an act, as it was clear that this prolonged confinement had left him in poor condition. He looked so pale, Harold thought he might fall over at any second.

Yet Harold hadn't seen through Farman's charade. He'd been fooled not just once, but twice.

"You have nowhere to run, Mr. Farman," Harold warned him in a low tone.

Farman didn't seem to hear him, though. He reached for the back of his neck, pulled out the isolation unit HSB stick connected to his port, and placed it on the worktable.

Harold had speculated that a black market Mnemosyne-modifying HSB stick might have been in play here, and it seemed his intuition was correct.

But it seemed as though *she* alone had tormented herself for falling for Farman. No, maybe that was just as true for Harold, who had recklessly come so far.

As Harold tried to process the situation, Farman picked up an isolation unit from the desk and inserted it into the port in his neck. He then picked up the

ropes he'd freed himself from and used them to bind Echika around the torso.

"Mr. Farman." Harold somehow held his ground. "...What are you going to do with her?"

"I'm just tying her up," he said, his voice still raspy. "So she won't be able to run once she wakes up."

"And you think I'll let you do that?"

"You're an Amicus. You can't stop me. I can tie her up. Hell, I can even kill her, and all you can do is stand by and watch. You can't attack people to stop them." Farman suddenly stopped moving his hands, and he looked up at Harold. "Or maybe you can? Can you go even further than what Marvin did to me?"

Harold had no choice but to fall silent—lying beside Echika was her pistol, glinting invitingly. And if he were to turn around, he could reach the gun Marvin had dropped. But he couldn't. He was incapable of threatening this human.

For a second, Daria flashed before his eyes.

But even so, he couldn't.

"I see you're wise, Harold," Farman said, looking back down at his hands.

He casually tightened the rope around Echika. Harold hung his head, overrun with frustration.

I have no choice. I have to make the right decision now.

"The Bureau seems to think I'm doing this out of resentment toward Lexie," Farman whispered.

"Investigator Hieda doesn't believe that. She says she felt something else in your Mnemosynes."

"But she didn't listen to my request. I told her to go all the way back to my old memories."

"She wasn't allowed to. There are regulations about what you can and can't do when Brain Diving."

That being said, though Echika had sensed something was off, she didn't guess at Farman's real motives—which was a good thing. She was better off not

knowing. Because if she found out, she could someday become an obstacle to Harold. And more than anything, it would make her suffer.

“And even if Investigator Hieda tried ignoring regulations to trace your Mnemosynes back, I wouldn’t have let her do it,” Harold said quietly. “I know what you’re trying to do, Mr. Farman.”

Having finished tying Echika up, Farman picked up her pistol and stuffed it into his belt. He then got up and walked around the room, weaving past the scattered tools on the floor.

“I know what your head is like on the inside, Harold,” Farman said.

Harold kept his mouth shut.

“You might not be aware of this, but you RF Models are a menace. Lexie lied not just to me and Novae, but to the ethics committee, too... Would you be so kind as to cooperate with me?”

“No matter what you might think, I won’t do as you please,” Harold retorted calmly. “I’m affiliated with the Electrocrime Investigations Bureau. The only reason I allowed you to tie Investigator Hieda up was because I couldn’t find a way to stop it that didn’t involve assaulting you. This doesn’t mean I agree with what you’re thinking.”

“Fine.” Farman stopped in his tracks. “Then let’s go with this.”

He swiftly picked up a nail hammer from among the tools—and Harold could only vacantly stare as the man swung the blunt instrument down on his legs. He had a faint feeling it might come to this, but an Amicus wasn’t allowed to attack a human, even if they were armed. He couldn’t resist.

The hammer landed directly on the actuator that governed the movements of his knees; Farman could achieve this level of accuracy thanks to his comprehensive knowledge of Amicus structure. Harold’s knee shattered like a breaking bone, its interior crushed.

His system perceived that his parts were damaged, causing major errors to pop up. Harold was helpless, incapable of even taking any action to circumvent the shock. All he could do was tumble to the floor like a doll knocked from its perch.

“I’m sorry.”

After that, Farman swung the hammer down on both of Harold’s hands, unflinchingly crushing the joints of each of his fingers. Perhaps he was too enthusiastic, as the sheer force of the blow tore a few of his digits off altogether. Harold wasn’t sure what would become of him if he didn’t shut off his sense of pain immediately.

All he could do now was stare at his detached little finger rolling on the floor.

Confirming that he’d rendered Harold’s hands entirely useless, Farman threw away the hammer.

“I’ll go look for the car key. It should be somewhere in here.” Harold knew he was referring to the parked, covered car outside the house. “Let’s go for a drive, Harold.”

It would be foolish to demand Farman tell him where he was taking him. Lying helplessly on the floor, Harold watched him leave the room.

Ugh, this is the worst possible scenario.

And yet Harold’s thoughts still ran cold. He performed a system diagnosis, which called up a list of damaged parts. Thankfully, he wasn’t leaking circulatory fluid. He tried to put his detached finger back on, but that was of course a wasted effort. It was beyond saving.

“Investigator,” he called to Echika in a whisper, but she didn’t wake up.

Lifting himself up with his elbows, he crawled over to Echika, examining the knot in the ropes binding her slender body. They were tightly bound and didn’t look like they would loosen easily.

The serrated knife from earlier was lying right in front of him.

This is my only chance.

Using his elbows, Harold somehow pulled it over. Closing his jaws around the grip, he pushed the blade against the rope. Naturally, he couldn’t cut into it very well, but he tried desperately to sever it regardless.

He was gripped by an inexplicable sense of regret. At the same time, he felt terribly frustrated with himself for letting Farman tie Echika up.

He knew he'd had no choice in the matter. Yet he'd still been foolish. Without a doubt.

I really do keep putting this girl through terrible things.

Before long, Harold heard Farman ascend the staircase, so he released the knife and pushed it out of his reach. For now, this would suffice—all that was left was to hope Echika would regain consciousness.

He stared into her face. It occurred to him that he didn't very much like seeing people with their eyes closed.

When Farman returned, he pulled Harold up wordlessly. Carrying the Amicus's immobile form on his back, he left the room. He descended the staircase slowly and carefully, so as to not drop Harold's heavy body.

By contrast, Harold couldn't do much of anything. He found himself staring at Farman's neck, where the isolation unit was inserted. Some absentminded part of him marveled at how strange it was that this man's neck so closely resembled his own. His skin was a bit more damaged from age, but this would probably be what Harold would look like if he was capable of growing old.

What would that feel like? Had Harold been born human, would he have led a life identical to this man's?

But something disturbed those idle thoughts—a hint of anxiety. He needed to make a plan, but what could he do in this situation? Wasn't praying the best he could do at the moment?

"Why did the professor use your appearance to make me?" Harold tried asking. "Normally, she'd just mix several people's appearances together. I was supposed to be presented to Her Majesty, after all."

Farman said nothing. They passed through the landing and continued down the steps.

"She said that of all my parts, my face was her favorite. Does that have something to do with it?"

"Would you shut up?" Farman asked bluntly, refusing to elaborate further.

He stepped out the front door and headed straight for the car, which was now

free of the tarp. It was an antiquated Citroën. After stuffing Harold into the back seat, Farman reached for the back of the Amicus's neck, pressing his finger down on the thermal sensor under his artificial skin that would activate his forced shutdown sequence.



It took some ten minutes for the process to start. Harold felt his consciousness rapidly recede. And the last thing to cross his mind before he blacked out was, when all was said and done, that contrary electronic investigator.

4

As soon as she woke up, Echika was assailed by a splitting headache. What had happened? She could remember Farman strangling her all of a sudden. Did she go unconscious?

Letting out a moan, she tried to sit, but found that her arms and trunk were tied with rope.

What is this?

She checked the time in her Your Forma's UI. It seemed it hadn't been long since she'd been knocked out. Lying next to her were Marvin's remains—but neither Harold nor Farman were anywhere to be found. There was nothing in this house but complete, eerie silence.

No.

Echika swiftly grasped the situation and felt a shiver run through her. Right. The fact she was tied up was proof that Aidan Farman had taken Harold away. But why? Was he thinking of holding Harold hostage so he could extort Professor Carter?

I have to go after them, now!

She thrashed, trying to undo her bonds. But as she did, she spotted something under the worktable. Something lurking in the thick darkness beneath the piece of furniture.

What's this? She squinted, trying to look ahead...

When she laid eyes on *it*.

She just barely held back a scream.

How is it here? No, wait. Could it be?

She had to make sure. Echika tried to shimmy over to Marvin, when the rope abruptly snapped. It came undone with almost anticlimactic ease. Apparently, it had been torn somewhere. Echika wasn't sure if the rope had degraded or if this was some kind of coincidence, but it seemed luck was on her side.

She tore off her bonds, brushed them away, and approached Marvin's corpse. When she touched his right hand, she became oddly tense. Slowly, she picked him up and looked—finding that what she'd expected to discover was indeed there.

Decisive evidence that tied everything together. Aidan Farman wasn't insane at all. All he'd been doing was *proclaiming the truth*. And his hand of cards had long since been assembled.

Despite this, a part of Echika still couldn't believe it. But either way, she had to go after Farman. She staggered to her feet and reached for the holster in her leg. Her gun was missing; she'd dropped it right before she fainted. But looking around the room, she could find neither her pistol nor the Flamma 15 Marvin had brandished. Had Farman taken both of them? Not just that, but the isolation unit that had been on the desk was missing, too.

Meticulous bastard...

Echika was gripped by irritation, but now wasn't the time. She left the room and went down to the first floor. The front door was cracked open. Peering outside, she could see the car tarp flapping on the ground. The vehicle that had been parked there was notably absent. Farman had used it to escape.

Suddenly, Echika remembered the landline phone in the kitchen. She needed to call Totoki; she could ask for reinforcements, since acting on her own at a time like this would be unwise. And yet...

Echika's hand brushed her throat. The place where she was strangled was still bound with dull pain.

She had a very bad feeling. The inexplicable premonition pressed down on her.

No one should know, at least for the time being.

Echika left the house and hurried over to the pickup truck she'd parked in the

pasture. Her footsteps echoed loudly in the silence. The night sky was so vast it looked like it might encompass all of creation, staving off the morning glow.

“—Analyzing and modifying the system code will require much more than just that. You’d need your own maintenance pod.”

If Farman was going somewhere, it would have to be there.

YOUR FORMA

Chapter 4

The Royal Triplets



Chapter 4

The Royal Triplets

1

Almost every single day, the memory of how it had all begun surfaced in his mind.

In Elphinstone College's courtyard stood an apple tree. With each turning of the seasons, pretty white flowers would bloom on it, their ivory petals fluttering in the wind like snow.

And whenever that happened, the bottom of the tree became her semipermanent haunt. She would sit in the shade of the tree, dozing off. That was the kind of person she was. She would tie multiple events together and build up principles and rules within herself.

When the flowers bloomed, she napped.

That was, perhaps, the single most silly rule this smart girl had made for herself. And more annoyingly, somehow it was his job to wake her up in time for her afternoon lectures.

"Lexie."

The courtyard had been awash with sunlight that day, and unusually enough, there were no signs of rain. Lexie was under the apple tree, just like she'd been the day before, but today something seemed different about her attitude. Normally, she'd be snoozing, her mouth half-open. Today, however, she was wide awake.

"Aidan." She smiled upon noticing him. "Finally. Were you going to have me wait here for hours?"

"I think I'm here the same time as always." Farman checked the time on his

Your Forma.

“You look terribly happy. What, more accolades from the academic conference?”

“Hey, how many years have you been with me?” he asked. “That was a joke just now, don’t take me seriously,” he hurriedly appended.

“Good, then,” Lexie said, pouting. “Anyone who’d waste their time researching in exchange for a pat on the back from those people has to be really oblivious.”

Between the way she never minced words and her sharp intellect, Lexie had gained many enemies. This was perhaps an inevitability, since he was about the only friend she could speak to like an equal. Her talents fostered her bad attitude.

“Forget that. Check this out. Here, come on.” Lexie gestured for him to come closer.

Aidan sat next to her as requested. Suddenly, he caught a whiff of citrus perfume from her bluish-brunette hair. On closer inspection, he could see there were crumpled up petals tangled in it.

“About that research I mentioned...”

“You really are like a kid, Lexie...,” Farman remarked tiredly as he plucked the petals out of her hair.

He hadn’t seen another woman at this school who cared so little for her appearance. She was a young lady; he thought she ought to take better care of her looks. But upon looking at Lexie again, he found her leveling a very doubtful glare at him.

“You know, I just remembered something really unpleasant.”

“Huh? What’s gotten into you all of a sudden?”

“You took a girl from another lab out on a date, I hear? Apparently, you were such a show-off about it that even the people I know have been gossiping about it.”

After pausing to think for a moment, he finally realized what she was talking

about.

“You mean that time I helped that girl out when she went shopping? No, she just asked for help picking out a gift for her little brother, and—”

“You know, normally you’d use an AI for advice and buy your present online, right?”

“...Yeah, I guess.”

“See, that’s what ticks me off.” Lexie scratched her head in annoyance. “I wish you’d finally get it in your head that you’re basically a walking bomb. You shouldn’t act like a Good Samaritan to everyone you meet.”

“A bomb...?” Farman muttered, looking down at his chest. “Where?”

“Mostly above the neck. It’s very well-made, both inside and out.”

“I appreciate the compliment, but my head isn’t about to explode.”

“You ever heard of a figure of speech?” She cocked an eyebrow irately. “Listen, I wouldn’t like it if some good-for-nothing woman got her claws on you. Doesn’t take a lot to figure that out, you know?”

Farman stared for a second.

Wait. Did she just casually say what I think she said aloud? Does this mean...? No, it couldn’t, but—

“You’re about the only person who keeps up with what I say, Farman,” Lexie said with a very serious expression. “Things would grow very dull for me if you got a girlfriend. So could you not put your best mate through that misery?”

Yeah, that’s what I figured.

Farman hid his disappointment. Lexie was so enamored with her studies she cared little for what one might consider normal student interests. It honestly felt like she fundamentally wasn’t wired to have any inclination toward romance. It wasn’t so much that she’d forgotten the emotions she’d felt in her mother’s womb; it was more like she’d never had them to begin with.

She would likely never realize how he felt about her.

“That’s a pretty selfish request, Lexie. Sooner or later, I’m going to get into a

relationship with someone and get married.”

She narrowed her eyes all of a sudden.

“Yeah, because you’re a man who can find joy in that. I know that already. You don’t have to spell it out... But at least for the time being, it wouldn’t hurt you not to hang out with anyone but me, would it?”

Her expression was neutral, but Lexie came across as a bit peeved.

“...Okay, and?” Farman changed the subject. He really was hopeless when it came to her. “What about that research?”

“Oh, right,” Lexie said, regaining her enthusiasm at once. She handed him the tablet she’d been holding. “Check it out. It’s almost complete. You know, that thing I told you about?”

Farman took the tablet and glanced at the proposal displayed on it. What he saw there was honestly shocking enough to banish their exchange from a minute ago from his mind. This could be the key to accomplishing an otherwise impossible idea. It could drive connectionism into new territory.

“You really are a genius, Lexie.”

“You’re graduating soon, right? I want you to join Novae with me, so we can make sure we create Amicus with this system,” Lexie said enthusiastically. “Help me out, Aidan. I know we can make it work.”

“Of course.” He had no reason to decline.

“Oh, and I have one more request.”

“What is—?”

Farman’s eyes widened. She extended her smooth hands toward him and wrapped them around his cheeks. Lexie grinned, revealing her canines, and held him so close their noses were almost touching.

“If we end up making an Amicus with this plan, let me use your appearance data for it.”

“...What, are you going to make me into an Amicus and work me to the bone?”

“That’s right. To me, your face is a work of art.”

“Can I say no?”

“The part about working you to the bone was a joke,” she said teasingly. “It won’t be a mass-produced model. It’ll be a customized one... This research was always special to me. So I want to keep it that way, to the very end.”

Her night-like eyes sparkled like an abyss lined with stardust.

“Do you understand? To me, you’re the most exceptional person out there.”

Farman could only smile back wearily. Her proposal was truly cruel. But it didn’t occur to him to refuse. Maybe it was his youth. Or maybe it was because he couldn’t give up on his feelings for her. By lending his appearance to Lexie, who craved it so much, he could stay special to her forever.

And so he hadn’t refused. Not knowing what Lexie was hiding. Unaware of how far she was willing to go to achieve everything on her own.

She was his best friend. But not once had she looked at him at eye level.



When Echika arrived at Cambridge, early dawn was fast approaching. The road spanning the River Cam was devoid of people, and when she turned off the pickup truck, silence settled over the area.

As she got out of the truck, she turned her Your Forma’s online features back on and checked her message history. No messages from Totoki; she was still under the impression that Echika was in the Cotswolds.

She looked up at the gate—the Gothic architecture of the college stood imposingly before her. According to the Your Forma’s analysis, it had been built around the fifteenth century. The school flag atop the roof flapped against the early dawn.

Cambridge University’s Elphinstone College—if there was one place Aidan Farman would take Harold, it was here.

Echika flashed her ID card at the security Amicus standing at the service entrance.

“Has anyone entered the grounds tonight?”

“No. The campus is currently empty,” the Amicus said, looking confused. “If you have business with the college, I can let the office know. It opens at eight AM, so you’ll have to wait until then.”

“Are there any other entrances besides this gate?”

“There’s a parking lot at the back, but it’s currently closed.”

“Anywhere else?”

“I will relay your request to the office—”

The Amicus repeated the same sentence, confused.

Something’s off.

Farman couldn’t have passed through anywhere but here. Echika looked around, growing tenser. The campus was surrounded by a tall fence; too tall to jump over. In which case, Farman would have had to use either the service entrance or the back gate.

But then her eyes fell on the Cam River, flowing silently beside them. It reflected the walls of nearby storefronts, as well as a blurb for the MR projected onto them.

“Please participate in our punting tour! Registration this way.”

The data matrix called up a browser window containing a registration site. It was for a tour of Cambridge’s premises aboard a punt boat.

That’s it.

“Check the surveillance cameras along the river,” Echika told the security Amicus as she forced her way through the service entrance. “And if you find any suspicious persons in the recording, don’t report it to the police without my approval, got it?”

She had to save Harold as fast as possible.

As she entered the campus interior, helpful guide pop-ups appeared in her field of vision, one after another. She looked up the research department, then the courtyard.

The lawn was well-maintained. In its center stood a single tree, blooming proudly. The Your Forma's analysis identified it as an apple tree, but that detail didn't interest her at all at the moment.

She once again stepped inside and followed the instructions over to the east wing. The research department was large, but only a handful of labs were equipped with facilities for Amicus analysis. She tried to search them individually, but they were all locked.

Not here, either...

Eventually, she reached a door at the end of the corridor. It had a pointed arc design that felt historical, and when she inspected it up close, she found the lock had been broken.

This is it.

She pressed her ear against the entrance. Sure enough, there were noises coming from inside. Echika didn't feel comfortable doing this unarmed, but she had no other choice. Gingerly, she pushed the door open.

What she found inside went beyond her expectations—it looked less like a laboratory and more like a library. The floor was so smooth it must have been intentional, and the place had an atrium ceiling.

The shelves lining the walls were packed not with books but with tools of all sorts. A wooden staircase built into the wall led to a second story. Atop a long table sat tablets, laptops, and 3D printers.

There was no one in sight, but she could hear voices—whispers coming from somewhere.

Someone's here. Is it Harold and Farman?

Echika walked up the staircase carefully, step by step, muffling her footsteps. Her pulse boomed in her ears. And when she reached the second floor, she almost gasped in shock.

This level of the lab was lined with Amicus maintenance pods. They had a modern, hull-like design that clashed with the lab's otherwise antiquated interior. Standing before one of the pods was a man. He had fair features and

unruly dark-brown hair.

Aidan Farman.

There was an isolation unit inserted into his neck, and he held Echika's Flamma 15 in his right hand, its muzzle fixed on yet another figure seated across from him.

"See, didn't I tell you, Farman? Investigator Hieda would show up to save Harold."

Professor Lexie Willow Carter—even with a gun aimed between her eyes, she was still sitting casually, her long legs crossed.

Why is she here...?

Echika had never expected to find Lexie here. Farman's finger was on the trigger, like he was prepared to blast her brains out at any moment.

"Farman," Echika said, trying to keep her voice as calm as possible. "Put the gun down."

"She's right, you know," Lexie said nonchalantly, as though none of this concerned her. "You're resorting to this after everything that happened? Don't push yourself into doing things you're not fit for. Your hands are shaking."

"Investigator," Farman said, ignoring Lexie. "Handcuff Lexie. Right now."

"Hey now." The professor cracked an inappropriate smile. "She's here for you, you know? Or, well, for Harold, to be exact... Either way, she has no reason to arrest me."

"You're guilty of multiple offenses, Professor. And your biggest crime is this," Aidan said, holding up a tablet with his free hand.

The screen of the device was lined with rows upon rows of code Echika couldn't make heads or tails of. There were long cords extending from the tablet, one of which was plugged into a pod. Through the half-transparent hatch of the pod, she could see an Amicus lying inside it.

Harold.

Echika gasped. His eyes were closed and unresponsive, implying that he was in

shutdown mode. Somehow, she suppressed the urge to hurry over to him.

“What you see here, Investigator, is *Harold’s real system code*. I just finished analyzing it,” Farman continued coldly. “I’m going to upload this to the university server, exposing it to the public. And once that happens, Lexie, you will be imprisoned, and the RF Models will be put out of commission and disposed of.”

Echika gritted her teeth. So this really was what he’d been after. She hadn’t understood why Farman had forced her to read that intimidating letter when he’d kidnapped her.

“Analyze Harold Lucraft’s system code. Professor Lexie Willow Carter is lying to the IAEC.”

And that was it. That was all he’d wanted from the very start. Farman’s goal was to drive the RF Model out of use, and everything he’d done was just a means to that end. That’s why he’d attacked other people involved with the RF Model without altering his appearance and kidnapped Echika to expose Harold’s system code.

But these schemes had ended in failure. And when he was restrained in the Cotswolds, Harold had showed up, so he resolved to analyze the Amicus on his own. But he couldn’t do that in a technologically restricted zone, so he kidnapped Harold and brought him here to the college. After all, the only places that used analysis pods were large corporations like Novae Robotics Inc. and university laboratories.

This was why he’d gone to Elphinstone College. Perhaps it would have been simpler to kidnap Harold from the start.

“Lexie, reveal everything to the investigator.”

“No. I mean, what’s the point of doing that...? You’re going to leak the code for everyone to see anyway, right?”

Lexie let out sigh of resignation. The professor had known what Farman was after from the beginning. She’d intentionally hidden the fact that she was aware of his motives. The contradictions between Angus’s and Professor Lexie’s claims should have tipped her off to this.

Angus argued that the RF Models were “only pretending to think.”

Lexie, on the other hand, boasted that the RF Models “really were thinking, but no one believed it.”

But it wasn't that no one believed her—it was simply that no one had been informed of the truth, save for Echika.

After all, Echika knew little of robotics, so maybe Lexie had assumed she wouldn't understand and had let her vanity show.

“Do as I say. Unless you want me to splatter that brilliant brain of yours all over the walls.”

“All right, all right. But you're going to regret this, Aidan.”

Lexie opened her chapped lips, sucking in some air. Echika instinctively thought that she didn't want to hear this. But this reminded her of something she'd read in a book.

Eyes have lids so you can squeeze them shut and look away from anything unpleasant. But ears have no way of plugging themselves.

“It's called the neuromimetic system.” Lexie let the words slip out in an almost casual tone. “Thanks to the widespread use of the Your Forma, the human brain's connectome has been greatly explored. A long time ago...back when I was still a kid, there was a project aimed at utilizing that information to further artificial intelligence. They wanted to recreate a human brain using AI.”

Echika couldn't move.

“But the project failed. Any ordinary neural network would reach its limits. The idea was theoretically possible, but there were too many parts to it that couldn't be utilized. That neuromimetic system was one of them. The whole endeavor broke apart and fizzled out of the scientific community's consciousness... At least, until I dug it back up when I was a student.”

Lexie's words slithered through the air, like creatures with a will of their own.

“By the time I graduated the college and got my job at Novae, my research was complete. All I needed was an opportunity when someone would need it.”

The memorial ceremony celebrating the sixtieth anniversary to Queen

Madeleine's reign, where the royal family would be granted Amicus as a tribute. That was the first major project Novae Robotics Inc. had entrusted to Lexie. Through her time in college, Lexie was seen as a rising star in the field of robotics. She was believed to be the best person for the job, and she had assembled the development herself.

And it was there that she decided that she would unveil the research she'd spent years working on.

"Amicus presented to Her Majesty would certainly draw attention the whole world over. And so they had to be a crystallization of Novae's...no, of all England's technology."

"Apparently, the RF Models are smarter than ordinary Amicus."

"And so I christened the RF Model as a 'next-generation all-purpose artificial intelligence.' "

"Don't you think Harold acts a bit more human than most Amicus?"

"When, in fact, they were Amicus equipped with the neuromimetic system, which recreates a human neural network."

"That's all thanks to this cutting-edge technology, apparently."

"No one knew I did it, yet still I made something no one else could."

Something capable of thought processes that were entirely different from mass-produced Amicus. An entirely new kind of machine, equipped with a recreation of the human brain's neural network.

That was what the RF Models really were.

Echika felt her mouth dry up bit by bit. Her head had gone all but blank, and she couldn't form a coherent thought. The only thing she knew was that the bad feeling that had been growing larger and larger had finally ruptured, coloring everything.

"I was against it," Farman interjected. "As deputy head of the development team, I was her assistant. But once we got started, I realized something... No matter how you tried to spin it, the neuromimetic system was in violation of the IAEC's review standards. Its black box would simply be too large."

The International AI Ethics Committee's review standards were quite simple: Any proposal for a system structure *that did not adhere to the Laws of Respect* would not be permitted for production.

"And despite knowing it would never pass the evaluation, Lexie wouldn't listen to me. That's why I decided to leave the team. I thought departing would punch a hole into the development process, maybe drive her to change her plans. But..." Farman shook his head. "After that, the RF Models received the IAEC's approval and went into production.

"Do you understand what that means?" he asked, his voice full of suppressed emotion.

Professor Lexie Willow Carter is lying to the IAEC.

"It goes without saying for Talbot, but the committee in general is just a collection of ignorant fools, from where I'm standing," Lexie said with a frighteningly vague smile. "All it took was a slightly elaborate dummy proposal to trick them. Really, what's the point of that organization?"

Echika finally managed to say something.

"And you got the rest of the development team and Deputy Head Angus...all of them to cover for your story."

"Oh, no, they don't know a thing. I'm pretty amazing, you know that, Investigator? Loading a dummy system that matches the fake proposal onto the RF Models so it completely hides the real one was easy enough for me." Lexie wobbled in her chair, bored. "Except, unlike Angus and the others, Aidan both knew about and understood the neuromimetic system. That's how he was able to draw the real code out of Harold..."

She heaved a bitter sigh, as though chiding herself for telling him about it.

"He understood at first, too. Why did it have to come to this?" She moaned.

"Don't play the victim. You hid just how massive the RF Models' black box would become up until development began," Farman said, his expression pained. "I couldn't bear that burden. It's not even remotely ethical. Anyone with common sense would know this research isn't to be touched."

“Ethical?” Lexie scoffed at him. “Ethics, eh...? Yeah, stiff engineers like you sure do love to drone on about that.”

The emotion she’d felt in Farman’s Mnemosynes crossed Echika’s mind. Yes, he felt deep, lingering regret. Remorse at letting Lexie’s sense of ethics crumble—at not preventing her curiosity from getting the better of her, and at not stopping her from crossing a line that no human, no software engineer should ever cross.

All this time, he’d had to bear the burden of the truth about the RF Model. His attempts to have Lexie convicted after he left the development team, of being driven to crime after seeing the tabloid article about Steve; all of it was his way of trying to take responsibility for loosing the Amicus that could pose a threat to human society into the world.

Farman’s motives were justified. His methods were unacceptable, of course, and the fact that he’d assaulted innocents involved with the RF Model, including Daria, wasn’t something that could be overlooked. But it was clear that Lexie was even farther gone than he was.

“I told you to stop so many times. Why did you insist on going along with this? You must have known this would happen!” Farman asked her desperately.

“Knew what would happen?”

“Steve went haywire, and Marvin held me captive!”

“Aidan.” Lexie leaned her cheek on her palm, her wavy hair sliding off her shoulder. “I don’t think anything I did was wrong. Not one bit.”

“Lexie!”

“I’m not like you.”

A pillar of faint light fell into the room from the skylight set near the ceiling. Night was on the verge of fading away—but by contrast, Lexie’s eyes looked immutably closed and shut off.

“Aidan. Once upon a time, you believed the same things I did, but...I guess only I was born special after all.” Her gaze lacked any scorn—she was truly expressionless. “Listen to me. It is the duty of the exceptional to do

extraordinary things. I've surmounted the insurmountable, achieved the unachievable. I've created something new that's capable of thinking on its own."

"I already told you. You don't have to go that far to achieve merit."

"You've gone rotten." Lexie narrowed her eyes. "All you do is huff out empty compliments, but I never once asked for praise. I never yearned for merit. I've always done what I wanted, and I always will. That's all there is to it."

The muzzle of Farman's gun shivered ever so slightly.

"...I guess you and I will never understand each other again, after all."

"Understand each other? Oh, so that's what this was about...? You really are kind, Aidan. You always were, and I liked that about you." Her voice was completely clear of emotion. "Have me prosecuted if it puts your heart at ease. I don't mind that. But don't you feel bad for Harold? He's innocent, and what you're doing here is going to get him put out of commission."

She's right. Echika's thoughts once again creaked back into motion.

The neuromimetic system went against IAEC standards. If this revelation was to go public, it would do more than get Lexie punished. It would have repercussions for all of Novae Robotics Inc. And the RF Models—of whom only Harold remained—would be shut down.

"Listen, Aidan." Lexie's voice was tinged with something terribly cold. "The RF Models... Harold really is like a child to me. If you want me convicted, you can get me indicted for any other crime you'd like. But that system code?"

Give it back.

Echika nearly moved to stop what was about to happen, but she was too late. The moment Lexie got to her feet, Farman pulled the trigger. The bullet skimmed her hair and burrowed into a bookshelf behind her.

Lexie bashed her fist hard into Aidan's cheek. Even looking at it from the side made it clear how much force she'd put into the blow. And Farman's physical condition wasn't ideal as it was. He wobbled in place, and Lexie grabbed him by his collar and slammed his body into an empty pod.

The tablet slipped from Farman's grip. Lexie grabbed for it desperately, but before she could, he forced her away.

"Agh! What are you doing?!" the professor spat out as she lunged at him.

Their tussle knocked the tablet away, sending it sliding along the floor...where it stopped at Echika's feet.

Huh? She stared at it, stunned.

"Investigator." Farman groaned. "Upload it to the server, now—"

"You can't!" Lexie bellowed at her, cutting him off. "Erase that code! You don't want Harold to get shut down, either, do you?!"

The tablet's display switched from lines of code to an upload screen to the university server. Farman had prepared the transfer ahead of time—it would just take a single tap to expose Harold's system data to the world.

Wait. Echika stiffened.

Professor Lexie was a criminal who'd gone against the IAEC. If the system code were to be disclosed, it would serve as valid grounds for her to face justice for her actions. Farman's fears were valid. He'd gone as far as resorting to crime to expose Lexie. If Echika did as he said, the chance of him fleeing again was quite slim. He'd gracefully accept his arrest.

But...

If she did what was right, what would become of Harold? She turned her eyes to the maintenance pod, where the Amicus lay still, his eyelids squeezed shut. What would become of him? It went without saying—he'd stay like that, forever.

He would never wake up. Never utter another word.

No... Echika felt something cold slither down her spine.

She couldn't let that happen to him. But why? Harold had lied and deceived her so many times. He always manipulated her. Even this time, he'd used her as bait and put her through the terrible experience of getting kidnapped by Farman. And moreover, the RF Models had the dangerous potential to disobey the Laws of Respect.

But then she heard a gunshot. Echika looked up in surprise. Apparently, the scuffle between the two of them had ended with Farman shooting Lexie through the leg. She crumpled to one knee, blood slowly seeping from her right thigh. Farman stood there panting, the pistol still gripped in his hands.

“Why won’t you listen to me...? Are you the same as Lexie, too, Investigator?”

He walked over to Echika, shaking. Lexie tried to cling to him, moaning, but failed to reach him. All she could do was withstand the pain and gasp out her next statement.

“Aidan! You really are a stubborn oaf...!”

“Investigator, if you are truly an officer of the law, you’re obligated to act in the name of justice here,” Farman said, standing in front of Echika.

His lip was bleeding from when he’d been punched, dripping genuine, human, red blood—not black circulatory fluid.

Echika remained frozen.

“You just don’t understand anything. He thinks, he really thinks. But his thoughts, his calculations... They’re in a bottomless abyss. Too deep for us to understand.”

Calculations—true. Harold did calculate everything he saw. Even his smiles were part of his ploys. He toyed with humans, so effectively the people he manipulated never even noticed.

And yet...

Farman reached for the tablet lying at Echika’s feet.

“How nice it would be if I could Dive into your mind.”

Harold’s lonely smile flashed in her mind.

“I get the feeling that if I could, maybe I’d understand you clearly for the first time.”

Even those words and that expression might have been calculated lies.

But even if they were, so be it.

It didn’t matter what form his heart took. That was how she felt back then,

after they'd solved the sensory crime together.

For a moment, Echika was stunned by her own thoughts. But no matter what, she couldn't bear the idea of losing Harold. Because meeting him was the first time—the first time someone had drawn close to her. And even if he had barged in, he didn't just trample over her heart—he introduced a warmth she'd never felt before. That was why she was careless enough to believe in him.

The moment you let someone into your heart, there was no going back. Echika couldn't return to a life of stifling her emotions and living like a machine.

Would she have been better off otherwise? Would she have had to go through this if she was still all alone, grasping to her nitro-case necklace for support?

No. Not one part of her believed she'd have been better off without this.

What I'm doing is wrong. I know it is.

Before she knew it, Echika was grabbing Farman's hand. His fingertips were millimeters away from the tablet. Her eyes met his, so similar to Harold's but much more alive and rusted over.

"I'll take Harold's system code," Echika said, her voice so clear she hardly recognized it as her own. "Aidan Farman, I'm once again placing you under arrest—"

"If you're going to lie, make it more convincing." Farman squirmed out of her grasp, then rammed her as hard as he could.

She was ready for it, but he was much stronger than her. Echika staggered back and banged her spine against the handrail. Her faint breath was knocked out of her lungs. A sharp pain shot through her back, and she slowly sank to the floor.

By the time she looked up at him desperately, he'd already picked up the tablet.

"...Forgive me for this."

He moved his finger towards the code upload button...and tapped it.

It took only a moment.

No.

The screen shifted, and the progress bar grew visibly green. Only forty seconds until the upload was complete. Thirty seconds, twenty—

Echika tried to scramble to her feet, but her body screamed in pain when her ankle bent in the wrong direction. She must have twisted it when she'd fallen.

You've got to be kidding me! Not now. Why now?!

"I will do my utmost to be a suitable partner until we solve this case."

"Why do you try to present yourself as cold and unfeeling?"

"I want you to understand that this is my way of being sincere."

"For how cold you can seem, you're very kind. I like that about you."

"You told me to take better care of myself, but those were words you should have directed at yourself instead."

"I never had any intention of placing you in harm's way."

"No, let's leave it at that. I don't think I can express it properly."

She didn't hear the rest of what he had to say. Something washed over her like a wave. And if it wasn't him, she probably wouldn't—

Ten seconds remained.

But then, suddenly, a sound pierced her eardrums.

What? Echika thought in disbelief.

Aidan Farman slowly crumpled to the floor. A faint red color scattered into the air like the vestiges of something—and as the sound reverberated against the ceiling, Echika finally realized it was a thundering gunshot.

The tablet fell to the ground with an explosive crash.

"I told you you'd regret it..." Lexie growled, lowering a gun she'd pulled from somewhere.

A Flamma 15, Marvin's gun that had gone missing in the workshop—but now wasn't the time to be surprised. Driven by urgency, Echika reached for the tablet. Crawling toward it, she frantically pulled it closer, but the progress bar

was still moving.

Three more seconds. She tapped to pause the upload, and the screen froze. It completely stopped, a second before the transfer was complete. Warmth finally returned to her body.

I made it.

Echika hugged the tablet and fell on her back. She felt oddly drained. But even as she did, a rush of guilt washed over her and threatened to crush her heart.

2

Aidan Farman had been shot through his stomach, a fairly severe wound. In this state, he wouldn't be fit for questioning any time soon, but the silver lining was that he was still alive.

Emergency medical technicians and officers had been alerted and hurried into the laboratory, throwing the room into a flurry of panic. Echika watched as Farman was carried off after receiving first aid. Standing beside to her was a holo-model of Totoki, who directed a piercing, sharp glare at her.

"Hieda, why do you always have to be so reckless...? Why didn't you contact me?"

"...You have my utmost apologies." Echika could only shrink remorsefully.

She knew that going after Farman without backup was inappropriate conduct, but given the secrets of the RF Model, she decided she'd be better off not telling Totoki about it. And it did seem Totoki hadn't picked up on anything.

"All's well that ends well because you ended up catching him, but don't do it again."

"I'm sorry. Seeing that Aide Lucraft was kidnapped shook me up, but... Still, it was thoughtless of me."

"You could have assumed the worst. You're scheduled for a stern talking-to tomorrow, so you better be ready for that," Totoki said flatly. "Speaking of which, I just got the security footage from Cambridge. Apparently, both Farman and the doctor snuck into campus by riding boats on the Cam River. Those two

think alike.”

So Echika had been right about how he got in.

“So, how’s our dear Aide Lucraft doing?”

“Professor Lexie’s getting ready to reactivate him.”

“I’m glad there’s at least some good news. Let the professor take care of the rest.”

“...Understood.”

Totoki’s holo-model vanished, melting away. Echika closed the call and finally felt all the stress drain from her body. She thanked god that the chief trusted her, but at the same time, she was overcome with guilt. She squeezed her eyes shut, trying to contain it.

She then opened her heavy eyelids and turned around. Lexie was in front of Harold’s pod. She was sitting on a chair, silently fiddling with a tablet. A tourniquet was tied around her injured right leg. A bothered-looking paramedic was standing next to her.

“Miss Carter, you were shot. We need to get you to the hospital as soon as possible.”

“Once I’m done with this. The anesthetic you gave me, by the way? Works like a charm. I can’t walk, but I don’t feel a thing.”

“That was for first aid purposes, so it’s not a perfect solution—”

“Just do me a favor and buzz off. Come back in, like, ten minutes. I should be done by then.”

The paramedic was obviously very reluctant to leave, but there was no way to get Lexie to budge. They left bitterly, passing Echika as they descended the stairs.

“Investigator,” Lexie said, without sparing a glance in her direction. “Harold should wake up soon, so be good and go to the hospital.”

“Professor,” Echika said slowly, trying to temper her emotions. “Once you recover, I will have to place you under arrest.”

“Oh... You meant what you said earlier?”

“And on top of that, you’re under suspicion of abusing Marvin and kidnapping Aidan Farman. You used Marvin to confine Farman so you could tweak his Mnemosynes, right?”

The silence that followed dug into Echika’s flesh like a thorn.

“Well,” Lexie whispered through her slender lips. “I guess you would figure it out. I mean, I did know that Aidan kidnapped Harold and arrived here before you did.”

Lexie didn’t seem the slightest bit fazed by that. In fact, she spoke with a soft smile.

“I’ll let you have this first.” She took something from her pocket and tossed it at Echika. “If you’re going to arrest me, you should have it.”

Echika looked down at the object in her hands—a Mnemosyne modifying HSB stick. Earlier, while Echika was using her Your Forma to call an ambulance, Lexie had crawled over to Farman’s crumpled form, taken out the isolation unit connected to the port in his neck, and inserted the HSB stick instead.

She did it to wipe the conversation they’d just had from his Mnemosynes.

“Might as well ask you to share your theory about what happened, genius Electronic Investigator.”

“...When the RF Model assaults began, you must have realized Farman was behind it.” Echika spoke like Harold often did, piecing the story together. She was clumsier than he was, of course. “*You hid the fact that Marvin was in your possession all along*, which is how you knew the culprit had to be Farman. But you couldn’t tell that to anyone. And you were afraid that if he got arrested, the police might somehow find out about the RF Models’ secret.”

“Yup. I started really worrying about what to do when you two got involved in the case,” Lexie said, going back to tapping on the tablet. “I was hoping to kidnap Aidan and tweak his Mnemosynes, but...I didn’t make it in time. I thought it was all over, and the truth would end up going public. But when you talked to me after Brain Diving into him, you still didn’t know anything.”

“Because they didn’t let me Dive beyond Mnemosynes related to the incident. But I did intend to Dive again, based on the results of his psychoanalysis.”

Looking back on it, Farman had been trying to use his Mnemosynes to expose the truth behind what had happened. He’d explicitly asked Echika to Dive into older memories because Lexie had shown him the RF Models’ secret system code in the past.

He’d gone as far as trying to use his own Mnemosynes to expose that.

“And that was it. When I heard he was being transferred for psychoanalysis, I thought that it was my last chance...”

“And that’s why you configured the Bureau’s Amicus to go haywire. Did you modify their Diving module?” Echika was the one who had trusted Lexie and let words slip out about the transfer—now she wanted to beat herself up for it. “You said it yourself once. ‘If you want to make an Amicus bug out, you just need a tablet.’ ”

Echika had noticed Lexie speaking to a guard Amicus at the entrance to the bureau, and she did have a tablet in hand. And only an Amicus could go in and out of the security room to change the other Amicus’ settings.

“I made it so they could move perfectly well but wouldn’t be capable of holding the steering wheel,” Lexie said proudly. “And I wiped some of their memory, too.”

“And you planned on kidnapping Farman when he tried to escape?”

“He was faster on his feet than I expected, so it was a bit of a struggle, but Marvin was very well-made. I had to ask him to do it because I had my hands full helping you search for him, but he did a better job than I expected.”

Farman must have gotten captured by Marvin the same time they lost track of his GPS data. And then he was taken to the Cotswolds—to Lexie’s villa. There was a key case with two sets of keys in it in her house in the Amicitia District; one would normally assume one of the keys was to her house, but her front door used a palm reader in place of a lock.

A villa in a technologically restricted zone—it was the perfect place to keep Farman confined. But Harold had seen through it all, and much faster than

Echika did.

“Imagine my surprise when I came to check the villa,” Lexie said. “I found Marvin dead and you unconscious. And what’s worse, Aidan was gone, and Harold, who I figured would be with you, was also missing.”

Lexie worked out what had happened, hence why she’d grabbed the Bureau’s automatic pistol on the ground to defend herself and reached Farman before Echika had.

“But the most important part isn’t coming into view here, Investigator.” Lexie was still working the tablet. “When did you figure out I was involved?”

Echika remembered what she’d seen—and fell momentarily silent.

“When I came to in your villa... I found *Rib’s head* under the worktable.”

Right—what she’d seen in that moment was Rib, the Amicus she’d met at Lexie’s home just a few days before. The gruesomely severed head lay there, a pleasant smile on its face. That’s when a possibility occurred to Echika, prompting her to check Marvin’s remains—only to have her worst fears confirmed.

Etched onto Marvin’s thumb was the same butterfly tattoo she’d noticed on Rib.

“To catch Farman, you attached Marvin’s head to Rib’s body,” Echika said, unable to stop herself from grimacing. “Rib had a very distinctive tattoo, which is how I knew you were involved with Farman’s confinement...except...” She never could have guessed that Lexie was keeping Marvin hidden in her villa. “You left Marvin’s ‘corpse’ on the Thames riverbank to make him seem dead and put an end to the search efforts.”

“Bingo.”

“But you had to have known that would make Harold’s position worse.”

“Only for a moment. Of course, I did feel bad for him, but...”

“Why did you go that far?”

Lexie finally looked up from the terminal. There was an almost apologetic smile on her face.

“I found Marvin a long time ago, but he was always a little broken. Specifically, there was a problem somewhere in his black box, something even I couldn’t fix. But if I brought it up, everyone would just tell me to shut him down and hold a funeral, right?” Lexie lamented. She hadn’t wanted to let go of her beloved son. “So I hid Marvin, like a doll who could neither walk nor talk, back at the villa. But the search efforts got so serious that I thought if he ended up being discovered this time, he’d be put through something worse than just a funeral...”

And so she’d fabricated Marvin’s corpse.

“But isn’t this just the same as you having killed him with your own two hands?”

“Not at all. The only thing that matters for an Amicus is up here, and I kept that safe.” Lexie pointed at her temple. “Except... even though I attached Marvin to Rib’s body, so he’d kidnap Aidan, I was surprised it actually worked. I modified part of his system code on the fly, hoping it would do something, and he actually moved.”

Her tone made it clear she didn’t feel the slightest bit of guilt.

“He still couldn’t talk normally, but he did understand orders. I bet he thought it would be an honor to protect his brother’s secret. Yes, I’m sure of it.”

Echika felt disgust build up inside her. Would Marvin really have wanted to do that? She had no way of knowing, of course, but she found Lexie’s claim hard to accept. If she hadn’t wanted to see Marvin die, she wouldn’t have cut off his limbs. It all felt contradictory to Echika, and yet it all somehow seemed consistent and logical in the professor’s mind.

Echika just couldn’t understand her.

“But what I was trying to say was, I modified Marvin so he’d attack you and Harold. I ordered him to get rid of anyone who tried to free Aidan. In other words...what happened to him isn’t the same as what happened with Steve.” She placed the tablet in a nearby cart. “Investigator, I’ll accept the consequences of any crime you want me to answer for. I won’t run.”

Lexie gazed up directly at Echika, her eyes as dark as night. *For any crime.* Did

that include lying to the IAEC? But...

“...Professor Lexie.”

“Yes?”

“Amicus with the neuromimetic system...” Echika licked her lips, well aware of how afraid she was of asking the question. “In the end, how are RF Models with brains that are just like humans’... How are they different from us?”

Lexie’s eyes widened for a moment, then narrowed. And yet she didn’t smile.

“Well, they have machine bodies and machine brains modeled after human cerebrums. It makes sense you’d ask yourself that. And they really are smarter than other Amicus.”

But they’re different from humans, she whispered.

“The neuromimetic system does replicate the human brain. But that just means they have something close to a human mind in them. It doesn’t make them human.”

“But you said the RF Models’ black box is much larger in scope, which is why they develop personalities and are capable of growth. Then that’s just being human, isn’t it?”

“Stop selling yourself short, Investigator.”

“...Selling myself short?”

“If making people was that easy, we’d have done it a long time ago. Some people out there even complain that the definition of what makes something ‘human’ is vague enough as it is.”

“But if that’s the case...” Echika’s tone was bordering on accusatory. “Then...*what is Aide Lucraft supposed to be?*”

If he could act more human than humans could, then what was he? He loved Daria like family and was gripped by dark emotions because of Sozon’s death. He could look no different from any person and then expose a side of himself that was terribly cold, like a machine. What was he, then?

“I don’t know.”

Just like she'd done once before, Lexie replied with an all-too-serious expression.

"What?" Echika couldn't believe what she'd just heard.

"I said, I don't know." For how terribly irresponsible her statement was, Lexie's tone was all too sincere. It felt mismatched. "Do you know the story of Victor Frankenstein?"

The tale of a young man who, in his quest to create the ideal human, commits an act of blasphemy against god's providence. And what arises as a result is just a monster.

"Even if you set out to create something that acts like a man, what you end up making won't necessarily be close to being human. Doctor Frankenstein didn't set out to create a monster, after all."

The RF Models' black box was horrifying—deeper and vaster than that of any other Amicus. An unfathomable something one must never peer into.

Since it was impossible to Brain Dive into an Amicus, no one could reveal what they thought.

" 'It's up to you to decide who we are,' " Lexie whispered, as if possessed by someone. "Or...that's what Marvin might have said."

And it was then that Echika understood.

She might have developed trust for someone—or something—terribly unfathomable.

And yet when it happened—the moment Farman tried to upload Harold's system code to the server—she'd realized something. It wasn't logic or reason that had spurred her forward; it was emotion. Fear.

I can never go back to the way I was before I met him.

Once she came to learn of that warmth, letting go of it and living without it became much harder than moving forward while ignorant of it. It felt like she'd grown much more foolish.

And maybe she really had.

“Professor Lexie.” Echika forced the words out, though they felt heavier than lead. “I’m an officer, and I have an obligation to the law. Except...I can’t read this system code. So *I can’t even say for sure whether the neuromimetic system even exists.*”

Her words simply scattered into the air, without echo or reverberation.

Lexie smiled, showing her teeth.

“Thank you.”

Her carefree grin almost seemed innocent.

“I knew you would protect Harold.”

And Echika couldn’t escape her gaze. In all likelihood, she’d made the wrong choice. Would she someday come to regret it?

“Hey, Investigator.” The professor carried on softly, undisturbed. “If you want Harold to continue being your aide, there’s one thing... One thing I have to tell you.”

You can think of it as me talking to myself, she added.

*

“Aide Lucraft?”

When his system fully booted back up, the first thing his optical device perceived was Echika. She peered down at him, looking terribly pale—or so he thought, until she pulled away from him as if stung. She must have realized how close their gazes were.

Harold was overcome with inexplicable relief—he was sure Echika would find him, but he’d still felt a great deal of unease. Would Aidan Farman successfully analyze and expose his system code to the public before she saved him?

Or maybe—had it been leaked to the public already? Harold didn’t have a grasp on the situation yet.

“Can you hear me, Aide Lucraft?” Echika asked. “How do you feel?”

“Awful, I bet, even with his sense of pain turned off,” Lexie commented. “Both

his arms and legs are broken. I really should have pumped another round into Aidan for that... Just kidding, of course.”

Looking around, he found none other than the professor seated next to the pod. He was genuinely surprised; he hadn’t expected her to be there.

“What are you doing here, Professor?” He thought she’d have been arrested for abduction by now.

“Hey, if you’re talking to someone, it should be her, not me,” Lexie said, looking exasperated with him. “Oh well. I’ll be going on a date with the nice EMT, so you two play nice.”

She left, telling him that she would send Angus to pick him up and let the rescue worker lend her a shoulder. This gave Harold enough information to piece together what had happened. The incident was more or less resolved, it seemed.

“The professor insisted on not going to the hospital until you woke up,” Echika said, watching Lexie leave. “A lot happened while you were out. Farman shot her in the leg...”

“So you found him?” Harold asked.

“We got him, but he’s badly injured. I don’t think he’ll be leaving the hospital anytime soon.” Based on Echika’s tone, Harold speculated that the professor had injured Farman. Yes, he could see her doing that. “You should worry about yourself for the time being. Once Deputy Head Angus comes to pick you up, you’ll be going straight to the repair shop.”

He imagined that would be the case.

“It’s a good thing this is England. No need to order parts,” he said.

“Hey.”

“It was a joke,” Harold said, trying to smile as naturally as he could. “Thank you for saving me, Investigator.”

Whatever Echika thought of his words, she averted her gaze from him. Was this just simple bashfulness, or perhaps guilt? It felt like it could be either or both. He’d lost confidence in his ability to read her at some point.

“Professor Lexie was desperate to save you. But she also used Marvin to kidnap Farman, so...” Echika spoke rapidly, quickly recounting what happened. “Once the professor gets better, I’ll place her under arrest...though that might be difficult for you to accept.”

“No, if someone committed a crime, they should be brought to justice. Whatever their motives may be.”

Those were his honest feelings. Lexie may have been his “mother,” but the two of them had never shared a bond typical of a parent and child. Same as how the “brotherly love” he shared with Steve and Marvin was different from what human siblings felt.

“So you knew.” Echika directed a slightly accusatory gaze at him. “You knew the professor kidnapped him.”

“Yes...I realized it.” He had to admit that much. “When we visited her house, I asked Rib some questions. When I remembered the state of the place, it all came together.”

“You mean the key case?”

“And the laundry in the yard, too. She must have gotten circulatory fluid on her clothes when she cut Marvin up and couldn’t get the stains out. They were blackened. And more importantly...” Harold carefully observed Echika’s expression as he explained himself. “The night Farman kidnapped you, Professor Lexie was in the pub across the street from the restaurant. For whatever reason, she’d been planning on kidnapping Farman to begin with. So she followed us, knowing we’d find him sooner or later, and thought she’d snatch him before we got to him.”

He assumed Echika would get angry and demand to know why he didn’t tell her, but she was surprisingly quiet. In fact, she didn’t seem the slightest bit upset about him withholding information. Maybe none of this really registered as real to her.

He had to figure out just how much she knew right now.

“Investigator, why do you think the professor went as far as she did to kidnap Farman?” He asked a leading question.

“I don’t know,” Echika replied at once. “I mean...I thought you understood her better than I did.”

“I still don’t know her motive. Even if she was trying to take the blame for Farman, using Marvin to imprison him feels off.”

“I think the interrogation should clear that up.”

“Didn’t the professor tell you anything?”

“She wasn’t in the state of mind to talk. She was fixated on saving you.”

“Farman’s actions are unclear, too.” Harold feigned ignorance. “Why did he kidnap me and place me in this pod? What was he trying to achieve?”

“It’s hard to say without questioning him, but he was probably...trying to modify you.” Echika curled her hand up in her lap, like she was afraid to touch anything. “He was trying to incriminate Professor Lexie the whole time. Maybe he thought he’d be able to tarnish her reputation by modifying an RF Model Amicus and making you go haywire.”

“I don’t think he was trying to incriminate her. You said that yourself when we Brain Dived into him. That he was bound by some sense of responsibility.”

“I wasn’t clear enough. He felt bound to incriminate her. He has a problematic personality. Wasn’t that why you wanted him sent to psychoanalysis?” Echika then got to her feet, as if hiding her leg. “I’m sorry, I’m getting a call from Chief Totoki... I’ll be right back, so just rest for now.”

Did she really get a call?

That thought crossed his mind, but he didn’t voice it.

Maybe Echika was just tired. He’d suspected the possibility of her knowing the secret of his “brain,” but surely Lexie wouldn’t share the truth that easily. Even if Farman had told her about it, he doubted Echika would trust anything he had to say, given his position.

Harold hoped she’d write it off as nonsense, at least.

“What can we do to become equals?”

He replayed the lonely smile she’d had at that moment.

We can never be equals. She and I are two completely different things.

From Harold's perspective, that much was obvious, and it didn't even register as an issue. But that wasn't the case for Echika. It was the first time he'd seen a human wish for something so earnestly.

"If I could slip into your thoughts, like when I Brain Dive..."

Once again, he felt an unknown, inexplicable emotional strain on his system processing mechanisms. When would he be able to analyze this? Would Lexie have the answer?

For now, he could only pray Echika didn't know anything. If possible, he hoped she'd never have to make that sad, lonely smile again.

And yet he wasn't even sure what made him feel that way.

YOUR FORMA

Epilogue Accomplice



Epilogue

Accomplice

1

Chairman Talbot's office in the IAEC's London headquarters offered a good view of the BT Tower's imposing majesty. The communication tower was one of London's more famous landmarks. Echika's eyes moved from the circular, overlapping form of the building back to the chairman's desk.

"So you're saying both instances of the RF Models going haywire were the result of Professor Carter's modifications?"

Talbot massaged his brows, seated on his large office chair. He was browsing, via his Your Forma, the final investigation report submitted by Novae Robotics Inc.

"Correct," Echika replied. "The professor admitted to it during her questioning. She testified that she secretly developed the system code so as to make them attack humans, and that she used Steve and Marvin as part of her experiment."

"And Harold?"

"We conducted a comprehensive inspection on him but didn't find any signs of modification," said Deputy Head Angus, who was standing beside Echika. "Only the other two models had the code loaded onto them."

"And in Marvin's case, he was used to take revenge on Farman?" Talbot asked.

"Yes." Echika nodded. "She'd secretly had Marvin in her possession and used him for her experiment. She intentionally dumped his body to throw off the investigation. After all, if Marvin was tracked down, her modified code would come to light."

A week had passed. The RF Model assault incident was now known as the Novae Robotics Employee incident, the details of which had been disclosed to the public. Aidan Farman's and Lexie Willow Carter's names adorned the headlines, and the media summed up the case and its tumultuous conclusion as a sensational "lovers' quarrel between two geniuses."

The poor internal communication of Novae Robotics Inc. and its sloppy safety administration had become the subject of much criticism, but by contrast, nothing about the RF Models was reported. Those were Amicus presented to the royal family; if word got out that they'd been used for crime, it would cause double and triple media bashing, and the corporation itself would be seen as opposed to the monarchs.

And so Novae Robotics Inc. and the IAEC had worked to thoroughly cover up that element of the story.

Meanwhile, the public seemed to care less about Farman, who was still hospitalized, and more about Lexie. Her reputation as a genius professor came tumbling down in a magnificent fashion; the media couldn't have hoped for a juicier story.

But each time Echika saw the ridiculously blown-up coverage of the case, she grew quite bitter. It was all a lie to keep the RF Models' neuromimetic system secret. Lexie had opted to exaggerate her crimes in order to keep her secrets safe.

Was the professor's fixation on the RF Models the same as hers? Right now, Echika could be certain in saying it wasn't.

"I always thought Professor Carter was eccentric, but I didn't think she was that far gone..." Talbot seemed to entirely believe the publicly disclosed information. "Anyway, enough of this mad scientist talk. What I want to know is if Novae can guarantee that the RF models will be safe from here on out."

"You have our assurance," Angus declared. "As you can see in the proposal we submitted the other day, the RF Models were perfectly safe Amicus to begin with. With Professor Lexie fired from our company, this kind of trouble won't happen again."

"You've also made your background checks for engineers stricter, correct?"

“And more thorough.”

“Well, I suppose I’ll be expecting good things from you in the future, *Department Head Angus.*”

Angus’s jaw stiffened—with Lexie fired, the Special Development Department needed a new head. It was only natural her deputy would be given the role.

“Investigator Hieda, you’ve also done quite well in this case... Will you be going back to Saint Petersburg tomorrow?” Talbot asked.

“That’s the plan.”

“Ah, that’s regrettable,” Talbot said, sounding not the least bit regretful. “Did you enjoy your time in London?”

Echika thought back on this incident. Several memories, none of them pleasant in the slightest, crossed her mind. The events that brought her to this city had been awful to begin with.

“Yes... It was a pleasure. An absolutely fantastic time.”

After leaving the chairman’s office, Echika got into the elevator with Angus. The contraption was entirely glass-sided and see-through, giving them a view of the city spanning beneath them.

She’d grown used to looking at London’s streets. Red double-deckers were swiftly driving through the streets today as well, as they did every day.

“Investigator,” Angus said, his expression oddly brooding. “...Was Professor Lexie’s goal really what you told the chairman earlier?”

Echika wanted to believe she didn’t let her doubts show on her face.

“I was present for her questioning. Those should be her reasons, yes.”

“Did you Brain Dive into her?”

“I couldn’t.” Angus made a dubious expression, so she expanded her explanation. “For the same reason as Farman. Like I already explained, the professor wiped his Mnemosynes. She did the same to herself.”

“But us discovering the code used to modify the RF Models proves it. Right?”

“With her confessing to her crimes, there’s no need for any further evidence.”

The elevator continued its sluggish descent. Bit by bit, the suffocating surface approached them.

“I’ve worked with the professor for a long time, but...I guess you can never know what a person thinks deep down,” Angus said with a somewhat pained whisper. “I guess I never really knew her in the end.”

Echika pretended not to notice the surge of guilt climbing up from the core of her stomach.

Following the incident, three of the engineers Farman had attacked resigned. One couldn’t very well blame them, since they’d gone through a life-threatening experience. And with Lexie, the brain of the Special Development Department, now gone, Angus probably had a very hard road ahead of him.

When she stepped out of the building, Echika was greeted by blinding sunlight.

<Enjoy this spot of clear weather>

Echika looked around the cityscape as she listened to her Your Forma’s annoying announcement. The MR advertisements had all changed to ones planned around bright weather, and the passersby seemed to have a spring in their steps.

As they parted ways, Angus tried to see her off with the brightest smile he could manage.

“You’ve been a great help to us, Investigator. I’ll be handling Harold’s maintenance in the future, so you can rest easy.”

“Thank you.”

“Will you be heading to the hospital next?”

“Yes, she’s finally being discharged today. I’ll be picking her up with Aide Lucraft.”

“That’s good to know. Give them both my regards.”

And so Angus walked into the crowd. Echika remained still for a while, watching him fade into the pedestrian traffic.

I told some huge lies today.

No, not just today. She'd been lying nonstop since the incident ended.

As she stood there, lost in thought, her Your Forma brought up a message alert from Harold.

<I'm here to pick you up>

Echika turned around, finding a rental car at the shoulder of the road. A blond Amicus waved at her from the driver's seat. His timing was, well, perfect.

"Thanks for coming along." He greeted her with his usual smile as Echika got into the passenger seat.

Appropriate for spring, Harold was dressed lightly in a thin jacket. His legs, which had been broken during the incident, were back to normal, and the fingers with which he gripped the steering wheel were perfectly restored and unblemished.

"I just saw Department Head Angus off. Were you watching or something?"

"Yes, I'm always watching you."

"Coming from you, that doesn't sound like a joke. It's just creepy."

"I got here a bit earlier than expected, so I was waiting in the parking lot over there." Harold shrugged as he switched the engine on. "I just got a call from Daria. She said she's done packing and is waiting for us."

Daria had regained consciousness four days before. Echika had nearly crumpled from relief when she heard the news, and Harold was probably several times as grateful. When they visited her the first time after she woke up, he hugged her so tightly that the attending Amicus nurse scolded him, saying he might open her wounds.

It was truly the best news Echika could have gotten. It really was a relief. She wouldn't know what to do with herself if they ended up losing Daria. And of course, what would Harold do? It wouldn't be an exaggeration to say it could push him over the edge to insanity.

Echika found herself staring vaguely up at the sky through the window. Its faded blue seemed almost shameless.

2

It felt like this was the first time in a while she'd seen the general medical center so full of sunlight. It looked like it was sparkling in the sun. She could see a few cars parked by the roundabout, but it wasn't very congested.

Echika got out of the rental car and leaned against its roof. She waved a paperback book in her hand.

"I'll be waiting here," she said, prompting Harold to blink in confusion. Awfully dense of him. "I mean, hmm... She's finally out of the hospital, and you have plenty of catching up to do. Take your time and enjoy each other's company."

"I appreciate you being so considerate, but..."

"It's fine. I'll just read this."

"...Thank you, Investigator," Harold said, but didn't walk away. Instead, he directed at her a gaze so sincere it made her uncomfortable. "Can I talk to you for a second?"

"Huh?" Echika knit her brows. "Do you want to keep Daria waiting?"

"Of course not, but... Once she comes back, things will get hectic again, so I thought I should tell you this now." His tone was quite atypical for him, and evasive, at that. "...Do you remember our exchange at Bibury?"

The limestone houses and the stream the waterfowls glided over surfaced in Echika's mind's eye. And in that beautiful scenery, they'd had an exchange without an exit.

"What can we do to become equals?"

"No, let's leave it at that. I don't think I can express it properly."

Even after they solved the case, neither of them touched on the matter, but now Harold had brought it up on his own initiative.

"Yes...I remember."

“At the time, I couldn’t put my thoughts in order...,” he said, blinking in a very mechanical manner. “And honestly, I’m not confident I can properly express it now, either, but I still feel like we need to talk about it.”

Echika nodded, but she felt very confused by the situation. It was the first time she’d seen Harold at such a loss for words. She had no idea he was capable of making that kind of face.

The rude tumult of the roundabout grew distant, like a receding wave.

“What I’m trying to say is... I want to keep working with you going forward. But my way of thinking as an Amicus could get in the way of that. So I want you to tell me...”

There was a warmth to his words one could never imagine leaving the lips of a machine.

“What can I do to become the kind of ‘equal’ you want me to be?”

But she already knew.

“Even if you set out to create something that acts like a man, what you end up making won’t necessarily be close to being human. Doctor Frankenstein didn’t set out to create a monster, after all.”

Echika stared straight at him. She wasn’t sure she could properly express her thoughts, either.

“...Just knowing you put so much into it makes me happy,” she said, and indeed, trailed off there. She licked her bottom lip. It felt dry and chapped. “Honestly, I don’t know what to do, either. I’ve always tried not to get too close to people until now... And more than anything, you’re an Amicus, so I’ll never really understand how you think.”

The noise of the roundabout once again picked up in volume, as if to fill in for the pause in her words. Along with it, the rustle of a gentle breeze.

“But...you’re the first person I’ve ever wanted to understand.”

Harold’s frozen eyes widened slightly—a ray of light shone down, rolling between them.

He was within arm’s reach. And yet there was still an undeniable chasm

between them. And so Echika reached out to fill that insurmountable distance.

It wasn't often she reached out to shake someone else's hand, and it made her feel supremely awkward.

"I'm sure I'll end up hurting you in the future. But I still want us to walk side by side. So...if you don't mind, could we? For now, this is enough for me...I think."

Unusually enough, Harold didn't smile. His expression was stiff, like he'd resolved himself to something, and he said:

"...I'll do my best to grow closer to you, Investigator."

His dry hand gently gripped Echika's in a shake. When all was said and done, the palm of an Amicus was still colder than that of a human. But the surprisingly smooth touch of his hand still clung to her heart, like a black blot.

And so this time he turned around, leaving to go pick Daria up. Echika looked away from his retreating figure and opened the paperback book.

"Hey, Investigator." She could hear Lexie's voice once again blow into her ear. *"If you want Harold to continue being your aide, there's one thing... One thing I have to tell you."*

It was in the lab, before Harold woke up, when Lexie, seated on the chair, was alone with Echika. The brunette hair spilling over her cheeks so pale as to almost be transparent. Red was spreading from the wound under her tourniquet, but she didn't seem to mind.

"What do you think the Laws of Respect are?" The words left her lips as if she were a corpse. *" 'Respect mankind, obey mankind's orders, and never attack a human being'... A mantra programmed into the Amicus. But the thing is, there's something wrong with that, and no one ever noticed."*

Just thinking about it now, Echika sneered.

"Mass-produced Amicus only pretend to be thinking. How can a mere Englishman locked in a room—a machine that doesn't even understand the concept of attacking humans—obey the Laws of Respect? They couldn't abide by them to begin with. It's like warning a plant not to speak English."

Some part of Echika knew she shouldn't have listened to Lexie, but there was no turning back at that point.

"The IAEC's review criteria is that any proposal for a system structure that does not adhere to the Laws of Respect will not be permitted for production. But they don't realize they're actually dealing with system structures that cannot contain the Laws of Respect."

In other words...

Echika had tried to say something, but Lexie held an index finger to her lips.

Just shut up and hear me out.

"Amicus were made in pursuit of creating something that's as human as possible. But not everything we humans do is necessarily good and just. That's why everyone's so afraid. What if Amicus go haywire and attack people? What if they band together and revolt against us?" Her words came out in a whisper, but almost sounded songlike in tone. *"In the age since Čapek wrote R.U.R., we've learned to imagine a robot revolution. We've written countless works of fiction about it. That's why everyone is so wary of mass-produced Amicus, even though they're simply not intelligent enough to attack us."*

And so the Laws of Respect were born.

"The Amicus are bound by the Laws of Respect. For the users, knowing that is good enough. And more importantly, all Amicus are told that they were made with the Laws of Respect loaded onto them."

However...

"But on the other hand, the RF Models' neuromimetic system is capable of special thought processes. And on top of that, it has a vast, large-scale black box... I'm sure you're starting to see where I'm going here, yes?"

Lexie smiled. Then, with frightening calmness, she'd said:

"The truth is, the Laws of Respect never existed to begin with."

Echika's body had felt numb and distant for minutes now.

"I'm operating absolutely normally. I simply came to learn what the Laws of Respect truly are."

Steve had said that during the events of the sensory crime, holding a gun to her.

The RF Models were capable of realizing that the Laws of Respect were an illusion. And depending on the situation, they could devise a method of attacking humans, if need be.

"If I ever catch Sozon's killer, I intend to judge him by my own hand."

And Harold must have uncovered this secret already. Because if he didn't, he wouldn't have been able to counterattack when Marvin assaulted them in Lexie's villa. Yes. He hadn't acted to restrain Marvin; he definitely *counterattacked*. Despite the fact the concept of "attacking" someone shouldn't have existed in his Chinese Room.

He was only pretending to be an obedient machine, and that was why that facade was coming apart at the seams. And when he eventually would come face-to-face with the culprit behind Sozon's murder, he would cast aside everything and give in to revenge.

And what am I going to do when that happens?

The blowing of the cold wind against her cheeks pulled her out of her thoughts. Glancing up, she saw the clear sky was starting to grow cloudy. Weather in this country was predictable. It wouldn't be long before another drizzle started.

She looked down at the pages of the book open before her. *Frankenstein*.

"Thus strangely are our souls constructed, and by slight ligaments are we bound to prosperity and ruin."

Echika silently closed the book. Then she reached into the pocket of her coat and took out a slender pipe—an electronic cigarette. She'd bought it this morning at the hotel kiosk. She switched it on with a click.

As she placed it on her lips, the nostalgic yet distinct flavor of mint slipped

into her nostrils, and the smoke she blew out vanished faintly into the void.

It felt like there was no escaping the din of the coming rain.

Afterword

Thanks to the readers who picked up Volume 1, I've been able to release Volume 2. I would like to thank you from the bottom of my heart. Ever since I applied for the Newcomer Award, I've been dreaming of the chance to write a continuation to this story. And while I relished the opportunity to do so, the days spent writing this volume were filled with hardship. I truly, honestly hope that the end result lived up to your expectations.

Much to my delight, *Your Forma* will be getting a manga adaptation. It will be handled by Yoshinori Kisaragi and is set to begin serialization June 2021 in *Monthly Young Ace* magazine. Echika and company's exciting story will be rendered in lovely, charming art, so do check it out. Also, please take a look at the official Your Forma Twitter at <https://twitter.com/yourforma> for all the latest news.

Last, some thanks. To Yoshida, my editor. I've caused you a great deal of trouble with how many times I went off track. Thank you so much for your patient guidance.

To the illustrator, Tsubata Nozaki. I can only gratefully bow my head to you for illustrating my modest work, despite your busy schedule. I actually haven't seen the illustrations of Volume 2 yet, but I'm looking forward to seeing how they'll turn out.

I intend to put in my best effort so we can meet here once again.

July 2021, Mareho Kikuishi

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