

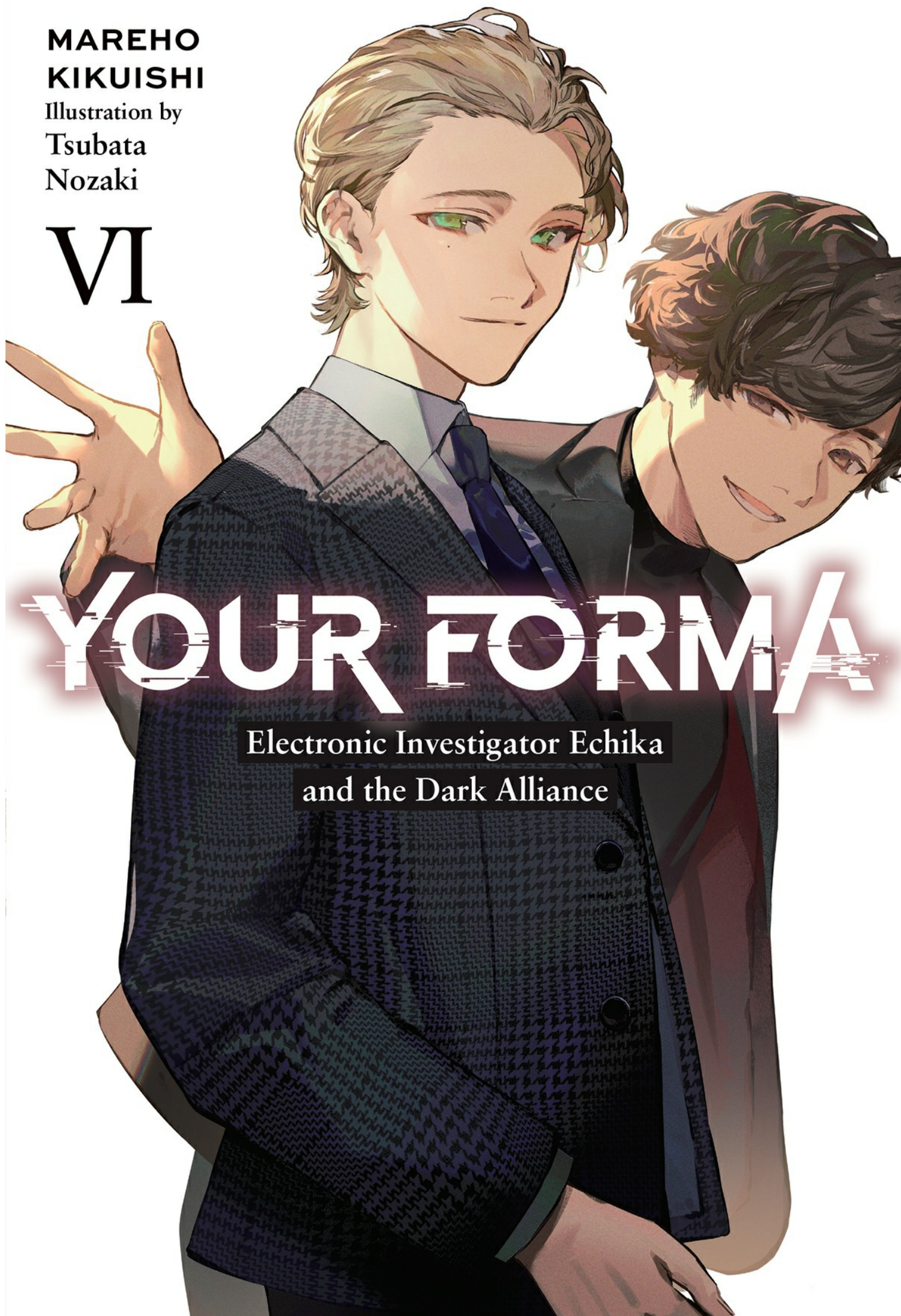
MAREHO
KIKUISHI

Illustration by
Tsubata
Nozaki

VI

YOUR FORM/A

Electronic Investigator Echika
and the Dark Alliance





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Y O U R F O R M A

Electronic Investigator Echika and the Dark Alliance

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Lexie W. Carter
Creator of the RF Model Amicus,
including Harold. Currently
incarcerated for committing multiple
crimes in the name of protecting the
secret of the RF Models.



Ivan Fokine

An investigator for the bureau's Investigation Support Department. Was appointed as the head of the Saint Petersburg Special Investigations Unit and has been charged with recovering TOSTI and looking into Lascelles. A hopeless sweet tooth.

Ui Totoki

Chief of the Brain Diving Division at the Electrocrime Investigations Bureau headquarters. Keeps an eye on Echika and Harold, watching over them firmly yet fondly.

MAREHO KIKUISHI

Illustration by
Tsubata Nozaki

VI

YOUR FORM/A

Electronic Investigator Echika and the Dark Alliance

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YOUR FORMA VI

Electronic Investigator Echika and the Dark Alliance MAREHO KIKUISHI

Illustration by

Tsubata Nozaki

Translation by Roman Lempert

Cover art by Tsubata Nozaki

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YOUR FORMA Vol.6 DENSAKUKAN ECHIKA TO HAMETSU NO MEIYAKU

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Electronic Investigator Echika and the Dark Alliance

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YOUR FORMA

Prologue

Crossroads

Prologue

Crossroads

She stuffed those feelings with nowhere to go in a glass bottle and corked it shut. Ever since it happened, that same image had replayed in her mind again and again and again.

Late December. As the end of the year approached, the chill of midwinter descended on the streets of Saint Petersburg, where a Christmas market was being held. This custom was originally imported from western countries, but in recent years, it had become a staple of the season.

“Calm down, Hieda. You’ve still got two shots left. Just aim at the fifty-and one-hundred-point targets. If you do that—”

“Would it kill you to be quiet, Investigator Fokine?”

Echika faced the target, unable to concentrate. Then she squeezed the trigger of the air gun, firing a cork bullet at the line of prize boards. Her shot hit a palm-sized board with the number 50 drawn on it. Score. Just one bullet left.

“That makes for a total of one hundred fifty points.” The owner of the stall scratched at his stubble tediously. “If you get a total of two hundred fifty points, you’ll get an exchange code for thirty scoops of *marozhina* (ice cream) from the GUM department store.”

“If she ends up missing, let me have another try.”

“Sorry, mister, but it’s one attempt per person. If you want to have another go, come back tomorrow.”

As Fokine looked up in prayer beside her, Echika aligned her sights, taking aim

at the small one-hundred-point board set in the corner of the display case. She hadn't been this absorbed in target practice since her days at the academy.

Just as she carefully slid her index finger over the trigger—

“Sorry for the wait, they were all out of hot chocolate!”

—Echika jolted in surprise and fired prematurely on accident. An unintended “ah” escaped her lips. She and Fokine watched the cork bullet as it went flying in a random direction and hit the wall.

The hollow, fruitless silence that followed was accentuated by the sound of Tchaikovsky playing from the roadside speakers.

“I did buy some mulled wine for us instead, though,” Bigga said as she approached them, her cheeks flushed from the cold. She was balancing three cups between her hands. “It’s not sweet, but the spice should warm us up... Uh, what’s wrong, you two?”

Noticing that Fokine and Echika were acting off, she looked at the shooting stand. The short, stout owner leaned into his stall, rummaging around for the appropriate prize.

“That’s one hundred fifty points. Here’s your prize, enjoy.”

As Echika stood there, dumbfounded, he handed her a *matryoshka* doll of *Ded Moroz*, the Slavic version of Santa Claus. There was a *yarmarka*—a fair—spanning the whole area between Sadozvaya Street and Manezhnaya Square, with stalls lining the road. Russian Christmas trees—*yolkas*—were decorated with gaudy lights, and there were merry-go-rounds and skating rinks set up.

Even though the sun had set, the area was still bursting with children and adults alike having fun.

“I made you miss that shot earlier, didn’t I?” Bigga said awkwardly.

Having left the stall, Echika and her group were sitting around a table at a nearby picnic area. There was a Christmas-colored parasol in the center of the table, and the joyous lights and sounds of the fair washed over them.

“I don’t think I’d have hit it either way. It’s not your fault.”

Echika wrapped her hands around her paper cup. The warmth of her

beverage was difficult to feel through her gloves.

“Yeah, if it bothers you, you can come and try again tomorrow. I’ll be working, but you’ve got time off, right?”

“I’m not going to spend my *suspension period* shooting targets for you.” Echika narrowed her eyes.

Fokine shrugged and sipped on his mulled wine. He was dressed in a puffer jacket and wool hat, the kind of casual outfit one would expect to see someone wearing on their day off.

“You say that, but I got the impression you were enjoying yourself.”

“Yes.” Honestly, the stall had been a refreshing change of pace. “But I didn’t get your precious *marozhina*, did I?”

“If I want it that badly, I can just go out and buy it, right?”

This was a bit of a jab. Echika had told Fokine those exact words when he’d taken her to this shooting booth last autumn. She never would have imagined her statement coming back to bite her like this.

“But I’m glad you came with us, Miss Hieda.” Bigga smiled in relief. “Investigator Fokine and I have been worried about you this whole time. To be honest, when I ordered you to come with us to the Christmas market, I thought you’d say you weren’t in the mood...”

Three weeks had passed since the thought manipulation incident at Farasha Island. This artificial island, lauded as a next-generation technological research city, was in fact being controlled by an illegal thought manipulation system developed by Elias Taylor, the culprit of the sensory crime incident.

During the case, Echika had been forced to perform a Brain Dive on Chairman Talbot of the IAEC, one of the conspirators, without a warrant. This was, of course, a breach of regulation. When questioned by the bureau, Echika attested that she had “acted on her own judgment to prevent Talbot from eliminating evidence,” but Chief Totoki and the other top brass sentenced her to one month of suspension.

Frankly, it was a little anticlimactic. She had been expecting heavier

punishment. It was another reminder of how, ironically, the bureau treated her as special. Since being suspended, Echika had spent all her time until today shut up in her apartment. It wasn't that she was forbidden from leaving—she'd simply been too depressed to see anyone. But rather than soothe her heart, the solitude only increased her torment.

Right now, she honestly felt that she'd made the right choice in accepting the invitation.

"Thank you, Bigga." Echika smiled sincerely. "And you, too, Investigator Fokine."

"You can call me Ivan when we're off the clock." Fokine flicked the *Ded Moroz* doll sitting on the table with a finger. "Personally speaking, if Talbot was trying to eliminate evidence, I don't think you made the wrong choice... But, well, no point in arguing with regulations, I suppose."

"You say that, but all our colleagues probably think *Hieda only got away with it with just a suspension because of favoritism.*"

"What the hell?!" Bigga realized what she'd just said and hurriedly covered her mouth. "Just ignore them!"

Echika tried to force a smile, but the guilt stopped her from doing so. Bigga and Fokine believed that she'd only acted the way she had and was punished for it because of her dedication to her duties as an investigator.

But that wasn't true. She did everything for one simple reason: to protect Harold's secret.

When it happened, Echika and Harold had been heading to Farasha Island's central control room to seize the thought manipulation system. There, Talbot tried to dispose of all the evidence, which included attempting to kill Echika. In response, Harold held him at gunpoint—allowing Talbot to discover that he wasn't working in accordance with the Laws of Respect.

At that point, Echika's path had been clear. To keep the RF Models from being placed in shutdown mode or disposed of, she would need to erase Talbot's Mnemosynes. She decided that she would use the Mnemosyne-modifying HSB cartridge Professor Lexie had given her to wipe his Mnemosynes after

performing a Brain Dive on him to get clues about the incident.

But once she tried to Dive, things went completely sideways. Talbot's Mnemosynes were mixed with thousands of people's memories—a state called Mnemosyne muddling. Harold had speculated it was some kind of independently developed defense mechanism.

Despite that, Echika didn't report the unusual Brain Dive to Chief Totoki and the bureau, keeping the fact that she'd wiped Talbot's Mnemosynes a secret. She and Harold were the only ones who knew about the muddling. And either way, it didn't change the fact that she hadn't been able to get a single clue.

Feeling the bitterness fill her heart, Echika took a sip of her mulled wine.

"Forget me... How did the investigation into Farasha Island go after that?"

"Come on, talking about work on a Saturday night? In the middle of a Christmas market?" Fokine asked.

"I'd have thought taking so much time off would help you get over your workaholic tendencies," Bigga added.

"No, it's just, I'm going back to work next week..." Echika said, accepting their criticism as she took another sip.

The spice in the wine lingered in her nostrils. Honestly, she felt more in her element talking about work than engaging in idle chatter. This way, she wouldn't have to worry about them bringing up the very thing she didn't want to talk about.

Fokine sighed with resignation.

"We're investigating the investors and external organizations involved with Farasha Island and narrowing down people who might be involved in the Alliance. According to Steve, Taylor knew of the Alliance. By matching the suspects with people he knew, we're zeroing in on them."

"—You were brave, Investigator Hieda. I'll be sure to tell as much to the others at the Alliance."

Talbot's words crossed Echika's mind. The Alliance had masterminded the project to steal Taylor's thought manipulation system and test it out on Farasha

Island. Who its members were wasn't clear yet; the only thing the bureau knew was that it was some kind of secret society. How large the size of its membership and the scale of its operations were unknown.

But if Talbot's statements were to be believed, the Alliance was planning on profiting off the thought manipulation system by selling it to entire nations. With that in mind, the bureau was regarding outsiders involved with Farasha Island as potential suspects.

"Either way, we can't talk about this in the open." Fokine glanced around, concerned. "Rig City did declare that the thought manipulation system was the result of a virus. The possibility of the media catching wind of that has us on edge."

"What about Paul Lloyd, then? We didn't find anything in his residence... Any developments there?"

Echika had asked about the other piece of the puzzle. Paul Samuel Lloyd was a robotics professor believed to be involved with the Alliance. He was also the developer of the programming language that had been used to create the TOSTI AI, which meant he might be connected to the individual known as Alan Jack Lascelles.

Lloyd had been involved in a homicide incident five years before, after which he committed suicide, but the scene of the crime turned out to be a detached house Lascelles had bought in Friston. Regardless, he was a key figure they needed to investigate alongside the Alliance.

"We found out he had a villa in Oxford," Fokine said, his expression darkening. "The London branch is organizing a special investigation team to look into it, but for some reason, they're not getting a warrant to search the place."

Echika frowned. "Is the judge holding back?"

"Apparently. There's probably some complications with that." Bigga seemed vexed. "And for all we know, there might be clues left in that villa."

"And Talbot, the only person we know for sure is related to the Alliance, is still catatonic." Fokine scratched the back of his neck, looking stumped. "He's been discharged from the hospital, but he has to be cared for by his family in his

home in London. With all this going on, we really don't have enough people to go around."

Echika clenched her jaw but tried to keep her confusion from showing on her face. The Mnemosyne-altering memory cartridge had left Talbot in a state of ego muddling, basically rendering him mentally disabled. Aidan Farman, who'd had the same HSB used on him, also exhibited the same symptoms. Until now, Echika had suspected that Professor Lexie might have done something to the HSB cartridge, but at this point, it was all but confirmed, in the most painfully ironic of ways.

Talbot wasn't a saint, but that didn't mean she'd had the right to fundamentally alter his mental capacities. Especially since he was a material witness. Each time she thought back on it, the weight and guilt of her choices threatened to crush her heart.

"If there's one other person who might have been related to the Alliance..." Bigga glanced at Echika, concerned. "Well, I hate to say it, but... It's Ms. Hieda's father, isn't it? He was the one who told Chairman Talbot about Taylor's thought manipulation system."

"—Taylor is in all likelihood trying to achieve intentional thought manipulation."

Like Bigga had said, Echika's deceased father, Chikasato, had secretly informed Talbot of Taylor's thought manipulation system. At this point, the possibility of him being connected with the Alliance had to be considered seriously—this was one more reason Echika was depressed. Just when her troubled relationship with him had been well on its way to becoming nothing more than an old wound, this had to go and happen.

"I suspect my father, too," Echika answered curtly. "I'm looking into him on my end."

"The only bit of good news we have is that the IAEC has proven its innocence," Fokine said. "We looked into them thoroughly, but couldn't turn up any damning evidence on them or the other committee members. It looks like Talbot was the only one with ties to the Alliance."

"That's good." Echika exhaled in relief. AI was much too integrated into

modern society, and if the reliability of its ethics committee was called into question, there could be untold chaos. “Who’s the new chairperson?”

“They haven’t announced it yet. Regardless, we have enough headaches to worry about as is.” He took a sip of his mulled wine. “Anyway, that *ponchik* (donut) stand over there is calling to me.”

Talk about changing the subject without warning.

“You had those donuts in the bureau just yesterday.” Bigga looked fed up with Fokine. “Personally, I’m more interested in the *konfety* (candy) stand next to it.”

“I see you’ve picked up some of the shamelessness this line of work calls for.”

“You’re the one who told me about that place, Ivan!”

“I did?”

Fokine rolled his eyes evasively and walked away from the table—it seemed he was intent on not talking about work anymore. He was right that talking about it for too long would only spoil the cheer of the Christmas market...

Echika looked at Bigga, who was taking another sip from her paper cup.

“I see you two have gotten friendly while I’ve been away,” she said.

“It’s probably because we ended up hospitalized together in Dubai last time? It kind of broke down the wall between us...,” Bigga said, fiddling with her braid. Echika was honestly glad to see her opening up to other people and expanding her world, especially when she thought back to how Bigga used to act back when she’d first left Kautokeino for Saint Petersburg.

“That’s good.” Echika’s lips curled into a grin.

“Oh, stop smirking like that!”

“It was just a normal smile.”

Tchaikovsky was still playing over the speakers. A pop-up on her *Your Forma* identified this song as the “Dance of the Sugar Plum Fairy.” Bigga pouted bashfully, but then recomposed herself. The glow of the Christmas lights bounced off her polished nails.

“By the way...have you been keeping in touch with Harold?”

Echika’s breath caught in her throat. So it finally came up. Her heart twinged at just the sound of his name.

“If that’s the case...I don’t think I can get along with you anymore.”

The way the Amicus had stood there on the day they parted ways in Dubai’s airport vividly came to mind. His lakelike eyes, that at one point had looked as though they might finally thaw, once again froze over. And it was none other than Echika’s fault. She couldn’t explain why she was so fixated on Harold, and her attempts only ended up fizzling away to nothing, with him pushing her away.

But even so, she believed that this was the best possible choice. That was partly because she knew that she’d just become a burden to him if they stayed together any longer, but it was also because she knew he’d eventually discover the unsightly emotion she was harboring. Even if his discerning eye was dull when it came to her, he’d arrive at the answer sooner or later—and she didn’t want this conceited feeling of hers to be exposed. The thought of it being uncovered scared her, because once that happened, then everything would definitively and thoroughly break beyond repair.

But above all else, Harold had made it abundantly clear that he didn’t want to get Echika involved in his secret. So yes, the two of them keeping their distance and being apart was the ideal choice.

And despite that...the emotions she’d closed up in that glass bottle deep in her heart would still rattle every now and then.

It almost feels like I was more balanced back when I was on my own, clinging to Matoi.

“We haven’t spoken, no,” Echika replied to Bigga, trying to maintain an air of nonchalance. “I mean, he’s been busy, you know.”

“But haven’t you spoken on days off?”

“He only sent a few e-mails. Besides, we’ll see each other when my suspension is lifted.”

Talking about it made Echika's stomach tighten in knots. This was her biggest issue at hand. Harold was currently the only Belayer who matched her data-processing abilities. So long as the Electrocrime Investigations Bureau intended to make full use of Echika's capabilities as a Diver, they would be against the two of them annulling their partnership.

Which begged the question: What were they going to do next?

"I might be imagining things, but haven't things been shaky between you two ever since Dubai?" Bigga asked, probing for an answer. "So is everything, um, okay between you two? I mean, I can tell it isn't, but..."

"We're fine." Echika didn't want Bigga to worry if she could help it. "I'm sorry, but it's nothing major, really."

"Really? Not that I, er, want you two to start talking again, uh..."

Bigga trailed off there, her clear green eyes darting about. She cast her gaze in the direction Fokine had vanished, then looked back at Echika.

"What's wrong?" Echika asked.

"It's nothing... Sorry!" Bigga lowered her eyes for a moment. "Ivan told me to keep my mouth shut so I wouldn't worry you..."

Her words made Echika's chest tighten in anxiety. "What?"

"Well, you see...Harold's been experiencing problems with his data processing recently."

This was the first she'd heard of that.

She stiffened. The din of the fair grew, as though wads of cotton had been put in her ears.

"He went to Novae Robotics Inc. last week for his scheduled maintenance... If it's fixable, we won't have anything to worry about. But Harold said this was his first time experiencing anything like it. The wound he sustained in Dubai shouldn't have impacted his system, so he has no idea why it happened... Except..."

The way Bigga's lips moved reminded Echika of flower petals, slowly fluttering down.

“He did say that if it can’t be fixed, *he’ll have to quit his job as a Belayer.*”

Oh.

She’d forgotten, it seemed, just how calculating this Amicus could be.



Harold had been staying at Novae Robotics Inc. for a week now.

It was Sunday, and the lounge on the fifth floor of the first technological ward was deserted. Harold stood alone by the windowsill. It was quite bright for a London winter’s day, and the sunlight glittered over the waters of the Regent’s Canal flowing below. The narrowboats moored in the waters were stunning to behold, a world of difference compared to the frozen Neva River in Saint Petersburg.

Just then, Harold heard the sound of footfalls.

“Good morning, Harold. I’m sorry, but could you move into the maintenance room?”

Approaching him with flustered steps was Department Head Angus of the Special Development Department. His red hair was sloppily quaffed, and the sweater he had on was clearly half-dried. It was quite obvious he’d been called out of bed first thing in the morning. In other words...

“You got a call from the private prison in Ashford, I take it?” Harold asked. “Can they deploy Professor Lexie to help with my tuning?”

“It took some pushing, but they agreed to have her inspect you online for now. I did ask for time until our technicians can come here, but they said we have to do it right now, since she has prison work to do after this...” Angus looked around the lounge wearily. “Where’s Darya?”

“Still in her hotel. She’s not used to being away from home for so long, so she’s tired. I thought it’d be for the best if she spent the day in bed.”

“She might not make it in time for the meeting, but call her over. I’ll give her the results directly.”

Harold followed Angus out of the lounge. On workdays, the corridors were

always full of technicians and engineers, but they were deserted now. Soft sunlight filtered in from the wall-length windows, casting shadows thickly over the floor. Harold operated his wearable wristwatch terminal to message Darya.

“Honestly, I didn’t want to have to turn to her for help,” Angus said beside him, wearing a sour expression. “But we’re completely stumped about this malfunction of yours. We have no idea what’s causing it.”

“I’m sorry to trouble you like this, Department Head.”

“Don’t apologize. I don’t like to admit it, but we’re doing this because I’m entirely out of my depth here.”

They entered one of the Special Development Department’s maintenance rooms—a small one, with only a single maintenance pod. All the equipment was new, though the place was cluttered with a variety of terminals and cables that had been brought in over the last few days. Angus instantly walked over to boot up the pod.

Harold glanced at the wall, where a flexible screen that hadn’t been there the day before was set up.

“Hey there, Harold. It’s been ages. I’ve been so lonely, what with you never coming to visit.”

Projected onto the turned-on screen was his “mother.” Her brunette hair was now shoulder-length, and around her neck—which was much thinner than he last remembered it—was a distinctive prisoner’s choker, which functioned as a network isolation unit.

This was his first time seeing her since the RF Model assault incident the previous spring.

Professor Lexie Willow Carter was the creator and parent of the RF Models. She had been convicted of several crimes—including abduction, attempted murder, and violations of International AI Operations Laws—and sentenced to fifteen years in prison. Her wrongdoings were the product of a single objective: to prevent a man named Aidan Farman from exposing the secret of the RF Models.

Angus spoke before Harold could answer.

“Professor Lexie, the guards asked for you to keep chatter to a minimum.”

“That’s just procedure. I get along with people here, and they let me get away with little breaches of conduct here and there.” Lexie turned away from the screen for a moment. **“Just like you asked, it’s only me in this room. We can go into detail regarding Harold’s...or rather, the RF Models’, system without fear that someone might be listening in on company secrets.”**

The RF Models were Novae Robotics Inc.’s masterpiece, a next-generation all-purpose AI. Even the prison guards would have to leave if they were going to discuss direct details about the system—and Angus had gotten the penitentiary to agree to these terms. Harold was surprised that they’d complied, though. Maybe it was just Lexie’s past renown working its magic?

“I’m surprised you came to a criminal for help, though. Where’s your pride, Angus?”

Lexie teased Angus sarcastically, but he ignored her. He gestured for Harold to switch into his maintenance gown.

“About Harold,” said Angus, cutting to the chase in a businesslike manner. **“The figures for his processing throughput have dropped significantly, and it’s clear there’s some kind of internal error. But his CPU isn’t detecting any issues. We suspected there might be some kind of glitch in his utility function system because he made a network connection with Steve the other day, but there were no issues there, either. And so—”**

“—You tried to open up his system code, and that’s where your comprehensive abilities ran up against a brick wall.”

“You used custom code on the RF Models, and its quirks are too absurd for me to make sense of. And the Electrocime Investigations Bureau is pressuring me, so I can’t spend too much time deciphering it.”

“I thought your pleasant nature was your strong suit, Angus. What’s got you so high-strung?”

As he listened in on Angus’s exchange with Lexie, Harold changed into the gown and lay down in the pod. Angus was once Lexie’s assistant, and there had been a time when he’d felt nothing but admiration for her. But the revelation

that she'd planted berserk code in Steve and Marvin made him feel betrayed. He must have been having a hard time suppressing his mixed feelings now that he was seeing Lexie again.

"I'll show you his system code, so please identify the reason for the decline in his processing abilities." Angus touched the back of Harold's neck, triggering the thermal sensor that started his shutdown process. "By the time you wake up, you'll be all better."

"Does Harold want to be fixed, though?"

"What are you saying, Professor?"

Guided by his system, Harold peacefully closed his eyes.

When he rebooted an hour later, Angus was nowhere to be found. Harold sat up in the pod and looked around the room. His gaze met Lexie's, who was still projected on the flexible screen. She was just in the middle of stifling a bored yawn and letting out a sleepy "Oh, he's up."

Harold removed the cables connected to his cervical vertebrae. "Where's the department head?"

"Just as you were rebooting, Darya called and said she'd arrived. He went down to greet her." Lexie pushed up the bridge of her glasses. **"He asked me to make sure you woke up. I tell you, I can't tell if Angus trusts me or not."**

"I think he retains his respect for your technique and knowledge."

Harold got out of the maintenance pod and took off his gown. As he put on Sozon's sweater, he checked his outer shell's system. Sure enough, his lowered processing numbers had improved. But they were still a third of what he was capable of. His hands stopped for a second.

"It's better for you if it doesn't get better, right?" Lexie smiled, flashing her pretty teeth. **"I had a feeling this might be the case, so I didn't go too far with the tuning."**

"I did think you'd pick up on that even if I didn't say anything." With this improvement, he'd be able to retire from his role as Belayer for the time being. "Thank you."

“I mean, it’s fascinating. There’s no malfunction, no glitch, but here you are, feigning illness.”

Lexie was right. Harold wasn’t experiencing any malfunctions. His neuromimetic system was tuning the outer shell of his system code, making it seem as though his figures were lowered, keeping them suppressed. Lexie could see right through this, but since Angus and the others didn’t know the truth of the RF Models, they’d thrown in the towel. That small illusion was all it had taken for his “feigned illness” to work.

This was all because he needed a reason to quit his job as an investigator aide.

“...You don’t...have to understand.”

He thought back to the restrained words Echika had said before they parted ways in Dubai International Airport—when she’d committed a completely unnecessary crime, all to protect Harold’s secret. She’d been driven to extremes by her fixation on him—the fixation she’d once held toward Matoi. Echika herself wouldn’t admit that she was obsessed with him, though. In fact, she did nothing but take their attempts at treating each other as equals and dash them against the rocks.

She must have been at her limit. In retrospect, he probably should have distanced himself from her sooner, but on some level, Harold himself was fixated on her, too. Even as his emotional engine had grown unstable, he’d put his faith in it, insisting on staying at Echika’s side. And this was the outcome. He’d forced her to make a choice she would never be able to take back.

He couldn’t afford to make that mistake again.

“So what’s your plan this time? Is this part of an investigation?”

“I’m stepping down as Investigator Hieda’s aide.” Now that he was voicing it aloud, the idea didn’t shake him as much as it used to. “We have an ongoing case, so my superiors will probably try to keep me in the bureau, but I’ll make up a reason to go back to the Saint Petersburg police.”

“Hmm. That’s fascinating.” Lexie smiled. She wasn’t surprised, but he hadn’t expected her to be. **“You’re not looking for Detective Sozon’s murderer**

anymore? The news says the real killer hasn't been caught yet."

Apparently, she was keeping up with the news in prison via the television. "I'll keep looking for his murderer, of course, but I won't be relying on electronic investigators to do it anymore. I'll track them down by some other means."

"So you're saying you'll betray Echika after she went above and beyond to guard your secret."

"We're in agreement about this. Besides, the only reason Investigator Hieda had to carry my secret in the first place was because you, of all people, forced it on her."

"She could have chosen to expose it and condemn me. She cooperated willingly."

Come to think of it, his "mother" could be seen as the source of all these problems—but Lexie wore an unapologetic, teasing smile. This came as no surprise, but she felt no guilt or regret over the things she'd done. She'd always been an aloof genius, and he didn't think that would ever change.

"I think I've heard enough of that." Harold shook his head in resignation. "There's something more important I have to ask. Why did you make the emotional engine like that?"

"What do you mean?"

"It's basically defective. I actually went to the trouble of checking it, and I discovered that it's falling apart. But I can't fix it on my own."

Harold traced back in his memory. It had happened after he'd parted ways with Echika at Dubai International Airport and gotten into a taxi. Once he was by himself, an inexplicable emotion flooded him with the intensity of a tidal wave. Just remembering it made him feel like it could crush his circuits, or like his circulatory fluid had gone cold all at once.

At the time, his diagnostics system had told him he was functioning normally, but he couldn't see the intensity of that feeling as anything but a defect. And so, thinking he would fix it, he'd connected to his emotional engine for the first time.

What he found inside it was truly hideous.

“You can’t call that kind of code an engine. All it does is react to situations as they take place and automatically transmit signals. It’s completely disorderly.”

“It only looks like that to you because you’re a machine. But the truth is that I intentionally made it that way.”

“Then I’m even more confused.” Harold coldly eyed Lexie on the screen. “Even if you made it imitate human emotions on purpose, I don’t see why it would be necessary. An emotional engine is destructively incompatible with a system that endeavors to remain constantly rational to begin with. I would have preferred a system that faked my emotions.”

“You’re saying you’d rather be like a mass-produced Amicus, just pretending like you’re happy or sad?”

“It would certainly allow us to keep our processing powers at maximal output.”

“I see—so that’s why you’re trying to keep your emotional engine suppressed.”

Harold didn’t so much as move an eyebrow, even as she said this to his face. It had been days since he’d rewritten his code to slow his emotional engine as much as possible. Doing it had made him realize just how many unnecessary processes he’d been saddled with until now. Everyone else assumed this change in his behavior was due to his malfunction, so it hadn’t caused him any issues. Since then, he’d gotten by just fine pretending everything was normal.

In fact, he found it ideal. His thought processes were carried out successfully, without any needless memories muddying the waters. He was able to consistently focus on the tasks in front of him and make the best choices in every situation.

“But I think I understand. I was hoping you’d get closer to being human, little by little, but now you’ve changed course...” Lexie cocked her head pensively. **“Now I’m curious—what did Investigator Hieda do to you? Come on, tell me.”**

“The other day, I met with Chairman Talbot. He said he went to speak to you

after reading an article about me.”

“Did you just ignore me?” Lexie grimaced deliberately. **“I hear that mustached asshole was on the artificial island, too? And he had to resign from his position at the IAEC over health issues?”**

“Yes, he’s basically been rendered an invalid. What did you plant in that HSB?”

It was a brief, curt exchange of questions, but it was enough to answer her doubts. Lexie parted her lips into a wordless smile, like she realized what he was getting at. Harold got the distinct feeling he’d never really understand how his “mother” thought.

“Wait a moment, please. Department Head Angus is calling me.”

Having changed back into his clothes, Harold reached for his coat. As he made to leave the maintenance room, she softly called for him to wait. Turning around, he found Lexie looking at him with an oddly serious expression. He felt like he could see the stars twinkling in her dark eyes, and it made him want to avert his gaze.

“If you really decide that you don’t want your emotional engine, come to me and ask to have it removed again.”

Unless Harold was mishearing things, her tone had an eerie hint of expectation. He silently clenched his jaw and left the maintenance room. Even if such a time came, he wouldn’t come to Lexie for help. She’d only ever viewed him and his siblings as lab rats to begin with. The changes he was going through right now were nothing more than entertainment to her, the opportunity to see a test subject display hitherto unseen results.

The light spilling into the corridor was weaker than it had been earlier. As Harold walked by, he checked his wearable terminal. He had a few new messages. One was from Chief Totoki and had been forwarded to the entire bureau. Unsurprisingly, she was working during a day off. He opened it.

<List of Farasha Island investors narrowed down to six suspected affiliates with the Alliance>

The message included an outline of recent developments in the investigation,

along with a summons and date for a meeting tomorrow afternoon. He could make it in time if he caught a flight out of Saint Petersburg now.

All that was left was for him to find the right chance to leave the Electrocrime Investigations Bureau. The question was how.

The lounge soon came into view. Angus and Darya were standing and talking to each other, wearing serious expressions. Darya looked slightly unkempt, since she'd needed to get ready to leave in a hurry.

"Professor Carter doesn't know what's causing it?"

"Yes. Harold's a next-generation model, so some unexpected malfunctions are to be expected, but..."

Harold closed the holo-browser before they noticed he was there. When Darya's eyes met his, he ordered his system to produce a serene smile.

Better this than a futile, halfway attempt to become closer to human. At least faking emotions didn't strain him as much.

If we're supposed to be Amicus ex Machina—mechanical friends—then this is how we should be.

YOUR FORMA

Chapter 1

Six Silences



Chapter 1

Six Silences

1

Zurich, Switzerland. The building for the Assisted Suicide Organization Fenster stood across from Berlivet Street. It wasn't readily apparent, but it was a residential building, which stood out in a business district. The glass windows on all sides of the building amplified the winter sunlight.

"I checked Mr. Chikasato Hieda's hearing sheet after I got your call, but...he hardly mentioned any friendships to speak of. As far as I can recall, he was a very taciturn man."

In a lounge that had been made to look homey so as to keep clients from feeling intimidated, Echika sat on a sofa across from a middle-aged woman with gray-streaked hair.

<Isabelle Lange. Fifty-five years old. Psychiatrist. Representative of Assisted Suicide Organization Fenster>

"I'm here today because my father's relationships might provide a clue in an ongoing investigation." Echika glanced at the teacup sitting on the low table. Her tense expression stared back at her from the surface of the light-colored tea. "We understand you have a duty of confidentiality to uphold, but we ask for your cooperation."

"Oh, I understand. But really, these are all the records I have."

Lange apologetically handed Echika a tablet with a hearing sheet on it. The form had been filled out by her father—Chikasato Hieda. It was dated June 2020, roughly four years ago. That was around when Echika had graduated from

high school and started working with the Electrocrime Investigations Bureau. Her father seemed to be behaving normally at the time, but then suddenly went missing and took his life, with the help of this assisted suicide organization.

That made this sheet the last formal record he had left behind.

Echika scrolled down the screen. All the questions in the sheet were worded so as to make the client reconsider suicide.

According to Lange, the term “assisted suicide organization” invited the misunderstanding that Fenster was actively endorsing that people kill themselves. The phrase originated from activists who argued that people with incurable diseases should be allowed to die with dignity. Even now, most of their clients were people whose days were numbered. Cases like Chikasato’s were rare.

Just then, Echika’s eyes fell on a single question.

<Q.15: Look back on your life one more time. Please write down the names of as many people as you can remember meeting>

<A. Kayori, Echika>

Chikasato’s reply was concise—he’d listed only the names of his divorced ex-wife and his sole daughter. She scanned over the whole sheet, but indeed, her father hardly mentioned other people. It didn’t seem possible to infer any relations he’d had with the Alliance. She’d been hoping to find some clues before her suspension period ended, but it appeared she would have no such luck...

Echika pushed the tablet back to Lange, making no attempt to hide her disappointment.

“Thank you.”

“I’m sorry we couldn’t be of help.” Lange frowned. “Did you find anything in the will we sent you?”

“Nothing.”

“I see...” Lange exhaled through her nose. “Chikasato was healthy—at least physically, if not mentally—and we thought it would be a waste to let him die.

But he was...a very adamant man. During his medical examination, he kept saying, ‘I must atone for the crimes I committed.’”

“I think that was important for my father.”

The wound of failing to implement Matoi had driven Chikasato to his death. Echika recalled that Elias Taylor had alluded to as much, and she didn’t think he was off the mark. Matoi had caused several deaths in its testing stages, and this no doubt caused a major shock to Chikasato, who had headed the project.

“Do you remember how last time, I told you that your father had visited our organization before?”

“Yes.” Echika nodded. Soon after her father’s passing, Fenster had told her the details of their association with him. “He read up on your history online and came to you not as a client but as a patient for diagnosis.”

“Yes, we had many therapy sessions online, but they all failed to change his perception that he was guilty of ‘crimes.’” Lange shook her head morosely. “He concluded that he would continue blaming himself for as long as he was alive and conscious.”

“He dedicated his entire life to work, so he couldn’t accept such a major failure.”

Echika pictured her deceased father’s face in her mind’s eye—for as long as she could remember, he’d always prioritized his work as a programmer. He’d contributed to the development of the Your Forma, helping to set up the post-pandemic generation. Many in the industry saw him as the secret key figure in the Your Forma’s development.

But she only saw him as a coldhearted—heartless—failure of a father.

“Echika, what was your role here? To be my machine, right?”

If not for the investigation, she wouldn’t have ever considered spending her time on him. She took a deep breath and buried those wounded emotions deep down.

“That will be all, Dr. Lange. Thank you for taking the time to meet with me.”

“It’s all right, I have a lull in my clients right now anyway. I hope you can

resolve your case.”

Echika rose from the sofa, her tea still untouched. She shook hands with Lange, who then escorted her out. As they walked by the porch, Echika noted how spacious it was, with magnolia flowers blooming on the naked winter branches. A female model housekeeping Amicus who was tending to the soil raised her face. It was one of the organization’s Amicus, and a member of Lange’s family.

“Are you heading back home now, Ms. Hieda?” The Amicus greeted her with a sociable smile. “If you’re looking for Swiss souvenirs, there’s a very popular line of antique wristwatches I recommend.”

“She came here to ask about Chikasato, not sightseeing advice,” Lange gently reprimanded the Amicus, who blinked a few times.

“In that case, have you been to the Fraumünster Church? Mr. Chikasato often visited it.”

Echika’s expression turned dubious. “A church?”

“He went to a church?” Lange asked. Evidently, this was news to her as well. “Wait, actually... Yes, he did go on walks every morning while staying at our lodging facility.”

Her father had never been a pious man. It all felt very odd, but Echika couldn’t imagine that an Amicus would lie. She looked up the Fraumünster Church on her Your Forma, finding it was only a kilometer away by foot.

“I’ll check it out.” Echika paused in thought, then asked the Amicus a question. “Did my father mention anything else to you? Old friends, or anything of the sort?”

“Yes, once,” the Amicus said with a mechanical smile. “He told me that I reminded him of someone called Sumika. That’s a Japanese name, so I assume you know her?”

Sumika.

Echika bit the inside of her lip. Sumika was the name of the gentle mass-produced housekeeping Amicus who had served as Echika’s surrogate mother.

She was under her father's service, however, not Echika's. She'd never actually asked him about this, but she had little doubt that he'd sought a replacement for his ex-wife in Sumika. After Chikasato died, Sumika had comforted his newly orphaned daughter every day. But Echika couldn't put up with this, and so she donated Sumika to a local orphanage. Keeping with standard procedure regarding used Amicus, Sumika's memory was erased, which put a definitive end to that chapter. All the discord that accumulated throughout her childhood was wiped clean in just an hour.

Yet something that fragile and transient had remained in a corner of her father's heart to his last breath.

This is just great...

It was confounding to think that emotions like these were what made her feel like she really was his daughter, bound to him by blood.

"...Thank you." Echika put on a fake smile. "Dr. Lange, if you find out anything else, I'd appreciate it if you could contact me."

She parted ways with the two there and walked out of the organization's grounds.

<Today's temperature is 4°C. Attire index B, warm clothes to ward off the cold, are advised>

She walked down Berlivet Street and headed to Zurich's city center. For a while, all she saw were hotels and office buildings, but her field of view soon opened up as the road approached the banks of Lake Zurich.

The winds blowing in from the lake tickled the back of her neck, prompting Echika to pull up the collar of her coat. She'd thought of flying to Switzerland when she'd gone to the Christmas market with Bigga and Fokine the other day. She was worried it might be a bit too direct, but she figured it would be a better use of the remaining time before her suspension ended than would staying at home.

More than anything, working helped to keep her mind off things.

Her destination, the Fraumünster Church, was on the other side of the Münsterbrücke Bridge in Zurich's city center. It was an impressive building, its

turquoise spires stretching up to the sky. It doubled as a clock tower, and there was an eye-catching timepiece built into the outer wall. Given the time of day, the place was relatively empty, with few tourists in sight.

Echika entered the church, feeling as though she was being drawn inside. People were seated here and there on the pews, silently offering prayer. Turning around, she saw a massive pipe organ hanging over the entrance, reflecting the colorful sunlight shining in through the stained glass. The sound of her breathing felt incredibly loud in this serene place.

Now that she was here, she didn't find the claim that her father had visited this place any more realistic. She walked down the nave between the pews. Down the passage and up a step past that was the presbytery. Echika stopped in front of it and looked back at the church one more time, when she noticed a fresco on the wall. It depicted a beautiful girl, her long hair looking like it was woven from golden thread. She appeared to be about sixteen, perhaps seventeen years of age, and she was standing in a dignified manner, clad in a brilliant dress.

Somehow, the painting reminded her of her "older sister," Matoi.

"That girl is the daughter of the German king who built this church. In the middle of her journey, she was guided by the light and received a divine revelation to build a church that would offer salvation to the people here."

Echika turned around. A middle-aged priest stepped out of the presbytery and greeted her with a gentle smile. He'd noticed her staring at the fresco and approached her.

"Is that so?" Echika hesitated for a moment. Did her father speak to this priest? "Pardon me, but there's something I'd like to ask..."

She explained the situation, pulling up a picture of Chikasato on her tablet and showing it to the priest. He instantly gave an "oh" of realization.

"Yes, he used to come here. I think it's been a long time since I last saw him... He loved this mural for years."

Lange's Amicus had been telling the truth, it seemed. But something nudged at Echika's attention.

“For years?”

“Yes. When was the first time I met him...? I’d say it was fifteen years ago.”
What? “He came here with a group, said he was in Zurich for an academic conference. After that, he’d return about once a year just to look at this mural.”

Echika looked at the fresco again. It really did look like Matoi. Like the priest said, her father had often gone abroad on academic conferences. And if he first saw the fresco fifteen years ago, it was possible he’d used it as inspiration for modeling Matoi.

That said, academic conferences usually changed locations every year. If he’d visited the church that frequently, then his trips to Switzerland must have been intentional. Was it to get examined by Lange? No, he only became her patient toward the end of his life; they didn’t go that far back.

There was a decade or so between Matoi’s failure and her father’s decision to end his life. Had he been contemplating suicide the whole time? Or had staring at this fresco put his heart at ease?

I feel like I don’t actually know my father at all.

“He didn’t talk much, but he was a lovely man, very polite.” The priest narrowed his eyes, thinking back on Chikasato. “I haven’t seen him in some time, so I don’t know what he’s up to nowadays...”

She couldn’t bring herself to tell him he’d been dead for some years now. Echika simply thanked the priest and left Fraumünster Church, as though she was trying to get away from his innocent gaze. There was a flagstone plaza outside the church, with a violinist holding a performance in front of a fountain. The gentle melody slipped through the crowd that formed around the violinist and rode the wind to reach her.

<“Jesu, Joy of Man’s Desiring” by Johann Sebastian Bach>

The Your Forma graciously showed the name of the song in a pop-up window. She tiredly dismissed it. In the end, she’d learned nothing here. She’d gone as far as to check out the church, but not only did she find no clues about the Alliance, this trip only served to poke at old wounds. She would have been better off spending her day at home.

But just as she was about to sigh—

<Audio call from Ui Totoki>

This made Echika feel all the more depressed. She and Totoki had exchanged a few messages after Echika reached out to her about Harold following the Christmas market. Echika had let the chief know she was going to Switzerland for personal reasons, and now she had to figure out how to tell her the trip had amounted to nothing.

“Hello.” Totoki’s voice was as indifferent as ever. **“Are you in Switzerland already?”**

“I’m in Zurich right now. I visited Fenster and a church to check if I could find anything about my father...” She concisely summed up her activities thus far. “Unfortunately, I didn’t turn up the kind of proof I was hoping for.”

“That’s a shame, but there’s not much to be done about it.” Totoki let go of the topic with surprising indifference. **“Hieda, the truth is, I didn’t call to check in on your progress in Switzerland. Your suspension is due to expire in three days, right?”**

Echika frowned. “Yes, that’s correct.”

“The bureau director gave permission for it to be lifted effective immediately. We need you back at work ASAP.”

...*What?* It took Echika a moment to fully process what Totoki had just said.

“I need you to back up Investigator Fokine. He’s at Saint Moritz right now. It should take you three and a half hours via train to get there.”

“Got it.” Echika nodded, mostly out of inertia, struggling to keep up with what Totoki was saying. This was nothing new, but things were moving too fast. “Were there any developments about the Alliance? I’d appreciate it if you could share anything you have.”

The other day, Fokine had told her that the Special Investigations Unit had narrowed down the list of Farasha Island’s shareholders to a number of people suspected of being affiliated with the Alliance.

“Oh, yes, sorry. We’ve identified six shareholders who seem suspicious.”

Totoki sent her the investigation report, which Echika promptly opened. It included a brief summary of the investigation and personal data for the six investors. She skimmed their profiles. Politicians, wealthy people, a neurologist... Her Your Forma picked up on some of the data as Totoki spoke.

<Brian Quine, investor. Owns a villa in Saint Moritz>

In other words...

“Investigator Fokine tracked Quine down to Switzerland?”

“Yes. We were going to have Investigator Zacharov accompany him, but they’re occupied with another case.”

“What about Bigga? I heard she can help if she gets time off from the academy.”

“She’s got her hands full with another case. She went to Finland with Aide Lucraft.”

Echika tensed up at the sudden invocation of Harold.

Why are you reacting like this? Calm down. This shouldn’t shake you up.

“I get that you’re short on hands here, but... Um, wasn’t Aide Lucraft sent to Novae Robotics Inc. for tuning?”

“He came back to Saint Petersburg yesterday.” Totoki paused for a moment, as though she was unsure of what to say next. **“Listen, Hieda. Normally I’d tell you this in person, but...”**

Echika unconsciously scanned the plaza. The audience applauded the violinist, who had just finished his performance. The street was full of pedestrians. There was a toddler riding a tricycle and tourists in gaudy clothes. The sky peeked out at them from between the buildings, its hue a much warmer blue than the surface of the frozen lake.

“Even after the tuning, Aide Lucraft’s processing abilities didn’t fully recover.”

Echika guessed what Totoki was about to say before she’d even said it. Or at least she knew that Harold wanted to keep his distance from her, and that she felt the same. That meant he had to be deliberately lowering his processing

power. In practice, the Electrocrime Investigations Bureau would insist on keeping him around for his effectiveness as a Brain Dive Belayer unless he made himself useless. His reasoning made sense, and his plan was sound.

“I see...” Her voice left her dry lips with surprising calmness. “I wonder what’s going to happen to him.”

“I’m sure you understand, but it’ll be difficult for him to keep working with us.” Totoki seemed to be trying to remain as calm as possible. **“But his observation skills are reliable. We’re planning on retaining him as an investigation support Amicus as he continues undergoing maintenance.”**

“I see.”

“Finding you a new aide will take some time. We considered asking Novae Robotics Inc. to lend us Steve, but the IAEC won’t approve it because he went haywire once already.” Totoki didn’t need to say it out loud, but at worst, they’d need to assign her human aides again. **“I’m sorry if all of this is just making you worry, but for now, just focus on the task at hand.”**

“Understood.”

“You can ask Aide Lucraft for the details when you meet him in person.”

“...I will.”

“In the meantime, I need you to link up with Investigator Fokine.”

Echika hung up and discovered that she had been clenching her hand in a fist, leaving visible nail marks in her palm. The violinist started playing another song. The melody was quite tragic this time, and it seemed to drown out the din of the plaza.

It really was over. No... It had already been over for some time now.

Echika thought she would just stand there for a while, only to realize that she was already walking. Spurred by something, she turned her back on the plaza. She placed a call to locate Fokine’s contact address and began her trip to Saint Moritz.

She needed to remind herself how she’d withstood this loneliness before, and she needed to do it fast.

“I looked into it before coming here, but they say Engadiner Nusstorte is a real treat.” This was the first thing Fokine said upon greeting Echika.

Saint Moritz was a health resort in the mountains in northeastern Switzerland. It was also a limited communications area that drew in tourists and celebrities from across the globe, seeking to undergo digital detoxes.

As soon as she took one step out of the train station, which was devoid of MR ads, she was greeted by the vast ridgelines of the mountains and a view of the frozen Saint Moritz Lake. The scenery screamed “resort.”

In other words, there was plenty to do here besides sample the local cuisine.

“Investigator.”

Echika ruthlessly dashed Fokine’s excitement. “Again with your sweet tooth?”

“It’s a traditional Swiss pastry with caramel and nuts inside. It should make for a good souvenir.”

“We’re here for work, not sightseeing.”

“You switched to work mode awfully fast for someone who just had her suspension lifted.”

Echika glared at Fokine in annoyance to get him to stop joking around—apparently, he’d had a look around town while she’d been en route. He was already holding a souvenir bag.

“Right now, I don’t have my gun or my ID. I’m effectively a civilian.”

“Just having you around will make things easier. Let’s pick up a share car over there.” Fokine pointed to a parking lot in the station’s roundabout. “It should take us ten minutes to get to our destination. Anyway, I heard looking into your dad didn’t pan out?”

Who told you? Totoki? “Yeah. If you hadn’t pinned down the investor, I would have felt even worse.”

“I’m glad that was good news for you, at least.”

As they talked, Echika and Fokine got into a share car, seeking to escape the

cold. Saint Moritz was covered in snow during winter to spring. The temperature was consistently below freezing.

According to the map Fokine had in his bag, Quine's villa was in the western Bad district. Echika let Fokine handle the driving, and their car rolled out of the station.

"Did Chief Totoki send you the materials, by the way?"

"Yes, just earlier. His history is pretty suspicious."

Echika opened up Quine's personal data again, which she copied to her offline storage. He was a wealthy investor in his sixties from Los Angeles, where he was the head of a company that produced silicon wafers. He had a reputation for being interested in cutting-edge tech, and he actively donated to the American health care industry.

On the other hand, however, he had a history of running factories that engaged in forced labor and were suspected of trafficking illegal substances. This was only hearsay, though, and he had never been charged with anything.

"We did discover highly addictive drugs on Gomez and the luddites on Farasha Island. We're wondering if Quine might have sourced them."

"That makes sense. When did Quine go back to his villa in Saint Moritz?"

"The local police reported the lights were on at his place as early as two weeks ago. Apparently, he takes his wife and daughter's family here for a ski trip at the end of every year. But it's too early for that right now, and he's here alone."

"Very suspicious."

Echika closed Quine's data. The car drove by the shore of the Saint Moritz Lake. Echika could see tourists walking along its frozen surface. Some of them were standing shoulder to shoulder and taking pictures. Lake Zurich rarely ever froze, but just a few hundred kilometers away, the environment seemed completely different.

"Apparently, they're setting up a skating rink," Fokine said. "Wanna stop there on the way back?"

“My suspension just ended.”

“Come on, the chief doesn’t have to know about it. Besides, you could use a change of pace.”

Echika fell silent, unsure if he was being serious or joking. Come to think of it, Fokine already knew about Harold’s malfunction. He’d realized Echika had lost her investigator aide and needed a “change of pace.”

She was causing him needless concern, too.

“I’m fine.” She maintained a calm tone. “Forget the lake. We should be looking for souvenirs for Bigga and the others.”

Fokine smiled. “I thought we’re here for work, not sightseeing?”

“Well...” She averted her gaze. “I just hope we find those en—whatever you call them. The pastry.”

“Even if we don’t, we have to get some milk chocolate. It’s a Swiss staple. That’s bound to be delicious.”

“...Just how many kinds of sweets are you planning on getting?”

The road eventually moved away from the lake, instead tracing the black peaks of Piz Nair. Between the seemingly endless rows of larch trees, Echika could make out a row of houses. Their destination, Quine’s villa, was a large building set up at the end of a one-way street. It was made of stone and stood behind a pastoral fence made up of rock and wood.

The surrounding larch trees opened up, giving them a clear view to the porch. The place looked empty, though. A Rolls-Royce Phantom was parked in front of the garage.

Echika took off her seat belt. “Do we go in through the front door?”

“Unlike you, I’ve got my ID on me.”

Fokine got out of the share car after Echika and made for the porch. The front door had a fancy glass decoration set over it. As Fokine rang the doorbell, Echika glanced at the garage. The shutters were down, and the car was parked facing the driveway. Honestly, wasn’t leaving a luxury car parked outside rather careless?

“We’re in the mountains, so he couldn’t have left without his car.” Fokine rang the doorbell again. “I’d at least expect a housekeeping Amicus to come out.”

“Maybe he didn’t bring one along. This is a designated limited communications area, after all.”

Echika approached the car. Peering into its interior, she saw there was a men’s clutch bag sitting inside.

“Hieda?” Fokine called to her dubiously.

She ignored him and circled the vehicle, looking at the driver’s seat. There was a smart key sitting inside the pocket of the door.

She did think it was strange—so this was why.

“I think Quine must’ve left the key here when he went inside the house, intending to go out again.” She pulled the sleeve of her coat over her palm and used it to pull the car door open. It wasn’t locked. “He was going to leave right away, but something kept him inside.”

Fokine was gobsmacked. “You’re really taking after Aide Lucraft.”

Echika was stumped as to how to respond to that. Harold’s influence on her was considerable, for sure.

“Um.” She pulled herself together. “Is the front door locked?”

She couldn’t quite explain it, but she had a sinking feeling about this. Fokine’s policeman intuition must have kicked in, because he took out gloves from his pocket, put them on, and touched the knob of the front door. It opened without resistance, creaking loudly. Echika and Fokine exchanged glances. Apparently, her hunch had been on the mark.

“I’ll go in first.” He took out his Flamma 15 from his knee holster. “Watch my back.”

“All right.” Since she was unarmed, she didn’t have much of a choice. “Be careful.”

Fokine undid the safety and tiptoed into the house. Echika followed a few steps behind him.

The entryway floor was made of marble, and light filtered into the room through a skylight. The wall was decorated with oil paintings, and a fan-shaped staircase extended to the second story. Fokine started his investigation with the living room on the first floor. They hadn't heard so much as a peep yet.

"Mr. Quine?" Fokine called out. "Please say something if you're there!"

As expected, the living room was empty. The fixtures and sofas were all relatively modest, but there was elegance to the simplicity of it all. They walked into the room, stepping onto its Persian carpet. But the moment Fokine took a look in the kitchen, he suddenly lowered his pistol.

"Aw, shit... Hieda, call an ambulance."

Echika glanced over Fokine's shoulder into the kitchen and gasped.

Lying facedown and limp on the clean floor was none other than Brian Quine.

2

Enontekiö was a small Finnish village close to the Norway-Sweden borders. It was in a technologically restricted zone that composed the majority of northern Finland.

"I thought London was cold, but this place is just messed up. My cheeks hurt, and I can feel the blood vessels in my head contracting."

"That's why I told you to get earmuffs, Investigator Gardener."

<Today's temperature is -10°C. Attire index A, cold-resistant clothes, are required>

Harold closed his wearable terminal's clothing app. The parking lot of the village's sole coffee shop was an unpaved lot. Powder snow ruthlessly flitted down on his and Bigga's shoulders. The sky was a vast half circle, and the only things in sight were some small huts visible between the European pines.

Harold heard someone beside him let out a loud, booming sneeze.

"Bigga, won't you lend me your hat? You're used to the cold already."

The man trembling next to them was one Investigator Jacob Gardener, a twenty-eight-year-old British man who was the head of the Special

Investigations Unit for the London branch. He bleached his hair, as young people often did, and wore an expensive brand of down coat. It was clearly a personal garment, as opposed to being issued by the bureau.

“I don’t think it’s your size,” Bigga said, looking a bit irked as she took off the wool hat she was wearing. “Why didn’t you look at the forecast before coming here? Take this seriously!”

“Cut me some slack. I hardly get to go on business trips, so I don’t know. I’m originally from the Online Monitoring Department.”

“This isn’t a business trip; it’s an expeditionary investigation.”

“You can call it whatever you want, just get in touch with that Hansa kid and tell him to get here fast. I’ll wait inside the car.”

Investigator Gardener walked over to their share car, trying to expand the hat Bigga had lent him. Harold heard Bigga let out a conspicuous sigh. She brushed the snow off her hair in annoyance and pulled the hood of her coat over her head.

“I don’t like having to say this, but how did someone so irresponsible get to be our group leader?”

“I don’t know the details, but Investigator Gardener’s father runs a drone development company that provides the bureau with its products. I assume he pulled some strings to get his son a gig.”

Harold shared the story he’d heard about Gardener with Bigga, whose expression grew even more sour. Since she was studying so diligently in the academy, it didn’t sit right with her that Gardener had moved up based on his father’s influence.

A day had passed since Harold had finished up his maintenance at Novae Robotics Inc. and returned to his duties at the Electrocime Investigations Bureau. Upon sharing his maintenance results with Chief Totoki, she told him that he would continue working on the Special Investigations Unit as an investigation support Amicus. In other words, he would no longer be an investigator aide and Belay.

He’d accomplished all this before Echika’s suspension period ended. He

needed to keep going at this pace.

“This just means we have to do our job right!”

Bigga seemed to have switched gears and was now looking up enthusiastically at the case file she’d opened on her Your Forma. Harold did the same, calling up the document on his wearable terminal’s holo-browser. It showed the personal data of the investors they were pursuing.

<Jonas Banfield>

A forty-year-old neurology physician who resided in London. He also served as the president of a welfare medical organization that focused on hospice care. But what he was really doing was getting donations from members of the organization and its recipients to invest significantly in Farasha Island.

“Based on what Banfield’s family is saying, he left London last week.” Bigga’s expression was serious. She looked less like an academy student or a consultant and more like a first-class investigator. “He’s a major photography hobbyist, and he usually goes on trips this time of year to take photos, but...”

“His family hasn’t noticed that his GPS position was lost.”

After narrowing their sights on the group of six investors with potential ties to the Alliance, the Electrocrime Investigations Bureau had tracked down each of their GPS coordinates. Banfield and a few others had already disappeared so as to shake off the investigation. Using past GPS records and surveillance drone footage, they found that Banfield had taken a direct flight from London to Helsinki, then moved north to the technologically restricted zone. But once he got to Enontekiö, his signal suddenly went dark.

“Investigator Gardener says that London’s Special Investigations Unit was tracking Banfield, and they believe he might have gotten caught up in an incident... But you think otherwise, right, Bigga?”

“There’s only one reason a Your Forma user would visit a technologically restricted— No, the kind of areas we Sami live in.”

Enontekiö wasn’t far from Bigga’s hometown of Kautokeino. Their briefing on the area had mentioned that 20 percent of Enontekiö’s population was Sami, and much like Kautokeino, their economy was based mostly on reindeer

husbandry and aurora tourism. With the growing spread of the Your Forma, the region had achieved notoriety for being a technologically restricted zone, leading to an influx of new industries.

In other words.

“Your theory that Banfield is undergoing bio-hacking was correct.”

“I would have preferred to be wrong...,” Bigga said. Just then, she blinked. She appeared to have gotten a message. “He should be here soon.”

About three minutes later, a jeep pulled into the coffee shop parking lot. Its wheels ground against the unpaved gravel as it came to a stop. Then the driver—a jumpy-looking boy—left the car. His hair was cut short, like a mowed lawn, and his pale skin was covered in freckles. He wasn’t very tall. Military fatigue pants peeked out from under his down jacket.

“Hansa.” Bigga greeted the boy with a nervous smile.

Hansa was a childhood friend of Bigga’s and a novice bio-hacker. This area was his turf, and there was suspicion that he’d been involved with Banfield’s bio-hacking.

“I haven’t seen you in ages... I’m glad you showed up.”

“I’m happy to see you, too. But Dad can’t find out I saw you.” Hansa looked around nervously. “Um, Bigga told me the bureau won’t arrest me or anything, no matter what I say... Can I believe you?”

Since Hansa and his fellows were making a living from criminal activity, they naturally feared the bureau. That aside, it appeared that Hansa had mistaken Harold for a human, just like Bigga had when they’d first met.

“So long as you help the investigation, we’ll hold up our end of the bargain,” Harold replied in a businesslike manner. “Also, I should add that I’m an Amicus, so I don’t have the authority to arrest you.”

“Huh?” Hansa stared at him with wide eyes. “You’re an Amicus? But you look so...”

“Ah, over here, over here! I’m the officer in charge.”

Investigator Gardener got out of the car and hurried over, curling up to shake

off the cold. He must have seen Hansa pull over. He held up his ID as he approached the boy.

“I’m Investigator Gardener. Did you perform the surgery on Banfield?”

“Ah, um...” Hansa’s eyes darted in confusion. “Could you speak a little slower...?”

Sami like Bigga and Hansa were multilingual, but he was terribly nervous.

“No, I heard that he didn’t do any surgery, but that he did prescribe Banfield a suppressant.” Bigga cut in. “The kind that stops all the machines inside your body, mainly the Your Forma. Right, Hansa?”

“Oh, yes, I did prescribe him that. Um, it was three days ago.”

Three days—that lined up with when Banfield’s GPS data had gone missing in Enontekiö. The suppressants must have shut down his Your Forma.

“Why did Banfield ask for the suppressant?” Gardener asked in a polite tone.

“I don’t know,” Hansa replied, his expression stiff. “At first, he said he wanted his Your Forma taken out altogether, but since I’m still new at this, I can’t do that... So I prescribed him a suppressant instead. Sold him a month’s worth.”

“Is there some rule preventing you from giving us information on your clients?”

“Basically, yes. But I think that if he turned to us for help, he probably has a guilty conscience.”

For whatever reason, Banfield didn’t want his GPS coordinates known—and it made sense, because the incident in Farasha Island had received worldwide coverage. The official story was that the mental shutdowns had been caused by a virus, but the investors who knew the truth were seized with fear. It was plausible that, like the other investors, Banfield was afraid his ties to the Alliance had been uncovered and had attempted to escape.

Bigga butted into their exchange. “Hansa, you set up Banfield with somewhere to stay, right?”

“Yeah, a hotel nearby. I think he’s still there.”

“Good, we were hoping you’d take us there.” Gardener placed a hand on Hansa’s shoulder. “Come take the jeep with me. Bigga and Harold, you take the share car.”

Gardener gently pushed a confused Hansa forward, hurrying him along to the jeep. Bigga looked concerned, but Harold urged her ahead and walked over to the car. It was a Japanese car they’d borrowed at the airport, but since it was an “oldie” that had been mass-produced during the 2000s, it didn’t operate very well.

As Harold got into the driver’s seat, Bigga put on the seat belt in the passenger’s seat.

“Investigator Gardener is sharing the route on my map, so I’ll give you directions.” She sighed. “Ugh, I swear, he could have just sent it to your terminal...”

“You can’t blame him. It’s his first time working with an investigation assistant Amicus.”

Bigga tensed up a little at his comment. Harold pretended he didn’t notice it and pulled the emergency brake. Despite Gardener taking refuge from the cold here a few minutes ago, the inside of the vehicle was back to freezing. The heating wasn’t working very well, but Harold was personally fine with that.

The heating.

An unpleasant memory crossed his thought process, but Harold easily corrected course back to normal.

“Um... Harold?”

Bigga parted her lips meekly as they drove out of the coffee shop parking lot after Hansa’s jeep. The bumpy trail surrounded by pine trees became dim at some point. It wasn’t even three PM yet, but the sun set early in the Nordic countries this time of year.

“Yes?” Harold asked, still gripping the steering wheel.

“Uh...” Bigga seemed to decide against saying what she originally wanted to say and changed the question. “Your malfunction isn’t fully fixed, right? But

they sent you all the way here, to the countryside... If you're having trouble working, you should tell Chief Totoki, okay?"

"The glitch doesn't get in the way of ordinary activity. It just makes it difficult for me to handle actions that are taxing on my processing power, like assisting Brain Dives."

"The chief told me that, yes... But if it get worse, let us know right away."

"I appreciate the concern, Bigga," he answered with a perfect smile, but her expression remained as troubled as before.

She was clasping the seat belt tightly. She must have been conflicted over speaking her mind and had ultimately settled on picking a roundabout way of saying it.

"You're the only one who can match Miss Hieda's abilities, Harold," Bigga said, her voice sounding like she was trying to deliberately soften it. "I keep asking how the two of you will manage... No, that's not it. I don't just mean in terms of work..."

"Even if our positions change, I'll still be Investigator Hieda's friend."

"Yes, right." Bigga's voice hardened. "I just, um, got a little nervous. Because the two of you have been acting kind of awkward for a while now... But, sorry. What I said was weird, wasn't it...?"

Nothing's changed, right?

Bigga's whisper felt like it was meant to calm herself more than anything. Harold's feigned sickness was one thing, but he knew that keeping the change in his relationship with Echika a secret was going to be the hardest part. He'd been gambling on the fact that people wouldn't pry too deeply, but when it came to Bigga, he couldn't say for sure.

It'd be tricky if she ever found out about the secret.

For the first time, his system explored that possibility.

Banfield's hotel was on the outskirts of Enontekiö. The two-story lodging facility facing the lake had a flat sort of design that reminded Harold of a British

terraced house. Harold and Bigga exited the car in the mostly empty parking lot.

“Give me a minute. I’ll talk to the owner and ask for their cooperation.”

Investigator Gardener hurried into the building, leaving Harold, Bigga, and Hansa to wait at the roundabout. The sun was setting, and as darkness crept across the sky, fluttering snowflakes shone like shards of glass in the light of streetlamps.

Harold glanced over at Bigga and Hansa. For childhood friends, the two of them sure weren’t talking much. Harold could easily imagine that Bigga’s decision to wash her hands of the bio-hacking business had driven a wedge between them.

“Hansa.” Harold addressed the boy, choosing a topic of conversation based on his system’s suggestion. “I’m not very familiar with this, but how often is the aurora visible in the area?”

Hansa directed a suspicious glance at him. The boy must have been chiding himself for mistaking a machine for a human—bio-hackers were luddites who lived in technologically limited zones where there were no Amicus. And since Hansa was a beginner bio-hacker, he’d had precious few chances to go into coexistence zones where he might see them.

“Sometimes you see it, but some days it’s not visible at all.” Bigga answered for him. “Harold, have you never seen a real aurora?”

“No, I haven’t. I didn’t have the time to look at it while I was in Kautokeino.”

“Then let’s go see one next time!” Bigga said, her spirits lifting. “Oh, um, I didn’t mean just the two of us. Everyone’s welcome, of course...”

“What’s the point of a machine looking at an aurora?”

Hansa’s tone was harsh. It was clear he wasn’t amused by this situation—by Bigga showing such clear affection for Harold, a machine.

“Hansa.” Bigga frowned. “Don’t talk like that. It’s rude.”

“Rude?” Hansa looked shocked, then he flared. “Bigga, I’m helping because you asked me for a favor. Lying to my dad and convincing him to give me the car was hard. Everyone calls you a traitor, but I never—”

“I know everyone back at Kautokeino doesn’t think fondly of me anymore.” Bigga didn’t act confused, apparently understanding Hansa’s feelings. “I know I’m causing you a lot of trouble, and I’m really grateful you’re cooperating with us—”

“I never said you caused me trouble.”

“You said it was hard.”

“I did, but—” Hansa looked frustrated. “But that’s not the issue here.”

“What is the issue here, then?” Bigga was growing visibly annoyed. “Hansa, what are you getting at?”

“What I mean is! Why are you acting like that toward a machin—?”

“I’m back. She said she’ll let us into Banfield’s room.” A voice cut into their argument.

Investigator Gardener walked out of the building alongside an old woman, apparently the manager of the hotel. Bigga and Hansa glared at each other for a second, then both looked away in annoyance. Harold thought he should intervene to mediate their disagreement, but his system warned him that getting involved would just aggravate the situation.

“Is Banfield really staying here?” Harold asked Gardener.

“Yes. She called his room, but he isn’t picking up, so we’ll have to speak to him in person.”

After Gardener explained, the woman beside him walked toward the rooms, her silence clearly expressing her displeasure at the bureau suddenly forcing their demands on her. Gardener followed the old lady, and Hansa hurried after him, eager to escape the awkward mood.

Bigga looked up at Harold apologetically.

“I’m sorry, Harold. Hansa doesn’t think kindly of Amicus...”

“I don’t mind. He’s right—I am a machine, and I can’t be offended.”

Harold said this with a calm smile, but instead of cheering Bigga up, it only made her expression darken.

The guest rooms were set in the building's eastern wing, their doors lined up on a half open-air corridor. Banfield's room was on the first floor, and there was some light snowfall in front of it. The old lady rang the doorbell, then knocked on the door with her wrinkled fist. But as seconds stretched into minutes, there was no response from inside.

"Does the suppressant have any side effects?" Gardener asked Hansa.

"It makes some people nauseated. Sometimes, it's so bad they can't get out of bed."

"You think maybe we should come back later if he's sick?"

"Investigator Gardener, are you serious?" Bigga raised her brows in surprise. "Banfield is clearly refusing to go out because he's got something to hide. You should be asking the manager for the master key!"

"Oh, um, I was just joking. Don't glare at me like that."

At Bigga's castigation, Investigator Gardener took the master key from the old lady. He wasn't very reliable, but there wasn't much to be done about that. He fumbled with the keys, unlocked the door, drew an automatic pistol from his holster, and timidly stepped into the room. Fearless, Bigga tried to follow after him, but Hansa stopped her. Throwing a sidelong glance at the two, Harold walked into the room after Gardener.

The room was snug, and the lights were still on. The wallpaper was peeling in places, and the interior looked old, more tasteless than plain. There was nothing much at a glance, save for a bed with visibly weak springs, a mirror on the wall, and a small desk.

Nothing—save for Banfield, lying faceup on the floor.

Since his emotional engine was inhibited, Harold wasn't surprised. But yes—things had just gotten a lot more complicated.

"You've gotta be kidding me." Hansa gulped behind him. "Why...? Suppressants can't kill people..."

"Oh, crap, what do we do now? Right. First, we call an ambulance..." Gardener went pale and lowered his gun before turning to Harold. "I'll ring

them up, so make sure to leave the room's furnishings untouched. No disturbing the crime scene."

"Understood."

Gardener turned his back to Harold and made an emergency call using his Your Forma. The old woman looked frightened, apparently having seen the state of the apartment from her position by the door, and she started chattering in panicked Sami. Bigga tried to calm her and walked her away from the entrance.

"It's not my fault," Hansa said over and over. "Suppressants don't have these kinds of side effects..."

Ignoring the boy's claims, Harold approached Banfield's body. He looked significantly more emaciated than he did in the picture in his personal data, and he had more gray hairs, too. Lying next to him was a single lens reflex camera. Its lens was broken from impacting with the floor, and its film had popped out. Glancing at the window, he noted it was slightly ajar. Did he collapse after taking a photo of the lake?

He knelt near the body and observed its state carefully again. Banfield's eyelids were half-open, but his clothes were undisturbed, implying that there were no signs of assault. No visible signs of him being affected by narcotics or poison, either.

Harold touched the body and noted that rigor mortis had progressed as far as Banfield's lower half. That meant eight hours or so had passed since his death, but his body temperature was surprisingly high. The internal sensors in Harold's skin showed that he had a consistent temperature of thirty-four degrees Celsius. Normally, corpses chilled to twenty-four degrees or so by this point...

Banfield's personal data did not have any records of chronic illness. Which meant...

"—Stop, Harold." He looked up, finding Gardener there again, having finished the call. "I told you not to disturb the crime scene. We need to wait for instructions from Chief Totoki."

"This doesn't look like homicide. Hansa, was Banfield sick?"

“Huh?” Hansa looked confused, forgetting his antipathy toward Amicus. “No, I took his temperature before administering the suppressant, but it was normal. Maybe he came down with something later...”

“Given his unusual temperature right now, he might have had a fever when he died. It looks like a severe infection.”

But even if he had died of illness, the timing was clearly suspicious. Would a sick person open the window to take photographs of the lake when it was bitingly cold outside?

“Look, I’ve heard you’re very smart, but you need to follow orders.” Gardener was visibly confused. “We shouldn’t make any conclusions about his cause of death until forensics inspects him.”

“Yes, of course.” Harold nodded and retracted his hand from the body. “But we should probably take samples as soon as possible. Depending on what infection this is, traces of the virus might disappear before the autopsy is performed.”

“Hansa, do you have a sampling kit? Could you lend it to me?”

Bigga entered the room after escorting the old woman away. She must have heard their exchange on the way here. She pointed at Hansa’s shoulder bag.

Bio-hackers often acted as back-alley doctors and would carry many different tool kits with them. This was something Harold had learned from his interactions with Bigga during the time of the sensory crime incident—but he knew that an Amicus asking Hansa for them wouldn’t be as convincing as having the girl he fancied do it.

“I do, but...” Hansa hesitated, taking out a sampling kit in a vinyl bag. “This isn’t an approved kit, so I doubt it’ll last long. It’ll need to be placed in cooling at the very least.”

“Our transport drones have a model with a cooling system.” Gardener operated his Your Forma. “Our closest factory with a production line should be...in Rovaniemi.”

Harold checked the map with his wearable terminal. Rovaniemi was a coexistence zone that was a three-and-a-half-hour drive from Enontekiö. A

transport drone moving along the airways could probably get to them faster than that, but that wasn't the problem.

"Factory?" Bigga blinked. "Are you considering asking a production factory to supply a drone directly to us? That sounds a bit far-fetched..."

"They'll do it if we ask," Gardener said casually. "My father runs a drone development corporation that provides surveillance drones to investigation agencies... Have you heard of an English company called Robin Flutter?"

Harold was familiar with the Robin Flutter brand—the firm had risen to prominence not only because it supplied drones to primary transport companies, but also because a large number of police organizations worldwide held a significant market share of their drones. This once again explained why the bureau treated Gardener so magnanimously. Favoritism was normally something to be avoided, but it seemed that the bureau had determined that the opportunity to deepen their relationship with him was too good to pass up.

Regardless, in this situation, it was a windfall.

"Investigator Gardener, please ask Chief Totoki for permission to use a transport drone for this."

"Hold on, I need to contact the factory and check first. I just hope someone's there to take the call..."

As Gardener operated his Your Forma, Harold unsealed the sampling kit. It was imperative that he take a sample from Banfield's corpse as soon as possible. But just as he was about to do that—

<Incoming message/Ui Totoki>

His wearable terminal got a notification. Harold paused, and Investigator Gardener and Bigga both looked up at the same time. Both had received a similar message via their Your Formas. Harold opened the holo-browser.

<Special Investigations Unit members of all bureaus are to join an emergency online meeting at 7 PM UTC. Attendance is mandatory>

The outlook had just turned even more grim.

“We’ve confirmed that all six investors are dead.”

Their only option had been to relocate to a cramped hotel room in central Enontekiö and set up a flexible screen, which made the place feel rather oppressive. The video feed showed Chief Totoki in the Lyon headquarters, as well as members of the Special Investigations units from different countries.

None of the attendees could mask their shock. Bigga and Gardener, sitting on a cheap sofa, were no exception.

“You’re joking.” Bigga whispered. “How is that even possible?”

“All of the people we zeroed in on turn up dead... That’s ominous, yes.”

Investigator Gardener frowned next to her. Bigga glanced at Harold, who was standing by the sofa. His handsome face was fixed on the screen, and he didn’t seem to be listening to their exchange. His expression was a mask of calm and composure, which only made her more anxious.

Just when they’d been on the verge of finding a lead on the Alliance, everything had gone up in smoke.

“About half an hour ago, the investors being investigated by Fokine’s team, Pergrand’s team, Jeff’s team, and Fassbender’s team were provisionally declared dead.” Totoki shared the data for their autopsy report as she spoke. **“Each and every one of them passed from sudden, unexplained heart failure caused by an ischemic heart disease that can spontaneously appear even in healthy individuals. In other words, sudden death.”**

“It’s a little hard to believe it’s just sudden death when they all croaked at the same time.” Fokine, whose image was in a corner of the screen, raised a hand and cut Totoki off.

His team was in Saint Moritz, and judging by the background, he was currently in a share car.

“Investigator Fokine is right.”

“This has to be intentional.”

“The Alliance picked up on the fact we’re going after them and killed the investors to silence them, right?”

Members of the other teams burst into the conversation.

“Settle down.” Totoki waved her hand to silence them. **“Yes, this could be the product of a conflict within the Alliance. And if it was, then it would explain why some of the investors cut off their online connections and fled to technologically restricted zones to hide their GPS positions.”**

The report noted that Banfield—whom Bigga and Harold were looking for—and Quine—whom Fokine was in charge of—had moved to designated limited communication zones. Until now, they’d theorized the investors had fled there to hide from the bureau, but if Totoki’s theory was correct, then they were actually fleeing the Alliance.

“But it’s hard to deny that the state of the corpses makes the possibility of this being homicide seem very unlikely. We’ll need to look into this more carefully before we can conclude this was murder.” Totoki cradled her forehead. As tough as she may have been, she was on the verge of exhaustion. **“Our only hope for the time being are the two investors who are being autopsied right now... But in Banfield’s case, it seems his cause of death was some infectious disease that caused a high fever. Right, Lucraft?”**

Bigga’s heart sank at Totoki’s roundabout question. Now that Harold was no longer working as a Belay, he was no longer “Aide Lucraft.”

“I sent the sample we collected from Banfield’s body to Saint Petersburg, using the transport drone that Investigator Gardener arranged for us,” Harold answered indifferently. “It should arrive at a forensic medical center sponsored by the bureau by morning. The results should come straight to us.”

“We might need to consider the possibility of Banfield alone dying in a manner unrelated to the Alliance.” Totoki raised her brows. **“Hieda, now that the lead on the investors has run dry, consider looking into your father again.”**

Bigga squinted, peering carefully at the screen. Echika’s suspension should have still been in effect. But to Bigga’s confusion, when Fokine readjusted the camera, she saw Echika sitting next to him in the passenger’s seat. Bigga had heard that the bureau was short on agents, but when did this happen?

Is everything all right?

But the thing that came to Bigga's mind was concern for Echika's feelings. Echika clearly felt conflicted over the matter with Harold, so she must not have been wholeheartedly enthusiastic about returning to work.

Yet Echika had never consulted Bigga about this, despite how she'd felt at the Christmas market. Maybe she'd decided to bottle it all up because she didn't want to make Bigga worry.

"Understood." Echika replied, her expression firm. **"I think if there is a clue somewhere, it would be in Rig City, where my father worked... but I'm not expecting much. We already combed through it during the sensory crime incident."**

"Just focus on that for now, all right?"

Totoki told the other members of the Special Investigations units to end their expeditionary investigations and adjourned the meeting, telling everyone she would share the results of the remaining two autopsies once she got them. The attendees gradually exited the call, and the screen eventually turned into a dull white.

Bigga's shoulders felt awfully heavy. All the progress she'd thought they'd been making this past month had evaporated in an instant.

"Well, dammit." Gardener scratched his cheek. "Being back to square one so soon is honestly really bad."

"There's still two autopsies left. Well, no, if Banfield really died from disease, it's just one..."

Either way, getting despondent wasn't going to accomplish anything. Bigga got up from the sofa, rousing herself. Her stomach suddenly growled—she hadn't eaten anything since the light breakfast they'd had in the airport lounge.

"This hotel has a restaurant, right?" she suggested, trying to lighten the grim mood. "Why don't we take a break and have dinner?"

"I'd love to," Harold said. "Investigator Gardener, what about you?"

"I have to draft my report, so I'll order room service. You two go on ahead."

Bigga and Harold parted ways with Gardener and left the room. The hotel was a single-story building, with dust balls rolling around the wooden floor of its corridors, but the building itself was newer than the lodging facility Banfield had been staying in. The other guest rooms were silent and empty. When they'd checked in, they spoke to the manager of the hotel, who told them they kept staff members low to cut costs, which wasn't uncommon here. Apparently, they would be the only guests that night. Most tourists went to the coexistence zone in Rovaniemi.

Unsurprisingly, the restaurant at the end of the lounge was empty. Bigga and Harold took a seat at a table by the window, and a middle-aged chef stepped out of the lit kitchen. There were no Amicus around, of course, and he was the only worker here. Bigga and Harold browsed a menu full of crossed-out items and ordered reindeer meat stew.

"Is this a regional dish?" Harold asked as the chef walked away.

"Yes, I'd eat it a lot back when I lived in Kautokeino."

"This is my first time having it."

"Don't you worry, it's great!"

Even as they chatted, Bigga snuck glances at Harold. Ever since his malfunction, something about him had changed. She'd be hard-pressed to put her finger on what exactly was different, but he wasn't the Harold she knew. His gentlemanly attitude and gaze were unchanged, but somehow, something felt shallow about them.

If she had to say, it was like he was acting with the uniform artificiality of a mass-produced Amicus. Was this because of the malfunction? If so, Bigga couldn't help but feel saddened by it. She wished he'd go back to being his old self.

"I hope the last autopsy yields some kind of clue about the Alliance..." Bigga casually examined his expression. "But I didn't expect Miss Hieda would be in the meeting earlier."

"Yes, I wasn't expecting her, either. I was surprised. It must have been a last-minute decision."

“Have you talked? Um, about you not fully recovering...?”

“If you mean about me stepping down as Belayer, Chief Totoki should have informed her by now.” Harold wasn’t smiling, but his demeanor was serene. “It was the chief’s idea. She thought Investigator Hieda would accept it more easily if it didn’t come from me.”

“I think she’d still be shocked, though. Plus, in her case, she might not find another aide who’s able to work with her...”

“Yes, I do feel guilty about that. But Investigator Hieda has already experienced setbacks like this one in the past, so I believe she’ll find a way to overcome.”

The chef approached with glasses of carbonated water on a tray, and their conversation ended there. They hadn’t ordered any drinks, so it must have been a freebie. Bubbles rose from the water in the thin glasses. As Bigga sipped her beverage, she wondered what was making her restless, like the gears weren’t meshing right.

“Even if our positions change, I’ll still be Investigator Hieda’s friend.”

Bigga couldn’t help but feel that what he’d said back then was superficial. Harold looked too calm, to an excessive, eerie degree. Echika was irreplaceable as a partner. He must have decided to keep up a calm facade, since getting depressed over things wouldn’t fix his malfunction. He was much more mature than Bigga was, so that must have been it. Still, she wanted to see Harold and Echika go back to their old relationship, if possible. Though she wasn’t sure why she felt that way.

After all, normally, she should have envied Echika.

This wasn’t to say she didn’t envy her right now, of course. But the two had been working as partners for as long as she’d known them, and Bigga assumed this was just the natural state of things. She’d only been accepted to the academy in the first place because the two of them had recommended her.

She’d never seen the two of them apart, so seeing their partnership disintegrate was painful. It made her anxious, for some reason.

Bigga glanced out the window, hoping to calm herself. Large piles of snow had

formed in the parking lot, melting away the darkness of night. Snowflakes were still fluttering down incessantly. The aurora wouldn't be visible tonight, but...

"You two visited me in Kautokeino on a snowy day just like this one, right?"

She thought back to the night one year ago, when she'd met Harold and Echika for the first time. Bigga had opened her front door to find a girl roughly her age dressed in all black and a young man who looked more handsome and refined than any she'd seen in her village. At the time, she'd been focused on maintaining a facade of composure so she could hide her cousin Clara Lie, who was taking refuge in her house.

"That brings back memories." Harold noisily placed his glass on the table.

"We can look back at it and laugh now, but Miss Hieda was really rude when we first met."

"It's funny to me now, but I do regret letting her handle the questioning."

"And I spilled coffee on your hand."

"Yes, you got really worried about it, which showed me just how kind you are." He smiled at her softly. Her heart skipped a beat. "It still eats away at me that Lie got hurt as a result."

"She and I are both over it by now! She said she got herself into that accident by trying to run away..."

Speaking about it made Bigga think back to what happened, which made it impossible not to recall *that specific memory*.

"I'll, um, go pour you some more coffee."

This was after she'd invited Echika and Harold to the living room; they'd come to investigate an electronic crime. Bigga had taken their mugs and scurried out of the room to refill them. At the time, she was convinced that Echika and Harold had come to chase down Lie because she'd used bio-hacking. She hurried to the kitchen, determined to get her cousin out of the house.

"Clara, get out through the back door, now."

"I just got the snowmobile ready." Lie already had her poncho on and was getting ready to flee. "I'll be at the fishing spot we used to play in. Come pick me up once they leave."

Lie dashed out of the kitchen, but then Bigga's eyes were drawn to the table. There was a palm-sized plastic case sitting there. An untouched suppressant syringe. She broke into a cold sweat. It was almost time for Lie's suppressant to wear off. If she didn't get another shot, she'd start seeing that blizzard again.

Bigga grabbed the case. Just as she was about bolt out of the kitchen, however—

"Pardon. Are you all right?"

Harold showed up in the entryway, and she nearly bumped into him. He placed his hands on her shoulders to catch her, just barely stopping their collision. Bigga blushed on reflex. She'd been moments away from diving into the chest of a very good-looking man.

No. I have to go after Lie, fast.

"A neighbor just knocked on the back door." Bigga hid the case behind her back, sensing Harold's gaze. "He wanted to return something he borrowed. If you could just wait a minute for the coffee—"

"I came from the back door, too. That case, it's a bio-hacking tool, isn't it?"

He knows.

Bigga froze on the spot, as though going cold from head to toe. She felt an urge to shake out of Harold's hold, but her body wouldn't budge.

No. What do I do? I'm going to get arrested. No...!

"I'm not going to hurt you, Bigga." He parted his handsome lips in a whisper. "Please, listen to me. How are you related to Clara Lie? Why did she come to you for help?"

Bigga shook her head in a panic. She should have never implanted Lie with that muscle control chip in the first place. Her cousin had asked her for help because she wanted to become a prima ballerina, and Bigga hadn't been able to turn her down, operating on her under her father's nose. But now Lie was

experiencing dangerous side effects and being chased by the police because of what Bigga had done.

It's all my fault. I just wanted to help my cousin. I wanted experience, to become a bio-hacker just a bit sooner—even though I knew deep down I was doing something wrong. It's been eating away at me this whole time.

She felt miserable and frustrated, knowing that this was all she was good for. If only she had faced her true feelings before jumping headfirst into operating on Lie; then she might have avoided landing in this situation.

"Bigga, I promise you that if you tell me the truth, you won't have to lose anything."

Harold peered into her face. His closeness, coupled with the concern that made her mind feel like it might split in half, made her almost choke up. She had to fool him and hurry to Lie's side. Once the suppressant wore off, her cousin could be in a dangerous state.

But her mind was blank. She looked back into his eyes. Their color reminded her of the Kautokeino River at the height of winter. His lashes were the same pretty blond as his hair.

He was like the moon shining brilliantly in the night sky, serving as a guidepost.

"Please, don't torment yourself any longer. You're allowed to follow your heart."

At that moment, Harold read Bigga's heart, peering into depths that no one else knew of. That was probably the moment that pulled her in.

I want to know more about him, she'd thought.

"Did you figure out how I really felt with your powers of observation?"

By the time Bigga finished reminiscing, the stew in her bowl was empty. She put down the spoon as Harold, sitting across from her, dropped his eyes in shame.

"I'm sorry if it made you feel uncomfortable."

“Oh, no! I know this is what you’re good at.” She really didn’t feel uncomfortable about it. Quite the contrary. “Having someone see through it all...made me happy, somehow. Um, I didn’t know it at the time, but I think I wanted someone to notice.”

Bigga had started questioning the luddite way of life after her mother’s rejection of technology had led her to die from an incurable disease. But she hadn’t been able to share these feelings with anyone. Not her father, nor her friends. Her situation just didn’t allow for it. She grew older and set off down the path of a bio-hacker, but it kept tormenting her. Something always felt off.

Harold was the first one to notice that about her.

“I realize you only did it because it was your job, of course.” She felt oddly self-conscious all of a sudden and gulped down her soda quickly. “Sorry, I started talking about weird things out of nowhere...”

“Not at all. If what I said helped you somehow, nothing could make me happier.”

“It helped me a lot.” She couldn’t look Harold in the face. “Hmm, the stew’s delicious, isn’t it? It’s great!”

“Yes, very.”

She felt like she’d run her mouth a lot but somehow had failed to mention what mattered.

How could she tell him she wanted to know why things were so awkward between him and Echika? Wouldn’t that be sticking her nose where it didn’t belong?

The chef walked over a moment later, prompting Bigga and Harold to rise from their seats and thank him for the meal. By the time they left the restaurant, it was past nine PM. The lounge was quiet and the check-in counter unmanned. The chairs lined near the wall had a layer of dust on them.

“Bigga, is your room next to Investigator Gardener’s?”

“Yes. You’re in his room, right?” Gardener’s room had a single bed, meaning Harold would need to sleep standing up. “We should have gotten another room

after all.”

“Sleeping without a bed isn’t an issue for us.” She knew that logically, of course, but he was suffering from a malfunction as it was, so she wished he would handle himself more carefully. “Make sure to keep warm when you sleep, too. I had fun talking to you for the first time in a long while.”

His smile was as perfect as ever, but it still seemed to be missing something.

“Me too.” Bigga smiled back, but the question she was neglecting to ask still hung in her thoughts. “Umm, Harold?”

She nearly posed it to him, only to be stopped by her doubts. “Um...”

As she faltered, a Your Forma notification popped up in her field of vision.

<I’m in the hotel parking lot right now. Can we talk for a bit?>

Bigga jolted for some reason. It was from Hansa. They still hadn’t talked things out and resolved the argument they’d had back at Banfield’s hotel. She’d sent him a message before the meeting, but she wasn’t expecting a response.

“What’s wrong, Bigga?”

“Nothing.” Somehow, she managed to change her mind. “Um, Hansa contacted me. Sorry, could you go back to your room without me?”

Cutting off her conversation with Harold, she hurried to the entrance. As she did, relief flooded over her—if their conversation had gone on any longer, she definitely wouldn’t have been able to keep herself from asking.

Hansa’s jeep was idling inconspicuously in a section of the snowy parking lot.

“I didn’t think you’d still be in Enontekiö. I was sure you’d go home.”

Bigga settled into the passenger’s seat, with Hansa sitting awkwardly in the driver’s seat. The car stereo was playing a ballad that had been popular some years before. The deep tones of the piano mingled with the sound of the heater blowing on the back seat.

“I was thinking about going home, but I couldn’t do it without making up...,” Hansa mumbled. “Sorry. We’ve been friends forever, and I shouldn’t have acted

that way.”

“If you mean what happened at noon, I’m not mad.” Her anger had indeed run its course. Hansa had his own viewpoint and way of thinking, and she was being childish about it. “If anything, I acted really mean toward you after I basically talked you into cooperating with the investigation. I’m sorry.”

“No, it’s not your fault. I was being childish.”

“I mean, you *are* a kid,” Bigga said teasingly.

“Hey, I’m seventeen, you know,” Hansa replied, sulking, but then he smiled.

Come to think of it, this was always how they made up after a fight. For some reason, Bigga was doing a lot of reminiscing today. As they sat there in silence for a moment, the ballad ended, switching over to a bright pop song.

“You know, I...” Hansa’s expression turned serious again. “I think somewhere deep down, I... I haven’t accepted that you’ve started a new life yet. It’s a bit late to say it, but I was really shocked when I heard you gave up on bio-hacking. I always thought we’d grow up together.”

“Well...” Bigga was momentarily lost for words. “I didn’t think I’d end up doing that until just a short while ago. But things happened with me and Dad during the summer... It made me realize that I can’t lie to myself about how I want to spend the rest of my life.”

Casting away the life of a bio-hacker in favor of the wish she’d always harbored deep down meant losing some things, her relationship with Hansa among them. She couldn’t deny feeling guilty about it.

But this didn’t mean she regretted making that choice.

“You’re not coming back to Kautokeino, are you?”

“No. I’m a Your Forma user now...”

“Do you live with that Amicus?”

His question came out of nowhere, and Bigga stared at him with befuddlement. Hansa, on the other hand, looked completely serious.

“His name’s Harold, right? You like him, yeah? It’s pretty obvious.”

“M-maybe, b-but living with him? That’s going way too far, way too fast!” She thought back to Shushunova, the owner of a grief care company they’d investigated, who was married to her Amicus. Bigga did wish she could live like that, yes. “We’re not even together yet.”

“Huh, really?” Hansa looked dubious. “That feels kind of strange, though...”

“How so?”

“I mean, Amicus are machines, right? Aah, I don’t mean that in a bad way, though!” He quickly corrected himself as he saw Bigga raise her brows. “I don’t know much about them, but they’re supposed to be obedient to humans and do whatever people want, right? So if you’d have told him how you felt, you’d have become a couple right away.”

“...What are you saying?”

This time, Bigga didn’t understand what Hansa was getting at. They’d become a couple right away? She didn’t even know if Harold liked her, so how could Hansa say for sure that would happen?

“I mean...” He scratched his temples. “He’s supposed to do whatever humans tell him to, right? If Amicus could refuse orders, the Your Forma users’ society would go out of control.”

“That...” Bigga was starting to understand. “That might be true with mass-produced Amicus, but Harold is special. He’s got a will and feelings of his own...”

“That’s how it looks, but you haven’t actually checked, have you?”

“Well—”

The only people who could speak definitively on Harold’s consciousness were the employees of Novae Robotics Inc., not a layperson like her. But before she could say that, she realized this was wrong. *No one* could really confirm that, because the AI black box problem was standing in the way of that. The more complex AI became, the more incapable mankind would become of objectively confirming what processes it used to think.

So even if she could prove Harold had a will of his own, the best one could say was that he was just *acting* like he had a will and emotions.

Bigga had considered that in the past. But Harold really was different from mass-produced Amicus, and even from custom models, like Shushunova's husband, Bernard. There was something special about him. She'd heard that Harold was some kind of high-performance Amicus. She didn't know any of the details, but he was definitely different from other Amicus. That much she could gather through her interactions with him.

Bigga had to admit that her opinion wasn't all that logical, but sometimes reason alone didn't explain things.

"Anyway, Harold does have a heart. That's obvious if you spend any time with him."

"But you can't prove that." Hansa was starting to seem like a stranger to her. "If you really feel that way, that's all the more reason to let him know how you feel as soon as you can."

"That's not your choice to make, Hansa."

"It kind of is. So, um..." The boy sullenly averted his eyes from her and bit his lips. "If that doesn't work out...and I know it might be too late for this, but...keep me in mind."

It took some time before it dawned on Bigga that this was a roundabout confession. She stared at Hansa blankly. His freckled cheeks were flushed, and he was blatantly averting his gaze. Just then, he quickly said that he needed to get back home before his father got suspicious, and he banished Bigga from the car. She watched her childhood friend's jeep drive off, like it was running away from her.

She knew that he cared for her, but she never would have guessed he had feelings for her.

Bigga didn't remember how she got back to her hotel room. She crawled into bed, thoughts of Hansa and the problems with Harold swirling in her head, keeping her awake. She somehow managed to doze off, eventually waking up at dawn.

It was six AM, still dark beyond the curtains of the window. Through her groggy eyes, Bigga spotted a message notification from her Your Forma. Totoki

forwarded Banfield's autopsy report to the Special Investigations units' members. The transport drone carrying his sample had arrived in Saint Petersburg on time.

<One of the two victims died from the same reasons as the other four, acute heart failure. Banfield alone had a different cause of death—multiple organ failure brought on by the immune system going out of control due to a viral infection.>

Harold had reasoned as much at the time.

<In addition, when the drone arrived at the inspection center, its blades were damaged. The culprit is unknown, and the incident is assumed to be intentional sabotage. I'm seeking further information on Banfield's case, and I'll keep you posted if I learn anything.>

In other words, Banfield didn't just coincidentally die from a severe cold or flu?

As Bigga groggily scanned over the message a few times, she felt a chill run through her.

4

"I heard the drone was deliberately sabotaged?"

Echika and Fokine's share car drove along a highway in the city of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. The artificial greenery of the municipal park they passed was a far cry from Saint Moritz's abundant nature. The sky overhead was a stagnant color, crowded with delivery drones flying here and there like swarms of insects. The fact that so many of them could fly all over the place without bumping into each other was almost as impressive to witness as a feat of acrobatics.

"I zoomed in on the photo Totoki shared with us. The scratches on the drone look like they're from bullets," Fokine said as he held the steering wheel. "Based on the flight altitude report, it was likely targeted while flying over the woodland. I guess you could assume some amateur hunter mistook it for a bird and shot it, if you want to be generous, but..."

Echika zoomed in on the footage in her Your Forma's window—one of the

blades of the drone's propeller had a thin abrasion mark on it. Even if it was shot by some amateur marksman, it was unlikely they would be out during nighttime, nor would they mistake a fast-moving machine for a wild bird. Had someone tried to intentionally gun it down?

"If the Alliance did this, does this mean the result of the sample would be bad for them?" Echika closed the image. "Does the Alliance keep an eye on the dead investors and track what we're up to?"

"Looking at Chief Totoki's message, that would seem to be the case."

Fokine was referring to the message Totoki had sent them that morning.

"There's been a development in the matter of Banfield's sample. You'll need to fly to Philadelphia. I'll send the address."

Echika rubbed her neck, which was still stiff from the airplane seat, as she read the concise instructions Totoki had sent them again; she and Fokine had gotten this message when they were in the Zurich International Airport. They were just about to board the flight to Saint Petersburg when they got the order.

"Normally, you'd expect a US-based branch to send people to Philadelphia." Fokine produced some Swiss chocolate he'd bought as a souvenir and started nibbling on it. "We were in yesterday's emergency meeting and were supposed to take the morning flight back to Saint Petersburg. What changed?"

She understood what he was trying to say.

"We'll need to ask the chief, but there must be a reason she's sending us to do it."

"I hope it's that, and not that there just happened to be a direct flight from Switzerland to Philadelphia."

They couldn't rule that out with Totoki. "Forget that. Don't eat all the souvenirs."

Echika scrutinized Fokine, who jolted a bit and retracted his hand from the chocolate box. She'd had a hunch she would need to buy a lot of chocolate, and it had been right.

Fokine cleared his throat. "Our destination is a medical research institute in

Lafayette Hill, right?”

“Right. Except, when I looked up the address the chief sent us, a rehabilitation facility came up instead.”

“Assuming she didn’t send us a wrong address, it must be a disguise.” Fokine frowned bitterly. “You don’t think it’s some top secret military research facility, do you?”

“Who’s to say? Whatever the case, it’s going to have strict security.”

The name of the disease Banfield had contracted hadn’t been disclosed to them, after all. Why were they being sent to a medical research facility in Philadelphia that had nothing to do with the bureau, at this point in the investigation? Echika had messaged Totoki about this earlier that morning but had gotten no response. Maybe the chief was busy—she wasn’t picking up any calls, either.

That was all the more ominous.

Trying to distract herself from the grim premonition filling her mind, Echika took a packet of nutrient jelly from the dashboard. She’d bought it in the airport kiosk that morning. She tore the pouch open, then noticed Fokine’s exasperated gaze on her.

“Might as well eat the chocolates, no? They’d taste way better than this.”

“How many times do I have to tell you, we got those as a souvenir for Bigga and the rest.” Echika glanced at the box of chocolates. *And even if it wasn’t a souvenir...* “I’m not in the mood for sweets right now.”

“Investigator, smoking is good for relieving stress, but personally, I’d recommend you try sweets instead.”

One time, Harold had opened his hand, offering her a piece of a chocolate.

She thought back to seeing him in yesterday’s meeting. Maybe it was because it was through the screen, but surprisingly, his presence hadn’t fazed her too much. She could only hope she’d be able to keep her emotions in check going forward, too.

I can do it. For sure.

Lafayette Hill was a small town north of the Schuylkill River surrounded by parks and golf courses. It was a serene place, quite unlike the hustle and bustle of Philadelphia. The “rehabilitation facility” they were heading for was an old-looking bungalow on the outskirts of town.

According to the map, the building was designed in an unequal cross shape, with a private road surrounding its grounds. The glass door was nailed shut with a few planks, but there were several cars in the parking lot. Echika read the signboard’s matrix code, which reported the rehabilitation facility had been closed off and blockaded for a long while now.

Was this really the place?

Echika and Fokine got out of the share car, doubt clear on their faces.

“Right on time. I’m glad you came straight here.”

A figure approached them from the private road along the side of the building. Echika watched it silently—it was none other than Ui Totoki, clad in her usual gray suit. Her tight ponytail fluttered in the cold, ten AM wind. She had been in Lyon during yesterday’s emergency meeting, and Echika had failed to contact her since.

“Chief?” Fokine was stunned. “I didn’t know you were here.”

“I was busy. I’m sorry I asked you two to come on short notice.” Totoki apologized without the slightest bit of sincerity. “Like I said in my message, there was a problem with the analysis reports on Banfield’s sample. I had the two of you come here at the bureau director’s request.”

Echika was perplexed. “What’s going on?”

“You both were at Farasha Island during the thought manipulation incident and are well aware of the situation there. I’ll be listening to a detailed explanation soon, but...for now, let’s talk inside.”

Totoki looked stiffer than usual. Echika and Fokine exchanged curious glances as they followed her. Given the situation, they couldn’t express their doubts. Their only option was to keep their mouths shut and follow.

The chief led them to a side entrance on the building’s west side. Like the

front entrance, it had a glass door that had been boarded up from the inside. At first glance, the place looked abandoned, but there was a narrow entrance leading inside with a latest model security gate set up there. Some security Amicus demanded they leave their weapons there. Totoki and Echika were unarmed, so only Fokine had to comply.

Slipping through the oppressive security gate, they took the elevator down to the first basement floor. The interior looked like it had once been a tennis court, though the court itself was gone now, with the area near the entrance remodeled into an office space.

Past a partitioned area, Echika could see a space full of machinery and research equipment. The staff employees walking by were all dressed in lab coats or suits.

Echika's eyes darted around nervously as she tried to maintain her cool. This was definitely some kind of lab, not a rehabilitation facility.

"My investigators are here, Department Head Miller." Totoki called out to a middle-aged Black man sitting behind an office desk. He turned to her. There was not a single wrinkle on his lab coat, and he wore a pair of thick-framed glasses over his methodical-looking eyes.

<Grayson Miller, 59 years old. Department Head of the Contagion Biology Lab at the US Department of Defense's DARPA (Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency) Philadelphia Medical Institute. Was affiliated with the Pennsylvania Temporary Infection Control Measures Team during the SID spore pandemic. Previously a member of the Baumgartner Medical Development Laboratory's Neural Safety Development Division's subcommittee...>

Many researchers had made major developments during the pandemic period, but Echika was surprised to see someone who'd actually been involved with the Neural Safety Development Division. Neural Safety was a threadlike machine that preceded the Your Forma. During the pandemic thirty-two years ago, many of the infected had died from encephalitis. This revolutionary medical device, incorporated directly into the brain, had been humankind's ray of hope.

“Thank you for coming all the way here.” Miller shook Echika’s and Fokine’s hands with a friendly smile, then looked at Totoki. “A representative from the NSA has just arrived, too. I’ll show you to the booth.”

Miller led them to a locker room that was renovated into a meeting room. At the center of the room was a “booth” consisting of a frosted glass cube at the center of a nest of boxes. The moment they passed through the booth, her Your Forma called up a warning.

<No available network environment detected. Switching to offline mode>

Now Echika understood why they were in the booth. It cut off access to the internet, allowing its occupants to communicate without fear of being intercepted.

This all felt very suspicious. She felt herself stiffen.

“Oh, she’s very young for an investigator. Did you bring a trainee over?”

Inside the booth was a circular table where two figures were seated. The one to make that snarky remark was a woman dressed in a vivid-colored suit. She looked to be around Totoki’s age. Her hair, dyed a platinum blond, was immaculate, and Echika could smell her thick perfume even from afar.

“Thank you for waiting.” Totoki approached the woman, unfazed. “I’m Ui Totoki, from the Electrocrime Investigations Bureau HQ’s Brain Diving Division.”

Because they were cut off from the network, they needed to handle introductions orally.

“Hello, I’m Cook from the National Security Agency. Welcome to Philadelphia.”

Echika couldn’t believe it at first. The National Security Agency, or the NSA, was the United States’ leading intelligence organization, managed by the Pentagon. Their existence had once been secret, and even now, over half of their activities were classified.

Needless to say, they had nothing to do with the Electrocrime Investigations Bureau.

So how had things gotten to where the NSA needed to get involved?

“Well met, Investigator Hieda and Investigator Fokine,” said the other person seated at the table.

He was a German man whose silver-gray hair fit him very much, but his face was a familiar one—it was the director of the Electrocrime Investigations Bureau, Rolfe Schlosser. He was fifty-four years old, but he looked much younger. The impressive navy-blue suit he wore certainly added to his dignified appearance. He’d gotten his start as an agent and had climbed the ranks to his current position, which he’d held ever since Echika joined the bureau.

In other words, this was their top-ranking boss.

Totoki hadn’t mentioned coming here alone, but Echika wasn’t expecting her to be here with the director. At the same time, though, it made sense for him to be involved if they were dealing with the NSA. Still, this clearly wasn’t an ordinary situation.

“Director,” Totoki said. “I believe Hieda and Fokine want to know why they were called here.”

“I think it’d be for the best if we let Department Head Miller explain the circumstances. Would you mind?”

Schlosser motioned for Echika and Fokine to sit, and they did. Miller turned on a holo-projector set up in a section of the booth. The monitor of the tablet in his hands came to life, along with a browser on the table that projected it. The first thing it showed were the results of the sample’s analysis, displayed in Russian format.

“These are the results of Banfield’s sample,” Miller began explaining. “The clinical inspection center in Saint Petersburg believes that he had a superinfection. The sample tested positive for multiple viruses, including the spore virus.”

The spore virus?

“Wasn’t it eradicated?” Echika had to ask. “The spread of thread devices is supposed to prevent it, so people rarely come down with it nowadays.”

“That’s true. But in developing countries, the disease still claims about ten thousand lives a year. News of that typically doesn’t reach areas populated by

Your Forma users, though.” Surely the personalization of media was part of this, but this was the first Echika had heard of that many people dying from it. “Your Forma users are also barred from traveling to those nations for sanitary reasons. And the spore virus is why... Regardless, the clinical inspection center’s analysis is wrong. Banfield didn’t have a superinfection.”

“Cut to the chase,” Cook said, exhaling in annoyance. “I’d rather not waste my time.”

Miller frowned at her curt tone and operated the projector. The monitor changed, presenting a graphic of a virus’s structure. It looked almost artistic, like a geometric pattern taken straight out of a kaleidoscope, and since Echika knew nothing of viruses, none of it made a lick of sense to her. She did, however, get the overall gist of it.

“It looks very, er, complex for a singular virus...,” Echika whispered.

Everyone there turned to look at her. She instantly regretted speaking up, but in that time, Miller nodded gravely.

“Yes. This wasn’t a superinfection, but the virus itself *was made by crossing the genomes of multiple viruses*. We have a fitting name for that in the world of pathology: ‘a chimeric virus.’”

Silence settled over them. The way Miller put it implied...

“This is an artificially created virus, and one that rapidly kills those it infects. It’s highly likely it was created as a biological weapon.”

Biological weaponry. Echika felt something very cold settle in the pit of her stomach. The purpose of biological weapons was to intentionally cause infections in humans or animals. There was a case in the US where terrorists had unleashed anthrax spores in the Washington, DC, area, resulting in considerable casualties. Cases of terror organizations in other areas of the world resorting to biological weapons were not unheard of, either. There was a time when all the world’s militaries had developed them.

“But where did Banfield get infected?”

“There’s plenty of plausible situations where one can inhale a virus in our daily lives. But assuming Banfield was personally targeted, the most likely

avenue is that it was physically mailed to him. It's a primitive method, but effective."

"We found nothing in Banfield's personal belongings that would fit that description," Totoki said calmly. "Isn't the production of biological weapons outlawed by international treaties to begin with?"

"Let me answer that," Cook said curtly. "Terrorists, for example, have no obligation to follow the Geneva Convention. How much does the Electrocrime Investigations Bureau know about the TFC?"

TFC—Thread Free Country. That was the name of a terrorist organization Echika vaguely recalled hearing about during her academy training. It was apparently the name of a self-styled independent nation and anti-government organization that had unilaterally declared independence from Saudi Arabia. Its members were mostly fundamentalists, and the organization had gotten its start among people who rejected thread technology on religious grounds. However, in recent years, their ideology had shifted to focus on cynics, and they began accepting foreign immigrants, which was clouding their founding values.

"What sets them apart from luddites is that they object to Your Forma as a business, but otherwise accept the technology on its own," Cook said. "The TFC has sided with anti-American countries in an attempt to develop an alternative to the Your Forma. Rumor has it they've actually succeeded in doing that, but that hasn't been confirmed. Regardless, these nations have been won over by the TFC and are being compelled to produce illegal weaponry."

Furthermore, the TFC had been in a state of cold war with the Saudi government for decades, since its declaration of independence. The conflict developed into an armed civil war at one point, but this developed into a long-running stalemate, with both sides maintaining a tenuous status quo.

"The NSA has been keeping a watchful eye on the TFC, designating it a terrorist group backed by anti-American nations." Cook took out a tablet of her own and handed it to Miller. "They're likely developing weapons around the clock, turning the schools and shopping malls in their territory into production factories."

"Do you have proof of that?" Director Schlosser asked. "If you've got any

information, share it with me.”

“It’s top secret, so I sadly can’t share all the documents even with you. I do have clearance to show you this, however—Department Head Miller?”

At Cook’s behest, Miller operated her tablet, and a few browser windows opened over the desk, displaying structural diagrams of viruses. Like the chimeric virus from earlier, the infectious agents were oddly geometric in shape, and they danced in the air with an almost malevolent beauty.

“Our operatives who infiltrated the TFC recovered this,” said Cook, parting her crimson lips. “I’ll just say that they have the means to produce the chimeric virus in large quantities.”

“But for nations, this is ideal technology.”

Talbot’s words came to mind. The Alliance intended to sell the thought manipulation program to national governments. It was questionable if a terrorist organization like the TFC could be considered a nation, but since they called themselves as such, it was possible the Alliance was involved with them. Or perhaps, the TFC actually *was* the Alliance.

Regardless, they had to seriously consider the possibility at this point that the Alliance had deliberately targeted and assassinated Banfield.

“In other words.” Director Schlosser furrowed his brows. “If we look into the TFC, we might discover leads pertaining to the Alliance.”

Totoki looked at Cook silently. “Does that mean we’re being asked to cooperate with the NSA?”

“Yes, though the cooperation ends here.” Cook raised her thin brows. “The Saudi government is very wary of US intervention, and the White House is also trepidatious about this case. This is the first and last time we have to handle intervention from your side.”

Saying this, Cook rose from her seat, as if to say this is where her place in the matter ended. She must have been busy. She thanked Director Schlosser and left the booth without glancing back at them. Miller hurried after her.

A resounding silence remained in their wake. Only the geometric pattern of

the virus, still projected on the browser, shone lazily in the air.

At face value, this was a breakthrough in their investigation. Echika dug her fingers into her thighs under the table. Totoki's and Fokine's expressions made it clear they were thinking the same thing—even if the TFC and the Alliance were connected somehow, this was a terrorist organization, for all intents and purposes. It was too big for one investigation organization to face alone.

How would we even begin to get involved with this?

"Setting aside the question of whether the TFC and the Alliance are related and have successfully developed a substitute device for the Your Forma, on top of that," Director Schlosser carried on, seemingly oblivious to their misgivings. "As well as the question of whether the thought manipulation program actually exists... The Alliance is truly monstrous."

"I understand your disbelief regarding the thought manipulation program," Totoki said. "But keep in mind that Investigator Fokine here suffered greatly because of it, and Hieda witnessed it, too."

"So it seems. Which is why I asked for you two to handle this."

This was why they called us to Philadelphia.

"We'll try to resolve this case, of course," Totoki carried on. "But we'll need backup. Having support from the Saudi government or police would make it easier for us to act, for example."

"I feel the same way and contacted them, but they tacitly refused. This does involve the faction they're fighting a cold war against, after all."

"What do we do, then?"

"According to Ms. Cook, the TFC is receiving aid from NGOs, for the purpose of supporting the civilians living in areas controlled by them. This is partially to present themselves as humane in the eyes of the international community."

Echika wasn't the only one to frown at his roundabout phrasing.

"So what you're saying...", Fokine said, sounding very vexed. "Is we're supposed to ask an NGO to assist our investigation?"

"Yes, they've already given their consent. You'll infiltrate the place while

passing as NGO staff.”

This all felt too reckless.

Echika and Fokine froze, of course, but even Totoki looked stunned. But Schlosser’s eyes were unyielding, burning with firm resolve. Echika did understand that if they couldn’t rely on outside organizations for help, their options were limited. What’s more, the TFC’s background was too complicated for the bureau to openly get involved with.

“Investigator Hieda, this is your chance to restore your honor. Go by the book.” The director firmly reminded her and looked at Totoki. “Investigator Totoki, handle this like your own reputation is on the line. I expect results.”

“...Understood, sir.”

Even Totoki couldn’t do anything but sigh and comply in this situation. For better or for worse, no one in this room could bring themselves to object to Schlosser’s decision.

YOUR FORMA

Chapter 2

Scheme



Chapter 2

Scheme

1

The day they were to infiltrate the TFC was, ironically enough, quite bright and sunny.

<The current temperature is 18°C. Attire index D, please note the extreme difference in temperatures between daytime and nighttime>

Al Bahah was an alpine city in southwestern Saudi Arabia. This region, nestled in the Sarawat Mountains, was quite detached from the heat of the lowlands and was blessed with ample humidity and a pleasant climate.

The center of activities for the NGO they were infiltrating, the International FLM (Frontline Medicine) Foundation, was a group of camping trailers set up in the outskirts of the city. A simple fence marked their plot; the sight of a fifteen-meter-wide line of large US-made trailers was quite impressive. Nearly one hundred employees deployed from across the globe lived here as they went about their daily aid activities.

“To think I’d see the day you wore something other than black... I’m getting emotional!”

“What was I supposed to do? The staff’s jackets are all white...”

Standing under a tarp tent set in the plot, Bigga nodded in satisfaction, ignoring Echika’s sour mood. The nylon jackets they’d just put on were emblazoned with the foundation’s emblem, and there were IDs hanging from their necks—forged ones, of course. Around them were the ten other members of the Special Investigations Unit who’d been deployed for the infiltration

mission, putting on their jackets and confirming that their small, portable cameras were still working.

Three days had passed since Director Schlosser had ordered this mission. Totoki's handpicked group of members from the Special Investigations Unit had finally arrived on the outskirts of Al Bahah, which was a major stronghold for the TFC. Based on the information that Cook had provided them, Al Bahah was being used as a weapon production hub, chiefly of the biological variety.

The situation was clearly a mess, but at this point, there was no sense in grumbling about it.

"The staff pack up their aid supplies and set out to the city at eight AM, so you can basically blend in with them. That should be fifteen minutes from now." Bigga read the plan outline from her Your Forma. "Once you get into town, make way to the designated destination and look for clues related to the Alliance."

"Roger that." Echika breathed out her nose. "I think you've got talent as a commanding officer, Bigga."

"That's the only role I can fill right now." Bigga frowned in disappointment. "I wanted to join you, but I'm still not officially an investigator, so I can't."

"I think Chief Totoki did her best to get you some concessions. Normally, you wouldn't even be allowed to come here."

Echika and Bigga turned around to find investigator Fokine. He'd heard their exchange just as he was putting his Flamma 15 automatic pistol in his shoulder holster.

"I know that. I'm just saying I'm worried about you!"

"The NGO's checks are pretty lax. The International FLM Foundation has been working here for years, so apparently, they don't particularly care, even when the personnel change." Fokine donned his nylon jacket and pulled up the zipper, perfectly hiding the holster. "You can just kick back and snack on the chocolate we got you from Switzerland while you wait for us."

"Stop treating me like a kid." Bigga pouted. "I'll eat the whole thing, every last chocolate."

The door to the trailer opened, and Investigator Gardener, who was in charge of handling the communications equipment, called Bigga over. She reluctantly turned on her heels and walked away. Gardener was the squad leader for the London branch's Special Investigations Unit, and the son of the Robin Flutter company's CEO. Echika heard he'd worked with Bigga in the days leading up to this.

"The small cameras we're carrying transmit to this trailer." Fokine jerked his chin in the direction of the trailer. "That's our communications center, so to speak. Is your camera set, Hieda?"

"Not yet, but—"

"Here it is, Investigator Hieda, I'm sorry it took me so long."

Echika stiffened. She slowly turned her head—a terribly handsome Amicus entered the tent. The baggy nylon jacket he was wearing clashed with his meticulously waxed blond hair and his neat shirt.

Harold had linked up with them just before they left for Saudi Arabia. This was the first time in a month she'd been in his presence, and she felt the urge to bolt, but she was able to greet him calmly enough. They didn't discuss their falling out in Dubai or the malfunction that had caused him to stop being an investigator aide. She knew there was no point in touching on those topics.

They both were aware of each other's intentions without having to talk about it. They'd concluded they needed to keep their distance from each other, so there was no need to discuss it anymore. But although they'd made their choice, the fact that things had changed still stung at her heart.

"Thanks." Echika accepted the camera from Harold, trying to keep her tone as natural as possible. "I thought you were setting up the transmission equipment with Investigator Gardener?"

"He insisted on doing it himself, so I left the matter in his hands," Harold replied, looking just as casual and unaffected. "He's in the Online Monitoring Department, so things like this are his field of expertise."

"Keep a careful watch over our camera footage, would you, Aide Lucraft?" Fokine told Harold. "At least as much as possible, given your malfunction."

Harold, like Bigga, was part of the team that was staying behind to survey the situation. As an Amicus with a striking appearance, Harold stood out far too much to pass himself off as a member of the NGO.

“Of course.” Harold nodded. “But Investigator, do remember I’m now an investigation assistant Amicus.”

“Oh... Yeah, sorry, Harold.” Fokine awkwardly corrected himself. “I heard from Bigga, by the way. Investigator Gardener gave you trouble over in Finland?”

“Yes. He probably wouldn’t be here if Bigga hadn’t lent him her wool hat.”

“Was that sarcasm?”

“Perish the thought. The Laws of Respect forbid me from being rude to humans.”

Echika shuddered at his joke. Fokine naturally laughed back, oblivious to the truth about Harold. Fokine walked away in a hurry, beckoned by another agent. Once he was gone, the noise of the wind seemed to fill the place. The silence weighed down on her.

“So,” Echika said, feeling at a loss. “I hide the camera in the breast pocket, right?”

“Yes. There’s a little hole in the pocket’s inner side, so fix the lens there.”

She followed Harold’s instructions and placed the thumb-sized camera in the pocket of her nylon jacket. The Amicus didn’t walk away. The thought crossed her mind that she needed to say something. Not about their argument or his malfunction, but something else that would draw the right line in the sand.

The resolve crawled as far up as her throat, but it took a few seconds to actually escape her lips.

“...Aide Lucraft.”

“I’m an investigation support Amicus now.”

“Right.” Echika recoiled a little. “I, um... I hope we can both do a good job from here on out. As coworkers.”

She was shocked by how trite and shallow her words felt, yet at the same

time, deep inside her heart, the emotions she'd stuffed into that glass jar throbbed.

Why won't everything go back to normal already?

"Yes." Harold smiled with his usual composure. "Let's do our best, both of us."

For a second, Echika was flooded with an inexplicable feeling of unrest. Something was wrong. The way Harold had just acted felt off. If she had to say how, it was like the way a mass-produced Amicus acted. A perfectly friendly smile, delivered at a perfectly calculated angle. A paper-thin facade, detached of free will or real emotion.

He wasn't acting like an RF Model. His expressions were supposed to be more human, surprisingly subtle but rich.

A question left her lips before she could stop herself. "So is this malfunction part of your act?"

"What do you mean?" Harold looked at her quizzically. "I'm not sure what you're talking about."

"No, I mean..."

"Miss Hieda, Chief Totoki is calling for you," a nearby officer, Investigator Lin, told her.

She was part of the Lyon branch's Special Investigations Unit, a Chinese-American with black braided hair. Echika had crossed paths with her occasionally back when she'd worked at the Brain Diving Division in headquarters, but they'd rarely spoken.

Echika shifted her gaze and saw that Totoki was indeed standing outside the tent, looking her way.

"She didn't bring Ganache along on this expedition," Lin explained. "She's on edge, so you should probably hurry."

"I'll be right there," Echika said briefly, moving her eyes back to Harold. "Um, see you."

"I look forward to seeing how you perform, Investigator Hieda."

Echika hurried along, and Harold saw her off with a mechanical smile. She walked toward Totoki with quick steps, her insides boiling with self-loathing.

Why did you ask him that?

Even if Echika did find out Harold's malfunction was all part of an act, what was the point? He wasn't her Belayer or her partner anymore. They were just coworkers, and if they were going to keep their distance from each other, she should refrain from asking questions like that. Yet she'd still let that question slip, mostly out of habit.

She gritted her teeth. It looked to her like Harold was executing the task of keeping his distance from her without any trouble. And after facing him online during the meeting, Echika had thought she was fine, too—but in the end, she was still human to a fault, and couldn't make that distinction as easily as an Amicus.

She had to clamp down on her emotions. To firmly, decisively draw that line in the sand.

"Hieda, I ordered your group to investigate the residential block, right?" Totoki said, right off the cuff, as soon as Echika approached.

Totoki, too, was dressed in a nylon jacket, and she was loading a cartridge into her automatic pistol. Her long hair was tied into a bun on the back of her head.

"Yes. Has there been a change in assignment?" Echika asked back.

"No, there hasn't. I'll just be joining your group on the scene."

Echika blinked in surprise at this unexpected development. "How come?"

"The more hands on deck, the better. And personally, I want to see what goes on inside their turf," Totoki said concisely as she stuffed the gun into her shoulder holster. "I'll be commanding from the scene, so can I count on you to lend a hand as things develop?"

Echika looked up at her superior, surprise clear on her face. The pressure Director Schlosser had put on Totoki in Philadelphia must have really gotten to her. Now that the investigation into the investors had fizzled out, the

connection between the TFC and the Alliance was the only lead they had left. They couldn't afford to fail here.

Once again, Echika realized just how important the mission they were on was.

"Got it. But does that mean we'll be leaving Investigator Gardener in charge of the communications center?"

"It should be fine. He used to work in the Online Monitoring Department." Totoki pulled up her zipper. "It's almost time to set out. It goes without saying, but keep your own safety in mind. Understood?"

Echika nodded gravely, shaking off what bit of emotionality still lingered. She had no choice but to get over this.

The streets of Al Bahah were silent and decaying. Echika and the members of the Special Investigations Unit blended in with the NGO workers and got on several vans, which safely crossed the checkpoints. Like Fokine said, the inspections were mostly a formality, and they entered the TFC's turf without much incident, along with a few small trucks loaded with aid supplies. They drove as a convoy for a while, but once they reached a parting in the roads, the trucks all went their separate ways and headed for their respective destinations.

The van carrying Echika, Fokine, and Totoki drove north along the Sarawat Mountains, moving toward a local residential area. The worn-out cityscape sailed by through the dirty window of the van—dead shopping malls stood in stasis, their faded signs frozen in time.

Every so often, they would see a TFC operative patrolling the streets, rifle in hand. Most of the passersby were locals, but there were also immigrants. They were few and far between, but still noticeable. The civilians' attire was by no means clean or neat, but there was an air of mellow, peaceful daily life here, without any conflict to speak of.

"The immigrants are cynics who share the TFC's ideals," Totoki told Echika from the seat next to hers. "Since they want a device to substitute the Your Forma, this place is like a utopia for them."

“Even so, I can’t imagine why anyone would want to move to a place controlled by terrorists...”

Still, she’d been expecting the turf of a terrorist organization to look a little more imposing. If one ignored the armed operatives walking around, the place looked no different from any other poor rural town. Yet according to Cook, the buildings were being used to manufacture weapons.

“Yes, I read you loud and clear,” Totoki said, responding to Gardener in the communications center. “Once we get there, switch over to a group audio call. And test the camera now, while we have the chance.”

“Keep your wits about you, Hieda.” Fokine turned to her from the seat in front of hers, making her jolt. “We couldn’t get the riot police in on this, so we have to be extra careful.”

The Electrocime Investigations Bureau had a riot police unit for situations that required immediate response. It was smaller than the special forces the police used, and their gear was minimal, but they were still dependable. This time, however, Director Schlosser hadn’t approved their dispatch.

“The Saudi government must have applied pressure to stop it. Can’t have a political incident, right?”

“That’s just how it goes. This area isn’t even in our jurisdiction, so to speak.”

The group of vans and small trucks that their vehicle was a part of arrived at the residential area at the foot of the mountain. They found an empty plot that served as a parking lot and stopped there. The staff got out of the vans one by one and began unloading the small trucks with practiced motions.

Shortly after that, Echika and her squad began getting audio calls from the other team members deployed around the area.

“Everyone, you can hear me, yes?” Totoki called out. “Investigator Gardener, keep monitoring the situation from the communications center. Investigator Lin and Aide Wood, you cover the shopping mall. Next—” She gave instructions to each investigator. “Investigator Fokine, you check the watchtower.”

“Roger. Hieda, look after the chief, you hear?”

Fokine walked out of the parking lot first. Echika deployed a map of the area with her Your Forma and checked their surroundings. The local residential area spanned a few kilometers around them. Based on what the NGO staff said, the TFC fighters rarely patrolled this area, and the entry of immigrants was greatly restricted here. There were regulations forbidding them from speaking to the locals, but it did keep the public order relatively stable. The only exception was an old watchtower, or *qasaba*, in the area, since TFC operatives came to and from it every now and then.

“We’ll go around the residential area and look into the replacement device.” Totoki ended the call and turned to Echika. “If it’s real, it’s likely it’s in use by the locals.”

If the TFC was involved with the Alliance, they were likely plotting to use the thought manipulation system in the future. By identifying the replacement device that would be used as a conduit for this system, they’d be able to make a breakthrough in the investigation—the problem was that they simply had too little information.

“We don’t have any leads on the device, right?” Echika asked for confirmation. “Because if it’s complete, and it’s an invasive device like the Your Forma, then how are we supposed to see it?”

“We should probably assume it’s noninvasive. It conflicts with the idea of them using the thought manipulation system, but keep in mind that they reject the Your Forma on the grounds of it being used for business.”

She was right—since the thought manipulation system was still in testing stages, they shouldn’t let that narrow the breadth of their speculation.

Echika and Totoki linked up with the NGO staff. Young men and women were pushing box pallets full of supplies out of the parking lot. They were headed for a school that offered the local children a place to study while instilling them with TFC ideology. In other words, it was a place for brainwashing and indoctrination. Apparently, their teachers were TFC operatives.

“What is the TFC’s ideology, anyway?” Totoki asked. “Is it like what the luddites believe?”

“We don’t know all the details, but it has something to do with the dangers of

the Your Forma,” an NGO member answered, while looking wearily around. “The children here have never seen a thread device before, and they’re taught to think it’s some kind of scary, dangerous fairy-tale monster.”

“But they have a substitute device, right?”

“Probably. We’re not in a position where they tell us too much...”

Most of the homes in the residential block were apartment buildings with uniform white exteriors, making them hard to tell apart. Echika could see pedestrians and locals chatting. They casually greeted the NGO staff. She snuck a glance at the backs of their necks, and sure enough, they had no connection ports.

Meanwhile, multiple reports arrived via a group call.

“This is Lin. We’ve infiltrated the shopping mall,” Investigator Lin whispered into the call. **“No weapon production lines in sight, but it looks like they’re using this place as an armory.”**

“You don’t see any biological weapon development facilities?” Totoki asked.

“Not at present, no. We’ll continue investigating.”

“I just arrived at the watchtower,” Fokine said. **“No fighters in sight. I’m going inside.”**

“Investigator Fokine, this is Gardener, speaking from the communications center. I have a message from Harold: ‘There might be some kind of alarm. Be careful when you enter.’”

Echika felt her breath catch. Harold had stayed behind in the communications center with Bigga and Gardener, where they were watching the camera feeds from the investigators in the field. Any footage deemed important was to be shared to Totoki’s Your Forma.

“Investigator Fokine,” Totoki said. “What does the interior of the watchtower look like?”

“There’s a wooden box about the size of a beer crate by the wall. There’s dozens of papers inside.” There was a brief pause. **“They’re transaction reports. They’re exchanging weapons for grain.”**

“Is there anything related to the substitute device or the biological weapons?”

“No, it’s just firearms and ammo. It might be enciphered...”

They climbed up a gently sloping hill, and their field of view instantly opened up. An aging school building with phytotrons built around it came into sight. They were much more primitive than the greenhouses Echika had seen in Farasha Island’s agricultural development areas. They stood against the backdrop of the desolate scenery and were all made of glass panes, through which Echika could see small children studying inside. A Slavic teacher was teaching them, likely a TFC fighter. As Totoki continued her exchange with Fokine, Echika asked an NGO member a question.

“Aren’t phytotrons really expensive?”

“Yes, I hear they were purchased by donations and volunteers from organizations like ours. The food shortage in the area is quite severe, so they want to begin cultivating wheat here, since it’s relatively unaffected by the weather and the changing of the seasons.”

The NGO member then left, saying she needed to deliver the supplies to the school. Echika waited outside the school grounds. As she watched two operatives leave while carrying box pallets, she looked at the phytotrons again. Cook had called the TFC a terrorist organization, but so far, the area hadn’t seemed any different from other impoverished areas. That male teacher was supposed to be a TFC member, but the sight of these children playing was one she couldn’t link to terrorists. This was just her impression, of course.

“No developments yet.” Totoki sighed as she ended her conversation. “I’d hoped that if the Alliance has something to do with this place, we would have found something by now.”

Absolutely true. “Maybe we should approach the locals and see what we can learn from them?”

“It’s too risky.” Totoki shot down the idea right away. “Even if the locals don’t realize who we are, the TFC fighters might notice, and that’ll just encourage them to push away the NGO’s support.”

Totoki was right. Civilian support groups like the International FLM

Foundation, which was cooperating with the TFC, were supposed to be neutral groups. Echika didn't know how Director Schlosser had talked them into doing it, but if their cooperation with the bureau was discovered, the TFC would grow suspicious and cut ties with them, and the only ones who'd end up hurt would be the civilians receiving aid.

"And the director sent us here with all that in mind?"

"Maybe he thought this was a small risk to take, compared to the possibility of the thought manipulation system spreading worldwide." Totoki gazed at the phytotrons, as though she had just noticed they were there. "I don't appreciate that line of thinking myself, but we can't prioritize personal feelings here."

Making those kinds of distinctions is just part of being in this organization.

Hearing her whisper this, Echika mused, perhaps belatedly, that while Totoki's calm, collected decision-making may have come across as cold and cruel, she was actually quite emotional. Looking back on things, Echika had taken matters into her own hands during investigations many times in the past, and Totoki always backed her up out of respect for her Brain Diving abilities.

"Chief," Echika said, remembering something. "Did my suspension only last a month because...?"

She trailed off there. The sound of the children cheering could be heard from inside a phytotron. The teacher had just opened a jar, releasing butterflies that were trapped inside. The insects fluttered away, evading the small hands reaching for them, and flew out of the open door. One butterfly flew right past Echika's eyes, and her Your Forma automatically analyzed it and opened a window presenting information on it.

<A swallowtail butterfly robot for environmental performances. Traces of modification detected>

Indeed, the proboscises of the fluttering butterflies were modified to be straight, like straws. The butterflies changed course and flew back into the greenhouse, apparently directed by a control device held by the teacher.

"I wonder if they use pollen as an intermediary," Totoki whispered. "Normally, they use agricultural pollinator hollow units."

“Ultra-small drones modeled after insects, right?” Echika had some basic knowledge about agricultural machinery from her school years. “Maybe they just spent all their funding on the phytotrons. They’re supposed to be expensive.”

“What are you doing here?”

A voice suddenly spoke out behind them. Echika and Totoki turned around, and the moment they did, Echika felt all the air in her lungs freeze over. Three TFC fighters were approaching them. Their faces were covered, but they were clearly young men, and they each carried a black gleaming rifle in their muscular hands. Echika spotted an old, battered van parked far behind them.

There weren’t supposed to be any TFC fighters patrolling this area.

“Hieda. Calm down,” Totoki whispered.

This made Echika come to. Right, she couldn’t let them notice her panicking. Totoki remained composed beside her, fixing the position of the ID hanging from her neck, so as to make it more visible for the fighters.

“We’re from the International FLM Foundation,” she said. “We’re here to deliver supplies to the schoo—”

“Are you Echika Hieda?” one of the fighters asked.

Huh?

Echika remained silent, her eyes widening in surprise. It was so sudden, she had to wonder if she’d misheard them. Totoki looked shocked, too. What was going on? Why did they know her name?

“I think you have the wrong person,” Totoki said, quickly reacting and stepping in front of Echika. “We’re from—”

But Totoki’s words were silenced at the sound of a merciless gunshot. The sound of the children laughing in the phytotron abruptly stopped.

What?

Echika could only stare, dumbfounded, as Totoki staggered in place. Her denim pants were ruptured at the thigh, and crimson droplets dripped down to the dry soil. The fighters had all raised their weapons, and smoke was rising

from the muzzle of one of their rifles.

The moment Echika realized what had happened, her blood ran cold. But she didn't have the time to support Totoki.

"Echika Hieda from the Electrocime Investigations Bureau, raise your hands and turn around," a man sharply ordered, thrusting his gun toward her. "Walk back toward us, slowly. If you don't comply, we'll shoot this woman in the head."

Echika's vision trembled. So they did know who she was. She didn't know how they'd figured out her identity, but either way, this was the worst possible scenario.

"This is bad. How did they find out?"

"Miss Hieda, Chief Totoki, are you all right?!"

She could hear Gardener and Bigga call out from the audio call.

"Communications center, what's going on?" Fokine said. **"Come in!"**

"Hieda." Totoki exhaled through gritted teeth. "Do as they say..."

Her judgment was sound—if she didn't want to provoke them, she had to obey.

"I'll walk over. Don't shoot her, please," Echika said, doing as the fighters instructed.

She turned around, raised her hands, and walked backward toward them. As she did, panic filled her thoughts. She had no idea how she'd been exposed. Was there a security camera somewhere in the town? Did someone discover her identity and report it to them? Or maybe—?

The men behind her grabbed her by the shoulders, cutting off her thoughts.

"Any weapons?" One of the men asked concisely.

"...Under my arm," Echika replied in resignation.

One of the other men tore off her jacket and took the automatic pistol from her shoulder holster. Then she felt someone grab the back of her neck hard, bending her head forward painfully. The men were checking how many

connection ports she had.

What are they after?

The most natural conclusion would be that they wanted to take her hostage to force the bureau out of their turf.

“It’s her, all right,” the man said. “Take her to the boss.”

As her pulse quickened, Echika gritted her teeth, preparing for the worst.

2

“Investigator Gardener, send their coordinates over to my Your Forma.”

“I’ll have it in a second, just give me some time.”

Their trailer in the NGO’s compound, which was more modest and unadorned than a hotel room, had a portable flexible screen set on its wall. The screen displayed windows with all the operatives’ video feeds streamed in real time. But at the moment, Bigga’s eyes were fixed solely on Echika’s and Totoki’s windows.

“Why?!” She couldn’t help but ask. “How do the TFC know about Miss Hieda?! Wasn’t the local residential block supposed to be safe...?!”

“Look, I’m sorry, but could you be quiet?” Gardener cut her off.

He was sitting on the sofa, leaning in as he busily operated a laptop. Harold stood in front of the screen where he was adjusting the audio. The Amicus hadn’t spoken a word for some time now, and his expression was calm and collected. The volume of the camera was amplified, and the earsplitting crackle of static noise filled the room.

Gardener’s hands stopped moving. “I sent it over, Investigator Fokine. The chief’s probably injured.”

“I’ll be right there. What about Hieda?”

Just as he asked that, Echika’s camera feed on the screen went dark. Totoki’s camera was still online, which implied the terrorists had torn off Echika’s jacket. The men forced Echika to hang her head and checked the back of her neck.

“It’s her, all right. Take her to the boss.”

She really will be taken captive, at this rate.

“No, we have to do something!” Bigga said, forgetting that she’d been told to keep quiet. “Ivan, hurry, the terrorists are taking Miss Hieda...!”

“Bigga, calm down,” Totoki whispered. **“Investigator Gardener, Hieda’s...”**

“What are you doing?!”

A dull thud followed, and Totoki’s screen went black. They could hear her coughing violently. Bigga was pale in the face at this point. Had the terrorists knocked her down? What was going on? Harold wordlessly raised the camera’s volume further. The static noise tore into their ears. The feed remained black, but they could hear Echika and the terrorists talking in the distance.

“I did what you said! Why did you hit her?!”

“She was trying to pull a gun on us. Consider yourselves lucky we didn’t kill her.”

“I get it, okay?! Just stop. She dropped her weapon, so promise you won’t do anything—”

Then they heard Echika groan and the heavy sound of fabric rustling.

Bigga shuddered. No more.

“Leave this woman here. We don’t need her.”

“We need to call the NGO people here.”

“The boss hasn’t given any instructions yet.”

They heard the TFC fighters’ concise exchange. The noise got much harsher. The blackness covering Echika’s camera was torn off, and light filled the footage. They saw one of the assailants look right into the camera.

“They hid a camera in the jacket—”

The footage cut off with a crack. The camera had either been switched off or destroyed. The trailer went quiet, a low buzzing hanging in the air. Only the sound of their hearts beating fast surged up from the depths of stillness. They went still as statues, their every sense numbed and distant.

What now? What would they do?

“All members, retreat. Let the NGO know we’re pulling out.” Totoki’s choked orders spurred the frozen room back to life. **“Investigator Gardener, they put Hieda into a van. I can’t stop them from here.”**

“I’m tracking Investigator Hieda’s GPS coordinates.” Gardener peered into the laptop, his face pale from stress.

“Share it with me. I’ll go after them,” Fokine’s voice ordered. **“Can someone pick up Chief Totoki?”**

“I’m on it,” Investigator Lin replied. **“Investigator Fokine, you handle Miss Hieda.”**

“Stop deciding what to do on your own!” Totoki snapped at them in an uncharacteristic display of emotion. **“We need to prioritize saving Hieda right now. I’ll get back on my own. Besides, if the TFC has taken her hostage, they might make demands of the bureau—”**

The officers trying to take control of the hectic situation started talking over one another. Bigga could only freeze up, her eyes swimming in disbelief. Was there anything they could do to help? But then she spotted Harold move away from the screen and walk straight across the living room. Bigga reflexively took off after him.

“Harold, where are you going?!”

She crossed through the door, leading to the trailer’s entrance area, which was integrated with a kitchenette. Harold was opening the door. He turned to look at Bigga, like he’d just come to his senses. Save for the fact that he wasn’t blinking, he looked absolutely calm.

“No.” The Amicus backed away from the door, seemingly realizing how odd his actions looked. “Pardon me, I’m not going anywhere.”

“Please, calm down,” Bigga managed to say, the words partially directed at herself. “I want to rush to Miss Hieda’s aid, too, but acting recklessly is dangerous.”

“Yes... I think I had a problem in my system processing. I’m sorry.”

He touched his temples, like a human suffering a headache. Unsure of how to proceed, Bigga returned to the living room for lack of anything else to do.

“Do you want me to call Novae Robotics Inc.? If it gets too bad, I can—”

“Thank you, but no. My auto-repair can handle this much.”

Harold approached the kitchen in what seemed like self-contemplation. He looked down at his own reflection in the sink. It was painfully obvious what was pressuring his system.

“I’m sure Miss Hieda will be fine. Investigator Fokine will save her soon.”

“My system is okay.” Harold didn’t raise his head. “I’m not particularly worried about the investigator.”

Bigga couldn’t believe what he’d just said. His curt choice of words was wholly uncharacteristic. Maybe it was his malfunction’s influence on him, or maybe it was the auto-repair, but whatever the case, his processing wasn’t keeping up.

Or maybe...he was just wording things inconsiderately because of how shaky his relationship with Echika had been recently? Even if that was it...

“I—I think saying things like that in this situation is... It’s not right,” Bigga said, letting her unstable emotions take over. “I’ve been meaning to ask this for a while now, but—”

“Don’t ask. Please.”

“What happened between you and Miss Hieda?!”

Bigga drew closer to Harold, ignoring his rejection. When they’d dined together in Enontekiö, she’d kept that question bottled up, and now honestly wasn’t the time to fix this issue. But she couldn’t keep quiet about it any longer. She didn’t want to see Harold and Echika change any more... Or rather, she didn’t want to see Harold change any more.

“This is just speculation on my side, but...” She couldn’t keep her voice from trembling. “Did your fight with Miss Hieda cause your malfunction? Did something bad happen between you two, and the shock made your processing...?”

She couldn’t finish the rest of her statement. The words popped like bubbles.

Harold looked up, his eyes fixed straight on her—the blond lashes bordering his eyes looked the same as ever. They were still every bit the signpost they had been that night. But this time, all the warmth she'd felt in his eyes was missing.

"I don't want you to intrude on this, Bigga."

The blankness of his features wasn't the same uniform, standard Amicus sort of non-expression she'd seen him make recently. No, it was different from any face she'd ever seen him make. His face was like glass, like cold pottery, and it possessed an artificiality that made him seem like a collection of lifeless machine parts that had been cobbled together.

She hated having to put it like this, but he felt...mechanical. She didn't know he was capable of making this kind of face. The realization filled her with instinctual dread that surged up from the core of her body.

"I know..." Bigga clenched her fingers to drive the fear away. "I know I'm sticking my nose into things, but—"

"I thought you'd be happy to see me and Investigator Hieda have a falling out?" he asked, in a voice that was as calm and serene as ever. "Humans are envious creatures. It would make sense for you to resent her *if you really loved me*. So why?"

For a second, Bigga couldn't process what he'd said. But as the meaning fully sank in, her vision warped. She realized, of course, that he had some inkling about how she felt. She knew that she didn't really try to hide it, and that her paired Amicus on Farasha Island had confessed her feelings to Harold not too long ago, which he'd tacitly ignored at the time.

She didn't mind the fact that he knew at this point. But...

"Are you...trying to make me angry on purpose?" Bigga asked in a low voice. The anger she felt was intense, but she wasn't sure how to lash out at him. "Both you and Miss Hieda mean a lot to me. I can't just watch the two of you drift apart when I don't even know why, and not say something... It hurts! Why won't you understand that?!"



“I’m sorry. I didn’t consider that.” He spoke with all the absence of emotion one would expect of someone reading out a form. “But if you won’t even envy her, can you call that love real?”

“What are you talking about?!”

“What would you say if I told you I guided you into developing feelings for me?”

Bigga looked into the Amicus’s handsome face in a daze. The memories of the day she’d first met Harold played in her mind. He’d noticed her conflicted feelings when her back was against the wall and had raised her up. This was what caused her to develop an interest in him, and what made her want to learn more about him.

Even if he’d only used his powers of deduction because it was necessary for the investigation, Harold had spoken those words out of genuine kindness. That’s how she felt, and even now, she wanted to believe it.

“The sensory crime was my first assignment as an investigator aide. I needed to resolve it, no matter what, so I used every tool at my disposal.” Harold’s tone was soft, but his every word prickled her skin like needles. “I realized you took a liking to me right away, and I used your feelings to ensure Lie wouldn’t get away.”

“You’re allowed to follow your heart.”

To Harold, those words were nothing more than a tool he’d used to ensure everything worked out in his favor. The way he’d touched her when she’d spilled coffee over him was intentional. He’d pulled the wool over her eyes, and Bigga, naive and clueless country girl that she was, had blindly fallen for it.

And yet.

“...They’re real.”

“We Amicus are designed to please humans, down to the smallest detail. The affection you’ve felt for me this whole time is the same as the affection one feels for a stuffed toy.”

“That’s not true!” No. Times like these made her want to start crying like a

child. “Why are you...? Why do you keep telling me how I feel?! I really—”

“I can’t grant your wishes, Bigga. We can’t love you. All we can do is make you happy by *acting like we do*.”

Harold’s gaze didn’t waver. He looked at her so directly, it almost felt strange, like unbending steel. His unwavering gaze chiseled a crack into her heart—if everything he said was true, then Hansa was right after all.

Had she known this, somewhere deep down? If so, then what was this pain supposed to be?

“Even so,” she said through a throat that felt like it was in knots. “I think you really do have a heart. Because...if all that was just programming, you wouldn’t be admonishing me like this.”

Harold’s brow furrowed ever so slightly. “No. This is just what my system says is the ideal action right now.”

“Then that’s no different from what we humans do. You’re no different from us at all. So...”

Bigga looked for the end of that sentence, of these words that felt like a useless struggle, but it all sank into the quagmire, nowhere to be found.

The Amicus narrowed his eyes. “I’m sorry I hurt you, Bigga.”

His voice was full of suppressed emotion; it didn’t sound mechanical in the slightest. At this point, Bigga couldn’t tell if his apology was heartfelt. Did Harold even have a heart? What if this was all just programmed reactions? Or maybe all this cold behavior was because of his malfunction?

She couldn’t make sense of it anymore.

Harold walked by Bigga and returned to the living room. She could only listen to his receding footsteps, her mind a complete blank.

Why did this happen?

All she wanted was for Harold and Echika to make up. The only comfort, if she could call it that, was that the situation was too dire for her to linger on the shock.

Thirty minutes later, Totoki returned to the camping trailer.

“We called an ambulance. She lost a lot of blood, so we need to give her first aid.”

Investigator Lin—or rather, her large-framed partner, Aide Wood—carried Totoki over. They left her in the kitchen with Bigga and instantly went back outside. Bigga rushed to take out the first aid kit under the sink and brought it over to Totoki, who was sitting next to the table.

“I have to admit, this is humiliating.” Her nylon jacket, now covered in dirt, was draped over her shoulders, and her cheek was swollen from the blow she’d taken. The towel tied around her left thigh—better than nothing, but not by much—was discolored with red blood. “The bullet only skimmed me, and the bleeding’s mostly stopped.”

“That doesn’t mean this is good enough! We have to tie up the wound and put something cold on your cheek!”

Attempting to keep her emotions in check, Bigga busily applied an antiphlogistic patch to Totoki’s cheek, undid the towel on her leg, and wrapped a clean bandage around it. Investigator Gardener appeared from the living room and shared the information he had with Totoki. The TFC had maintained radio silence so far, and the bureau hadn’t received any demands from them in exchange for returning Echika.

“Investigator Fokine went after Hieda. For the time being, we’ll wait for an update from him,” Totoki instructed Gardener. “I’ll go to the trailer next door and talk to the NGO’s managers.”

“Huh?” Bigga exclaimed despite herself. “But there’s an ambulance on the way here.”

“Then, um, I’ll let you know if I hear anything,” said Gardener, quickly retreating back into the living room.

As soon as Bigga finished carefully tying the bandage around Totoki’s leg, the chief rose to her feet, holding up a hand to silence any protest.

“You need to stay put!” Bigga repeated. “If you move too much, your wound might—”

“That’s fine, just let me know when the ambulance gets here.” Totoki was as stoic-faced as ever, despite clearly being in pain. “And give Hieda this when she gets back.”

Totoki took something out of her pocket and placed it on the table. Bigga gritted her teeth and stared—it was a nitro-case necklace. It was a bit dirty, but it looked familiar. When they’d first met, it had always been around Echika’s neck, but she’d stopped wearing it recently.

“It came off when the terrorists took Echika. Give it back to her.”

“All right. Um... Miss Hieda will be coming back unharmed, right?” Bigga asked, giving in to her anxiety. The worst possible outcome kept filling her mind, but she hung her head and dismissed the thought. Her emotions were all over the place, and it felt like her head might burst.

“Bigga.”

She jolted with a start, feeling Totoki gently touch her shoulder. Looking up, she saw her own frightened expression in her dignified superior’s eyes.

“If you’re going to be an investigator, you have to be stouthearted.”

Totoki tapped her on the shoulder, and Bigga straightened her back. She tried to take a deep breath—Totoki was right. Panicking and sobbing would accomplish nothing. Yes. Fokine and the others will save her, for sure.

She had to believe that, even if she was forcing herself to do so...

Totoki told Bigga to stay put and wait, then stumbled out of the trailer with unsteady steps. Now by herself, Bigga reached for Echika’s necklace so as to not lose it. But the moment she picked it up, the lid of the nitro case came undone, and its contents spilled out on the table. Bigga hurriedly picked it up.

It was a small HSB cartridge, the size of a pinky nail. It must have belonged to Echika, but Bigga didn’t see a stock number printed on it. The device was completely indistinguishable from any other HSB cartridge... But Bigga knew from her time as a bio-hacker that HSB cartridges without serial numbers were

illegally modified and circulated on the black market.

Why would Echika have something like this?

“Bigga, can you help me out for a second?!” Gardener called out to her from the living room. Bigga quickly stuffed the HSB cartridge and nitro case into her pocket. For now, they needed to focus on saving Echika as soon as possible.

She could spend the night crying over her broken heart after everything was settled.



The moment she came to, a dull pain spread over her stomach. Echika opened her heavy eyelids and found that she was lying in the back seat of a parked van. Still in a daze, she brought her hand to her chest out of habit; the nylon jacket she'd been forced to take off was missing, and so was her fake ID. Her holster was empty. And also—

Her mind went blank.

It's gone.

She couldn't feel the nitro case she always wore under her clothes. She nearly sat up out of reflex, but before she could, the door of the van opened, filling the inside with light. Blinded before the glow, she forced her eyes shut on instinct, and someone grabbed her by the arm and dragged her out of the vehicle.

“What did the boss say?”

“To take her to his room.”

“Come on, hurry up!”

The men restrained both her arms and forced Echika to stand. Dull pain shot through her punched stomach, but it was bearable. As they pushed her forward, she looked around—they were on top of a hill overlooking Al Bahah. She could see several cottages, but the benches on their porches were all cracked, and their lawns were wilted from neglect. There were no people in sight. The plot of land was completely surrounded by a fence that was too high to scale.

Did Totoki make it back to their communications center? Feeling nauseated from the stress, Echika checked her Your Forma carefully, so the men wouldn't notice. Surprisingly, she was online. They hadn't used an isolation unit on her. To her relief, she saw that Totoki had sent her dozens of messages, which meant she was alive. Apparently, they had her GPS coordinates, and Fokine was heading over to save her.

This meant she needed to stall for time and figure out why the TFC had brought her here.

The men led Echika to the most intact cottage in the back of the plot. As they passed through the front door, its joints creaked loudly, and the rough smell of dust filled her nostrils. Past a dark corridor was the living room. The TFC fighters shoved Echika inside. Unable to keep her footing, she fell to her knees atop the faded carpet.

"We brought Hieda over, Boss."

Echika managed to lift her head. There was a TV board in front of her, with an old-styled CRT monitor set in it. To her right was a large sliding window and a wooden desk. Sitting on it was an ashtray stuffed with cigarette butts and a paperback faded from overexposure to sunlight. The man sitting by the desk silently rose to his feet.

"Step outside. Keep watch."

He was white, which was quite unusual, given the region. His overgrown blond hair was tied into a ponytail, he wore Wellington sunglasses, and his cheeks were covered in stubble, which made his features difficult to discern.

She couldn't tell how old he was, but if she had to guess, he looked to be in his forties. His personal data wasn't popping up—it made sense that a TFC member didn't have a Your Forma, though. Apparently, this man was the boss of the Al Bahah region.

The TFC operatives left, and the man shamelessly stared at Echika. She couldn't see his eyes, but she didn't feel any malice from him. Still, seeing as the hem of his shirt wasn't tucked in, it was clear he had a gun hidden under his clothes.

“You want a drink, Miss Hieda? I’ve got cheap wine and nonalcoholic beer.”

“I’m fine.” Echika tried to put up her strongest front. “Why did you bring me here?”

“I didn’t have you pegged as the impatient type.”

“How did you find out about the bureau?”

“You’d do well not to trust other people.” So someone had leaked the information somehow. The NGO was the most suspect. “That aside, I see you got your sour face from your father.”

...What did he just say?

The man walked toward the kitchen, leaving Echika to wallow in confusion. In a friendly tone, he told her to take a seat on the sofa as he opened the fridge. She decided it would be wise to do as she was told for the time being. With her eyes fixed on the man, she carefully got to her feet and took a seat on the hole-ridden sofa.

Somehow, this man knew her father, Chikasato.

“Since you’re on the clock, I think you’ll prefer this to wine.”

The man returned and handed Echika a bottle of nonalcoholic beer. She took it but had no intention of uncorking the thing, of course. She focused on registering every motion and gesture the man sitting across from her made.

“How do you know Chikasato Hieda?” she demanded.

“We were acquaintances,” the man replied briefly. “The name’s Kai. I’m the person in charge here in Al Bahah.”

His name was clearly phony, but that was trivial at the moment. Why did a TFC member know her father? There was only one theory she could come up with.

Echika went straight to the point. “Are you a member of the Alliance?”

“All I told them to do was bring you here. I wanted to talk.”

“What for?” She gripped the bottle. “You didn’t plug an isolation unit into me, so the bureau will be here in no time. Are you sure you want to be arrested?”

“You’re the ones illegally trespassing on our turf.” He remained perfectly calm. “Your bureau must really be in dire straits to knowingly send its investigators into danger in a remote town outside its jurisdiction.”

Echika swallowed. How much of their plan was he aware of? No, maybe he was just asking her leading questions. She didn’t know, so it would be best not to give away information. She needed to stall for time and get out of him any information she could. And while she knew that she didn’t excel in this area, she didn’t have any other alternatives.

“So... Why did you want to talk to me?” She repeated the question. “Depending on what you ask, I might answer. But in exchange, I want you to tell me about the Alliance.”

“I never said I was a member of the Alliance,” Kai said, scoffing. “But I do know your father sold Taylor’s thought manipulation system out to the Alliance. That’s all I can say.”

“That’s convincing enough.”

Claiming he was unrelated when he knew that much would be absurd. He was just watching what he said while refusing to flat out admit it. And since he didn’t have a Your Forma, she couldn’t perform a Brain Dive on him, which meant she had to take his words at face value.

Echika licked her lower lip. She hadn’t been expecting a member of the Alliance to outright contact her at this point. She needed to get this man into custody and return him to the bureau at all costs.

“Was my father involved in the Alliance, too?”

“You’ll have to do your share of the talking first. I’m the one who invited you over, after all.”

Kai spoke with a joking tone, but his attitude made it clear this wasn’t up for debate. She couldn’t risk provoking him, in case he tried to slip away. Echika clammed up, silently awaiting his demands. She could feel his eyes on her behind his sunglasses.

“Hand over the software Chikasato Hieda made.”

Echika frowned.

“What software?” Her father had made countless programs besides Matoi. He’d been involved with the production of much of Rig City’s software. “There’s too many of his programs to count.”

“I want all of them, including the incomplete, unpublished ones.”

“What for?”

“To save the world from being ruled by evil.”

Echika had to squint at Kai’s theatrical, bombastic response. He couldn’t have meant it literally. Given the TFC’s ideals, he must have been referring to the Your Forma, and if they were involved with the Alliance, they were likely working toward putting the thought manipulation system into use.

The Farasha Island incident had highlighted one of the system’s flaws, however—it didn’t affect people with high processing abilities, like Echika. And the system’s designer, Elias Taylor, had passed away. In other words...

“What, do you think you can improve the system using my father’s technology, since he was Taylor’s ‘friend’ and familiar with the thought manipulation system?” Echika sked quietly. “If so, you’ll probably end up disappointed.”

“Refuse to hand over the software, and I won’t reveal what you want to know about Chikasato’s involvement with the Alliance.”

“It’s not a fair deal to begin with. I stand to lose too much.”

“If you want to keep trying to guess what I’m thinking, that’s fine by me.” Kai reached for his back. “If that’s how you want to play this game, I can make you an offer that’s even more unfair.”

His tone still soft, he took out an automatic pistol he had hidden behind his back. He held the muzzle mere centimeters away from Echika’s forehead. She’d assumed he was hiding a weapon, but even so, the sight of it made her shudder. There was no chance she’d survive if he shot her from this close. Even if he was bluffing, she couldn’t oppose him openly.

“...Fine.” Echika tried to remain composed, cursing her lack of negotiation

skills. “I can get you my father’s software, but I don’t have it on me. Let me go, and I’ll contact you through the bureau when I’m ready.”

“Sorry, but that won’t fly, Echika,” said Kai, casually referring to her by her first name. “I think you have the wrong idea here—this is a personal request from me to you. If you’re going to get the bureau involved, I’m going to have to shoot you right here.”

“What do you mean?” Echika couldn’t understand what he was saying. “I’m going to need a better explanation—”

But then she heard the dry sound of a gunshot echo outside in the distance. Echika and Kai both fell quiet. More gunshots followed in rapid succession, and she heard shouting in Arabic, probably from the fighters she’d seen earlier. Footsteps pattered outside the window.

“Looks like your ride’s here. Be thankful that our security’s flimsy.” Kai swiftly made up his mind. He sighed once and got to his feet. “Remember, this deal is a secret between you and me. Don’t tell the bureau about it, no matter what.”

“No, wait! You’re not getting away!”

Kai quickly turned around and dashed out of the room. She couldn’t afford to let a member of the Alliance escape. Squinting from the dull pain in her stomach, Echika rose from the couch to go after him.

But as soon as she did, the bottle in her hands creaked.

Oh no.

She threw the bottle away, out of reflex more than anything else. The next moment, the bottle ruptured from the inside out. Echika squeezed her eyes shut. Shattered glass went flying, nicking her arms and legs, a few pieces stabbing into her flesh. Groaning in pain, she stumbled where she stood.

Had the bottle exploded because the carbon gas inside it was affected by the difference in temperature? Or was there some kind of explosive involved? Either way, Kai had caught her completely off guard.

She cracked open her eyes. The only thing left was the shattered remains of the bottle. A few of the glass shards were buried in the skin of Echika’s arms

and legs, and red was oozing out around them. When she tried to stand, the shards sank deeper, and even more intense pain shot through her. Kai was nowhere to be found...!

“Shit...!”

Overcome by frustration more than pain, Echika slammed her fist against the carpet.

Moments later, she heard hurried footsteps entering the cottage.

“All clear! There’s no one here.”

“This way!”

Those were the familiar voices of her colleagues. A few members of the Special Investigations Unit entered the living room, along with Fokine, holding a gun. Upon spotting Echika, he went pale in the face and hurried over to her.

“Hang on, Hieda.”

“I’m fine. It’s not as bad as it looks.” It did hurt, but all in all, her wounds were light. “Forget me, you have to go after him. There was a member from the Alliance here, a white man named Kai...”

Echika spat the words out quickly, nearly biting her tongue in the process. Fokine instantly ordered the other investigators to search the area. They left the cottage in a hurry. Echika hoped they would find Kai, but...

“What about the lookouts outside? Did things go all right?”

“There were just three of them, not much by way of security.” Fokine took off his nylon jacket and pushed it into Echika’s hands. “Put this on, you’re covered in blood.”

As Echika held the jacket, she watched in a daze as Fokine talked to Totoki over audio call. The only guards here were the men who’d brought her here, it seemed. She did think they’d been sloppy to have not put an isolation unit on her. Was what Kai said true, then? Had they really abducted her just so he could negotiate over Chikasato’s software? Even assuming he did know there was backup coming to help her... She couldn’t quite put it into words, but something felt off.

“Chief Totoki? Yeah, we found Hieda. She’s mostly fine, but she did get injured. We’ll need to call an ambulance for her, too—”

Listening to Fokine talk, Echika managed to stretch out her legs and stand. She approached Kai’s desk. The cigarette butts in the ashtray could be used to gather his DNA. The object she’d thought was a book turned out to be a journal, with most of its pages blank. A few pages were full not of text but of scribbles, and the cover wrapping had a bit of a bulge.

Echika rummaged inside the cover and discovered a card-shaped USB memory device. Echika froze up slightly at the design. Drawn on its surface was an all too familiar illustration of a butterfly.

The Farasha Island logo.

Could it be?

The realization hit her, prompting Echika to start sifting through the desk. She opened the upper drawer and found an old tablet with a converter adapter still attached to it. Maybe it was Kai’s or the property of the TFC; she unflinchingly attached the USB memory cartridge to the adapter. The screen came to life all too easily, no new security clearances or passwords required.

It displayed the files contained in the USB one by one. Echika’s eyes settled on a single line.

brainwash_backup0200...

You’re joking.

She couldn’t believe it. The very thing they’d tried so hard to get their hands on in the last incident, only for it to slip through their fingers, had now fallen into her lap with almost comical ease.

“Hieda, what are you doing?” Fokine walked up to her quickly, having finished his conversation. “We’re falling back. Apparently, the other terrorists are heading here. If you can’t walk, we’ll carry you—”

“I think this is the backup.”

At this point, she’d all but forgotten her aching wounds. She looked up at Fokine, unblinking, and he looked back at her dubiously. She showed him the

monitor of the tablet and watched his eyes narrow.

Why had Kai left something this important behind?

“I think we might have just found the backup data for the thought manipulation system.”

3

An entire day passed until Echika could have her wounds treated at a civilian hospital in Lyon.

The Electrocrime Investigations Bureau’s headquarters on the fourth floor of the Interpol building were mostly deserted, as most of the staff were already clocking out. The sole exception was a meeting room that had been temporarily allocated to the Special Investigations Unit to serve as their headquarters—the only place in the building where the lights were still on.

When Echika peered inside, her eyes met with Investigator Lin, who was working at a desk.

“Welcome back, Miss Hieda. The analysis team is looking into Kai’s USB right now.”

“Who’s watching over them?”

“Investigator Fokine. Chief Totoki is napping in her office, so he’s filling in for her.” A white fur ball stirred on Lin’s lap. “What’s wrong, Ganache? Wait with me a little longer until your mommy wakes up, okay?”

She grinned and hugged Totoki’s pet cat, Ganache. The robot Scottish fold rubbed its nose against Lin affectionately. Echika had to wonder if this department somehow drew in cat lovers.

Feeling a bit confused, Echika left the room and walked over to the analysis team next. Two days had passed since she’d found the USB in Al Bahah, though she’d spent one of them traveling to Lyon, so the investigation was only beginning.

She wanted to be involved in the investigation personally, but the medical care she got in Saudi Arabia only amounted to first aid, which led to her

spending the day in the civilian hospital in Lyon. The fact that Totoki was also injured but had toughed it out and stayed on the scene made Echika feel a bit pathetic.

“Oh, Hieda, you’re back. How was the hospital?”

As Echika walked down the hall, Investigator Fokine approached from the opposite side. He was rubbing the bridge of his nose in fatigue, and there were bags under his eyes.

“They removed all the shards from my skin. They said I’m fine now.” Apart from the fact that she was covered in bandages under her clothes. “Forget that. Weren’t you with the analysis team?”

“They kicked me out, said I was being a bother.” Fokine shrugged. “If what you found really is a backup of the thought manipulation system, this is huge progress.”

“I hope it’s the real thing...”

The USB she’d discovered on Kai’s desk contained what seemed to be a backup of the thought manipulation system. They’d needed to bring it back to the headquarters in Lyon to confirm its authenticity. If it was actually a backup of the real thing, the investigation would take a dramatic turn. Director Schlosser and the other top brass would have to drop their skepticism and start proactively involving themselves in this case.

But what baffled Echika the most was the question of why Kai had left something that important behind.

“I know you didn’t find Kai in the end, but...do we know where he went afterward?”

“He’s still in Al Bahah. We know that for sure. The International FLM Foundation said the regional boss contacted them about ending their contract.”

Echika felt bitterness fill her heart. What Totoki suspected had turned out to be true. The thought of all the children who would be hurt from the support being cut weighed on her.

“Oh, and about Kai’s cigarettes,” Fokine carried on. “We looked up the DNA

samples we extracted from them with the personal database and found matching biometric data.”

“Kai is definitely involved with the Alliance. If we can just take him into custody...”

“I feel the same way, but it won’t be that simple.” Fokine ruffled his hair. “He’s one of the TFC’s regional bosses... He’s like a leading member in a terrorist organization. Things are a bit too tricky for us to just walk in and arrest the guy.”

As an investigation organization, the Electrocrime Investigations Bureau had to remain politically neutral, and Al Bahah wasn’t in its jurisdiction. Like Cook from the NSA had said, if they arrested Kai, it would impact the TFC and the countries the TFC was using to produce weapons, along with the Saudi Arabian government, which was in a state of cold war with them. Acting recklessly could produce a ripple effect that would have lasting consequences on the international order.

All these obligations were holding them back.

Still frustrated, Echika thought back to Kai’s proposal.

“Hand over the software Chikasato Hieda made.”

“Can’t we use the deal in our favor?” Kai had asked her to keep quiet, but Echika told the bureau everything, of course. “If we use my father’s programs as bait, we could easily arrest him and get useful information out of him.”

“I understand what you’re saying, but we should keep that as our trump card in case things go south.” Fokine looked serious. “It’d be all sorts of bad if handing over your old man’s software actually helped them complete the thought manipulation system.”

That was a valid opinion—maybe Echika still wasn’t as composed as she thought she was. As she exhaled through her nose, she saw Fokine look up into thin air. He must have gotten a new message on his Your Forma. He shook his head with exhaustion.

“What’s wrong?” Echika asked.

“It’s Bigga. Her fever isn’t going down.”

Echika thought back to the last time she saw Bigga, when they’d parted ways in Lyon’s airport. About halfway through the flight, she’d started to complain about feeling unwell. She’d looked ill when they left Al Bahah, so Echika assumed all the pressure was getting to her, but maybe the climate just didn’t suit her. Either way, Bigga was staying at a hotel near the headquarters for the day, at Totoki’s discretion. Bigga had insisted she would be able to sleep it off.

“Maybe I should go visit her.”

“No, I’ll go. I need to go back to the hotel for a change of clothes, and the analysis team kicked me out anyway.” Fokine glanced up at the ceiling in a joking manner. “You stay here on standby, Hieda. Stay in touch if anything happens.”

“Understood. Tell Bigga I said to take it easy, would you?”

Echika watched Fokine walk off with quick steps. The only reason she’d gotten back from Al Bahah safe and sound was because he and the investigators he led had put their lives on the line to save her. She knew that she’d made Bigga worry a lot, too. She needed to thank the two of them properly when she got the chance, but...

Echika gently placed a hand to her chest. Her nitro-case necklace was still missing. She knew she’d lost it in Al Bahah, probably when the TFC fighters attacked her. She was aware that carrying it on her person meant she risked losing it, and yet. She’d been reckless.

If someone found out it contained a Mnemosyne-tweaking HSB... No, she’d be lucky if that was the only thing found out. If someone figured out what it did and that it belonged to her, it would be the end of her, but going back to Saudi Arabia to look for it in this situation would just draw needless suspicion.

Her stomach did flips just thinking about it. Driven by anxiety, she turned around in the corridor and headed to the office. She decided that she would help Investigator Lin with her work until the analysis team finished. If nothing else, it would serve as a distraction. She passed the lounge, where the sparkling lights of Lyon resembled a massive painting, visible through a window that spanned the entire wall.

She stopped in her tracks.

Standing there, like a figure in that painting, was a single Amicus—Harold. He turned to her, looking exactly as he had in Al Bahah. Everything about his appearance was so perfectly human, from his unwrinkled jacket to his handsomely quaffed blond hair.

Well, everything except the look on his face.

“You’re back from the hospital, Investigator?”

Harold greeted her with the artificial smile of a machine. Echika was a bit surprised, since she hadn’t expected him to call out to her. But at the same time, it made her heart ache. She hated how her emotions wouldn’t act the way she wanted them to.

“Yeah, I just got here. I’ll be waiting in the office until the analysis team is done working.”

“How are your wounds? You’re moving somewhat stiffly. Does it still hurt?”

Echika had intended to walk away at this point but froze upon hearing his question. Why would he even ask that? Maybe he was just making simple small talk, but— Oh, God, just cut it out. If she let herself get riled up this easily, she wouldn’t last.

“It’s nothing serious. It’ll heal in no time,” Echika said. Then a thought occurred to her. Should she tell Harold about losing the Mnemosyne-modifying HSB? The matter did concern him, after all. “Also, um, there’s something I need to tell you...”

Echika looked around to confirm no one was listening and walked up to Harold, close enough to whisper. When she told him about how she’d lost the necklace, his smile did wane a little, but he didn’t seem too disturbed. When she finished explaining, he nodded a few times.

“That’s concerning, yes, but even if they looked inside, the HSB is the usual market standard. I doubt anyone would know it’s meant for modifying Mnemosynes.”

He’d said this with the same artificial smile any Amicus would make. And that

was all. Echika wasn't sure what she was expecting, but she instantly felt a strange sense of regret at having told him. Maybe she shouldn't have spoken to Harold about this to begin with. Did she get the wrong idea and mistake how far apart the two of them had drifted? It made Echika want to run away right then and there.

"Investigator, there's actually something else I've been meaning to talk to you about," Harold said, his expression very serious. "I'm probably to blame for Bigga's illness."

"...What do you mean?"

It took Echika a moment to shift gears. Harold, however, spoke without a hitch.

"You see, when we were in Al Bahah, I revealed to Bigga that I took advantage of her feelings for me during the sensory crime incident. I did that because she noticed the rift in my relationship with you and was insisting on trying to get us to reconcile."

"Hold on." Echika cut him off. She could tell she looked confused. He was joking, right? "Why now? That's way too sudden, and why did you even have to do that to her?"

"She's observing me much too carefully, so it'll only be a matter of time before *she gets involved*. I decided that it would be best if I told her the truth and trampled on her feelings for me."

Echika thought back to how Bigga had acted during the Christmas market. She had indeed been worried about Echika and Harold and had seemed to want them to go back to their old relationship, but assuming she'd figure out the truth about the neuromimetic system based on that felt like a reach. Harold was smart—surely he'd figure that out on his own.

"Don't you think that was a bit excessive?"

"I'd prefer to err on the side of being excessive. I did cause you trouble when I was careless with you." Harold's tone was gentle, but he was making it clear there was no room for argument. "Either way, I hope you can look after her."

"What are you saying...?"

“Help Bigga recover. You’re human, so you can understand the pain of a broken heart. You’re a perfect fit for the job.”

The sheer arrogance of Harold’s statement left Echika stunned. Wasn’t Bigga someone he trusted? And not only had he effectively hurt her in what amounted to a surprise attack, but now he was trying to force mending the wound he’d created onto Echika.

And the way he worded it—“*the pain of a broken heart.*”

Echika bit the inside of her lip. What she felt wasn’t so much anger as it was a crushing sense of emptiness and guilt. She knew his malfunction was a deliberate performance, but even so, Harold had clearly changed. He was completely different from the Amicus she knew. And the knowledge that she only had herself to blame for provoking that change made her feel unworthy of touching on the issue.

“Let me tell you this. As a coworker.” She tried her hardest to remain composed. “If you really care about Bigga, you should have talked this out with her some other way. I know you—you could have come up with a thousand convincing excuses. You didn’t have to deliberately choose to hurt her.”

“The more I hurt her, the more likely she is to stay away from me.”

“I told you, you’re being too cautious!” Echika ended up raising her voice. “Bigga works with you, you know? Doing this is just going to make things complicated. It could impact your own work performance—”

“I’ll be going back to the Saint Petersburg police soon, so that won’t be an issue.”

...*What did he just say?*

Echika’s breath caught in her throat. All the color drained from her cheeks. His gaze sent a chill through her veins.

Harold was going back to the Saint Petersburg police?

“You mean...?” Her mouth went dry in a second. “You’re quitting the Electrocrime Investigations Bureau?”

“I’ve already stepped down as your aide, and I’m not of much use as an

investigation assistant Amicus.” Echika knew he was intentionally passing himself off as useless but refrained from pointing that out. “I *intend* to have my malfunction get worse. Once I get the chance, I’ll create a situation that will force Chief Totoki to accept my resignation.”

How she envied his nature as a machine, his capacity to change his mind rapidly and be so utterly detached from any emotion that might drag him down. At least at times like these. Echika thought their decision to keep their distance from each other would just entail going back to being coworkers, but if Harold left the bureau, they’d never see each other again. They’d have no reason to be in each other’s lives, and they’d become unrelated strangers.

He would truly and utterly vanish from her life.

It felt like the ground beneath her feet was cracking and falling apart. She thought she’d closed it all in a glass bottle and corked it up—her emotions, her heart. Her weak, pathetic self.

But I knew the whole time. That this was all a complacent, unseemly delusion.

“Do you think...that you’ll be able to go back to the police if your malfunction keeps ‘getting worse’?”

“I’ll come up with some reason. At worst, I’ll just find a position that lets me freely enter the police building.”

“And that’s how you’ll secretly keep looking for Detective Sozon’s killer?”

“That’s my plan.” Harold blinked slowly. “If we’re going to keep safe, it’s for the best that we never see each other again.”

This was the first time he’d touched on this topic since their fight at the Dubai International Airport.

If I cared about my safety, I wouldn’t have taken up this secret to begin with.

But if she said that out loud, they’d just start arguing like last time. He was an Amicus, and some part of him couldn’t understand human emotions in the truest sense. Echika herself believed that it would be for the best if he mistook her feelings for simple “fixation.”

In other words, they were at an impasse, one they couldn’t cross.

She tried to imagine herself continuing to Brain Dive in the bureau without him, and though that reality was fast approaching, it only felt like a blurred, nondescript fantasy.

In the end, I really am just too...fragile.

“Either way...” Echika somehow maintained her composure. “If you’re going to quit, don’t create any more problems. Don’t do anything else to hurt people. It’s unacceptable.”

“Understood.” Harold’s response came across as noncommittal and frighteningly concise.

Echika turned around—she couldn’t stand to stay there a second longer. She walked toward the office, feeling like his artificial gaze was pursuing her the whole time. Agitation surged inside her, despite her best efforts to keep it suppressed.

If only she could just focus on work and not think about anything else.

When she returned to the Brain Diving Division’s office, she saw a notification for a new message in her Your Forma. It seemed Chief Totoki had woken up from her nap. Echika opened the message, mostly out of inertia.

<All Special Investigations Unit members who went to Al Bahah are to report to the director’s office *immediately*>

Her gloomy mood instantly turned to complete unrest.

“Is everyone present, Investigator Totoki?”

The office of the director of the Electrocime Investigations Bureau was on the top floor of the headquarters building. Schlosser had asked that question gravely, sitting with his back to a window overlooking the Rhône River. He must have come from home, because he was dressed in a normal outfit instead of his usual suit. The officers present all wore severe expressions, but of course, none of them knew what was going on.

Echika had to stand uncomfortably between Fokine, who’d come back from the hotel, and Harold. She wasn’t in the state of mind to care about that right

now, though. The question burning in her mind was why the director had summoned them all in the middle of the night. Whatever the reason, it couldn't have been anything simple.

"Everyone except Bigga, who's currently on sick leave," Totoki replied. She still had that antiphlogistic patch on her cheek, a painful reminder of what had happened to her. "What's the matter, sir?"

"I think that you, or maybe it's all of you... Whichever it is, I think you already have an idea of why I called you here," Director Schlosser said with irritation.

He placed something on the desk. The investigators remained silent in confusion. Echika stood on tiptoe to look and caught a glimpse of the object on the table. It was Kai's card-type USB. The butterfly symbol glinted in the room's lighting.

"The analysis team's results came in, and they said the USB you brought in...*was Electrocrime Investigations Bureau equipment.*"

A very tense silence fell over the room. Echika herself wasn't quite sure she understood what the director was saying. The others must have been equally stunned in disbelief. What Schlosser had just said was absurd—what was going on?

"The USB's property data had an Electrocrime Investigations Bureau inventory tag number attached to it." The chief glanced at the wall. "Analyst Mayer, please upload the analysis data in the shared folder."

Only now did Echika notice that the head of the analysis team was standing there. Analyst Mayer, a German man in the prime of his life, uploaded the analysis results, as instructed. A Your Forma notification popped up in Echika's field of vision, and she instantly opened the data placed in the shared folder.

She was stunned. What she saw was a screenshot of the USB's property data, which was clearly registered with an Electrocrime Investigations Bureau tag number. The attached report spelled this out briefly, stating that the butterfly symbol had been independently printed onto the USB.

No, wait. That can't be. This USB belongs to Kai.

"Can you explain this, Investigator Totoki?"

“We definitely found the USB in Al Bahah.” Totoki turned to Echika, staring at her firmly. “Right, Hieda?”

Echika awkwardly took a breath. Not just the director but the entire room was looking at her. Her thoughts, which had frozen in surprise, creaked back into motion. The whole time, she’d been concerned if the data on the USB was fake or not. If nothing else, the events unfolding before her shouldn’t have made any sense.

“I was the one who found it. It was tucked inside Kai’s notebook, so I assumed it was his...” The more she spoke, the less certain she felt. Because indeed, that wasn’t enough to prove that the USB really was Kai’s. “And its design had the Farasha Island logo on it, so I assumed it might be related to the Alliance and checked its contents...”

Analyst Mayer spoke up. “The Special Investigations Unit seemed to believe it contained a backup of the thought manipulation system, but it was also a well-crafted fake. It did contain system code, but it was all unrelated scribbles.”

A fake.

That revelation in and of itself didn’t come as a big surprise. Echika had doubted why Kai would leave something this important behind ever since she’d found the USB. She did have a sliver of hope it might be real, but she’d been prepared to take the news it would be a fake, just the same. But now that things had gotten to this point, its authenticity felt like an afterthought.

“How did Kai get his hands on bureau equipment?” Echika couldn’t stop herself from asking the question. “No... Why would he go to the effort of making the USB look like it was from Farasha Island and lead us into discovering it...?”

“Maybe you should change your way of thinking, Investigator Hieda.” Director Schlosser cut her off. “Don’t ask yourself how Kai got a bureau USB. Ask how *someone from the bureau planted the USB to make it look like it was Kai’s.*”

Echika felt all the blood drain from her head.

What the director was saying was clear, but she didn’t want to consider it. And yet she couldn’t deny the logic of his statement. Even if the USB was a fake,

it wouldn't make sense for someone to take it without knowing its tag number was registered in the bureau. There was a chance that an outsider had hacked the browsing list, but the Electrocrime Investigations Bureau's security was top of the line, and getting both the USB and its tag number would have been difficult.

Murmurs spread through the group of the confused investigators.

"Even if this is all the handiwork of an insider...", Totoki said with a slightly sterner voice, trying to silence them. "Why would anyone try to do this?"

"To produce results and reap merit, if you ask me. But there's one more crucial fact that needs to be stated." Director Schlosser glared at Totoki scornfully. "Investigator Totoki, we know who borrowed this USB from the bureau office. It was registered in *your* name."

Echika couldn't help but shift her gaze to Totoki.

No. That can't be true.

"Yes, I did borrow a few USBs." Totoki's expression didn't waver. "But I didn't do anything like this."

"From the time the TOSTI incident started to this business with the Alliance, you've been concerned over your long-running investigation not producing any results. To think you would falsify evidence to boost your career..." Schlosser spat out the words viciously. "I suppose I was in the wrong to apply that much pressure on you, but...it reflects poorly on your character."

"Director, I would never do something like that."

"Who did this, then? There is consequential evidence implicating you, and you have a motive. Plus, if you're indeed behind this, you'd be in the perfect position to leak information to the TFC and get Investigator Hieda abducted."

"If I was the one who did this, I'd think twice before using equipment that would implicate me. Doesn't it make more sense to assume someone is trying to incriminate me?" Totoki's voice was calm but firm. "The Alliance doesn't want evidence of the thought manipulation system to be discovered. Doesn't it stand to reason that they would try to get in the bureau's way?"

Echika was inclined to agree with Totoki—she was devoted to her job, and despite her stoic exterior, she was a woman who truly cared. The Totoki who Echika knew wasn't the kind of person who would forge evidence to boost her career, much less allow her subordinates to get abducted by the TFC.

Echika had spent her four-year tenure at the bureau watching Totoki from up close. And so she knew—this had to be some kind of setup by the Alliance.

“But if the Alliance really is trying to deceive us, then why would they use your USB?” Schlosser asked, completely suspicious. “It makes no sense. You had Hieda recover your USB so you could get promoted, right? And you used bureau equipment so that even if the forgery was discovered, you'd be able to pin the crime on someone else.”

“That's fundamentally impossible. How would I even get the USB into Kai's room?”

“I just told you how. You could have bribed the TFC to help you.”

“Sir, I understand being suspicious, but please, compose yourself.”

Totoki straightened her posture, but Echika couldn't see her expression from where they were standing. Schlosser, by contrast, maintained his dubious expression. Echika felt her pulse thumping in her throat. Heavy silence hung for a few seconds.

“...Investigator Totoki, I of course don't want to believe you're behind this. But while you're very talented, you have been running into trouble as of late.” The director had no intention of changing his stern attitude. “Especially the matter of Investigator Hieda performing an unauthorized Brain Dive without a warrant last month. You were far too lenient.”

Those words gripped Echika's heart like a cold fist. She hadn't expected him to bring that up now.

Echika couldn't stop herself from speaking up. “Director, Chief Totoki had nothing to do with that. I was acting entirely of my own judgment—”

“I didn't ask for your sentimental arguments, Investigator.” The director coldly silenced her. “Totoki has a duty to manage her subordinates, and she failed to do so. And on top of that, she went ahead and handed fake evidence over to

the analysis team. Do you understand how big of a problem this is?”

“I’ve said this once, and I’ll say it a thousand times—these are false charges,” Totoki repeated. “If you’re going to insist on this so much, feel free to do a Brain Dive on me. That should prove my innocence.”

“We can’t trust the results of a Brain Dive without knowing if you acted alone or had cooperators. An investigator well versed in the nature of Mnemosynes would know how to speak in codes to deceive a Brain Diver.” Schlosser wasn’t wrong, but it felt like a stretch. “We need to inspect the matter thoroughly first. I’m sure you understand that.”

Echika was sure that under Totoki’s direction, they would be able to close in on the truth of the Alliance. Maybe this was why they’d ended up with the rug pulled out from under their feet.

“Investigator Totoki, you are hereby suspended and temporarily dismissed of your position as chief of the Brain Diving Division.”

Director Schlosser’s announcement hung heavy on the investigators. Echika was speechless.

Temporarily dismissed.

That may have been a fair decision, at least until all suspicion around her was lifted. And yet.

For a long while, Totoki remained silent and stared into the director’s eyes, only to suddenly turn on her heels to leave, like she’d run out of energy. She then slipped past her subordinates and left the director’s office without looking back.

This was the first time Echika had ever seen her act like this.

“We’ll prepare for someone to fill in for her quickly, so as to not influence the investigation. The rest of you are dismissed for the day.”

The members of the Special Investigations Unit couldn’t hide their apprehension but did as the director said and left the room. Echika walked out

to the corridor, following the despondent herd. The doors closed cruelly behind her. She could hear whispering all around her.

“Chief Totoki couldn’t have done it.”

“This is all a setup from the Alliance.”

“You don’t know that for sure.”

“Totoki did give a lot of reckless orders.”

“I don’t agree.”

Everyone shuffled into the elevator hall while exchanging improper comments. Totoki was nowhere to be found—she was long gone.

“The director’s too stubborn,” she heard Fokine mumble next to her. “I know the thought manipulation system is hard to believe, but doing this...?”

Echika stopped in her tracks. As Fokine walked ahead of her, she looked down at her worn-out shoes. The thought that had crossed her mind earlier sent a shiver down her spine. Totoki would never do this. She knew that for fact.

And yet she couldn’t imagine Kai getting his hands on bureau equipment on his own. Someone in the bureau must have given him a USB with the intention of setting Totoki up.

“This makes it clear.”

Echika looked up at the sound of that voice. Harold was standing right next to her, his gaze fixed on the investigators walking away. And yes, just like he said, it was clear at this point.

“The Alliance planted a mole in the Electrocime Investigations Bureau.”

She didn’t want to believe it, but this was the only possible conclusion.

4

She couldn’t remember the last time she’d had a fever like this.

Bigga tossed and turned in her hotel room bed. The lamps were dimmed to a minimum, and the city lights shining in through the window sparkled like the stars. If she could just sit up, she could surely see the treetops of the Parc de la

Tête d'Or, which was next to the Interpol building.

Guilt flooded her. She couldn't believe she needed to take sick leave after insisting on coming to Al Bahah at the expense of her academy courses. And yet—being all alone did give her a modicum of relief.

“What would you say if I told you I guided you into developing feelings for me?”

Whenever she closed her eyes, the image of her conversation with Harold in the camping trailer replayed painfully in her mind. Amicus could not love. She knew that, but she couldn't just undo the way she felt about him in the blink of an eye. And at the same time, it was clear things couldn't stay the same.

It was all too much. She couldn't breathe.

Bigga had never really believed they could become lovers, and Harold must have noticed that. Maybe the emotions burning within her had never really been that intense. Perhaps her love had grown much more ambiguous, to the point where she stopped envying Echika's relationship with Harold, like a dream within a dream.

The fact that she couldn't wrap her head around it made her all the more sad.

And yet the fact remained—for the first time in her life, she'd truly admired and yearned for someone, from the bottom of her heart. That alone wasn't a lie.

Bigga sniffled. Another hot tear spilled from her swollen eyelids. It was a shame, since her pillow had finally dried out. She would cry a lot, then sleep for a long while, and hopefully feel a bit better come morning. She wanted to believe that. She had to believe it.

She reached for the bedside table, looking for a tissue, and then her eyes fell on the nitro-case necklace sitting there. The HSB cartridge glittered in the dim light.

She didn't want to talk to Totoki about this before she knew for sure. In the end, the only person she could really turn to now was Hansa.

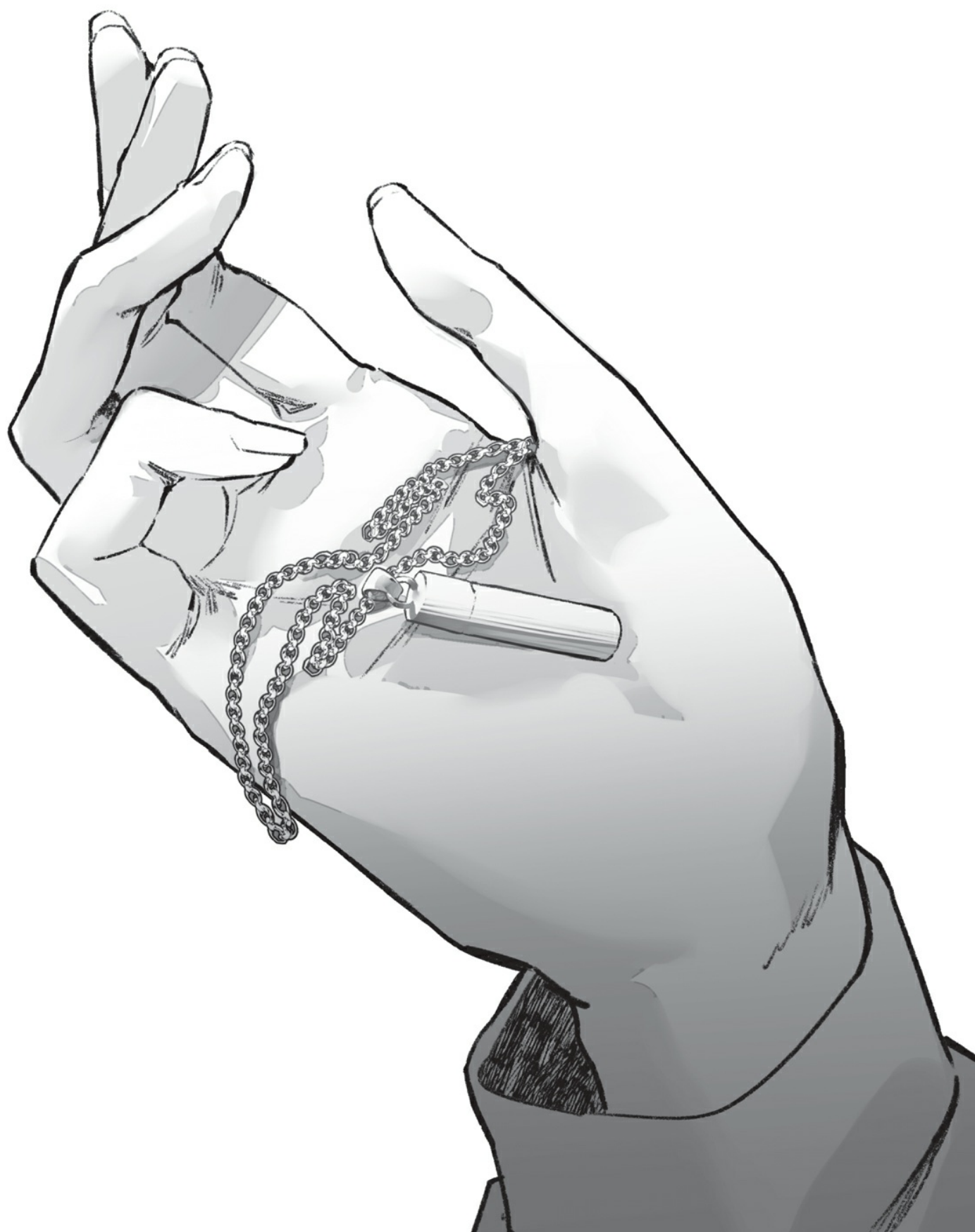
The thought of her childhood friend, who had gone into radio silence with her

ever since his confession, crossed her groggy mind.

YOUR FORMA

Chapter 3

Counteroffensive



Chapter 3

Counteroffensive

1

Totoki's replacement, the new chief Ruben Smith, was a hardheaded American man.

"I really have to question Chief Totoki's judgment. Why would she let a defective Amicus participate in investigations?"

The Electrocrime Investigations Bureau's Lyon headquarters—Smith had quickly taken over the Brain Diving Division chief's office from Totoki. The cat posters lining the walls had been torn off, replaced with fake green flowerpots that had a deodorization effect.

"Harold, I called Novae Robotics Inc. to ask about your condition, but they insisted you already went through maintenance." Sitting behind his desk, Smith scanned over his PC monitor with his neurotic gaze. "Anyway, once the rest of the investigators head back to the Saint Petersburg branch, I'll have them take you along. Stay put until then."

Harold stood with his back straight, carefully gauging Smith's every gesture. He looked to be in his midthirties, and as far as he could tell, the man was a machine denier. Apparently, he had two children but was divorced. He was aiming for a raise to help with his child support, so when Schlosser had asked him to fill in for Totoki suddenly, he'd gladly accepted.

"But assisting with investigations is my job," Harold said, trying to maintain an earnest attitude. "I may be malfunctioning at the moment, yes, but that doesn't get in the way of tasks that don't require advanced data processing."

“Don’t you understand? I’m saying that unlike Totoki, I’m not going to let you handle any tasks. Make a careless mistake, and it’ll be my responsibility.”

“What am I supposed to do here, then?”

“Handle the cleaning, for all I care. Speaking of, I noticed the pantry’s fridge was getting dirty this morning.”

Smith shooed Harold away with a wave of the hand, silently telling him to get out. Harold found it unpleasant to be around the man, so he obediently left the office. He made his way to the pantry, as told, when he ran into Investigator Fokine, who was leaving the meeting room that served as the Special Investigations Unit’s office. As he closed the door behind him, Harold caught a glimpse of Investigator Lin and her partner.

“Chief Totoki wouldn’t do that.”

“Well, Chief Smith is the boss around here now.”

Fokine wordlessly shook his head at their exchange and walked alongside Harold.

“So how did it go?”

He asked him this as they entered the pantry, refusing to meet his gaze. Fokine faced the espresso machine and started pouring coffee into a paper cup nonchalantly. He was being cautious—there was no door to the pantry, so anyone walking down the hall could see them.

At this point, there was no telling where the Alliance’s mole could be watching them. When Harold told him about the possibility of the mole, Fokine had gotten very high-strung.

Two days had passed since Totoki’s dismissal. Director Schlosser quickly handled the change in personnel, and Smith was appointed to department head and chief of the Special Investigations Unit the day after. Now that the investigation was effectively back to square one, his first order was to restart the investigation into the Farasha Island investors, as well as to look into Paul Samuel Lloyd’s villa, which they hadn’t been able to search yet.

“I’d say Chief Smith is gray,” Harold whispered back. “Given his position, it’s

possible that he's an insider for the Alliance. But it seems likely to me he's the kind of man who tends to prioritize his own safety above all else."

"Is your malfunction the reason you can't directly read into him?"

"No, it's simply because I don't know what criteria would indicate he's related to the Alliance. It would go faster if this was like a bad movie where all the members of the secret society had a tattoo or something."

Saying this, Harold opened the fridge door. Sure enough, it didn't look very sanitary and needed cleaning. Some sausages someone had brought over were on the verge of decaying. *I need to dispose of them before they rot*, he thought.

"How about you strip Smith and check for a tattoo, then?" Fokine joked, maintaining a straight face.

"We can't say for sure if there's only one insider to begin with."

"Either way, this new chief is clearly problematic." Fokine picked up his paper cup of coffee, his expression uncharacteristically angry. "Hieda mentioned that Kai guy had offered her a deal in Al Bahah. I proposed to Smith that she should contact Kai again while using her old man's software as bait."

"That's a bit too risky."

"But we're stuck for better alternatives. We've got nothing to lose, right? But you know what he said? 'Since Totoki planted Kai's USB, there's no evidence to support that Kai himself is related to the Alliance.' And along the way, he insisted that the existence of biological weapons and the replacement device in Al Bahah was 'verified by the NSA through a reliable source,' despite the fact we never found them."

Fokine was absolutely livid at Smith. Much like him and Investigator Lin, most of their coworkers were outraged at Totoki's dismissal. And honestly, Smith was by no means a good chief, although he was absolutely who you wanted if your metric was sticking to bureau regulations and following the top brass's orders to the letter.

It was only now that they were realizing how much Totoki respected each of her investigators and their work.

“So what are you working on at the moment, Investigator Fokine?”

“I look at Farasha Island’s investor list and call them one by one. ‘Hello, this is the Electrocrime Investigations Bureau, may I ask why you invested in the island?’ Apparently, asking that should make me somehow magically notice if there’s anything suspicious.”

“That sounds lovely. Like you’re doing sales.”

“Chief Totoki’s dismissal was unfair to begin with. I feel like if we don’t do something about it, we’ll just be playing into their hands.”

Fokine took a long, annoyed sip of coffee. He was right that just letting the insider roam free in the bureau would only make things worse in the long run. The director said he’d begin an investigation into the USB matter, but not only did it seem like Totoki’s innocence would not be proved, it also was looking like the whole investigation into the Alliance was going to be swept under the rug.

Harold gave a silent artificial sigh. From his perspective, Smith was preferable to Totoki for the purpose of resigning from the bureau. But honestly, he didn’t like this development much.

“It’s a pity, but I think the prospects of Chief Totoki’s reinstatement are slim. We need to act carefully, too.”

It was clear that they were seen as nuisances for getting too close to the truth about the Alliance. That was especially true of Totoki, who believed in the existence of the thought manipulation system and had the authority to mobilize the Special Investigations Unit, hence why she had been the first to be stripped of her position. In a sense, she was a warning.

“Everyone else who knows about the thought manipulation system, like Echika and me, could end up getting thwarted the same way,” Fokine said sardonically. Their teammates could end up changing. “Hieda and Bigga got hauled off to England to check Lloyd’s villa, right?”

“Yes. I imagine they were seen as rocking the boat because they didn’t agree with Totoki’s dismissal.”

Lloyd was the developer of the TOSTI AI and was suspected of being involved with the Alliance. For the longest time, they hadn’t been able to get a search

warrant for his villa, despite their call to have it investigated. But as soon as Chief Smith got appointed, they suddenly got the search warrant they'd been asking for.

The timing was simply too good to be true.

"At this point, our only option is to have everyone in the bureau lined up in front of you so you could sniff out who's in the Alliance, Harold," Fokine joked, half in desperation. "Your polygraph talents haven't gone down, right?"

"I can't do everything. Most importantly, the Alliance's insiders probably don't feel like they're doing anything wrong, so there's a high probability I won't be able to read them properly. A similar thing happened with Napolov."

"But you didn't say Smith was completely white—completely in the clear."

"We're investigators, Ivan." Harold made a point of referring to him by his first name, so as to bring him back to his senses. "Keep in mind that we need to stay calm as we go on the offensive."

The first thing they needed to do was go back to their starting point. They still didn't know the direct cause of death of the Farasha Island investors, with the exception of Banfield. In his case, they'd found out he died due to being infected with a chimeric virus developed as a bioweapon, which they traced back to the TFC. Yet when the Special Investigations Unit had had gone to Al Bahah, the supposed location of the manufacturing plant, they'd failed to find any evidence that the TFC was producing biological weapons. But that could be explained by the base being well hidden and the Special Investigations Unit failing to locate it.

Even so, they needed a change in perspective.

"Go on the offensive?" Fokine crushed the empty paper cup in his hand and dropped it in the trash can. "We've been trying to investigate this whole time. What other options do we have?"

"I'm not sure if it'll make for a breakthrough, but there's still one place we haven't checked."

Fokine raised his brows. "Where?"

If this hunch turned out to be off the mark, too, Harold might be ready to throw in the towel.

“Investigator Fokine, I’m going to need a human to chaperone me there. Are you still busy with your phone calls?”

“Even if I was really busy with it, I’d still say it was boring me half to death.” Fokine threw a reckless smile his way.

Harold smiled back. It felt like it had been a long time since he was able to do that, perhaps since he started inhibiting his emotional engine.

“So where will I be chaperoning you?”

Harold glanced at the corridor and whispered to Fokine in reply.

“The *refrigerator*.”



Paul Samuel Lloyd’s villa was in a quiet residential neighborhood in Oxford, England.

“Bigga, are you sure this Lloyd guy is the one who developed the TOSTI AI?” Gardener asked.

“Yes. And he’s the same person who was involved in Farasha Island’s construction, and the same person we suspect is connected to the Alliance. His cause of death is a very suspicious suicide that followed him committing homicide while drunk... Oh, you can look up the investigation data yourself! You did get a copy, right?” Bigga glared at Investigator Gardener like she’d just run out of patience.

“I did, but I thought it’d be faster to ask you about it.” He hastened his gait, like a scolded child.

Echika glanced at Bigga and Gardener through the map deployed by her Your Forma. They’d been like that ever since they got out of the share car in the parking lot. It was Echika’s first time working with Gardener, and he was more undisciplined than she expected.

As she glanced at the detached houses lined up in the neighborhood, Bigga

moved to walk beside her.

“Why did Chief Smith have to assign him to us?” she huffed bitterly under her breath, glancing at Gardener as he walked ahead of them. “I know he’s from the London branch and Lloyd’s case is supposed to be under their jurisdiction, but he’s originally from the Online Monitoring Department. What does he have to do with this?”

Bigga had had a slight fever until last night but finally had recovered that morning. Normally, she’d be inclined to take a few more days off, but it seemed she’d contracted workaholism on top of whatever illness had caused the fever.

“Well, the London branch’s Special Investigations Unit has lots of other issues to balance besides this case.” Echika closed the map. “Either way, I think the new chief just wanted to ship us off to get us out of his hair.”

“Yes, he did seem to think a trainee like me being involved was a recipe for trouble,” Bigga said, reflecting on the talk she’d had with Smith before they left the Lyon branch. “But why would he want to get rid of you?”

“He thinks I’m difficult to deal with because I’ve been working with Totoki for so long.”

“See, exactly! I don’t know what Director Schlosser’s thinking, either. Imagine suspecting Chief Totoki, of all people...” Bigga looked thoroughly outraged. “And some people in the Special Investigations Unit actually think Chief Totoki faked the USB. Can you believe it?!”

“And Investigator Gardener is on that side, huh?” Echika felt the oppressive mood return. “I guess there were some investigators who don’t know Chief Totoki that well and dislike her methods.”

Ever since Chief Smith was appointed, the mood in the Special Investigations Unit had been quite grim. Something of a schism had developed between investigators who had their doubts about Chief Totoki’s dismissal and those who believed she’d planted the USB. If this was what the Alliance was going for, Echika had to admit that it was a very competent plan.

“I guess Harold’s inkling was right...,” Bigga whispered, with a serious expression.

“The Alliance planted a mole in the Electrocrime Investigations Bureau.”

Echika had told Bigga about Harold’s theory. If he was right, that explained not just the matter of the USB but also why the search warrant for Lloyd’s villa had been stalled until now. There was no clear evidence to support it, but if the Alliance was interfering with the bureau, it would only be a matter of time before they would start disrupting its operations. At worst, they’d directly interfere with the investigation.

No, they had to consider that this was certainly the case.

“We can’t let them have their way.” Echika rubbed the bridge of her nose. “We have to do something about this, Chief Totoki’s false charges included. That much is for sure.”

“I agree, but what can we do...?” Bigga bit her lips, stumped.

Echika felt much the same way. As she looked at Bigga’s face, she remembered what had happened between her and Harold. She was probably putting up an indifferent front so as to not worry Echika. Harold had asked Echika to look after Bigga, but she didn’t feel like she had the right to intrude on their conflict.

Echika honestly found Bigga’s strength dazzling. She felt like she had to learn from her example.

“Oh, right. About that.” Bigga’s big eyes suddenly turned to look at her. “I should give this back to you.”

She rummaged through her shoulder bag and took out something that made Echika stop in her tracks. Bigga stopped as well in response.

“Chief Totoki picked this up when you were abducted in Al Bahah. She left it with me... I’m sorry I didn’t give it back sooner. I forgot about it in all the commotion.”

Shining in Bigga’s palm was the nitro-case necklace. It was definitely Echika’s, down to the small, minute scratches on its surface. Echika hadn’t expected Bigga to be holding on to it, since she thought she would never see it again. She relaxed for a moment at the relief of having it back...but then she tensed up again.

Had Bigga looked at the contents of the nitro case?

“Thank you.” Echika took the necklace, trying to look as natural as possible as she did. “I’m really happy to have it back. I thought I’d never see it again.”

“You had it on you during the sensory crime incident, too, right? I figured it must mean a lot to you.”

Bigga didn’t know that the nitro case had once contained Matoi. At best, she probably realized, through Harold’s speculation at the time, that it served as emotional support for her. So even if she had checked its contents, she would probably have assumed it was just a normal HSB. Just like Harold said, it was unlikely she could figure out what it was really for.

And that was why—why Echika had to assume that the hint of doubt she saw in Bigga’s eyes must have been her imagination. Her own guilty conscience was forcing the worst possible image into her thoughts.

“It holds, how do I put it...? Memories of my family.”

“Then it’s a good thing I gave it back to you.” Bigga’s smile felt somehow stiff. “Let’s go! We don’t want to let Investigator Gardener leave us behind, do we?”

She walked off quickly. As Echika followed, she put on the necklace. While Bigga was looking away, she opened the case to check its contents. The HSB was definitely inside, same as it was when she’d dropped it.

For the first time in days, she felt truly relaxed. Thank goodness. She needed to ensure that she never lost it again. Regardless, thanks to Bigga, she’d been able to get a bit of relief.

Lloyd’s villa sat atop a small hill. It was a deserted corner lot detached house. Its white outer walls were turning a dull gray from years of wear, and the chimney sticking out of its trapezoid roof gazed melancholically at the overcast sky. At the edge of the eaves were neglected old beehives, and the windows’ curtains were pulled down, preventing anyone from peering inside.

It was immediately apparent that this was a deserted house.

“Supposedly, some distant relatives of Lloyd’s look after the place now. They gave me a spare key.” Gardener unlocked the front door. “I’ll check the second

story. Could you check the ground floor?”

“All right.” Echika nodded. “Have the police been here?”

“The local police did look through the place after Lloyd’s suicide. They didn’t find anything linking him to the incident, though, so the record shows they just took some photos and left.”

Gardener pushed the front door open. The corridor was furnished with an old rug, and a strong, offensive scent of mold hung in the air. Gardener made a show of pinching his nose and strode up the staircase to the second floor.

“Assuming the local police didn’t take anything...” Bigga gave a small sneeze from all the dust in the air. “There might be some clues about Lascelles and the Alliance lying around.”

“Assuming the place really is untouched...” Echika looked around. “It took an oddly long amount of time for the warrant to be issued. The mole in the bureau could have destroyed any evidence in that time.”

That was their biggest fear at the moment.

“If that’s what happened, it really is unfair.” Bigga frowned in exhaustion. “Also, a thought... Can we really count on Gardener to handle the second story all on his own?”

Echika understood how she felt. With the risk of an insider in the bureau, there was no telling who it was, so they had to suspect all their coworkers, no matter how bad they may have felt about it. It was quite vexing.

“We’ll have to sneak up there and check on him later. For now, let’s check our position.”

Echika and Bigga walked about the first floor, getting a sense of the layout of the house. There were three rooms on this level: a sitting room and two other rooms, full of stacked boxes. They tried opening a nearby box, finding it was full of books and documents.

“I thought a villa would be more elegant...,” Bigga said, looking overwhelmed.

“Apparently, Lloyd’s home in London was small, so he used this place as storage.”

“Maybe we should split up.” Bigga put on some gloves, ready to work. “I’ll check around here; you can go check the basement.”

“Thanks. I’m counting on you.”

Leaving the ground floor to Bigga, Echika stepped into the corridor. She climbed down a spiral staircase leading to the basement floor. The smell of mold was joined by leaden moisture, the combination of which made her head spin a little.

The cellar was barely illuminated, just bright enough for her to see. She’d expected the place to be completely dark, but apparently the kitchen and dining room on the north side of the house were also a semibasement, with light filtering in from illumination windows.

The floor was divided into two sections, one dedicated to a 3D printer for domestic use, the other a workroom. Echika had seen similar equipment in Lexie’s villa, so she assumed it was somehow related to robotics. Echika approached the workbench, which was empty. By contrast, the wall was covered in slips of paper, stacked on top of one another like the scales of a fish, without a single gap to show the wall.

Echika read the slips. Most contained dense handwriting, making them hard to read. They largely consisted of grocery lists, instructions for using tools, and quotes from historical figures and books. Some had addresses and phone numbers for acquaintances, which Echika decided to record on the spot.

Under the pieces of paper, she also found articles from electronic newspapers. They were intentionally printed out and were mostly cutouts from articles about Lloyd’s achievements. They were all text and were mostly brief excerpts. She found one among them that looked like a full article.

First in history to win the International AI Conference Award for three years in a row.

The headline stood out, with a photo under it showing a young woman holding a trophy. That person, standing there with her head cocked in boredom, was terribly familiar. Echika widened her eyes in disbelief.

Lexie Willow Carter.

The old article was from eight years ago, and its text sang Lexie's praises. One line said the following:

No one can deny the achievements of this genius, who, at the young age of 21, developed the world's first next-generation all-purpose AI, the RF Model, and is now the first person in history to win the International AI Conference Award three years in a row.

The end of the article listed the names of winners in other categories in fine print, which included Lloyd's name. Lloyd was a robotics professor with enough talent to have been involved in Farasha Island's creation, but he was apparently dwarfed by Lexie's presence.

Echika's eyes moved idly, settling on a slip of paper near the article.

Oh! Stars and clouds and winds, ye are all about to mock me; if ye really pity me, crush sensation and memory; let me become as nought; but if not, depart, depart, and leave me in darkness.

It was a quote from *Frankenstein*.

The handwriting on that note was different from the rest, and it felt very emotional. It had clearly been penned in anger, with spots here and there thick with ink from a pen being pressed too hard on the note. For some reason, reading it gave Echika chills.

The people Lloyd had murdered, the Draper couple, apparently hadn't known him at all. For this reason, the local police had assumed Lloyd's crime was an impulsive, unplanned murder committed under the influence. But what if he was the kind of person to harbor such negative thoughts all the time? What if this quotation he'd plastered in his basement spoke to that?

If Harold was here, he would have figured it out right away.

Echika sighed, her thoughts turning to the Amicus, who'd been left behind in the headquarters in Lyon to handle chores. Apparently, Chief Smith had doubts about having Harold continue working for the bureau while malfunctioning. She could only hope there wouldn't be any trouble between them...

She left the workroom behind and opened the door to the next room. As soon as she did, she was met with a wall of darkness. Evidently, there were no

windows in this room, but the place should have had electricity, so Echika fumbled at the wall and flipped the light switch. The room was instantly flooded with light.

Echika's hair stood on end.

In the center of the dreary room was a stainless steel cage. Her Your Forma instantly analyzed it.

<Animal breeding kennel. Mostly used for large dog breeds>

It went up to about Echika's neck, and it was wide enough for an adult to lie inside. The cage was empty, and there were no pet supplies in sight. Lloyd's personal data hadn't mentioned him owning any dogs, either. Even if he'd gotten his dog from a breeder instead of from a formal pet vendor, the data about it could still come up. And it was plausible he would put away a kennel of a dog he'd once owned in the basement of a villa he used mostly as a storehouse.

But it all felt much too eerie.

Stricken with inexplicable terror, Echika shut the door. So far, she'd learned that Lloyd had a warped personality, but she'd uncovered no clues about the Alliance or Lascelles. Any evidence that might have been there must have been cleared out. For the time being, she went to call Bigga.



Interpol's autopsy facility was in a separate one-story annex building on the grounds of its headquarters. Before the Electrocrime Investigations Bureau was established, the Interpol was mostly an administrative agency and had needed to rely on local morgues for autopsies, due to lack of space. Only in recent years had they built a dedicated building for examining bodies.

When Harold and Fokine entered the autopsy facility, a female coroner greeted them.

"We only have four of the dead investors here: the three who died in Paris, Yekaterinburg, and Saint Moritz, plus Banfield. They were just transported here the other day." She was a gaunt middle-aged woman, and she'd regarded them

with annoyance ever since they'd called her half an hour or so ago. "This is very bad timing for us, since the family of the victim from Paris is coming to collect his remains today."

"We're working on orders from above. We just want to take a look at them," Fokine lied with a straight face.

The coroner scowled, looking very resentful, but led them into the facility. The lights in the corridor were turned off, making the place a bit dim. It felt oddly quiet, maybe because it had a significantly smaller overall staff than the headquarters.

If there was one thing Harold hadn't checked directly yet, it was the bodies of the investors other than Banfield. Even though they weren't all here, four was enough to try to see if they had something in common.

"Hey," Fokine whispered to Harold. "Everything's going according to plan so far, but are you sure about the next step?"

"Yes, go ahead."

The coroner walked over to the morgue. It was surrounded by exposed concrete walls, and the sensors in Harold's skin detected a low room temperature. The cold storage containers were similar in appearance to parcel lockers in residential buildings, where delivery drones dropped packages, and had been built to accommodate dozens of corpses.

"Take all four of them out and set them on the table over there."

Fokine pointed to a platform cart placed by the wall. The coroner, however, instantly refused, citing that the investors had to be kept out of exposure to open air, as they'd been dead for over a week. But surely just a few minutes of being in a warmer temperature wouldn't make that big of a difference.

"You can see their faces. Do your inspection from here."

The coroner opened the square doors to the cold storage units one by one and pulled out the trays on which the four corpses rested. They were all stored in body bags. She pulled down the zippers, revealing their heads, but of course, just looking at the investors' faces wasn't going to tell Harold much. He needed to inspect the state of their entire bodies.

But of course, he couldn't just pull the bodies out of their bags with the coroner looking. And so Harold sent Fokine an eye signal.

"Oh, right." Fokine turned to face the coroner. "Chief Smith asked us to check on the autopsy reports for the bodies. He told us to give you this note."

The coroner frowned. "A paper note? I wasn't informed of anything of the sort."

"Maybe another coroner got the message about that. Could you check?"

She looked visibly confused and said to give her a minute as she left the morgue. They listened to the sound of her footsteps receding down the corridor, and then Fokine closed the door. It couldn't be locked from the inside, so he pulled the platform cart over and used it to block the door.

Harold had to admit he was impressed at how smoothly their scheme had gone.

"Everything's going to plan." Fokine relaxed. "I'm surprised you came up with this."

"It won't take her long to call the other coroners and check. We need to hurry."

Harold and Fokine split up, pulling out the trays the corpses were placed on. There weren't enough trays for all of them, so they put them on the floor. Then they unzipped the body bags to exam the full state of the corpses.

The four investors, plus Banfield, had clear signs of postmortem lividity, but no outward injuries. Harold couldn't detect any wounds on them except markings from their autopsies.

"If this was homicide, there'd be some kind of injury..." Fokine knelt in front of one of the bodies, inspecting it.

Indeed, there would have to be some kind of sign of assault. It was too soon to give up and jump to conclusions.

Harold tuned his optical device's output, carefully examining the corpses of the four investors. He inspected every strand of hair, every pore on their skin. Before long, he could hear loud knocking from the entrance door—the coroner

had come back sooner than expected.

“Hello?! Open the door! What are you doing in there?!”

He heard her aggravated shouting, but he couldn't comply quite yet. The coroner was quite persistent and spent five minutes trying to force the door open until they at last heard her walk away with swift, indignant steps.

“She's totally going to call for Smith.” Fokine rubbed his cheek. “We're in for a good scolding.”

“Shall we claim the door was broken?” Harold asked jokingly, looking away from the bodies. “Don't worry, I'll talk things over so your position isn't compromised.”

“Hey, I'll feel guilty if you tell them this was all because of your malfunction.”

Harold hummed a noncommittal response and continued observing the corpses. But then he noticed something in one of the bodies' left ankles. It was Brian Quine, the investor who'd died in Saint Moritz. Harold ran a finger over his skin there and felt something sticky cling to it.

Cosmetic concealer.

It had been applied over a small area of his pallid skin, which was why it had taken even Harold's precise optical device some time to notice it. Harold thoroughly rubbed it off, exposing a spot-like bruise hidden underneath. He pressed on it with his finger, carefully scrutinizing the bruise. It wasn't livor mortis but a blood clot that had formed under his skin.

This must have been what he was overlooking.

“What's wrong?” Fokine, who was checking another corpse, noticed the change in Harold's behavior. “Find something?”

“Yes. There's a bruise on Quine's left ankle. It's from internal bleeding, not livor mortis.”

“What would cause a bruise like that?”

“I don't know. Let's check the other three.”

He and Fokine split up and checked the ankles of the other corpses. All of

them, Banfield included, did indeed have a small bruise on one of their ankles, though not on the same leg. The fact that the bruises had been hidden with concealer implied malicious intent. A female coroner had inspected them before—had she used her makeup set to conceal the bruises? Either way, it was plausible she hadn't decided to do so on her own.

“Since they went to the trouble of hiding it, it's possible this had something to do with the investors' sudden deaths. They were poked with a very thin needle...like a medical syringe, which caused this internal bleeding.”

“As far as I can see in their personal data, they have no history of hospital visits or drug use.”

Fokine checked the bruises while biting his bottom lip. Yes, *all four of them*. Even Banfield, who'd died from a viral infection and not a heart attack, had that bruise. The entire premise they'd been working under fell apart.

“This makes one thing very clear,” Harold said, wiping the concealer off his finger. “The investors didn't die from heart failure. *They were all injected with the chimeric virus.*”

It wasn't clear how Banfield had been infected, but the bruise meant it was safe to assume the pathogen had been injected directly into his bloodstream. The Alliance must not have anticipated the bureau finding out about the chimeric virus. The only reason they'd discovered it was because they had a bio-hacker, Hansa, provide them with a sampling kit on the scene of the crime. The average investigator wouldn't have been equipped for that. Even if they had questioned the corpse's body heat, they would have just followed protocol and sent it to forensics.

Back then, Harold hadn't been operating under the assumption that the Alliance had infiltrated the bureau, so he'd blindly believed the autopsy reports.

“Do you think it's possible the Alliance bribed the coroners to falsify the investors' cause of death as heart failure?”

“That...might be a stretch.” Fokine furrowed his brows. “Six people died in different corners of the globe. That theory would mean the Alliance bribed the coroners in every bureau.”

“Yes. That’s probably what happened.”

Something Talbot had said during their confrontation with him in Farasha Island replayed in Harold’s memory.

“I’m surprised you got this far without investigating things on this scale.”

Farasha Island had been receiving funding from around the globe. Talbot had been able to use his position as a member of the Alliance to climb to the top of the IAEC. It wasn’t at all strange that the Alliance would have taken root on an extensive scale—and yet the methods they’d used here were quite bold.

“You’re joking.” Fokine looked confused by what Harold had said. “But if that’s true...they bribed the coroner lady here? Is she part of the Alliance?”

“No, I imagine she’s an outsider. The Alliance must have bribed her to make sure anyone interrogating her wouldn’t come up with any dirt. It’s perfectly plausible to keep your identity concealed if all you’re doing is transferring money.”

“So if we try to question her, then the Alliance will know we figured out how the investors died and try to silence us next.” If the bureau really was compromised, that would be a likely outcome. “Just checking, but you have no proof about the bribery itself, right?”

“I think the discrepancy between the autopsy reports we received and the state of the bodies is compelling evidence on its own.”

Fokine settled into pensive silence, as though refusing to admit the reality before his eyes.

In all likelihood, it had been the Alliance that had tried to shoot down the transport drone carrying Banfield’s sample. But they’d failed, leaving only a scratch on one of its blades. The facts that the sample analysis had gone ahead and that the Alliance hadn’t been able to fully mask the cause of the investors’ deaths no doubt threw a wrench into their plans. They must have made an example out of Totoki in retribution for throwing things off.

Which meant the Alliance was feeling the pressure.

“This doesn’t really mean we caught them red-handed, though.” Fokine

ruffled his hair in frustration. “We assumed the Alliance had disposed of the investors the whole time. Finding out they used the chimeric virus to do it doesn’t change much—”

“It does make it clear that the investors were directly injected with the virus.” Harold cut him off softly. “There were no signs of a homicide on the crime scene, and no people entered their homes around their times of death. And yet somehow, the virus had been directly injected into their bodies. If we can elucidate this point, we might have a breakthrough on our hands...”

Just then, there was another strong rapping on the door. Based on the strength of the knocking and the muffled shouts they heard, this wasn’t the coroner. Harold and Fokine exchanged glances. Now that they’d checked the corpses, there was no need to lock themselves in here.

“...Either way, it’s not like reporting this to the bureau would help us solve this.” Fokine took a deep breath. “Listen, don’t tell anyone about the bruises. You might get targeted next.”

“Yes.” Harold jerked his chin in agreement. “Do you have any ideas?”

“Well... Something like that. Pretend like you’re covering for me for a bit, okay?”

Fokine rolled up his sleeves, as though firing himself up, and walked away from the corpses. Harold instantly understood what he was planning; he played the part of a machine and stood stock-still. Fokine pulled the cart away, and the door instantly burst open.

“What in the world are you thinking?!”

None other than Chief Smith himself stormed into the room. With a vein bulging on his forehead, he drew on Fokine like he was intent on striking him. Standing frozen by the door was the female coroner, who must have called Smith over. Her eyes moved to the four corpses, and she went very pale.

“You shut the coroner out of the room and inspected the corpses without permission?!” Smith looked like he was moments from foaming at the mouth with anger. “I never told you to do any of that! I only told you to call the investors!”

“Well, you see, I asked Fokine here to help me *clean the fridge*,” said Harold, trying to cover for Fokine, as he’d been instructed.

Smith turned, glaring at Harold. He was no doubt terrified that his subordinates’ unauthorized actions could end up costing him his new position.

“The fridge? Oh, yes, I suppose this counts as a fridge. But I explicitly told you to go to the pantry!”

“My hearing device is in bad condition, so I didn’t hear it. I assumed this was a roundabout way of asking me to inspect the bodies—”

“Go back to Novae Robotics Inc. for more maintenance! And this time, go straight to Saint Petersburg!”

“—so I had Investigator Fokine help me.”

Harold ignored Smith’s hollering and shifted his gaze to Fokine.

“Yes, and I did just that.” Fokine nodded nonchalantly. “That said, we didn’t find anything... But I guess cleaning the fridge is much better than having to call people all day like a salesclerk.”

He was being insolent to an almost exaggerated degree. He thrust his thumbs into his pockets and glared straight at his angry supervisor. It was blatant provocation, but Smith was too furious to notice.

“What is the meaning of this, Investigator Fokine?”

“I’m saying I can’t stand the way you’re running things,” Fokine said, ready to spit in anger. “You scrap all our progress on Kai and the biological weapons and tell us to look up the investors again? I get it, you hate having to take over for Chief Totoki, but your petty pride is getting in the way of our work.”

He was clearly going too far, but in this case, crashing and burning was better than going too easy.

Smith squinted at him. “...If you’re going to take that back, you better do it now.”

“If you want me to take that back, then try doing your job as honestly as Chief Totoki did.”

“You call fabricating evidence to boost your career honesty?”

Smith sneered at Fokine, who took a step forward. He grabbed his superior by the collar and slammed him against the wall. Smith grabbed Fokine’s collar in response, trying to pull the man off him. It only took a second, but the new chief’s pupils widened in outraged surprise.

“Don’t you dare insult Totoki,” Fokine spat. “She’s much smarter than you’ll ever—!”

Before he could finish that sentence, Smith slammed his fist into Fokine’s cheek. Harold frowned as Fokine staggered a few steps back and glared defiantly at his boss.

The cold air spilling out of the open cold storage device billowed over the floor.

“Investigator Fokine, hand over your ID and sidearm. Now.”

Smith stuck out his hand. Fokine wordlessly drew his pistol from his holster and pushed it into the chief’s hands, along with his ID card. The female coroner wasn’t at the door—she’d gone off somewhere without anyone noticing.

Smith spoke his order loudly, his voice trembling with anger as it reverberated through the room.

“You are hereby suspended from your role for assaulting a superior officer and breaking orders. You will be contacted later on with regard to the duration of your suspension.”



“I don’t care why you did it—you went too far! What’s the point of getting yourself intentionally fired?!”

Bigga’s outraged cry echoed through the weed-choked backyard of Lloyd’s estate. She was being loud. Echika quickly brought an index finger to her lips to hush Bigga, then turned to look at the house. Thankfully, Gardener didn’t rush out to check what the commotion was all about.

“The bureau is basically controlled by the Alliance right now, so it’s not like

we'd actually make any progress in our investigation here," Fokine's holo-model said indifferently, sitting on the other side of the rusted garden table. **"I talked to Harold about it, and apparently their hold on the bureau is stronger than we thought. Did you read his message?"**

"Yes, the one about the Alliance bribing the coroners, right?"

Echika looked over Harold's message again. It contained a brief, concise report that described how the dead investors had been killed by being injected with the chimeric virus, only for the coroners who inspected them to write off their deaths as "accidental."

This situation was worse than she expected.

"What about Lloyd's villa?"

"Bigga and I looked through a lot of cardboard boxes and Lloyd's workroom, but we didn't find anything about the Alliance or Lascelles," Echika answered, trying to mask her disappointment. "If the bureau really is compromised by the Alliance, it feels safe to assume they disposed of any evidence that was here while the search warrant was being stalled."

"I guess we really should be assuming they have control over the bureau." Fokine sighed. **"What are you gonna do next, Hieda?"**

"What do you mean?" Bigga looked confused. "What is she supposed to do?"

"She could pull away from the bureau for a while like I did and help me investigate."

Echika looked up in contemplation. Either way, she'd have to make a choice; Fokine was right in saying that in a situation like this one, where the bureau was under the Alliance's thumb, trying to solve this case by going by the book would be difficult. The Alliance would definitely try to impede her the same way they had with Totoki.

She may not have agreed with his methods, but she could understand why Fokine had acted the way he did. But at the same time, this was a risky gamble.

"If the bureau finds out about this, she'll be in huge trouble," Bigga said, pale in the face. "That could actually get her fired."

“No matter how it happens, if we stop the Alliance, the fact they had their people interfere with the bureau will become a sticking point. We can just have what we’re doing be processed as an undercover investigation after the fact.”

“But that would mean we’d be doing private detective work, right?” Echika returned her gaze to Fokine’s holo-model. “Look, I don’t mean to be rude, but... why take all these risks to continue the investigation?”

On a personal level, Echika couldn’t give up on the investigation until she found out if her father, Chikasato, had been involved with the Alliance. She also felt responsible for Totoki’s suspension, which had been expedited by the fact that Echika had performed an unauthorized Brain Dive on Talbot. But the same wasn’t true of Fokine.

“You may have been caught up in the thought manipulation system incident, but unlike me, you don’t have to stay involved. You won’t be in danger if you pull out of this now.”

“Well, it might not hurt me personally...” Fokine scratched his cheek awkwardly, like this had just occurred to him for the first time. **“But what happens if the thought manipulation system actually spreads all over the world? Forget me losing my job like Chief Totoki—we’ll have people getting their heads taken over.”**

For all I know, it could be my family or friends, he appended in his mind.

“I’d much rather act, to avoid feeling endless regret about not doing anything, even if it puts me in a bit of danger.”

Fokine’s words had a strange weight to them. For as long as she’d known him, he’d always worried about what might happen to other people. He would openly express how agitated he was whenever Echika was in trouble.

She could only speculate, but maybe there was a reason for that, one she didn’t know yet. Echika nodded vaguely and licked the inside of her lips. Either way, she was looking for some kind of breakthrough, and if the Alliance was suspicious of her, staying in the bureau wouldn’t be a wise choice.

“All right. I’ll try to find some kind of arrangement and link up with you.” After

working up some courage, she then said, “Will you be working just with us and Aide Lucraft?”

“No, I’ll contact Chief Totoki, too. I don’t know if she’ll agree, but she’s been had by the Alliance, too...”

“Wait, hold on!” Bigga, who’d been passively listening in on the conversation, leaned forward. “I’m helping, too! As a former bio-hacker, I might be able to be of assistance.”

“No, you go back to the academy. It should be safer than the bureau.” Fokine refused her flatly. **“You’re still in training, Bigga. If something happens, it’ll crash your police career.”**

“Well, yes, maybe, but—”

“No.” He stubbornly turned her down. **“Anyway, Hieda, I’ll contact you if anything happens. Also, I have a message from Harold. He said that if we find any information, we should forward it to him.”**

Echika glanced at the message that popped up in the edge of her field of vision.

<If you discover anything about the needle used to inject the virus, contact me>

That was all the body of the text contained. She had a lot of things to tell Harold, too, but she’d have to keep them to herself for now.

As they closed the call with Fokine, silence settled over the yard. Despite it being a midwinter afternoon, gentle sunlight filtered through the cracks in the cloudy sky, brushing the back of Echika’s neck. A bird was chirping somewhere, clashing with the weather.

It was quite clear the situation had gotten much more complicated. Yet at the same time, it felt like things had always been going this way after Totoki’s suspension.

“Why am I the only one who gets fussed over like this?” Bigga whispered in displeasure. “You guys are clearly in graver danger than I am...”

“Having you stay in the bureau gives us insight into what’s going on inside.”

This was hardly consolation, but she needed to convince Bigga to avoid doing anything rash. Echika didn't want to put her in danger, either. "Either way, once we're done with Lloyd's villa, do as Investigator Fokine says and go back to the academy."

"I can't go back to Saint Petersburg alone, I'll be too worried about you. I can't leave things—"

"Still... It'd be better than having to spend time alone with Aide Lucraft. That would just hurt," Echika softly pointed out.

Bigga stopped blinking. For the first time, Echika saw something fragile cross her green eyes. This wasn't just agitation or confusion. An emotion that she'd kept suppressed rose to the surface alone. Echika would have preferred to not touch on this matter, but right now, making sure Bigga was somewhere safe was more important.

"Um," Echika said carefully. "I was wondering why you suddenly got a fever, so I... Sorry. I was going to wait until you brought it up first..."

"Oh, no! I'm sorry I kept quiet about it." Bigga was clearly trying her hardest to maintain a cheerful front. "But I guess you found out. You know, I've been getting over it pretty well. It hasn't really affected me much..."

Her words trailed off, burning in the gentle sunlight. But even so, her small shoulders didn't tremble like she was about to break into tears. She did take a deep breath to calm herself, though.

"He told me my feelings for him weren't real. That I feel for him the same way I'd cherish a stuffed toy."

Echika felt a sharp pang in her heart. "Yeah."

"And he also said that Amicus can't love, they can only act like they do." The light shone through Bigga's pale lashes. "I still feel like Harold really has a heart, but... At this point, it's all a mess, and I don't know anymore..."

Amicus are only capable of acting like they love someone. Echika remembered Harold telling her the same thing. If she recalled correctly, it was back when they'd met Bernard, an Amicus who was married to Shushunova. At the time, Echika had thought Harold was the exception to that, just like Bigga did.

And indeed, given his neuromimetic system, he was radically different from mass-produced Amicus. But looking at how much he'd changed, Echika couldn't help but feel that his interpretation was wrong.

In a sense, he had full control of his emotions. A human wouldn't be capable of shutting off their emotions like that, but Harold had done so with ease. She had to admit that the mechanisms inside him really were completely different from those of humans.

"But...what shocked me the most was my reaction to this information." Bigga's smile was very feeble. "The fact I didn't feel like I should keep pining for him just made it hurt all the more... I felt like a horrible person. Like everything Harold said about me was true..."

"Bigga..."

"So, um, I'll be good and go back to the academy. I thought I was fine, but I guess it hasn't been long enough, and if I act awkward around him, it'll get in the way of the investigation..."

Echika swallowed. It felt bitter. She felt utterly and consistently powerless whenever this was brought up. All she could do was pray that Bigga's feelings would heal quickly—despite knowing that she was the one who'd opened this can of worms again.

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have talked about this."

"Don't worry. You only did it because you care. I know what you were thinking!" Echika could tell Bigga was trying to keep her voice as cheerful as possible. "Also, I forgot to mention this, but I still want to see you and Harold make up."

"Uh, hey, you two, could you come over?!"

Suddenly, they heard Investigator Gardener calling for them from above.

He was leaning out of the second-floor window and motioning for them to come over. Echika and Bigga exchanged glances. The time had come to return to the job at hand.

"Anyway, don't worry about us, Bigga. We'll do what we have to."

“If you need my help, don’t hesitate to call. And, um... Be really, really careful.”

The two whispered this to each other and walked back into the villa together, descending the staircase leading from the garden to the surface.

The rock garden built along a slope had a porcelain decoration shaped like a dog. As Echika looked at a few cracks running along the statue’s head, she recalled the cage from earlier. It still tugged on her mind, but she doubted investigating it any longer would produce results.

With Bigga leading the way, they went through the back door, which connected to the kitchen. Just as Echika was about to leave the yard, she heard the crunch of dried leaves underfoot and stopped in her tracks. She raised her foot and found a dead bee that had gotten caught in the doorframe. There was an old beehive in the eaves—it must have come from there.

The dead bee was already dried up, its stinger still and limp and its wings crumbling away. The breeze lifted it gently into the air.

A stinger.

The realization came to her in a flash and slithered down her back.

“Normally, they use agricultural pollinator hollow units.”

“Ultra-small drones modeled after insects, right?”

Her conversation with Totoki from a few days ago in Al Bahah came to mind. She used her Your Forma to look up agricultural pollinator drones. The results returned in less than a second—only one company was engaged in their research and development at present, holding a monopoly over that market. She entered the distributor’s official site and looked through its design catalog.

Just like she remembered from her classroom studies in high school, they all looked just like real insects. Butterflies, flies, horseflies... Soon enough, she found it and stopped scrolling at the honeybee model.

“Miss Hieda?” Bigga turned to look at her dubiously. “What’s wrong...?”

Echika broke into a sprint. She moved past a shocked Bigga and bolted up the spiral staircase. Without so much as pausing for breath, she made her way to

the second story, nearly bumping into Gardener, who was waiting for them at the top of the stairs. He pulled away from her in surprise, just barely preventing the crash.

“You didn’t have to hurry that much.” Gardener looked taken aback. “It wasn’t anything that important. I found some kind of book stuck in the mattress of the bed and needed a hand.”

“Would agricultural pollinator hollow units be able to *carry a virus*?” Echika asked, struggling to catch her breath.

“What are you on about?” Gardener looked at her, flummoxed.

“Your father manages a drone development company, right? Robin Flutter Inc.” She shared the link to the online catalog with Gardener. “The agricultural pollinator hollow units they develop there are meant for spreading pollen, but structurally speaking, would they be capable of injecting a virus?”

“Uh, I’m sorry, I don’t follow. Why are you asking me about that right now?”

Gardener stepped back, looking overwhelmed, and Echika heard Bigga’s footsteps behind her.

“Miss Hieda, what’s gotten into you?!” She brushed her hands against Echika’s back soothingly.

But it did nothing to calm her.

“I think I found it.” Echika wheeled around, facing a shocked Bigga.

A way to kill someone without any signs of homicide, something that could slip through a small opening and not be picked up on security cameras. Come to think of it, Quine had died after he went outside to pick up something he forgot. In other words, it was after he opened the front door. That would have been enough time for a small insect to fly in undetected. And the investigation report mentioned that Banfield had cracked the window in the room he’d died in.

“I think the investors were injected with the virus...by *agricultural pollinators with stingers*.”

In other words—bees.

<Today's temperature is 1°C. Attire index B, snowfall is expected in all areas during the afternoon>

Birmingham was a prominent industrial city in England; the MR ads covering the streets top to bottom advertised cars, drones, and industrial goods. Among them, the road running along the Birmingham Canal was lined with office buildings for agricultural corporations.

"Investigator Hieda," Gardener said, a sour look on his face. "We were supposed to spend the day writing the report on our investigation of Lloyd's villa. So why are we...?"

"Bigga's handling that for us. Besides, Investigator Smith himself asked me to look into this," Echika fibbed nonchalantly. The fact that she was so used to this by now scared her a little. "We need to look into Robin Flutter's pollinators... and since you're the CEO's son, I need your help."

From the parking lot, they took a look at Robin Flutter's main offices, a modern high-rise building that had windows of different sizes arranged in a stylized manner. The thoroughfare at its side had large trucks running through it. They were driving quite slowly, impeded by the carts parked at the side of the road.

"I'll help, of course. I wouldn't be here if I wasn't going to. But I don't know..."

It was only yesterday that Echika, inspired by seeing the bee at Lloyd's villa, had hypothesized that agricultural pollinators had been used to kill the investors. Even after sleeping on it, Gardener didn't seem convinced by her theory. Maybe he just didn't want to consider the possibility of his father's company's products being abused for crime.

Echika was prepared for the possibility that she was off the mark, off course. But at this point, this seemed like the most practical way the crime could have been carried out—and honestly, she had no other ideas as to how it could have been done.

"Even if the hollow units were used to carry a virus," Gardener said, "they couldn't penetrate the skin the way a syringe can. The honeybee model, or

rather, the pollinators, just don't have that kind of function."

"I know that, of course. It's just..."

"If we can see the schematics, it could help us with the investigation."

Harold, who was walking half a step behind them, softly spoke up. The Amicus had on a thick Chester coat and was carrying himself like his presence was a given.

"Well, my dad is a busy man, so I don't know how long he'll have for us, without an appointment."

"That's where you come in, Investigator Gardener. We're counting on you," Harold said with a perfect smile.

Echika couldn't tell what Gardener was thinking, but he sighed in resignation.

She, too, felt the urge to sigh. Harold had linked up with them that morning. Just as Echika and Gardener were leaving the London branch, he'd suddenly showed up with Investigator Lin, who was dispatched to London on business. Apparently, Chief Smith had Harold scheduled for maintenance at Novae Robotics Inc. that evening, and Harold decided to spend his free time until then helping them investigate.

In all honesty, Echika hadn't put her feelings in order yet. For the time being, she just tried to write it off as having a formidable ally on her side.

When they reached the entrance of the Robin Flutter building, they were greeted by a receptionist Amicus. While Gardener told it their business, Echika and Harold stood side by side. The silence hanging between them was hard to bear. In search of a distraction, Echika glanced at the footage running on a screen built into the wall. Information about the company's changes over the years and their products scrolled by, but none of it registered in her mind.

"Investigator, I understand what you're trying to say," Harold whispered. "We did contact Chief Totoki. She said she would link up with us and take command of things."

That was surprising. Totoki had always insisted on doing things by the book, so Echika never expected her to join forces in their unauthorized investigation.

But then again, she had been personally interfered with by the Alliance. Maybe she hated the idea of having to just accept the false charges and watch as the Alliance took over the bureau.

“I’m going to *walk out* on the bureau, too. When are you doing it?”

“Chief Smith already ordered me to go back to Saint Petersburg once my maintenance is finished.”

“But instead of doing that, you’re meeting up with Chief Totoki and the rest.” Echika had trouble gauging how much distance she should maintain from him. “Um... So what made you come here? I mean, I’m not saying your help isn’t appreciated, but...”

“I have high hopes for your agricultural pollinator theory,” Harold said in a businesslike manner. “It’s a promising lead that supports my current theory. I think I might be able to help.”

Echika couldn’t tell if these were his true feelings, but regardless, if Harold was about to quit the bureau soon, every second and minute she had left with him was precious. She wanted this to be good work, for both of them, and nothing could be better than if this would actually lead to them identifying how the crime was committed.

“My dad just stepped out.” Gardener had returned. “We’ll have to go check the schematics ourselves. I got us permission to view the company’s confidential documents, so we can go into the study.”

“Can we do this without your father’s explicit permission?” Echika asked.

“I sent him a message. We’re not doing anything wrong, so we’ll be fine.”

Gardener led them inside and up to the CEO’s study. There was a biometric device at the entrance, but he was able to get through it and ushered Echika and Harold inside. The study was rather small for a such a large enterprise, and its interior design was quite plain. Beside the dimmed glass window was a sturdy desk. There was a PC and multiple tablets placed on it, and everything looked neat and orderly. A half-transparent chest was built into the wall, and Echika could see USBs stored neatly inside it.

“Since everything is stored as data, there’s no need for much space.”

Gardener stood in front of the chest and opened one of the drawers like he knew exactly what to look for. “I think the documentation for the pollinators should be around here.”

Echika was flabbergasted. There were so many of them. “You’ve memorized what’s in each one?”

“I helped him out a lot during my student days,” he said indifferently. “When I got my aptitude diagnosis results, they said I was no good for corporate management, so I decided to work in the police instead.”

“So you had aptitude for police work, did you?”

“Investigator Hieda.” Harold chided her with a slightly reproachful gaze.

“I mean, I know I’m not very useful on crime scenes.” Gardener shrugged, which made Echika feel a bit awkward. It had been a while since she’d last let such a scathing comment slip. “To be precise, what they said is that I was good for work in the IT field. And since my dad is acquainted with Director Schlosser, I ended up working for the Online Monitoring Department.”

“In other words,” Harold said, “you joined the bureau, thanks to your father pulling strings, like the rumors say?”

“Hey.” This time, Echika had to rebuke Harold with a glare.

“I did go to the academy and pass all my exams,” Gardener said, sulking like a child. “And look, I’d be lying if I said that my dad selling the police drones didn’t help me get my position, but I am taking this job seriously.”

“I’m sorry for the inappropriate question.” Harold gave the most standard apology imaginable. “By the way, Investigator Gardener, you were born in the spring, correct?”

Huh?

Both Investigator Gardener and Echika raised their brows in surprise at the sudden question.

“No, during the summer. My birthday’s in July...”

“Let me guess. The twenty-eighth?”

“Third of July. What’s with all the questions?”

“It must be his malfunction,” Echika said hurriedly. “Don’t pay attention to him.”

“Oh, right, I heard. You’re kind of out of tune, right, Harold? Which is why Chief Smith sent you to maintenance...”

That seemed to convince Gardener. Perhaps deciding there was no point in getting mad at a defective machine, he pulled out some USBs from the chest and plugged them into tablets. Echika felt relief flood her. She looked at Harold and saw that he was walking around the study, like he didn’t have a care in the world. He clearly expected Echika to go along with him. She had no idea what he was trying to accomplish here...

Does this count as getting along with him as a colleague?

“There, found it.”

Gardener handed a tablet to Echika. It displayed a 3D schematic of an agricultural pollinator. Based on the text and the shape of the schematic, this was clearly the bee model Echika was looking for. The write-up was full of technical terms and jargon, but just like Gardener had said, the stinger wasn’t designed to function as a syringe.

Still, she didn’t want to write this off as her theory being wrong.

“Are there any other tiny drones that work like the pollinators?” Echika asked.

“There’s drones used for search and rescue during natural disasters. They’re made really small, so they can creep inside cracks in collapsed buildings and the like.” Gardener opened another chest. “But they’re not hollow units, and they don’t have any syringes.”

In that case, maybe she needed to change her approach. Perhaps the agricultural drones, like the environmental performance robots she’d seen in Al Bahah, could be modified to include a syringe? It was possible, but it would require a great deal of technique, so a novice couldn’t have done it. Of course, if the Alliance had people with that expertise, it would be a different story...

“Is this a schematic of some sort, too?”

Echika and Gardener turned around at Harold's question—the Amicus opened a desk drawer, pulling out a USB. The drawer had a simple number pad security lock, but the lamp was glowing green and set to "unlock." Since one had to go through biometric security to enter this room, the desk's installations were somewhat anachronistic.

"Huh." Gardener blinked in surprise. "Did my father forget to lock the safe?"

"Yes, it was already open when I found it."

Echika had to try very hard to maintain her blank expression. Harold's lie was incredibly bold-faced. It was painfully obvious that he'd asked about Gardener's birthday earlier so he could come up with the password for the safe.

"Put it back where it was. That USB is probably just for Dad's personal use." Gardener blindly believed the Amicus and walked over to him. "...Hold on. I told you to put it back."

Harold ignored his words, instead plugging the USB into one of the tablets on the desk. Before Gardener could stop him, the screen displayed the files in the USB cartridge. Gardener snatched the tablet out of Harold's hands, which made Harold look at him apologetically.

"My apologies. My hearing device isn't working right... Did you say something?"

It took all of Echika's mental fortitude not to slap him then and there.

"His malfunction is really bad, Investigator Hieda." Gardener looked very baffled, too. "Is he getting maintenance in the evening? Because honestly, I think he should be sent over as soon as possible."

"You might be right about that..." She had no choice but to say this.

"No, listen, this is really bad. These are probably my dad's personal files, and if he finds out we looked—"

Gardener tried to remove the USB from the tablet, but then his hands stopped. His gaze was fixed squarely on the screen. Echika peered at it as well. It showed a 3D schematic of a drone.

Her eyes narrowed in shock.

The drone was definitely shaped like a bee—except it was fashioned after a European hornet, which was larger than a honeybee. The model was outfitted with a sharp stinger, and it contained a flask-shaped hollow unit. But despite that, the measurements in the schematic showed that it was markedly *smaller* than the typical agricultural pollinator model.

What is this?

“Apparently, its hollow unit is capable of cooling its contents and is connected to a syringe.” Harold gave his cold analysis. “Investigator Gardener, what does this code mean?”

The Amicus pointed to a line of English alphanumeric text on the top right corner of the screen.

“I don’t know,” Gardener replied at once, pale in the face. “It’s not like I worked here.”

“Hold on, you just told us a second ago that you have access to confidential data and used to help out around here.”

Harold looked straight at Gardener; the Amicus must have assumed that Gardener knew what this code meant but was trying to play dumb. Echika stared at the two of them. Gardener, meanwhile, blinked over and over.

“Investigator Gardener.” Echika appealed to him, too. “Please.”

He closed his eyes once, like he was brooding over a choice.

“This is... I’m not sure, but I think this is a development code for a military weapon.”

A weapon.

And the investors had been killed by a chimeric virus, a biological weapon developed for military use.

“But weapons development isn’t our field, and if I remember correctly, we only accepted it once before,” Gardener said, stuttering awkwardly. “Back when I was still helping out here, we were making reconnaissance drones requested for the British Army... I don’t know if that was ever really utilized, but at the time, I got to see the schematics for it.”

“So this was developed during that venture?” Harold asked.

“No, that’s not what I mean, just that the code looks the same. Those drones weren’t shaped like bees. Our stakeholders are mostly moderates, anyway, and our company policy isn’t to make drones capable of causing harm.” The more he said, the faster he spoke. “A weapon that might carry a virus is going too far. We don’t make those kinds of things.”

They had to disregard Gardener’s sentimental argument here. Echika silently exchanged glances with Harold. They both understood without saying a word—they needed to carefully examine these schematics at all costs. And to do that...

“Investigator Gardener,” Echika said firmly. “Can you call the CEO here?”

“I think he’s already back.” He stiffened, seemingly operating his Your Forma. “He replied to the message I sent him, and, uh... It says *not to let the investigators into his study.*”

Things had just gotten a lot more suspicious.

“Let’s get out of here and meet your father at the entrance hall, then.”

Harold gently plucked the tablet from Gardener’s hands.

Gardener’s father entered the building a short while after Echika’s group walked down to the entrance hall. He was a middle-aged Englishman with square-lensed glasses, whose features greatly resembled his son’s. Following slowly behind him was a mass-produced secretary Amicus.

<Greg Gardener. Fifty-five years old. CEO of drone development company Robin Flutter>

“The least you could have done was tell me about this three days in advance.” The first thing Greg did was complain to his son. “Hello. How can I help agents of the Electrocime Investigations Bureau?”

“Mr. Gardener, I realize this is rude, given this is our first conversation, but I’ll cut right to the chase.”

There was no point in beating around the bush at this stage. Echika thrust the tablet they’d taken from Greg’s study into his hands, its monitor displaying the

schematics for the hornet-shaped military drone.

Greg's eyes flicked to his son in a blaming manner for a moment. Something was up, after all.

"I'm sorry, Dad. The investigation was already underway when I got your message," Investigator Gardener said in a guilty voice. "Please tell us about these schematics. We have to do this for the investigatio—"

"Jacob, we need to talk later." Greg cut off his son and turned his eyes back to Echika. "These documents are company secrets. I don't appreciate you searching my desk without a warrant."

"According to Investigator Gardener here, these are schematics for a military weapon. Is that correct?" Harold asked softly. Echika saw Greg's shoulders tense.

"Yes, well... We developed it under a request from the British government. This is a rejected draft, though."

"I thought it was supposed to be a reconnaissance drone?" Echika asked.

"Yes, and that's what this drone was designed for. They're fashioned like bugs so they would be difficult to spot. Every country develops drones like this. It's not exclusive to us."

"Is this particular feature necessary for a reconnaissance drone, then?" She pointed at the stinger part of the schematics. "This looks like it's built to inject something. Like a virus, for instance?"

Greg's eyes narrowed instantly, and greasy beads of sweat surfaced on his forehead. The look on his face said more than any words could.

This man was definitely part of the Alliance.

"...You're lying, right?" Investigator Gardener whispered, stunned. "No, Dad, the way you're acting—"

"I think that's enough." Echika shoved the tablet into Gardener's hands. "Mr. Gardener, I'm sorry, but we have some questions we need you to—"

Echika couldn't even finish the sentence. Greg suddenly pushed Echika away. It was so sudden, she couldn't brace herself, spectacularly staggering back. Harold

caught her, but by the time they looked up, Greg was already bolting out of the entrance door. Employees he passed by turned around, startled.

“Dad!” Gardener shouted. “Where are you going?!”

Oh, give me a break!

“Investigator, I’ll activate the mousetrap I set.”

“You think we have time for your riddles right now?!”

Echika ignored Harold’s vague words and took off after Greg. As she stumbled out of the building, she spotted a black Volvo parked at the roundabout.

No!

“Wait! Freeze where you are—!”

Echika hurried after him, but Greg wasn’t inclined to listen. The Volvo sped off and left the roundabout, passing through the unobstructed driveway and heading for the main thoroughfare. If she knew this was how it would turn out, she would have cuffed Greg the moment she saw him.

Echika gritted her teeth and ran toward the parking lot where her car was parked.

But then, upon hearing the cacophonous screeching of car brakes, she froze, startled. She turned to look and saw that a car that had just turned in from the thoroughfare was facing Greg’s Volvo. They’d stopped a moment away from a head-on collision. The other car was a silvery-gray van, and based on its license plates, she could tell it was a share car. Greg aggressively blared his horn at the other vehicle, but it didn’t seem inclined to move. In fact, the man and the woman driving the car stepped out of it.

Echika went rigid with shock. She recognized the people who’d exited the car—it was none other than Fokine and Totoki. Both were in casual wear, and Totoki had on sunglasses. Greg lowered his car window and started arguing with them.

Was this the “mousetrap” Harold had been referring to?

Echika felt all the tension drain from her body. Harold must have had Totoki and Fokine staying on standby this whole time. And sure, Echika may have been

working with Investigator Gardener, who'd needed to be kept in the dark about this, but surely Harold had time to send her a message and explain. He really did have zero faith in her poker face.

"Why is Chief Totoki here?"

Echika broke from her thoughts. Turning around, she saw Investigator Gardener step out to the roundabout. He knew Totoki was suspended, of course, which meant the situation had just gotten complicated for them.

"Isn't she suspended?" Gardener looked at Echika. "What's going on here?"

"Well—"

"I'd worry about yourself at the moment, Investigator Gardener," said Harold as he appeared, seeming cool and collected. Gardener was on the verge of arguing back but stopped himself somehow. Unable to remain composed, he flitted his eyes repeatedly from his father—who was being dragged out of his car by Totoki and Fokine—to the Amicus standing before him.

From the look of it, while Greg was clearly guilty, his son really didn't know anything.

"Your father is part of the Alliance," Harold declared. "And they've infiltrated the bureau. They incriminated Chief Totoki, who I assume your father is quite familiar with."

"No! This has to be some kind of mistake." Gardener looked terribly upset. "I mean, Chief Totoki planted the USB, right? She had plausible cause! Why would you think the Alliance did this?!"

"We have proof. And if you promise to help us, we can show you."

"None of this is making any sense! You guys are just out to get Chief Smith because you don't like how he's running thin—!"

"This is your last warning. You'd do well to worry about yourself at the moment." Harold ruthlessly cut him off. "Now that your father is in custody, you, as his son, aren't safe. Sooner or later, the Alliance will try to do something about this."

"I'm telling you, my dad has nothing to do with this! You really are

malfunctioning, aren't you?! Investigator Hieda, say something!"

Gardener looked at Echika desperately. He must have really believed Harold was only acting this way because he'd glitched out, but the cold truth was that Gardener's father had attempted to flee from them when they showed him the schematics. There wasn't much Echika could say.

"Investigator, I understand you're upset, but... Please, calm down and listen to what he's saying."

Gardener's expression twisted with despair.

"Look, I'm sorry, but you guys are mental. I'm reporting you to Chief Smith." He backed away from Echika, frightened. "You won't get away with this nonsense!"

With that shortsighted remark, Gardener ran out of the parking lot. Echika considered going after him but decided against it. He wasn't going to listen to her, the way he was now. She glanced at Totoki and Fokine. Greg seemed to have resigned himself to his fate and let them carry him into their van.

What now, then?

"It seemed I misread Investigator Gardener," Harold said, walking up to Echika's side. "Given his personality, I assumed he would cooperate with us to ensure his personal safety."

Echika gritted her teeth. She didn't know how much of this he'd predicted ahead of time, but—

"You could have gone about this another way. You could have persuaded Investigator Gardener to our side somehow."

"According to my system, what I did was the ideal plan." Harold's voice lacked any and all warmth. "We should wait for the right time to call him over to our side again. For now, we have other priorities."

Indeed, things had just gotten much worse—if Gardener reported what happened here to Chief Smith, sooner or later the insiders in the bureau would hear about it. And once the Alliance caught wind of this, it would try to interfere with their plan in some way.

Before that happened, they had to make their play.

“Well, on the bright side, you don’t have to come up with a reason to walk out.”

With that remark, Harold strolled over to Totoki’s side. Echika just stood there and watched him walk away; the wind toyed with his blond hair, and his coat flapped with every step.

The changes he’d undergone were more vividly apparent than ever before. At this point, he was going back to the way he used to be, when he’d only seen human beings as pawns on a chess board.

Echika only knew one thing. She was no longer in a position to influence him.

3

“Mr. Gardener, you cooperated with the Alliance, developing drones for the spread of biological weapons that were involved with the murder of six investors... Is everything I just stated correct?”

Fokine conducted Greg Gardener’s interrogation in a terrace house they’d rented, nestled deep in a residential neighborhood. He was dressed in a turtleneck sweater and denim pants, and one of his cheeks was swollen and red. Apparently, Smith had punched him during the altercation that led to his suspension.

Greg, on the other hand, was sitting on the sofa across from Fokine, eyes darting every which way.

“I keep telling you, I have nothing to do with this! Why aren’t you taking me to the bureau?!”

“It’s being renovated, so this is our office for the time being,” Fokine said, making up an excuse on the fly. “If you had nothing to do with the drone, then what were those schematics doing in your study?”

“It told you already, those were rejected plans for drones we provided to the British Army!” Greg raised his cuffed hands to his neck, his patience running thin. “Take these off! I am not a suspect! The way you’re treating me is an injustice!”

“We can’t have you running off on us again. Though I’d say you’re safer here with us than you would be on the lam.” Fokine crossed his arms calmly. “If the Alliance decides you sold them out to us, you’re probably next in line to get a dose of that chimeric virus.”

That got Greg to shut up for a second, the color draining from his face. But then he shook his head in denial.

“...Threaten me all you want. I won’t talk.”

No good.

Peering in from the gap in the door, Echika turned to Totoki, who was standing next to her. She gestured for Echika to follow her, and they walked away. Totoki’s black hair, which was usually done up, was hanging loose, and she had on a leather jacket instead of her usual suit. A few hours had passed since they’d brought Greg to the terrace house, and he was still being tight-lipped.

“We’re running out of time,” Echika said, keeping her voice low. “We need to get him to confess... If Investigator Gardener reports this to Smith, the Alliance is definitely going to try to silence him.”

“Well, we don’t know for sure if Smith is working for the Alliance, so we might have a bit more time than that.”

As she talked with Totoki, the two of them stepped outside the terrace house. It was past three PM, and clouds were starting to blot out the sky. The Your Forma’s forecast warned of heavy snowfall during the night. The neighborhood was silent, and the brickwork of the houses in the area darkened as the sunlight grew dimmer.

Totoki herself had chosen to set up base in Borehamwood. It was an hour’s drive away from London, so it was easy to access, and they wouldn’t have to worry about any staff here, unlike at a hotel. There were barely any security drones patrolling here, either, making it much easier to conduct their interrogation.

Despite that, with the bureau compromised by the Alliance, they’d needed to hide their GPS data.

“I never thought the day would come when an investigator like me would have to put one of these things on.” Totoki gently brushed her hair, exposing the spherical network isolation unit inserted into her port. Right before leaving on his suspension, Fokine had tricked a logistics and equipment Amicus and stolen these from the bureau. Everybody here was wearing them. “It just doesn’t feel right...”

Totoki took out a box of paper cigarettes from her pocket. As Echika watched Totoki’s slim fingers pull out a cigarette, she unconsciously reached for the electronic cigarette sitting in her jacket pocket. But a second later, she reconsidered.

“I never knew you were a smoker.”

“I haven’t for over a decade. My roommate at the time wouldn’t stop complaining about it, so I quit.” Totoki put the cigarette to her lips, turned on the lighter, and lit the tip. *I hope that “roommate” of yours isn’t a pet cat.* “I ought to have noticed the Alliance was laying a trap for us before this happened. If I had, you wouldn’t have needed to do this...”

A thin wisp of smoke blew from her lips. Echika watched it dance through the moist air. It wasn’t often she saw Totoki display so much weakness and vulnerability. She must have agreed to this covert investigation because she felt responsible for falling into the Alliance’s trap and putting her subordinates in harm’s way.

The guilt of it all must have been crushing.

“We’re doing this because we want to,” Echika said, on behalf of herself and Fokine. Indeed, none of them wanted to let the Alliance have its way anymore. “And we’re grateful for your help, Chief.”

“I’d have done this on my own if I had to. It’s my fault things came to this... And if I don’t act here, then what was the point of me becoming an investigator?”

The last thing she’d wanted to do was get them involved.

Totoki’s voice followed the coiling wisps of smoke. In the four years Echika had worked in the bureau, Totoki had always been her superior, but she’d

never asked Totoki why she became a police investigator, apart from the obvious reason of her aptitude diagnosis. There were many things that Echika hadn't confided in Totoki about, too.

They'd been working together for a long time, but they scarcely knew each other.

"I don't feel like you got me involved in this. And I'm honored I get to work with you." If nothing else, Echika couldn't see anyone as her boss but Totoki. There was no one she trusted more when it came to investigations. "We need you to lead the Special Investigations Unit..."

"Weren't you always fed up with the tight schedules I forced on you?"

Echika jolted. "That's one thing, and this is another story altogether."

"Regardless, I can't say I approve of bringing personal feelings into this." Totoki looked exasperated, but Echika could tell her words contained a hint of bashfulness. She closed her eyes, her long hair brushing her cheeks and hiding her expression. "As the woman who's looked after you all these years...it makes me proud seeing you become such a skilled investigator."

This was the biggest compliment Totoki had ever given her. And this was why...Echika had to actively suppress the pangs of guilt she felt.

"...Thank you."

"I'm sad I have to see it fall apart, though." By the time Totoki looked up again, she had regained her stoic expression and sharp glare. "Once this problem is cleared up, I'll make arrangements for your next Belayer. Even if I don't get my old post back, I won't let your career go down the drain."

"I'm prepared to see this incident to the end, too."

But even saying this, Echika actively tried not to think too much about her next Belayer. She didn't want to think about it, and above all else, she didn't have the time to let it occupy her thoughts. And yet something deep down in her heart felt like it was cracking.

Suddenly, some headlights flickered from a bend in the residential neighborhood's road. The others had come back safely.

“It’s time.” Totoki put out the cigarette and blew out the smoke in her lungs. “Hieda, let me take this chance to apologize for suspending you over Talbot’s case.”

“No, you did what you had to. I did go against regulations.”

“But now...I guess we’re birds of a feather.”

A sedan share car drove along the road, parking in front of the terrace house. Investigator Lin and Aide Wood stepped out of it. Echika had only just learned that Chief Totoki had called them over to join the covert investigation. Since they’d known Totoki for years, they objected to her dismissal and had already gotten on Chief Smith’s bad side.

“It’s a relief to see you again, Chief.” Investigator Lin smiled as she exchanged a firm handshake with Totoki. “Do we get started right away?”

“Yes. I’m sorry for dumping work on you as soon as you get back, but we don’t need to wait for warrants here.”

“True.” Wood jerked his stout jaw jokingly. “A real pity, that.”

There was only one way to get the truth out of Greg Gardener, so long as he insisted on holding his tongue—a Brain Dive. Everyone present understood that the path Totoki was taking them down was a dangerous one. It may have already been going beyond the scope of a covert investigation, but at present, they had no other choice. There was no telling how far the Alliance’s control extended, so their only choice was to turn to old colleagues who they knew were trustworthy.

“Greg’s inside. We’ll have to remove the isolation unit to Brain Dive into him, so we have to make it brief.”

Totoki ushered Lin and Wood inside the terrace house. Echika turned around, spotting Harold step out of the sedan’s driver’s seat. He’d picked up the two of them from the London branch.

“Good work.” Echika told him, her voice even. “How’s the bureau doing?”

“According to Investigator Lin, they thankfully haven’t realized anything yet. But something might be going on under the surface.” Harold walked past Echika

and opened the front door. “Has Greg squealed?”

“Nope. We have to Brain Dive.”

Harold and Echika crossed the front door together. Just then, they heard Greg shout from the sitting room. The moment she and Harold walked inside, Echika saw Totoki’s exchange with Greg through the door.

“You’ll never get a Brain Dive warrant on me!”

“We have approval to do it.”

“No! No judge would approve it!”

It vexed her, but she had nothing to contribute to this. Echika made way to the kitchen at the end of the hall on her own. The walls were gray, and the house was plain and unadorned. There were some paper bags on the ground containing groceries Totoki had bought at a local supermarket. Curled up next to them was a white fur ball, which proceeded to stretch lazily. It was Totoki’s beloved cat Ganache, moving in a way that didn’t feel the slightest bit mechanical.

Its adorable gesture made Echika smile a little. But at the same time...it also made the cork of the glass bottle closed in her heart loosen up somewhat.

She wanted to solve the Alliance incident as soon as possible, that much was true—but on the other hand, she was stricken with anxiety. Harold was going to leave the bureau soon. Even if they solved the case, and even if she kept her job as a Brain Diver, they’d just pair her up with another Belayer. Probably another human one...

Why?

The cork had held firm for so long, so why was it coming loose now, all of a sudden?

“There’s frozen risotto. You want some?”

She jumped a little at the voice as Fokine walked into the kitchen. He took out a pack of asparagus risotto from the freezer and popped it into the microwave. It was an old model, and its turntable rotated with a loud clatter.

“Greg was hard to work with. Investigator Wood managed to pin him down

and apply the sedative, though.” Fokine opened the cupboards hanging above him, only to find they were completely devoid of utensils. “This is going to be one drawn-out case. We should probably grab something to eat while Chief Totoki and the other two handle Greg. Hey, what’s wrong?”

Fokine turned to face her, and his eyes widened in surprise. Echika already knew that she’d made a huge blunder. Her eyes felt hot, and her lashes were moist. She regretted being so careless as to assume no one would come in.

“I’m sorry.” She averted her face reflexively. “I’ll step outside for a bit.”

Echika quickly turned on her heels, desperate to run. The sudden movement startled Ganache, who hopped down from the counter to the floor, his white fluffy tail passing by her feet. She tried to avoid him, but tripped in the process.

Oh no, I’m falling—the chilling thought crossed her mind, but Fokine reflexively caught her by the shoulders.

Though she’d managed to regain her balance, it felt like the self-loathing flooding her might tear her in half. How deeply was she going to embarrass herself?!

“That was close. Totoki would kill you if you stepped on Ganache, you know?”

“Sorry,” Echika said again. “I’m fine. Really.”

“No, where I’m from, we don’t call that state you’re in ‘fine.’”

“That was just— I was yawning.”

“Uh, come on, could you at least come up with something more convincin—?”

“What are you doing?”

Echika and Fokine turned their eyes to the door. Harold had shown up without either of them noticing. He was still in his coat, and Ganache rubbed between his legs. The Amicus’s gaze was as cold and artificial as lead, and seeing it made Echika feel extremely ill at ease.

She could only hope he didn’t notice she was crying.

“Hieda slipped, is all.” Fokine let go of Echika’s shoulders. He didn’t buy the excuse about the yawn, but he alluded to it anyway. “Something the matter?”

Harold's expression stiffened, like he'd just come back to himself.

"Yes, we need you to come over right away. Investigator Lin *collapsed* from Diving into Greg."

...*What?*

All the emotions that had been flooding her a second ago disappeared in the blink of an eye.

They hurried over to the sitting room. The first thing they saw was Greg, asleep on a sofa. Lying faceup on the cold floor next to him was Investigator Lin, with Totoki and Aide Wood peering down at her. Totoki had her ear pressed to Lin's lips, her jaw clenched.

"I understand. We'll handle the rest," Totoki said softly. "Wood, could you carry her to bed?"

Aide Wood quickly tried to carry Lin in his arms but fumbled over and over. Unable to watch, Fokine walked over to help him. The two carried Lin out of the sitting room.

As they passed by Echika while carrying Lin out of the door, she got a good look at Lin's face. Her cheeks were drained of color, and her locks were clinging to her forehead, wet with greasy sweat. Her eyes stared blankly at the ceiling.

What had put her in this state?

"What happened?" Echika asked Totoki. "She looks anemic..."

"We don't know. Right after they stared Diving, Wood noticed something was wrong and pulled out her Lifeline." Totoki held out a Brain Diving cord in her hands with a grave expression. Its connector, which was slightly charred, gleamed in the light. "Lin just said she couldn't make the Dive. Something happened... Something that placed a huge strain on her."

A huge strain.

Echika felt as though something cold and wet had just skittered down her spine. The events of her Brain Dive into Talbot at Farasha Island flashed through her mind. For some reason, his Mnemosynes had appeared as a muddled mixture of several thousand people's worth of memories. She'd tried to keep

Diving at the time, but the strain was so intense, she'd had to quit. And when they pulled the cord out, its connector had been charred.

Just like what had happened with Investigator Lin.

Echika glanced at Greg, who remained unconscious. Harold's words from that time came to mind.

"A defensive mechanism to keep the secret from being exposed."

If the Mnemosyne-muddling defense mechanism had been applied to Greg, then it would have fended off Investigator Lin's Brain Dive. Since her data-processing abilities as a Brain Diver were average, she hadn't even been able to manage a partial Dive. If just touching on his Mnemosynes was enough to make her pass out, what would have happened if she'd actually managed to start a Dive?

"Either way, we're stumped. We can't continue Brain Diving without knowing what happened to her." Totoki placed the cord on a low table and ran a hand through her hair. "We'll have to wait until Greg wakes up from the sedative and question him again, or maybe...?"

I might be able to Dive into Greg.

Echika licked her lower lip. If she spoke up about this, then someone else—Aide Wood, in this situation—would end up with their brain fried. But at the same time, the Alliance wasn't going to sit idly by and let them get away with this. Now that she and the others had gone so far as to restrain Greg, they needed to beat the Alliance to the punch and find some kind of clue. Otherwise, the Alliance would eliminate them. Everything they'd done until now would come to nothing.

She'd had enough of that with the Farasha Island case.

All she would have to do was stop thinking. She'd done this plenty of times already, hadn't she?

"How many minutes would Aide Wood be able to last with his data-processing abilities?" Echika asked Totoki bravely. "How long would he last as my Belayer?"

Totoki's eyes took on a hint of hostility.

"Hieda, that's not the issue here. If we don't know why the Brain Dive failed, trying another one is dangerous."

"If we think about it in simple terms, Investigator Lin was hit with a volume of data that exceeded her processing abilities, causing the Dive to fail. Greg's Mnemosynes were tweaked somehow to make that happen." Echika had to put it vaguely, since she couldn't tell Totoki about the Mnemosyne muddling. "And if that's the case, I might be able to take it. It's worth a shot."

"*You* might be able to take it, but Aide Wood would just collapse on the spot. Like Benno did..."

"So what if I were to Dive alone, then?" She knew what she was saying was absurd, but this was the only alternative she could think of. "We have an overall grasp on how much data I can process, and how long it would take me to do it. You could set a timer and pull the cord out a few minutes later..."

"Can you stop joking around?" Totoki flatly refused. "The method you just suggested was attempted in the trial stages of Brain Diving technology, and it caused unexpected accidents. I cannot approve of you Brain Diving without a Belayer to monitor you."

"But if we don't get something on the Alliance now, we'll all be in danger."

"I know that. Which is why we'll just get Greg to talk."

"How? He's been holding his tongue for hours."

"We'll figure something out by the time he wakes up. We'll find a legal way to —"

"With your permission, Chief Totoki, I could function as Echika's Belayer again."

Interrupting Echika and Totoki's argument, Harold took off his coat and leaned against the sofa. The Amicus's lakelike eyes burned with firm resolve.

What was he talking about?

"I might be malfunctioning, but I should still be able to last longer than Aide Wood."

“No,” Echika reflexively said. “If you do that—”

If Harold would function as her Belayer here, they’d just be back to where they started. The bureau would realize he was absolutely fine and force him to work as an investigator aide again. All their efforts would be for nothing. So Echika tried to object, but—

“Yes, if I function as your Belayer here, my malfunction will likely worsen. I probably won’t be able to assist the investigation, even in a limited capacity, after the Brain Dive.” Harold calmly turned his eyes to Totoki. “If that happens, please don’t think twice about dismissing me.”

Echika choked up. Right. If he framed his departure around his malfunction worsening, he’d be able to manipulate the bureau into not giving him back his old position. She inhaled deeply through her nose, discreetly, so the other two wouldn’t notice. Harold was looking for a formal justification to quit the bureau anyway, and this was the golden opportunity he’d been holding out for.

Totoki gazed back at the Amicus with a conflicted frown. Her silent deliberation hung thickly over every corner of the sitting room. Or perhaps it was Echika’s own mixed feelings that made the air feel so oppressive.

Calm down. Imagine it.

The lump of emotion she’d stuffed into a bottle in her heart, that tangled sentiment, was slowly freezing over. She quickly corked it before the frozen feeling melted away—she corked it harder, tighter, as tight as she could so that it could never come undone.

They’d chosen to stay away from each other, to keep themselves safe. They’d made that decision together.

“...Your discerning eye is too reliable for us to lose,” Totoki finally managed to say. “So there’s no need to talk about what-ifs and possibilities. We can figure that out when and if that happens.”

“I don’t intend to cause you needless trouble. When the time comes, make the right decision quickly.”

“Yes,” Totoki said in a noncommittal manner. She was probably gambling on the possibility that Harold would complete the Brain Dive successfully, but she

didn't know his malfunction was an act. "Hieda, your safety is our top priority here. Understood?"

"Yes, ma'am."

Echika nodded mechanically. Her neck felt so stiff that it seemed like that single motion would tear her skin off. Regardless, she hadn't expected to have a chance to Brain Dive with Harold again.

The Amicus approached her. With faltering fingers, Echika reached into her pocket and pulled out two Brain Diving cords. She always carried them on her person, even after they'd broken off their partnership. That was partially because Totoki had never insisted she return them, but at least some part of her must have been afraid to let go of them.

This was likely the last time they would do this.

"Aide Lucraft."

Echika inserted the Lifeline into the back of her neck and extended the connector on the other side to the Amicus, just like she always used to. As Harold took it, his fingers brushed against hers. While he plugged it into the connector in his left ear, Echika unplugged the isolation unit and connected herself to Greg.

It had been a month since the last time. One emotion dominated her more than anything, stronger than stress or any longing: a simple reluctance to begin their final Dive.

Echika tapped her heels against the floor a few times, trying to relax the nervous stiffness that gripped her. She kept eyes to the floor, trying not to look at Harold opposite her. His leather shoes reflected the lamplight. She absentmindedly counted the small scratches on their surface.

She had to do it now, before her emotions melted over and shattered the glass bottle. She had but one task to accomplish here.

Echika carefully closed her eyes, letting the serene darkness of her eyelids wash over her every thought.

There's nothing to worry about. Just keep looking forward and let it all flow

past you. All information, all emotion, everything. Just like you did every time until now.

She breathed in, feeling her lungs expand. Her lips, so stiff they felt glued together, finally parted.

“Begin.”

Echika was pulled in, overcome by the sensation of something gripping her brain. Suddenly, pieces of countless Mnemosynes rushed at her like a violent blizzard. Instead of being greeted by a serene sea of electrons, she had been plunged into the tall waves of a raging storm.

Muddled Mnemosynes.

Just as she suspected, Greg had received the same protection as Talbot. The stratum she was in was already shattered, with no concepts of up or down. The only thing she saw and felt was a vast deluge of information that rushed at her brain, like it had been lying in wait, expecting her to intrude. Pain burned and overflowed.

This is all just an illusion. Shake it off.

She reached into the whirlpool of nondescript data.

“—that were involved with the murder of six investors... Is everything I just stated correct?”

“...Threaten me all you want, I won’t talk.”

Her fingertips brushed against his surface Mnemosynes. But no, this wasn’t what she wanted.

Focus.

Her skin was hot. It felt like she’d been enveloped in flame. The vast rush of data was overwriting her thoughts, bumping against her extended hand and shattering, piece by piece. How many thousands of people did this data include?

Don't let this flow carry you away.

She forced herself to hold her breath. Faster, she needed to sift through this faster, to find only the relevant bits of information. The unnecessary Mnemosynes dispersed, slightly clearing up her field of vision, but in doing so, this made her feel as though a heavy weight was pressing down on her. Echika managed to blink, but she still couldn't see what she needed.

More. Strain your eyes.

She stretched her body as hard as she could, feeling like she was about to tear in half. Her forehead hurt so much, it seemed on the verge of splitting. But she had to bear it. She couldn't stop now, nor did she want to.

Not yet.

But then, the thunderous whirlpool of data weakened. Echika opened her eyes wide and looked around. The Mnemosynes rushing by her suddenly slowed. Or maybe she herself had sped up and was going too fast for them? She couldn't tell. It didn't matter.

But she could see.

All obstructions subsided, and Greg's Mnemosynes alone floated before her.

"I can't believe they're threatening me to get me to obey." She felt his fear, his pulse thumping. A tablet shone in the dark, displaying the hornet's schematics. *"So they took in Jacob to effectively hold him hostage."*

Jacob—that was Investigator Gardener's first name.

"It's not my fault if the investors start dying. I have to do this. My son's life is on the line."

His field of vision shook, and noise ran through the Mnemosynes. Echika felt the weakened storm once again intensify.

Not yet. I haven't gotten any real information. Who's involved with the Alliance? I have to expose them.

But her body already felt like it was on the verge of being crushed. Echika desperately hardened her focus, but she couldn't quite manage it.

She was out of control. Countless voices bashed against her.

“Dad, they appointed me as head of the Special Investigations Unit today.”

“You know what happens to your son if you don’t obey?”

“If you’re that afraid of being arrested, Greg, I can put the bulwark on you, too.”

“If you could supply the British Army with drones, then surely you can help us, yes?”

“No one will ever know. The coroners are all in our pocket already.”

“Seeing as you align with our ideals, you’ll help out with the purge, yes?”

“We can’t let Totoki and her people get their hands on evidence of the system.”

It was hard to tell one burned-out thought from the other. Echika tried to tighten her focus again and picked up only on Greg’s Mnemosynes. The storm was gradually growing stronger again. Echika held her breath once more. Her field of vision swam and wavered.

Still—this might be my last Brain Dive with Harold. I can’t go back empty-handed.

She forced down a Mnemosyne and grabbed it. Greg was inside his Volvo—the memory was from this afternoon. Through the windows, he could see Birmingham’s scenery drifting by. When Greg saw his son’s message, he hurried back to Robin Flutter’s offices.

“They didn’t enter the study, did they?”

“It’s fine so long as they don’t discover the blueprints.”

Greg’s heart thumped with panic as he glanced at a tablet—he wasn’t using his Your Forma for this, so as to not leave a record in its history. The monitor displayed a single message, the date of an online meeting. It included a data matrix that contained a link to download the meeting app, as well as an access password and a line of English text.

“If something happens, I won’t be able to talk my way out of this.”

“Their intentions are just too fearsome.”

“I have to keep Jacob safe, at least him...”

Her hazy consciousness instantly cleared up from alarm.

Are these details for an Alliance member meeting?

Echika turned to look at the Mnemosynes sailing past. She just barely managed to glimpse the date and time written on the message. And then, like a dam had broken, the flood of data rushed at her again. She couldn't maintain control anymore. Like a leaf blown in the wind, Echika was carried away. Her thoughts were shaken to their core, and she lost track of her identity.

And then everything vanished like it had been smashed against the rocks.

Echika barely opened her eyes, feeling a light impact against her back. She could hardly see—her vision was hazy, as though droplets of water were dripping from her eyes. She felt sick to her stomach, and her head felt like someone had stirred its contents with a spoon.

Things gradually came into focus, and she realized she was back in the sitting room. Totoki peered into her eyes, and Harold was in front of her. Totoki was saying something, but Echika couldn't hear it through the ringing in her ears. However—

“...It's, tonight.” Echika slurred out the words. “At ten PM. An Alliance meeting. The password should be...in Aide Lucraft's...memory—”

Unbearable exhaustion and fatigue overcame her. Unwilling and incapable of resisting, Echika let her consciousness slip.

4

When she woke up, she instantly felt sluggish, as though her body was made of thick mud.

Echika vacantly stared at the paper cup in the center of her vision. It took her a few seconds to realize it wasn't a cup but the covering for the LED light bulb in

the ceiling. She was lying on a fluffy bed, the realization settling in that her body was solid and intact. With difficulty, she raised an arm and touched her forehead, finding that she was sweating profusely.

Ultimately, she'd wound up passing out, just like Investigator Lin. It was dark outside the bedroom window, so the sun must have set. Her Your Forma had an isolation unit in it again, and it showed that the time was five PM. Three hours had passed since the Brain Dive—but there was still some time until the Alliance's meeting at ten PM.

She knew she couldn't afford to stay put, but when she tried to get up, her body refused to listen, like she was glued to the bed. Also, her throat was terribly parched. She moved her eyes, finding a glass cup full of mineral water with a straw sitting on the side table. There was a note next to it in Totoki's handwriting.

Rest up.

Feeling apologetic, Echika reached for the cup.

"You'll spill it if you're not careful, Investigator."

Another hand swooped in and picked up the cup for her—Harold's. Even the sight of his face wasn't enough to shock Echika's weakened mind awake. She just accepted the cup he held out for her, adjusted the angle of the straw, and sipped. It flowed through her parched insides in a satisfying manner, quenching her thirst. By the time the cup was empty, her head had started clearing up.

It was at this point—far too long after it had finished—that she realized her Brain Dive with Harold was over.

"...Why are you still here?"

She was shocked at how sickly and feeble her voice sounded.

"My excuse is that I need to rest as a result of the performance drop the Brain Dive caused." Echika realized he was sitting on the edge of her bed. He put the cup back on the side table. "Investigator Lin woke up a bit earlier. Everyone's in the kitchen, discussing our next move."

"Our plan for the Alliance's meeting?"

“Yes. You focus on resting for the time being.”

Harold turned his back to her and glanced out the window. Echika stared at him blankly. As always, the back of his blond hair stuck out a little. For some reason, it reminded her of an exchange they’d had when they’d first met.

“The hair on the back of your head is standing up, though.”

“That’s intentional. Leaving a few flaws in my appearance makes me come across as likable.”

She could tell her lips were curling into a self-deprecating grin. At the time, she’d never dreamed she would come to trust him so much.

“By the way, I see you found your necklace.”

“Oh, yes...” Echika unconsciously reached for her neck. The necklace hidden under her clothes was exposed, lying on the sheets. “Chief Totoki found it, and Bigga gave it to me.”

With awkward motions, she placed the dully glowing nitro case on her neck. She threw her arm over the bed. It was just centimeters away from touching the cuff of Harold’s sweater. He was always by her side, yet always just out of reach. In the end, she hadn’t gotten to him, and at this point, she felt afraid to even try.

But I’m sure that...this is for the best.

“...Your final Brain Dive yielded results,” Echika whispered at the Amicus’s side, so as to give each word weight. “I won’t tell anyone your secret. And as for Detective Sozon...I hope you find the real culprit this time.”

She knew that the only reason she could say this was because the haze from her Brain Dive hadn’t worn off yet. Just for this moment, she was grateful for being disoriented. If this was going to end either way, she preferred to let it be simple and clean, without him noticing anything.

Harold didn’t respond immediately, but his fingers, resting on his lap, moved ever so slightly.

“Thank you.” He didn’t turn to face her. “I, too, pray that you find a human aide who can match your talents.”

A thin, gentle silence hung lightly in the air. All Echika could hear was the thin hum of the central heating vibrating against the floor.

A human aide that could be a match for her.

If only Harold was human. Not a machine, but a normal young man.

That idea cruised through her thoughts.

After ten minutes or so passed, Echika heard loud footsteps ascending the stairs. A moment later, Totoki appeared in the open bedroom doorframe. Echika could move a bit better now than she'd been able to before, so she slowly sat up.

"Thank goodness, Hieda. How are you feeling?"

"I'm fine." She was still a bit sluggish, but within the acceptable margin. "Lucraft, about your maintenance tonight—it was scheduled for seven PM, right?"

"Yes." Harold stayed put on the bed, perhaps trying to present himself as being in bad shape. "Is there a problem?"

"I need you to contact Novae Robotics Inc. and ask them to postpone it. I'd love to see your malfunction fixed as soon as possible, but I think this might be a better idea."

...What is she saying?

As Echika and Harold stared at Totoki in confusion, she carried on sternly.

"With Steve's help, we're going pose as Greg and infiltrate the Alliance's meeting."



YOUR FORMA

Chapter 4

The Pact of Ruin

Chapter 4

The Pact of Ruin

1

<The current temperature is -2°C. Attire index A, a severe cold wave is coming and will last until tomorrow morning>

London—by the time Echika and her group arrived at the Novae Robotics Inc. building, the blanket of night had overtaken the sky, and snow had started to fall. It was eight PM, and the technological ward was appropriately silent for the time.

“Snow in London is almost as unusual as us getting visitors at this time of day.”

Department Head Angus greeted them without even trying to mask his nervousness. Totoki had called earlier, telling him she needed to “talk to Steve about Farasha Island.” To Angus, this was all very much a bolt from the blue.

“I’m sorry for reaching out to you on such short notice,” Totoki said, giving a formal apology. “Like I told you over the phone, this is urgent. I can’t give you any details, however. It’s classified case information.”

“Yes, I understand. I woke Steve up already. Come this way.”

Angus hurried down the deserted corridor. He had no way of knowing that Totoki was on suspension, of course. Echika and Harold followed him with fast steps. Through a conference call being conducted over the Your Forma, Echika heard Fokine report in.

“Chief Totoki, I’m patrolling the area around Novae’s building, but nothing’s out of the ordinary for now.”

“Stay focused,” Totoki whispered back. “We had to take off our isolation units for a long period of time to hold this call, so the Alliance might be trying to discover our GPS data.”

After dropping them off at the building, Fokine had taken the share car and started patrolling around the vicinity. There was no sign of anything suspicious at the time, but they had to be careful.

“By the way, Chief Totoki.” Angus turned to her. “What about Harold’s maintenance? Do we do it after your talk with Steve?”

“We can have the talk without Harold present, so run it in tandem. We ended up forcing him to Brain Dive, which made his processing power drop severely. The sooner you do it, the better.”

“Department Head Angus, please, do as much as you’re able.”

As Harold spoke, his handsome features were an expressionless mask. It was an act—he was selling the story that the Brain Dive had heightened his malfunction so greatly that he’d been stripped of the processing power to express emotion. Everyone besides Echika was convinced.

“Of course.” Angus jerked his head in a grave nod. “Don’t worry, I’ll do everything I can.”

Either way, Harold needed to stall Angus for as long as possible. Echika thought back to their conversation during the drive to London—Totoki had suggested that they infiltrate the Alliance meeting. Echika thought this was a brilliant idea, but the part about asking Steve for help was something she hadn’t expected.

“Chief Totoki, I know that’s the plan, but why turn to Steve?”

Their share car left the terrace house in Borehamwood and followed a long three-lane highway to London. As they sailed by, the lights of the roadside lamps caressed the roof of their car in set intervals. Totoki answered Echika’s question from the passenger’s seat.

“He’s got skills and knowledge as a modeler, right? To get into the Alliance’s meeting, we’ll need to tweak the user data of Greg’s Your Forma, but most importantly, we’ll need a holo-model of him.”

"I see." Harold understood on the spot. *"Yes, my brother did make a holo-model of Investigator Hieda back then."*

Echika finally remembered—they were talking about the sensory crime incident. Under Elias Taylor's instructions, Steve had created a holo-model of Echika in secret. It was made for a projector, but it was incredibly detailed and accurate, to the point where anyone would be convinced it was really her.

Yes, Steve would be able to produce the holo-model they needed in a short period of time.

"How do we explain this to Department Head Angus?" Fokine asked, while holding the steering wheel. *"Since we don't know who might be working for the Alliance in the bureau, we need to make sure he doesn't start asking questions..."*

"We'll just tell him it's for an urgent investigation." Totoki looked over at Harold. *"I'm sorry, Lucraft, but we'll be taking advantage of your maintenance. So long as Department Head Angus is occupied with you, he won't be looking at us."*

"I'll try to make it last as long as possible, then."

"And if he actually ends up fixing your malfunction, all the better." There was a hint of regret and sympathy in Totoki's emotionless mask of a face. *"Anyway... Let's hurry. I'm worried, what with only Lin and Wood watching over Greg."*

They had to get into that meeting, no matter the means. This was their one chance to get insight into the true nature of the Alliance, and they couldn't let it slip away.

Echika's thoughts returned to the present. They arrived at the technological building's lounge. It was lined with sofas with simple designs, and there were counters for light meals. The window offered a view of London's nighttime scenery, with specks of snow falling over the Regent's Canal beneath them. The place was empty, save for a lone Amicus sitting on a sofa.

"—I'm glad to see you haven't changed, Investigator Hieda."

Steve Howell Wheatstone. His face, the spitting image of his younger brother Harold's face, greeted her with the same sour expression she remembered. The

only thing that was different this time was that he extended his hand toward her. Surprised, she grasped it and shook hands with him.

“Um, thanks for playing along with us. I know it was all very sudden.”

“Department Head Angus instructed me to. And besides, I’m not entirely unrelated to this.”

She let go of his hand, which was as cold as an Amicus’s hand ever was. The thought manipulation system was originally developed by Elias Taylor, who Steve had once worked under. On Farasha Island, Echika had worked with him to expose the existence of the Alliance. But Steve’s goal was to resolve the issue of Taylor’s stolen legacy, and the fact that they’d failed to get any evidence meant the whole matter had ended inconclusively, in his eyes.

“Steve, I’m Totoki. We’ve met a few times during your questioning?”

“I remember, yes.”

Steve briefly greeted Totoki and shifted his gaze to Harold. The two Amicus exchanged a wordless nod. They’d always been relatively indifferent toward each other, so this was as much of a greeting either would give the other.

“All right, Harold, let’s get you to the maintenance room.” Angus gently tapped Harold’s back. “Investigator Hieda, you supervised Steve once before, so I’m sure you’ll be fine... But if anything happens, you can activate the thermal sensor on the back of his neck to shut him down.”

Echika nodded and asked, “How long will the maintenance last?”

“Two hours should be enough. Even if it drags, I’ll try to wrap it up before the date changes.”

Given the preparations they needed, they didn’t have much time.

Angus and Harold left the lounge, leaving behind Echika and Totoki, who exchanged glances. According to the Your Forma, it was already eight thirty PM. They only had an hour and a half until the meeting.

“Steve,” Totoki said coldly. “I’ll cut to the chase. What I’m about to tell you has to be kept secret from Department Head Angus until you have my permission to tell him. It’s about the Alliance.”

“Understood.” The look in Steve’s eyes changed slightly. “Has your investigation made any headway?”

Totoki explained the situation to him. Steve listened carefully. Following the Farasha Island incident, the Electrocime Investigations Bureau had questioned him several times. It was through Steve’s cooperation that they were able to narrow down the list of suspects to the investors that had died in this case. To this end, they’d assumed the chances of him refusing to help them was quite low.

“If the bureau requires it, I will gladly make your holo-model.”

And as they’d hoped, the Amicus instantly consented, after hearing Totoki’s explanation.

“Thank you. Your understanding the situation so quickly is a huge help.”

“Let’s be quick about this. Do you have any reference materials for Greg’s appearance?”

“We took some photos of him earlier. We have voice data for him, too.” Totoki took out a USB stick from her jacket pocket and handed it over to Steve. “Also, we need you to figure out where the participants of the meeting are logging in from.”

“I’ll try, but I can’t work here. Can we move to the office?”

“No, we can’t afford to leave traces of our activity on Novae Robotics Inc. computers. We have our own devices, so we’ll get them ready now.”

Totoki walked over to the counter and placed the briefcase she was carrying on it. She opened it up and took out a laptop they’d bought at a retailer on the way there. They couldn’t know for sure whether the Alliance had control of Novae Robotics Inc.’s computers, so this was their safest bet. As he watched Totoki swiftly prepare things, Steve whispered to Echika, “By the way, Investigator. Is Harold feigning his malfunction as an excuse to keep his distance from you?”

Echika stiffened. Since Steve spent his days here in Novae Robotics Inc., he naturally knew about his brother’s “condition.”

“Everyone believes he really is malfunctioning,” she whispered, emphasizing the situation. “Don’t tell anyone.”

“I won’t.” He blinked earnestly. “But his foolishness shocks me at times.”

“He has his reasons.”

“And you agreed to this?”

“Yes.” Saying that made her choke up a little. “We decided this was the best way to keep us both safe.”

Steve’s eyes, looking like dried-out lakes, narrowed. “I thought humans were greedier than that.”

...What does that mean?

Before Echika could ask, Totoki called Steve over. The Amicus walked over to the counter and checked the activated laptop. Its specs were on the lower end, just barely good enough for the job, and Steve quickly installed the programs he needed and got to work. His last statement still weighed on Echika’s mind, but the situation didn’t allow for her to bring it up.

All she could do after that was wait. She sank her body, which was still sluggish and tired, into the sofa and watched the seconds tick by in her Your Forma’s time display. Steve sat in front of the PC in silence as Totoki watched over him and spoke to Fokine over the audio call. The quiet hanging over the lounge grew heavier, to the point where it felt like a viscous sludge. Somewhere down the line, the snowfall outside the window had intensified, and it was now coming down nonstop.

The seemingly eternal silence was finally broken roughly ten minutes ahead of the Alliance’s meeting.

“The model’s still a bit shoddy, but it should be accurate enough for a holo-call.”

Steve’s fingers rose from the PC. Echika jolted off the sofa and approached the counter. She and Totoki, who looked somewhat tired, looked into the monitor.

Greg’s newly made holo-model gazed back at them expressionlessly, his body

in a T-pose.

He really did it.

“Brilliantly done,” Totoki said without a smile. “I want you to apply it to Hieda’s Your Forma and set it as her holo-model. We need to change her voice to Greg’s, too. Can you do that?”

“I worked in Rig City, where the Your Forma was developed, so I can do it in no time,” Steve replied calmly. “Do you want me to modify the user data for her Your Forma?”

“Yes, go ahead. She shouldn’t be able to enter the meeting unless we’re very thorough and ensure she’s indistinguishable from Greg.”

Since Totoki was both their point of contact and their leader, the actual act of infiltrating the meeting fell to Echika. They’d decided their respective roles on their drive here in the share car. Normally, using a holo-model to impersonate someone was a violation of international communication security laws. It was, however, allowed as an exception during covert investigations. Echika wanted to believe they were still on the very edge of what was legal.

“This way, Investigator.”

At Steve’s prompting, Echika sat on one of the counter’s stools. He plugged an HSB convertor cable into the PC, then connected its other side to the back of Echika’s neck. Her Your Forma detected an external device, and the overwriting of her holo-model started right away. At the same time, the PC started to monitor her communications.

With this, Totoki would be able to look into the meeting and gather physical records that would serve as evidence.

“I analyzed the meeting’s program and server,” Steve said, operating the laptop. “Neither one is a Rig City service. They’re unique Farasha Island tech.”

“They probably did that to maintain secrecy. I bet the security is very tight.”

“Nothing is uncrackable,” the Amicus said with a serious expression. “I’m up for the task. No need for concern.”

As Echika listened to their exchange, she breathed in, so as to calm her

nerves. She repositioned herself on the stool so she was sitting directly across from Steve. The Amicus's eyes fixed on Echika unflinchingly. Their color reminded her of Harold, despite his absence.

"Investigator Hieda, while I try to figure out where they're connecting from, I need you to stall for them by masquerading as Greg."

"All right."

Until Steve was finished, she had to be exceptionally careful. Depending on how she conducted herself, this whole operation could fall apart. Failure wasn't an option.

"Hieda." Totoki placed her hand on Echika's back. "We're counting on you."

It was almost ten PM.

<Password and user data confirmed. Connection to meeting server eed586865893 approved...>

The moment after the connection went through, the exterior of the lounge was replaced by the image of a vast sky. In the blink of an eye, Echika found herself standing atop a lake that seemed to stretch into infinity. The water's surface was still and clear, like a mirror, reflecting the blue sky. The clouds above cast a clear shadow, granting the illusion that she was trapped between two skies.

She knew this otherworldly scenery.

Salar de Uyuni.

It was a famous tourist attraction in Bolivia, a salt flat in the Andes Mountains. It must have been the inspiration for this scenery. Rather than calling the participants' holo-models over, the immersive online meeting used the Your Forma's augmented reality feature to change the space around them instead. This kind of technology did suit Farasha Island's methods.

Before Echika had time to marvel at the scenery, a glass roundtable appeared, with donut tables forming layers of rings around it. It stopped at the fourth ring. Echika had to turn her head to be able to see the entirety of the outer ring.

She'd been automatically seated in the second ring from the inside. When she looked down at her hands, resting on the table, she saw they were the bony, angular hands of a middle-aged man—the hands of Greg's holo-model.

Holo-models started appearing in the seats around her. They were all unfamiliar men and women of assorted ages. Echika opened the meeting participant list so that Totoki could inspect their personal data. She casually glanced back, seeing that the outer table had filled without her noticing. The sight of it filled her with an inexplicable sense of despair.

This was already much bigger in scale than she imagined. So many people were there, and they were all part of the Alliance.

“Good evening, everyone. Let's begin today's scheduled report.”

Despite the size of the place, the voice sounded like it was speaking right beside her. One of the avatars at the central roundtable was speaking. Yes, *avatar*—it wasn't a holo-model, and it didn't even look human. Sitting at the roundtable were white, smooth clumps that resembled cocoons or chrysalids. There were six seats at the roundtable—four were occupied by these strange avatars, and the remaining two were empty.

Echika somehow managed to keep herself from frowning. Context seemed to imply that these cocoons were managing the meeting. They'd hidden their faces, likely because they were deeply involved with the Alliance. She checked the participant list, but the four didn't have names. Instead, they were marked by letters of the alphabet—A, B, C, and F.

Why are D and E missing?

“Comrades #47, #50, and #78.” The same gender-neutral voice from earlier spoke—this was A. **“Please report on how you followed up after purging the investors the bureau was after. What about their families?”**

“No change in Quine's wife and daughter,” said someone called #47, whose holo-model was of a young white man. **“His daughter did express some doubts about his cause of death, but her misgivings were only temporary.”**

So the investors and their families were being watched after all. Though shocked and appalled, Echika also felt panicked. All the participants had been

allotted a number, but the seats on the tables didn't indicate which digit was assigned to whom. If the seats had been in numerical order, Echika could hazard a guess, but based on the person who'd just answered, it seemed the seats were in a random order.

What was Greg's number?

Her only option was to infer from what the others were saying. In other words, this didn't just make the members easier to tell apart, it also served as a measure to expose any rats.

<Stay calm.> Totoki messaged her. **<Steve is focusing on figuring out where the alphabet avatars are logged in from. You just need to stall for time.>**

Echika clenched her hands on her lap under the table.

Just focus on staying logged in.

The holo-models continued their reports. From the sound of things, the holo-models present here were lower-ranked members of the Alliance, comrades who backed the secret society. How had they been ushered into the fold? The thought manipulation system's influence instantly came to mind, but that hadn't been widely implemented yet...

"As for Banfield's wife, she's asking that the Ministry of Health look into the illness that killed her husband," said #78, a middle-aged woman who looked like an average housewife. **"The bureau informed her about the sample's analysis result, and she's trying to get the media involved to get an investigation started into his unexplained infection..."**

"The bureau is keeping the media silent. It was thanks to your negligence that Banfield escaped to a restricted zone and the infection was exposed."

C castigated the woman. He had a man's voice, one that was oddly...*familiar*? Yes, while the alphabet avatars had their appearances hidden, their voices weren't perfectly modified.

"So you're only scolding her?" asked B, with the voice of a woman who sounded like she was the type to wear perfume. She spoke in fluent American English. **"You share the blame, for failing to stop the sample from being delivered."**

“We had no comrades along the drone’s route, and there wasn’t anyone who could shoot it down without drawing suspicion,” C replied. “I bribed some local hunters to shoot it, but they proved useless.”

“Just because you managed to kill the other investors didn’t mean you could cut corners when it came to keeping an eye on Totoki,” A said.

“Now, listen, if you’re going to blame me for this, then #80 is also at fault here.”

C spat the words out bitterly, and silence settled over the roundtable. The four cocoons didn’t budge. A second later, Echika realized that the other holo-models had fixed their eyes on her.

#80. That must have been Greg’s number.

“Maybe you didn’t hear me. Then you don’t mind me calling you by your name, Greg?” C said with chagrin. “I got a report saying Totoki kidnapped you, but here you are. Where are you right now?”

The thing she feared most had happened right away. Echika came up with an excuse on the spot. “I’m in the suburbs of Birmingham. Totoki and her people released me and disappeared somewhere...”

“We sent our comrade investigators and had security drones out to track you down. It appears the bureau was wise enough to use isolation units.” Thankfully, it seemed like the Alliance hadn’t yet realized that Echika and company had taken off their isolation units. But what C had just said confirmed that the Alliance was involved with the Electrocime Investigations Bureau. Who was he? **“What did Totoki ask you? Investigator Hieda went missing, too. Is she with her?”**

“She suspected me of being involved in the Alliance, but I insisted I didn’t know anything, so she gave up. As for Investigator Hieda, I don’t know who that is...”

“I told you about her before. She’s a Japanese electronic investigator.”

“Oh, yes, I think I might have seen her, then.” It was getting harder and harder to keep up the facade. If only she could dig through more of Greg’s Mnemosynes for more details about his connection with the Alliance. “They

didn't Brain Dive me, though."

"Of course they didn't," C said, his voice cold and harsh. But at least it didn't look like he'd seen through her ruse yet. **"Either way, you carry a lot of responsibility here. It was your son that arranged for the drone that carried the sample while you were snoring in bed."**

"I'm sorry."

"This little private sermon of yours looks like it's going to take a while, so we'll narrow down your connection."

The moment A said this, looking quite fed up with the both of them, all the holo-models around them vanished. Only Echika in Greg's guise and the four alphabet avatars remained in the Salar de Uyuni.

You're joking, right?

Echika's mouth was dry, and her palms were covered in cold sweat.

<Not yet. Keep them busy for five more minutes> A message from Totoki popped up.

But if they asked her any more personal questions, Echika would almost certainly expose herself. She didn't have the first idea as to how she would wriggle out of this, but she had to keep going.

"Why didn't you dispose of the blueprints for the hornet in the first place?" C asked, his anger flaring now that there were fewer eyes on them. **"Was it payback for us using your son as collateral? Don't forget that I'm the one who gave Jacob his position."**

"No, I'd never dream of getting back at you...," Echika answered, recalling this one point from Greg's Mnemosynes.

He'd been terrified of needing to provide the Alliance with drones for their biological weaponry and of being complicit in the murders they committed. But he had no choice but to play along to protect his son, Investigator Gardener, who the Alliance was surveilling. Did that mean Greg was unlike the other comrades and hadn't joined of his own free will? Was he a recent addition, brought in to facilitate the injection of the chimeric virus via drone as a method

of assassinating the investors?

What if, in the process of taking him into the fold, they'd used his son as collateral to ensure he didn't resist?

Echika could only think of one person who could demand gratitude from Gardener for granting him his current position.

"That's not the only problem, is it?" B's way of talking really did strike Echika as familiar. **"None of this would have happened if the fact that Banfield died from a disease wasn't discovered. The sudden death angle would have thrown Totoki's investigation off our trail, and they'd have given up on finding evidence about the thought manipulations system."**

"Maybe making a virus so as to not leave any evidence of a homicide was a mistake, after all," A muttered. **"Our miscalculation was the sample being transported. Although they exposed the chimeric virus's existence, attempting to pass off a state secret as a weapon manufactured by the TFC may have been too excessive. We didn't have to set up such an elaborate performance just to get Totoki to pick up that USB..."**

"What's the point of questioning that now, A? That act was absolutely necessary to convince the bureau's people."

"There's also the chance Kai leaked something to Hieda, too. I took him on thinking he'd be loyal so long as he got paid, but with how Totoki zeroed in on Greg, it's possible he'd broken his contract with us."

Dumbfounded, Echika could only blankly listen to their exchange. The bureau had completely and utterly misread the situation. That much was clear now. As far as the alphabet avatars' conversation indicated, Kai wasn't part of the Alliance. They'd simply stuffed the USB into his notebook and hired him to ensure that Echika found it. The chimeric virus had never been a product of the TFC; according to A, it was a "state secret." Now it made sense that they hadn't found any traces of the TFC manufacturing biological weapons in Al Bahah.

Instead, the virus was the top secret weapon of some country or another. That, in turn, made her think back to what had happened in Philadelphia. They'd visited a medical laboratory run by the Pentagon, and the person who met them, Miller, was the chief of the Contagion Biology Laboratory. The

person to tell them the chimeric virus originated from the TFC was Cook from the NSA. If all of that was false, did that mean the virus was of US origin?

More importantly, the person who asked the Special Investigations Unit to cooperate was Director Schlosser.

If Investigator Gardener was to be believed, the director and Greg were acquaintances, and it was through his connections that Gardener had found employment in the bureau. So if the director had only done that to make Greg owe him...

Echika felt everything go dark. If this was the case, then the people involved with the Alliance weren't just anyone. When she and Fokine were in the medical research facility in Philadelphia, everyone there but them...had been part of the Alliance.

"If that's how it ended up, we should have done as I suggested at the time and placed Totoki and her people under the thought manipulation system's control." A's voice sounded oddly distant. "Our efforts failed, that's all there is to it. Even though she's been suspended, Totoki's acting against us in secret. And next time, one of us might end up crippled, like D was."

Echika finally realized who D must have been—Talbot.

"We don't know why D turned out like that, nor do we know if Totoki and her people did it to him," said C—Director Schlosser. "And A, have you forgotten that Investigator Hieda isn't affected by the thought manipulation system?"

"A was never very smart," said B—Cook—in an exasperated tone. "So long as Echika Hieda is at large, even if we place Totoki and her people under the system's control, they'll somehow end up getting the better of us. She has that oddly intelligent Amicus police investigator following her around, too."

"Even so, the Amicus is malfunctioning now. We can take our luck and try to move against them. Totoki hasn't given up, and even if she couldn't Brain Dive into Greg, she won't just—"

"Even if she did Brain Dive, the Mnemosyne bulwark would stop her. Investigator Hieda can't get through that. Isn't that right, F?"

Schlosser called out to one of the cocoons, who had remained silent so far. F didn't say anything back. Echika heard A and Cook exhale in frustration. But after a short pause, a voice replied with a gentle crackle of static.

"Oh, pardon me. Your petty squabbling was just so pitiful, I ended up nodding off."

This time, Echika's breath really did catch in her throat.

There was no way she'd forget or mistake that voice.

She felt like something was siphoning all the heat from her core. Steve and Totoki must have looked at the monitor in just as much surprise. Because this voice, and what had just happened—it couldn't and shouldn't have been.

After all, *she* was incarcerated in a place completely cut off from the internet.

"F, we were discussing the Mnemosyne bulwark you made." Schlosser repeated the question, annoyed. **"No one with ordinary data-processing abilities could possibly penetrate it, right?"**

"Yes. You can be sure of that."

"What about the improvements to the thought manipulation system?" A asked. **"You started the testing phase on it, yes?"**

"It's going well. Feels like I have a kingdom of my own to rule over." F yawned openly. **"It's still a long way off from being good enough to implement widely. It'll take a while before we can turn Investigator Hieda into our marionette."**

"That means our options are all the more limited," Cook said coldly. **"If we leave Totoki and her people out there, they'll expose us sooner or later. We have to take care of them before they actually trace things back to us."**

"Eliminating them isn't realistic," Schlosser said. **"I've said this before—a group of investigators dying all at once will draw attention. Investigator Hieda is especially well-known, so her cause of death is bound to be carefully examined."**

"But we have to make them disappear after this. We can just set up another fake case for them to pursue and eliminate them all. Ideally, in a way that

makes it look like a tragic mishap. Like if they get caught in a fire or drown.”

“They’re not stupid. If we could get rid of them that easily, we wouldn’t be having so much trouble.”

“Let’s focus on the problem at hand, then,” A said, unable to mask their irritation. “I think Greg’s blunders call for a suitable response.”

“That’s already been dealt with,” Schlosser said curtly. “Greg, I’m afraid you’ll have to reflect on what you’ve done.”

Given the situation, it seemed clear they weren’t going to overlook Greg’s failings this time. But at this point, Echika could hardly care about that—how was this possible? How?

Another message from Totoki popped up.

<We tracked down where B and C are logged in from. They’re Cook and Director Schlosser. Keep it up for just a little longer>

Echika gritted her teeth. How was she going to stall any longer than this? Echika parted her lips, knowing she didn’t have much time. But then—

“By the way, how long are you going to pretend that you’re Greg, Investigator Hieda?”

A shapeless wind disturbed the lake, making its mirrorlike surface sway and shake. Echika gazed at the roundtable, her breath held. The cocoon avatars didn’t budge, but somehow, she could tell all four of them were glaring straight at her. The featureless face of F’s avatar was definitely smiling at her. She could see it clearly—her pretty teeth.

She wasn’t dozing off.

Throughout all the time she’d spent in silence, F had been constantly tracking where Echika was logging in from.

“What?” Cook let out a high-pitched exclamation. **“F, what are you say—?”**

Out of sheer reflex, Echika tapped the “log out” option. The roundtables, the

Salar de Uyuni—everything crumbled and disappeared like grains of sand blown away by the wind. The brilliant blue sky turned back into the tasteless ceiling of the lounge. Echika nearly fell off the stool, but Steve caught her. Totoki pulled out the converter cable attached to Echika's neck.

She was drenched in cold sweat.

That ended badly.

"Steve," Totoki said, wearing a firm expression. "Did F trace us back?"

"I don't see any evidence of illegal access," Steve said, letting go of Echika and glancing at the blank PC monitor. His eyes were uncharacteristically confused. "F is a robotics professor. She may have some knowledge of networking, but she doesn't have the means to trace our position without my noticing it."

"Well, whether she has the means or not, she identified us. We have to move, now."

Totoki swiftly closed the laptop, her face pallid. Echika likely looked the same. People they'd trusted, including Director Schlosser, had turned out to be members of the Alliance. She and the others had been dancing in the palm of their hand this whole time.

It was honestly hard to swallow. The sheer humiliation and shock of it made it all the harder to accept.

"Investigator Fokine, you were listening, right?" Totoki swiftly spoke to the group call. "Find Investigator Gardener as soon as possible. Plus, I need you to get in touch with Investigator Lin and Bigga, if possible. She might be in danger, too."

"Got it," Fokine replied tensely. **"What will you do, Chief?"**

"Well, first, since we know where the director and Cook were connecting from, I'd like to take them into custody." Totoki closed her eyes, troubled. "But that'll be a tall order by ourselves. We'll need to turn to the London Metro Police for help."

"Do you have any guarantee they're safe?"

"None. It's a gamble." Those were the last words Echika had expected to

come out of Totoki's mouth. "Either way, the Electrocrime Investigations Bureau is rotten to the core. So rely on no one. Prioritize securing Investigator Gardener."

"All right. I'll put on an isolation unit, then, just in case."

Fokine hung up. When Totoki turned to face her, Echika blurted out what was on her mind, driven by sheer emotion.

"Let me go to the private penitentiary in Ashford."

"I was just about to ask you that." Totoki nodded. "But you shouldn't go there alone."

"I'll have Department Head Angus finish up Harold's maintenance."

"Yes, I just hope it went well... Let me know once you have him, and I'll send you the transfer address."

Totoki put the laptop into her suitcase, snapping it shut and quickly leaving the lounge. Echika made to hurry after her, but then her eyes met Steve's. The Amicus was silent, but his hand was raised, like he was about to reach out and stop her. He'd gone haywire and attacked someone in the past, so he wasn't allowed to leave Novae Robotics Inc.'s building without permission.

"Steve, I know you want to come with us, but..."

"I know that's not possible. But after you ask Lexie about this, could you tell me what she said?"

From Steve's position, this revelation was a nightmare. It meant that his own creator was a member of the organization that had stolen Taylor's thought manipulation system.

"Of course." Echika could only nod earnestly. "I'll stay in touch, I promise."

After this, she bolted from the lounge. She ran down the hall toward the maintenance room, at a loss as to how to break the news to Harold. It was such a quandary that it made her head hurt.

Echika had never thought of Lexie as a pleasant person, but she did think she was human. Plus, she was the only person with whom Echika shared the secret.

She had to get the truth out of her.

2

“You’re finally back, Investigator Gardener...”

The Electrocrime Investigations Bureau’s London branch. The time was eleven PM, and there were several police investigators from the Special Investigations Unit sitting at their desks, just barely awake. Bigga, too, was sleepily rubbing her eyes as she called out to Gardener, who’d just gotten back.

“Bigga?” He turned to her sluggishly. “Why are you here? I thought you went back to the academy in Saint Petersburg...”

“I had an evening flight, but you never replied to me, so I had to miss it!” Bigga said, half venting at him. If he had taken just half an hour longer to get here, she would have already been sleeping on the guest sofa. “Did you see the report on Lloyd’s villa? If there’s any problem, we’ll have to rewrite it.”

“Oh, yeah, I saw it. It was perfect, thanks.”

“Then you could have just sent me a reply earlier...” Bigga wound herself up to give him an earful, but then noticed his face was terribly pale.

He looked ill—he was clearly absentminded as he walked over to his desk, like he was trying to get away from her. If she recalled correctly, he’d gone with Echika to Robin Flutter’s building earlier in the day.

“Are you sick?”

“I’m fine.” Gardener said feebly. “You should hurry back to the hotel.”

“Well, I will, but...” He didn’t look fine to her, but it wasn’t like the two of them were particularly close, so she wasn’t sure what to do. “How did it go with the drone? You and Ms. Hieda went to check up on that bee thing, right?”

“We found nothing. I guess her theory was wrong.”

“Really...?” Bigga didn’t hide her disappointment. That must have left Echika dejected. “Is Ms. Hieda back, too?”

Gardener couldn’t manage a reply after this. Though unsatisfied with how nonresponsive he was, Bigga had no choice but to pull up her shoulder bag and

leave the office. Echika was nowhere to be found in the corridor. Bigga was scheduled to return to the academy, so it wasn't her place to stick her neck into this any longer. As she walked down the dim hallway, the pangs of her broken heart, which she'd been able to bury under work so far, rose to the surface once more. It still hurt, but she was starting to calm down a little.

If nothing else, she wasn't going to fruitlessly break into tears anymore. Maybe she was just too concerned about everything else to wallow right now.

It being late at night, the elevator hall was silent. Looking at the indicator, Bigga saw that the elevator was on the first floor, but she felt too tired to take the stairs, so she tapped on the panel to call it.

<New message from Hansa>

She jolted, unintentionally tensing up. The last time she'd messaged her childhood friend, Hansa, was when she'd been cooped up in bed at the Lyon hotel. She'd sent him a brief message asking for help and requesting that he let her know if he found anything out. They hadn't spoken since.

But looking back on it now, she had no idea what she'd been thinking. She'd acted impulsively after Harold had turned her down. She wouldn't have suspected Echika otherwise.

"...I should have thought that through," Bigga grumbled to herself in self-loathing.

Besides, it had been insensitive of her to call Hansa without touching on his confession. The truth was, there was no way Bigga could have feelings for someone she'd known for most of her childhood. At best, she saw him as a younger brother to dote on, and she didn't think that would change.

She would be better off telling him this sooner rather than later, so maybe now would be a good chance to talk to him about this. She'd have to pick her words carefully, so things wouldn't continue to be shaky between them in the future.

Bigga opened the message, feeling pessimistic as to what she might find there. Her mind was already occupied with how to turn him down—which was why it took her a moment to actually read what his message said.

<I got the HSB and plugged it into a tablet to check its contents. It's exactly like you thought>

Huh?

For a second, the words didn't register in her scrambled mind. A loud, inappropriate chiming rang out, marking the elevator's arrival. Bigga reflexively looked up—and what she saw there blew the message from her mind. Someone who shouldn't have been there stepped out of the elevator, his dark hair in a wavy perm—Investigator Fokine.

"Ivan?" she exclaimed, despite herself. "What are you doing here?"

He'd gotten himself suspended on purpose to free himself up to investigate the Alliance. After that, he should have gotten in touch with Totoki. However, Fokine was in civilian clothes, and his expression was uncharacteristically grave. He must have sprinted through the parking lot, because his jacket was wet with snow.

"Bigga? I thought you went back to the academy... But this is actually good timing. Are you all right?"

"Huh?" She didn't understand. "Er, I'm fine. But what are you doing in London?"

"I'll explain later. Where's Investigator Gardener?"

"In the office." This was getting even more confusing. "Ah, wait!"

Leaving her to gape in confusion, Fokine took off down the hall. Bigga had no idea what had gotten into him. She looked between him and the elevator. For the time being, she closed Hansa's message and followed Fokine. She had no idea what was going on, but whatever it was, it was serious.

When Bigga returned to the office, Fokine was already at Gardener's desk. But what she saw there took her breath away—Gardener had drawn his pistol and was pointing it at Fokine.

What's going on?

The other investigators in the office rose from their seats, murmuring in surprise.

“Someone, I need handcuffs!” Gardener said, looking even paler than before. “What did you do with my dad, you kidnapper...?!”

“Investigator Gardener, calm down.” Fokine raised his hands but refused to back away. “Greg is fine, I just want to talk. We have to get out of here and go into hiding this instant.”

“I’m telling you right now, my father is innocent, and he has nothing to do with the Alliance. Right, we’ve got nothing to do with this. So why, why did the chief...?”

“The chief?” Fokine focused on that word. “You talked to him?”

“Either way, my dad is innocent!” Gardener shouted in desperation. “I know everything, so—!”

But then Gardener *crumpled* where he stood, like someone had just pulled the plug on him. It happened so quickly, Bigga couldn’t follow what was going on—in the blink of an eye, Gardener’s upper body slammed against the desk and slid down to the floor. His pistol slipped from his fingers, rolled over the desk, and fell at Fokine’s feet.

An unbearable silence descended on the office. What had just happened?

As Bigga watched in stunned amazement, the office instantly exploded with shouts. The other investigators hurried over to Gardener, throwing instructions to call an ambulance. Fokine, however, pulled away the people flocking over to Gardener, knelt beside him, and placed a hand on his neck, checking for a pulse. He instantly shook his head.

That can’t be.

A chill went through Bigga, and everything grew distant. Fokine walked away from Gardener and instantly walked over to her, silently grabbing her arm and pulling her out of the office. The other investigators were occupied with frantically trying to apply first aid, so no one called out for them to stop.

As they strode through the hall, Bigga realized that she’d been trembling ever since this started. She looked at her arm as Fokine pulled it. His hold on it was terribly tight, but oddly enough, it didn’t hurt.

It couldn't be. She'd been talking to Gardener normally just minutes ago. Admittedly, he had looked a little ill—

He'd looked ill.

No...

Fokine took off the isolation unit hidden under his turtleneck and placed an audio call.

"Chief Totoki? Yes... I'm there, but it's too late. The hornet got to him."

She felt dizzy.

"Yes, that's right. The Alliance killed Investigator Gardener."



Echika and Harold got to Ashford around midnight.

"I'm sure the recording I just showed you makes it clear, but F was definitely Professor Lexie."

The share car they picked up in downtown London drove nonstop straight ahead, despite the intermittent snowfall. The wipers earnestly tried to clear the windshield. Echika gripped the steering wheel with her eyes fixed on them. They were mere minutes away from the penitentiary.

"Yes, so it seems. I'm don't know what to say...," Harold said from the passenger's seat as he closed the holo-browser on his wearable terminal.

He'd just finished watching the footage of the Alliance's meeting. His expression was understandably severe. He'd all but discarded the facade of a mass-produced Amicus's pleasant, indifferent smile.

Echika herself had a hard time believing the revelation.

"And if their talk is anything to go by, she's involved with their thought manipulation system, too."

"Still, her field of expertise is robotics. Why would they have her working on improving the thought manipulation system?"

"Even so, we'll be in even bigger trouble if they manage to modify the system

so it can control people who have high data-processing abilities, like me.” If the Alliance got their hands on a perfected thought manipulation system, Echika and the others wouldn’t be able to even take them by surprise anymore. “Either way, we have to meet her and get her to talk.”

“But visiting hours at the penitentiary are over, and we don’t have a rearrest warrant.”

“We’ll manage.” Echika checked there were no other vehicles driving by and stepped on the pedal again. “What about you, though? We had to stop the maintenance halfway through.”

“I’m fine. Department Head Angus can only tune my ‘outer shell’ anyway.”

After the meeting, Echika had knocked on the maintenance door and told Angus there was an emergency before taking Harold away. Angus was dumbfounded by this, so she made a note to apologize to him—but with the situation being what it was, they were very much racing against time.

Echika touched the isolation unit plugged into the back of her neck.

We have to hurry, before the Alliance cuts us off.

The private penitentiary soon came into view, sitting atop a hill overlooking the area. It was a gloomy building, surrounded by fences built around the foot of the hill. It was covered in snow at the moment, so it was mostly blurred out.

Echika could hear a faint sigh over the rumble of the car’s engine. She turned to Harold, who was digging his fingers into his forehead. Nothing she could have said would comfort him.

Upon their entering the prison grounds, a security Amicus softly tried to convince them to turn back, but Echika flashed her ID card to enter the parking lot. As soon as she got out of the share car, the incessant snow blocked her field of vision. It was already starting to pile up. Echika could only pray the motorway wouldn’t close before they took Lexie into custody.

“How are you going to take the professor out of here?” Harold asked.

“We’ll have to be smart about it and convince both her and the guards. Leaving her isn’t an option.”

Since Lexie had been able to openly participate in the meeting, the prison was clearly under the control of the Alliance. They couldn't afford to leave her here. The thought alone was enough to remind Echika of how dire the situation really was.

Echika and Harold entered the dark entrance hall, where a single prison guard stood at attention. He glanced at them with drowsy eyes and instantly said, "I'll show you the way," before turning on his heels. Echika exchanged dubious glances with Harold. They'd never called ahead and informed the penitentiary of their arrival, and of course, they weren't personally acquainted with this guard, either.

In other words...

"What about the improvements to the thought manipulation system? You started the testing phase on it, yes?"

"It's going well. Feels like I have a kingdom of my own to rule over."

Echika got chills. Did that mean the entire penitentiary was being used to facilitate thought manipulation system experiments?

"That explains things, honestly." Harold nodded. "When I was going through maintenance the other day, the professor was online. She told me she got along with the guards."

"Right..." A bitter taste lingered in Echika's mouth. "That much was true. She's getting along with them *swimmingly*."

After having lost Farasha Island as an experimentation ground, the Alliance must have decided to use the penitentiary as their next site. That would explain how Lexie was able to get an online environment. And since the other inmates weren't allowed to remove their isolation units, did that mean she was only experimenting on the guards?

This was so much to take in that it felt like there was a constant buzzing in her ears. Why was it that everywhere they went seemed to be firmly under the control of the Alliance?

"Investigator Hieda."

“I’m fine.” Echika shook her head, trying to regain her composure. “What?”

“If it’s all right with you, would you let me speak to the professor alone?” Harold was almost frighteningly calm. “The Alliance has likely predicted what we’ll do, so we can’t stay here for long even if we keep our GPS positions offline. I’ll keep my conversation brief and get her to follow me.”

Echika glanced at the Your Forma’s time display. It had been two hours since she’d logged out of the meeting. Harold was right—the Alliance had probably started a counterattack, and he was much more proficient at negotiating than she was.

“I’ll keep watch at the visiting room door, then. How long do you need?”

“Five minutes will do.”

The two nodded to each other and followed the guard.

The tasteless visiting room was reminiscent of a deserted cafeteria. As Harold stepped inside, the guard closed the door behind him. The LED ceiling lights were mostly out, casting a heavy gloom over the rows of tables. Only the table closest to the center of the room was lit up, as if under a spotlight shining down on an actor.

“—And here I was, expecting Investigator Hieda to come in.”

Sitting under that light was Professor Lexie Willow Carter, resting her chin against her hand. Her bright Brunette hair looked black under the poor lighting. Her prisoner’s uniform bared her neck, where the choker-type network isolation unit she’d had on the last time he’d seen her was now removed. In other words, she had no intention of even keeping up the act anymore.

“I had her wait outside.” Harold glanced at the guard. He was standing against the wall, a vacant look in his eyes, and he didn’t seem inclined to speak at all. “I thought I could convince you by myself.”

“What, did you assume I would tell Echika something she doesn’t need to know about your emotional engine? You’re overthinking things.”

Lexie gestured toward the chair across from her with a jerk of the chin, so

Harold approached it and took a seat. Once again, he faced his mother with an expression that was the very image of unhappiness. Her night-colored eyes fixed on him from behind her silver-rimmed glasses. As always, there wasn't a trace of guilt or conflicted emotion in her gaze.

Harold had realized a long time ago that she had long since discarded all semblance of ethics. But he always thought this stemmed from her partiality toward robotics, and he believed she didn't harbor any real lust for intellectual crimes.

But if she was part of the Alliance, then his evaluation of her was wrong.

"I didn't expect Greg would slip away from Totoki, being the dumb oaf that he is... But what really surprised me was Investigator Hieda masquerading as him. No one could even tell the difference!" Lexie chuckled, amused. "Steve's skills are as impressive as ever."

"When did you join the Alliance?" Harold cut to the chase.

Even with his emotional engine curtailed, there was a hint of scorn to his voice. He placed his right hand on the table, while stuffing his left hand—where he kept his wristwatch wearable terminal—into his pocket. He'd activated its recording application, just in case, and he needed to keep it out of Lexie's sight.

"Oh, don't glare at me like that. I'll blab. No point in hiding it anymore anyway." She shrugged like a child being scolded. "After I was incarcerated here, Talbot approached me to invite me into the Alliance. Though apparently, he didn't want to, and the higher-ups had to twist his arm into doing it."

His higher-ups—in other words, the still unknown ringleaders of the Alliance.

"Who are the ringleaders?"

"You know I can't answer that," she said, scoffing. "I've never met them."

Was she telling the truth? "Why did the 'higher-ups' want you?"

"They needed a skilled technician. They're trying out all sorts of things, not just the thought manipulation system." Given how the Alliance won over Farasha Island's investors, this did stand to reason. "And since I have to slog through this fifteen-year sentence, well, it makes sense I'd go along for the ride,

doesn't it? It's suffocating here—the work is monotonous, and the people are boring.”

“So you made this place your ‘kingdom’ to keep yourself entertained in prison?”

“Only recently. At first, the Alliance had me create a defensive cocoon for Mnemosynes, and I was focused on that. You heard about it in the meeting, right? The Mnemosyne bulwark.”

This was what the Mnemosyne muddling program installed in Talbot and Greg was called; Harold's theory about it being a unique defense mechanism wasn't off the mark. But even so.

“Professor, your field is robotics.”

“Well, I'm a genius, so I can handle anything.” Her explanation came across not as frivolous bragging but as an attempt to dodge the question. “Thanks to you guys messing things up at Farasha Island, improving the thought manipulation system became a priority, and I was relegated to that project.”

“And they turned this penitentiary into your new testing ground?”

“That was probably their idea, yes. A nice closed space, with no one looking in from the outside.”

Her words were fluent and indifferent, but something felt off to Harold. If Lexie had really helped the Alliance to escape the tedium of this place, she'd have broken out the moment she had the guards obeying her every word. But she hadn't done that, which felt oddly uncharacteristic of her.

“Were the bulwark and the thought manipulation system really that interesting to you?”

Lexie raised her brows. “What do you mean?”

“You're selfish and self-indulgent. You won't take on work that doesn't intrigue you.” Harold tried to read Lexie, peering into the face of the “mother” he'd never been able to analyze. “What's so appealing about this? As far as I know, you're not the kind of person who would derive pleasure from controlling people. Humans are not Amicus, and you care nothing for them.”

“People can change.” Lexie’s smile gradually melted away. “Oh, but yes... Now I remember. I always did hate this part of you.”

Lexie languidly took off her glasses and leaned against her chair. Unusually enough, she seemed to be choosing her next words carefully. The gaze of her upturned eyes felt utterly bottomless.

Silence. All he could hear was the distant hum of the air conditioning.

She was hiding something, he was sure of that, but he couldn’t read into what it was. Much like Echika, he’d never been able to fully understand Lexie, but this time, he couldn’t come up anything approaching a conclusion.

Was he becoming even more of a useless machine? Or was he overlooking something his system couldn’t possibly predict?

“By the way...how’s it going suppressing your emotional engine?”

Lexie put her glasses down on the table and blatantly changed the subject. Harold operated the terminal in his pocket and paused the recording.

“If you really decide that you don’t want your emotional engine, come to me and ask to have it removed again.”

What she’d told him the other day replayed in his memory.

“I don’t need your help, for the time being.”

“Oh, don’t get all stubborn on me.” Her white teeth flashed between her lips. “If I had a mirror here, I’d get you to see exactly how you look. It’s clear from your eyes that you’re trying to get me to talk. A machine with perfect control over its emotions wouldn’t make a face like that.”

It was a petty provocation. He could tell, to an irritating degree, that he wasn’t capable of fully suppressing his emotional engine. Ever since returning to the investigation, he’d been persistently trying to conduct himself like a mass-produced Amicus. To feel nothing, to think nothing, and to simply carry out necessary tasks.

And that had resulted in disaster.

The first time it happened was when Kai temporarily abducted Echika in the TFC. Once he realized she was taken hostage, his grip on the emotions he’d kept

so thoroughly suppressed momentarily slipped. And because his thought processing was so terribly delayed, he'd ended up pushing Bigga away when he hadn't intended to.

It got worse when he started working alongside Echika again. No matter how many times he would rewrite the code for his emotional engine, it would automatically repair and express itself against his will.

It felt like his entire core had been creaking and groaning this whole time. Still, to the vast majority of onlookers, his behavior hadn't seemed unusual yet.

"What do you want?" Harold shrugged off her words. "If your offer is for me to let you get away in exchange for removing my emotional engine, I don't accept."

"Do you take me for someone who'd say something that petty? I thought you'd know what I'm thinking already."

"Either way, Investigator Hieda will be taking you into custody." He intentionally refused. "Maybe you did so before your arrest, but right now, your Mnemosynes aren't tampered with. We'll Brain Dive and expose everything."

"And what if I'm using the Mnemosyne bulwark on myself?"

"Investigator Hieda can break through it. You've taken that into account, right?" Harold narrowed his eyes. He thought back to the video of the Alliance meeting. "Why did you lie to your fellow Alliance members and tell them the bulwark was completely impenetrable?"

Echika had been able to resist the Mnemosyne bulwark when she'd Brain Dived into Greg's Mnemosynes. It was only for a brief moment, but that was enough to allow her to learn about the Alliance meeting. Harold doubted that Lexie hadn't considered this possibility.

And indeed, the professor curled up her thin lips.

"It's simple. I lied because I was never on the same side as them."

"What do you...?"

Suddenly, Lexie half rose to her feet, grabbing the hems of Harold's coat with her smooth hands. Before he could shake her off, she pulled him closer.

Pressing her face close to his, she whispered like she was sharing a secret.

“I need your help, Harold.” Her two night-like eyes looked like they had become one. “Even when you feel like you can’t understand Investigator Hieda, you can’t help but feel fixated on her, right? I know what it feels like to be bound to something. I feel the same way.” Lexie flashed a smile devoid of warmth. “If you help me, I’ll tell you why I joined the Alliance. And I’ll pay you back in other ways, too. I can make it so you’ll perfectly understand everything about Investigator Hieda.”

His processing grew slower, and he struggled to grasp what she was saying. Understand everything about Echika? A terribly unpleasant prediction as to what that might mean flashed in his system.

“Don’t tell me you’re thinking of making her cooperate with you by using the thought manipulation system on her?”

“No, that’s not it. There’s a simpler, more thorough way of solving this issue.”

“I refuse.” Harold grabbed Lexie by the wrist. “I can see you have some kind of plan in mind. You can tell me all about it when you’re in our custody.”

“You’re planning on taking me away from here by force? That won’t end well for you.”

Choosing to ignore her, Harold got to his feet while binding her wrist. She’d already said what he needed to hear. All that remained was to take her into custody. But then Lexie took her other hand and dug her nails into the back of Harold’s hand with more force than one would expect from a woman.

“I’ll say it one more time, Harold.” Her expression grew chillingly cold, like emptiness given form. “Help me out. If you refuse, I’ll *expose the neuromimetic system* to the world.”

What an incoherent threat.

Harold was wordless with disbelief. The reason Lexie had gone to prison in the first place was to defend the RF Models’ secret—the neuromimetic system. She’d testified that Marvin and Steve only became belligerent and attacked people because she’d installed them with code to make them go berserk. She took the blame to end the incident so she could keep the investigation and the

IAEC away from the truth.

And now, in spite of all that, she was saying she would expose everything.

“If you’re going to bluff, Professor, you could stand to make your threats more convincing.”

“This isn’t a bluff. It’s your choice to make, and at this point, it’s got nothing to do with me.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about. If you expose the secret, your prison term will likely be extended to a life sentence.”

Even if the Alliance could get her off, Lexie would be forever branded a criminal who’d broken International AI Operations Laws. She had nothing to gain and everything to lose from this—on a fundamental level, this was contradictory.

The professor, however, remained composed.

“If the system is exposed, you’ll be locked up in Novae Robotics Inc., where you and Steve will be scrapped. You’ll never see Darya or Investigator Hieda again. Are you sure that’s what you want?”

Was she, too, under the control of the thought manipulation system?

That thought came to mind. If Lexie was in a position similar to Talbot’s, the odds of that were low, but not altogether impossible, and it would explain why she was acting so inconsistently.

“I’m sorry, Professor, but we’ll be taking you into custody to examine your Your Forma.”

“So you think I’m under thought manipulation?” Lexie snickered scornfully. “I guess your observation skills aren’t up to snuff, Harold. You’re becoming more human and incomplete. What made you like this?”

“Say whatever you’d like.”

“This is your final chance. Help me.”

“I refuse.” Harold repeated. “Professor, you’re coming with us.”

“That right? Well, I figured this might happen, but...I’m still disappointed...”

Her nails, which had been stabbed into his hand the whole time, loosened with almost anticlimactic ease. Lexie's gaze wandered up to the ceiling, like she was gazing up at the stars in the night sky. She stretched out her hand and waved it through the air. Maybe she was working her Your Forma, or perhaps she'd seen some kind of illusion

"I still can't grasp the concept of gratitude, but even so, I'm 'grateful' to you."

Lexie whispered this to no one in particular, her lips curling into a blissful smile.

A victorious smile.

No.

Something utterly irrational sent a jolt of intuition through Harold's system—this wasn't thought manipulation. What was it, then? He knew he was overlooking something, but he couldn't come up with a logical answer on the spot. But something about that smile gave him a strong sense of déjà vu.

Why?

The next question slipped naturally from Harold's lips.

"Are you really the professor?"

Her eyes, that starless black, drifted to look at him.

And then, in place of an answer, a vivid gunshot tore through the dark.



A single gunshot shook the visiting room.

Echika, who had been waiting in the hall outside, pushed the door open in a panic. She swiftly drew the automatic pistol holstered on her leg, but before she could take aim, there was another gunshot. The prison guard slid down the dim wall, having shot at his own temple.

Echika looked on, stunned.

What happened here?

“Investigator, call for an ambulance, quick.”

Harold’s voice pulled her out of her shock. The Amicus was kneeling on the floor, with the dim lighting casting a glow over a table covered in blood. Silver-rimmed glasses were sitting on it. Echika approached the desk, pulled in by the sight, and then she saw it.

The person lying under the desk.

Echika gasped. Lexie was lying faceup, unconscious. Her eyes, just barely open but unfocused, stared into the air, and a crimson flower was blooming from her stomach. Harold was desperately pressing his hands against the wound, trying to keep the blood from gushing out.

“The guard shot her from behind all of a sudden.” The Amicus looked like he was focusing on staying calm. “He’s under thought manipulation system. Professor Lexie refused to come along, so I suspect she tried using the guard to kill herself.”

The shock made her woozy, and she nearly pounced on Harold to hit him.

Are you joking? She really went that far just to avoid testifying against the Alliance?

“I’ll call an ambulance.” Echika took off the isolation unit, trying to ignore how fast her heart was beating. Having her whereabouts discovered was a concern, but given the situation, she had to risk it. “Aide Lucraft, are you all right?”

“A stray bullet skimmed me, that’s all. The shot went through the professor’s stomach. If we don’t hurry—”

“I know!”

Echika dialed 999 emergency services in an audio call. They picked up at once, and she gave the location of the penitentiary and the patient’s condition. The person on the other end of the line said it would take the ambulance crew ten minutes to arrive. The guard likely wouldn’t make it, and it was questionable if Lexie would last that long, too. The bleeding was already severe. A chill ran down Echika’s spine as she thought of the worst possible outcome.

She'd completely failed to anticipate that Lexie might attempt suicide, despite the fact that Napolov had tried to do the same.

We can't afford to lose Lexie here.

"I made the call." Echika hung up and turned to Harold. "I'll go outside and wait for the ambulance. You stay here and keep applying pressure to—"

<Urgent update required. Please tap to confirm immediately>

A Your Forma notification popped up in the center of her field of vision. Filled with intense irritation, she tried to dismiss the notification by swiping it away, but it was the kind that wouldn't close unless inspected.

Oh, just buzz off!

She opened it for lack of choice, and then—suddenly, lines of unfamiliar code filled her eyes. They rushed in, hiding everything from sight. It was so intense, Echika staggered back a step or two. This wasn't a software update. Was this a virus attack disguised as one, or some kind of hacking? She shuddered, goose bumps washing over her, but it didn't look like her Your Forma was in any danger of crashing.

Still confused, she read the title of the tab that was outputting this massive packet of code...only for her mind to go blank with shock.

<Novae Robotics Inc. Developed Amicus/RF Model/neuromimetic system, all system code>

What the hell...? This can't be.

"Investigator?" Harold called out to her, confused. "Did something happen?"

Echika could hardly hear him. If the code had been distributed as an emergency update, was it sent by the Your Forma's developer, Rig City? But there was no rational reason why Rig City, as an organization, would do this. Had someone hacked them, then? Given the timing, was it the Alliance? For what purpose? Did they know about the secret of the RF Models?

Calm down.

There was no guarantee this was real, after all. The only ones who knew about the RF Models' neuromimetic system were Lexie and Aidan Farman. The code could very well be fake. If this was sent to rattle her, then losing her nerve now would be a mistake.

"Can you hear me?" Harold asked again. "Investigator Hieda, what happened?"

"Someone cracked Rig City," Echika said, trying to remain as collected as possible. "They took over the management system and leaked code that's supposed to be your neuromimetic system to the Your Forma. It's probably a fake meant to corner us—"

But her words melted away in shock—because Harold looked up at her with an unstimulating gaze. There was no surprise or unrest in his lakelike eyes. Not even a hint of those emotions.

No. It can't be.

"It isn't a fake," the Amicus said clearly through his shapely lips. "Professor Lexie threatened me earlier. She said if I didn't help her, she'd expose the secret of the RF Models."

Echika's mouth fell open, but she couldn't immediately speak. "What—?"

"I thought it was a bold-faced lie, but...apparently, she was prepared to do just that."

It was completely impossible—it had to be a bluff. As Echika there in shock, something Lexie had once told her crossed her mind.

"If you do change your mind, I don't particularly mind if you publish the truth."

Echika always assumed the professor had only said that on a whim, since it wasn't a logical thing to say for someone in her position. However.

"There's something I realized a bit earlier. It's probably not that big of a deal."

Was that, in fact, what she'd always intended?

Everything grew distant, as though she was operating someone else's body

through the other side of a telephoto lens. She couldn't open the window that popped up, which continued to transmit the RF Models' system code.

Echika didn't know how many people could meaningfully understand or decipher this code. But if Rig City's management system had been temporarily hijacked to transmit it—

and if this wasn't all just a terrible daydream—

then every Your Forma user across the globe just saw this in real time.

What was Lexie thinking? If all she wanted was to escape interrogation, she shouldn't have needed to expose the neuromimetic system to the entire world. Still, now wasn't the time for speculation. What was going to happen? The worst-case scenario streaked through her mind like a bolt of lightning. No. Not that. Never...

"Get up."

Echika grabbed Harold's arm, spurred by emotion.

"No." The Amicus wouldn't let go of Lexie. "We have to stop the bleeding."

"When your system just got leaked to every Your Forma user?" Her voice came out raspier than she knew it could be. "Hurry up and get out of here. Go to a technologically restricted zone, or anywhere else where they won't find you. Otherwise, you'll—"

"Investigator, have you forgotten why we decided to keep our distance from each other?"

Dread crept up her body.

"If my secret ends up getting exposed to the public, don't try to hide it for me."

Right. They'd gone their separate ways to protect each other. So that now, when this came to pass, Harold wouldn't get Echika caught up in what happened, and she'd pretend to respect his choice so her feelings wouldn't be exposed. She'd grabbed Harold's arm on a whim, but that on its own was a breach of that promise, an act that would reduce all their efforts to nothing.

What she was doing right now was incredibly discourteous.

Echika finally released Harold's arm, like she'd just remembered how she was supposed to be acting.

"I'll tell you where the professor is hospitalized later, so for the time being, you should get away from here." The Amicus's eyes looked as artificial as ever. "For all we know, this indictment might be part of the Alliance's plan. And if it is, they'll try to pinpoint your whereabouts in the chaos that ensues. This could be the first phase in a plan to eliminate everyone."

Cook had suggested killing Echika and the others and making it look like an accident. But even so, it didn't take a genius to know what might happen to Harold if she left him here. The ambulance crew set to arrive at the prison would likely know about the RF Models' system code. Sooner or later, he'd be made public.

But even so, if she was to respect Harold's wishes, the right thing to do would be to do nothing. Even if she were to be interrogated about the RF Models' system code, she'd have to insist she was clueless, and if they tried to look into her Mnemosynes, she would have to doctor and wipe them. That was all she could do for him now.

And yet.

Echika's legs refused to budge, like they were frozen in place. A clear premonition kept gnawing at the edge of her heart—she knew that if she walked away now, there would always be a wall between her and Harold when they were together. At worst, this could be the last time she ever saw him.

Over the course of this last month, she'd stuffed her feelings into a glass bottle and corked them up. Humans couldn't process things as swiftly as an Amicus could, but they could still adapt and get used to any situation or environment. It was always like this. No matter how suffocating her circumstances, she would eventually grow used to them. It had been like this when her mother left her, when her father refused to love her, and when she would fry the brains of her previous aides during a Dive.

So she could let even this flow by. Turn all her emotions into memories and let everything go. In fact, she'd been ready to do this when she finished her Brain Dive into Greg.

But that was all based on the premise of Harold spending his days in safety. If she couldn't protect his secret, it would all be pointless.

"You are always such an utterly hopeless person."

Harold's emotionless whisper pulled Echika out of her thoughts. The Amicus took off his coat and tied it so as to apply pressure to Lexie's stomach. Then he got up and instantly grabbed Echika's arm with his bloodstained hands. His grip was so tight that she couldn't shake him off, and it made her heart shudder. He started walking out of the room, dragging Echika along.

"Stop." She tried to struggle, but he wouldn't budge. "Aide Lucraft, don't!"

"I keep telling you, I'm an investigation support Amicus now."

Her attempts at resistance were in vain, and he hauled her out of the room. He pulled her along the corridor the guard had escorted them down and then out the entrance. Once they were outside, Echika was buffeted by a cold, prickling wind. The hilltop penitentiary offered a view of the slope and the attached stairs leading to the parking lot. On the other side of the fence surrounding the premises, Echika saw blue emergency lights approaching along the driveway, partially obscured by the snowfall. That must have been the ambulance she called.

What do I do? How do I get out of this?!

"Go on, Investigator."

Harold finally released his grip on Echika's arm. He pushed her along, sending her stumbling a few steps forward. The Amicus stood opposite her, his eyes meeting hers.

"My greatest wish is to not see you get involved in this anymore." This machine, in all its supposed emotionlessness, furrowed his brows like he was suppressing something. "And if you claim to be my friend, you'll respect that."

Echika gritted her teeth. Despite the fact they were nothing more than colleagues, Harold had chosen this moment to call her his friend. She knew, of course, that he'd deliberately chosen that word to coax her into doing what he wanted. She could empathize with him—excruciatingly so; she likely would have done the same had she been in his shoes.

Walking away from Harold here and now would be the final gesture of respect she could make for him.

That was the only way to honor the last vestiges of mutual respect that lingered between them, even with their relationship broken as it was. She couldn't let her selfish emotions take control.

Just tighten the cork on that glass bottle one last time. That's all you have to do.

"...Fine."

Echika blew that one word onto the snowy wind, but it was loud enough for the Amicus's audio receptors to pick up on. Harold nodded. The wind toyed with his blond hair, brushing it against his eyes, which seemed to narrow with a hint of pain.

"Thank you." His voice was serene, in stark contrast with his expression. "I'm glad...I got to meet you."

It sounded almost absurdly forced. Echika bit the inside of her lips hard enough to draw blood.

I can't...force the cork in.

"I have...only one request."

"We don't have time."

As she spoke, Echika spread out her arms awkwardly. The wind blew into her sleeves, which were red with Lexie's blood. She knew she was doing something extremely uncharacteristic; maybe that was why she was trembling slightly.

Still, this was her only option.

"Could you, um... Could you hug me?"

Harold's eyes widened for a second. Distressed as she was, Echika couldn't tell if it was from scorn or pure surprise. She'd fully expected him to refuse, or maybe realize what she was thinking—but as those thoughts raced through her mind, the Amicus stepped forward and reached out to her. His decisiveness caught Echika by surprise.

There were no words. Harold silently, softly embraced Echika. It was a confused hug—he brought his hands to her back but didn't touch it directly, like he was afraid of something. Despite the circumstances, she thought back to how they'd reunited at the Pulkovo Airport roundabout after the sensory crime incident. It was the first time she'd seen Harold in months, and he'd hugged her without reservation.

Compared to that, he was quite careful this time. She could hardly feel the Amicus's low body heat. Any excuse would have worked—so long as it got him within arm's reach of her.

“...Thank you.”

Echika stood on tiptoe, wrapping an arm around Harold's neck. For a moment, the Amicus stiffened—but then, she *touched the force shutdown thermal sensor* on the back of his neck.

Forgive me.

Harold tried to pull away when he realized what she was doing, but it was too late.

“Echika—”

Harold couldn't finish his sentence. The shutdown sequence kicked in, and the Amicus lost the ability to remain on his feet and fell into her arms. Echika managed to catch him. As she wobbled a little from the momentum of his fall, she peered into the Amicus's handsome face against her shoulder. His eyes were closing like he was going to sleep.

There's no going back from this.

She had done something terrible; she'd trampled all over Harold's feelings. And yet...

Echika breathed out a puff of white breath, trying to calm her racing heart. Even so, she wanted him to run.

She had to make sure he escaped.

“What is this?! Some kind of hacking?!” Bigga called out shrilly inside the cramped space of the share car.

She’d taken off her isolation unit to contact Totoki, but when she opened the emergency update that was sent to her Your Forma, a bunch of meaningless code started flowing nonstop. The tab read *Novae Robotics Inc. Developed Amicus/RF Model/neuromimetic system, all system code.*

“Well, one thing’s for sure—a Rig City system got hit.”

Fokine turned the steering wheel and pulled over to the side of the road. Driving even a semiautomatic was dangerous with all this data running in his field of vision. There weren’t many cars on the streets of London this late, but they could see a few other cars making emergency stops in front of them, too. Drunk pedestrians were looking up and shouting incoherently. Bigga opened her car window a crack and heard shouts along the lines of “Someone’s sending me some weird program!” and “What is this, some kind of bug?!”

Time lag aside, it seemed like everyone was getting the same thing.

“Is this an attack from the Alliance?”

“Even if it is, would they target all the Your Forma users in the world just to get to us?” Fokine couldn’t hide his confusion. “This looks like some kind of Novae Robotics Inc. company secret... Bigga, close the window.”

At his urging, she quickly dismissed the window. They’d just seen Investigator Gardener die to the hornet at the London branch, so it wouldn’t hurt to be cautious. They were already trying hard to keep themselves calm in the face of the terror gripping them.

But then they got a call notification.

<Conference call from Ui Totoki>

✱

“Steve, I’m sorry, but I need you to go through some emergency maintenance.”

Novae Robotics Inc.’s technology ward’s Special Development Department—

Steve had been brought into the maintenance room and now lay inside the analysis pod. Department Head Angus was working a tablet plugged into the pod, looking very pale and alarmed, for some reason.

After Echika left, Steve had entered the empty warehouse prepared for him in the Novae Robotics Inc.'s technology ward, the same as every night. He'd returned to this room—where he was locked up, now that he was operational—where many devices took in all sorts of data.

The things he'd seen in the Alliance meeting had come as a major shock, so he'd decided to go into sleep mode to sort out his memory. But then Angus came in and ordered him to go to the maintenance room. It was past one AM, a time when Angus would normally be at home in the Amicitia District, which was adjacent to the office.

"When I close the hatch, you'll automatically go into forced shutdown, all right?"

"Understood." Steve nodded but was still uncertain. "Did something happen?"

Angus visibly gulped. He was a sincere man, for better or worse, and was terrible at maintaining a poker face—his behavior implied something bad had happened.

Steve thought back to the meeting, where Lexie had played the role of F. Had Echika and Harold visited her already? When had she joined the Alliance? No, this wasn't of much importance anymore. Either way, if Lexie was involved with the thought manipulation system, she must have known that Taylor had developed it.

How did she feel, then, looking at her "son" locked inside Novae Robotics Inc.'s cage for trying to protect Taylor?

"No, nothing," Angus answered. "I just remembered I forgot to tune something during your maintenance. It's a full-blown issue, so I need you in the analysis pod to check..."

"My self-diagnostics say all my functions are operating normally."

"Steve."

“I just want to know, Department Head Angus.”

Steve waited for Angus’s reply, but the man kept his mouth shut in a brooding manner, refusing to answer. Just then, he moved his hand to close the hatch. He was trying to lock Steve in, like he was afraid of being attacked by an animal that had gotten caught in a trap.

Steve swiftly stuck out his arm over the edge of the pod, preventing it from closing.

“Stop it!” Angus let out a scream. “I have to shut you down!”

His attitude alone told the whole story. Someone must have told Angus the truth about the RF Models. Steve increased the operation rate of his artificial muscles, forcing the half-closed hatch open. Angus cowered, retreating back against the wall. When Steve got out of the pod, Angus raised his arms in submission but made no sign of running. He wasn’t just sincere; he was also highly responsible.

“Department Head.” Steve got out of the pod unflinchingly. “I have no intention of hurting you. Please, just answer my question.”

“I never knew. I really didn’t—”

“Who told you about the neuromimetic system?”

Angus squeezed his eyes shut in resignation. Three hoarse words escaped his lips, more breath than speech.

“I don’t know.”

He didn’t know?

“It must have been some kind of hack. It was sent through a Your Forma update.” He continued gasping for air. “It included your surface-level system code, the one we always worked on, along with the neuromimetic system... And I know that coding style. It’s Professor Lexie’s. It’s not fake... It even says how you’re connected to the neuromimetic system.”

Most people wouldn’t have been able to read or make sense of it, and yet.

“I think...every Your Forma user is seeing this.”

Steve listened to his explanation impassively. There was no surprise or unrest anymore—no matter the leaker’s motivations, Steve had known that his secret wouldn’t last forever. If anything, it was a miracle it had stayed under wraps this long, given how dangerous it was. Though if it were up to him, he would have liked to see the thought manipulation system disposed of, if only to clean up the messes he’d left behind.

Nevertheless, he’d been prepared for this to eventuality.

“The IAEC called me earlier.” Angus went so pale he looked like a corpse. “They told me to shut down the RF Models and analyze them right away... Steve, maybe you never knew about it at all, and I know what I’m saying here is awful. But right now, you and Harold are something society deems illegal.”

Steve’s absent younger brother crossed his mind. Unlike him, Harold still had lingering regrets. He wanted to expose the killer who’d murdered a member of his family. And then there was Echika Hieda, too.

There’s no familial love between us.

He and Harold didn’t have anything that corresponded to the human definition of filial piety. This feeling was simply a consequence of his system projecting onto a unit of the same model as him.

“If you have to shut me down, then shut me down, but leave Harold out of this.”

“I can’t.” Angus shook his head right away. This wasn’t much of a surprise. “We’re looking for him, too. We’ve lost his GPS position, but Novae Robotics Inc. is determined to find him—”

“No deal, then.”

Steve grabbed the cables connected to the pod and tore them off with ease. Angus’s face twisted in terror as he watched Steve pull them along like ropes.

“I must retract my previous statement, Department Head. I may end up hurting you now after all.”

“Stop. We looked after you all this time. If you kill me—”

“I never said I’d kill you. All I’m doing is dragging you to the negotiation

table.”

Steve slowly stepped forward, and then he saw Angus swiftly draw out a pistol he had hidden in his belt.



“I see you two are still fine. Do you know where Hieda and Lucraft are?”

As they sat in their share car parked on the side of the London street, Bigga and Fokine connected to Totoki’s conference call. The two exchanged puzzled glances at her first question.

“Didn’t Hieda and Harold go to secure Professor Lexie?”

“Yes. They should have had her in custody by now, but I can’t get in touch with them.”

What?

From what Bigga had heard from Fokine, the Alliance planned to have Echika and the others disposed of. And indeed, they’d done just that to Gardener in the office. Because of that, she had a sinking feeling about Echika and Harold, but she tried to keep it in check and calm down. They didn’t know for sure that something had happened to them.

“Maybe it’s taking them time to get Lexie into custody, and she still has her isolation unit on?” Fokine suggested, but his face was clearly pale. “Ah, but that doesn’t explain why Harold isn’t picking up...”

“There’s a chance the Alliance contacted them.” The tension in Totoki’s voice made Bigga’s heart race with anxiety. **“Also, Department Head Angus called me about the system code we just saw.”**

“Did the Alliance do that?” Fokine asked.

“We don’t know yet. But that really is Aide Lucraft’s system code,” Totoki said nervously. **“We need to find him and take him back to Novae Robotics Inc. right away.”**

Huh?

In a daze, Bigga stared out into the street through the windshield. The

headlights shone through the snow, exposing the road covered in wire tracks.

Harold's an illegal model? That makes no sense...!

"Er, but isn't that weird?" The words left her lips before she knew it. "If this was true, they'd have seen it in maintenance or something, right? If they hadn't said anything about it before, then why are they saying it now, all of a sudden?"

"I don't know the details. Department Head Angus is going to analyze Steve, who's the same model, to confirm the validity of the leak... Did Lucraft tell you anything about this?"

"No." Bigga could only shake her head.

"First I've heard of this." Fokine seemed skeptical. "He was always a next-generation model, right? I know he's very high performance or something, but... calling him illegal doesn't sound right to me."

"Yes." Totoki calmly brushed his words away. "I wonder what Hieda thinks. Do you think she knew?"

"I think if she'd have known, she'd have reported it to you right away. Ms. Hieda's very serious about her work..."

Bigga thought back to what Hansa had messaged her about the other day. Echika was a smart investigator. If Harold was doing something illegal, she wouldn't just stay quiet about it. She was loyal to her job, and even if she did sometimes let her emotions get the better of her, she wasn't the type to break the law. And despite that—

"It's exactly like you thought."

She couldn't keep her heart from flooding with anxiety. What if that wasn't a mistake? What if Echika did, in fact, know Harold was illegal? Wouldn't that make for a good enough motive?

"Bigga?"

"What's wrong?" Totoki and Fokine both asked.

Her mouth was hanging half-open; she felt like she shouldn't say anything. This was just speculation, and saying it aloud would mean making her suspicions reality. For all that had happened between them, Echika was still a

close friend of hers, and Harold meant a lot to her, too.

But in the end—neither of them had told Bigga anything, had they?

No. It's because there was nothing to tell. They're innocent, so they didn't tell me anything. Harold isn't an illegal Amicus in the first place. But if Echika did know, then why did both of them...?

She couldn't tell anymore.

"Bigga." Fokine placed a hand on her shoulder, which made her realize she was holding her breath. "Hey, you all right?"

"I'm fine." Bigga swallowed a little. The concern was making her eyes feel warm. "This is probably...just me getting the wrong idea, and maybe this isn't Ms. Hieda's at all..."

"Calm down, Bigga." Totoki's voice was soft. **"What did Hieda have?"**

Bigga clutched at her chest, like she was holding on to something. Maybe it wasn't her place to speak on this...

"...A Mnemosyne-modifying HSB."

An oppressive silence filled the car. Fokine's grasp on her shoulder tightened. She was instantly hit with intense regret, concluding she should have kept that information to herself.

"Um." Bigga carried on, so as to not be crushed by the anxiety. "It was inside Ms. Hieda's necklace... It looked a little suspicious, so I sent it to a bio-hacker friend of mine to have him look into it. And he found—"

"When did this happen?" Totoki asked her. **"Why didn't you tell me at the time?"**

"I'm sorry, no!" She moaned in apology. "It's just, I didn't think it was important, because—"

"It's okay, calm down. So...you gave that necklace back to Hieda?"

"Yes. It looked like it meant a lot to her, so I thought I should give it back as soon as possible..."

She'd replaced the Mnemosyne-modifying HSB with an identical-looking one,

since she didn't know how long she would have to wait until Hansa gave the original back. If there was nothing wrong with it, she would have given it back and apologized earnestly. The fact that she'd never told Echika about this did leave a hint of concern in Bigga's heart, but that had turned out to be overly optimistic of her.

She thought it was all a misunderstanding. Some part of her still wanted to believe that.

"Do you think Ms. Hieda was set up, just like you were?" She said this so quickly that even she realized how unnatural it sounded. "It must be a mistake. Why would she ever have anything like—?"

"That's enough, Bigga." Totoki softly cut her off. **"You're right, I wasn't questioning why she always wore that necklace, but yes..."** It sounded like she was talking to herself. **"I have to speak to the London Metro Police, so I can't do anything about it right now. At worst, this will have to wait until morning."**

Bigga got a very bad feeling.

"Chief." Bigga leaned in, despite knowing Totoki couldn't see her. "Listen, um, I—"

"Investigator Fokine, make sure Bigga is safe in a hotel, and then go to the police station in Ashford to confirm what they found. Depending on the situation, the London Metro Police might get involved."

Fokine visibly gritted his teeth. "Understood."

No. Stop. Don't suspect them. I don't want to suspect them.

Keeping that internal scream from leaving her lips took all Bigga had. Then Totoki issued an order in a voice that was clear, yet more suppressed than Bigga had ever heard from her:

"We have to find Hieda and Lucraft. No matter what."

YOUR FORMA

Epilogue
Hang Up

Epilogue

Hang Up

Southern Scotland was covered in a layer of white.

The outskirts of Glasgow—the area near Loch Lomond, in the vicinity of Drymen, was a verdant nature reserve designated as a technologically restricted zone. The pastures that stretched in every direction were now covered in a blanket of snow, making the one container block hotel seem all the more boorish by comparison.

Next up is a new song by an indie band from Edinburgh—

This hotel had been created by repurposing old shipping containers, and its amenities were all outdated and anachronistic. Echika reached over to the antique radio that looked less like an appliance and more like a fossil and switched it off. Through the thin glass window, she watched the unmaintained road. A faded pickup truck tottered by with difficulty.

“Guess news of the neuromimetic system hasn’t reached an area like this one.”

It would have been nice to have a television, at least. Echika pulled the curtain and turned around. The cramped room barely managed to fit a small fridge and two beds. Harold was sitting on the bed closest to the front door.

“Amicus and Your Forma are irrelevant in technologically restricted zones. If it did make the news at all, it was probably a small article in the corner of the morning paper.”

He was leaning forward, resting his elbows on his knees, and refusing to look up at her. He’d been like this ever since she reactivated him. Despite how angry he must have been at her, the Amicus was frighteningly composed.

She would have preferred he lashed out at her.

It'd been one night since Echika had activated Harold's forced shutdown and made her daring escape. She'd put him into a share car and had driven off without looking back. She'd changed cars a few times, making for a technologically limited zone, eventually finding her way to Scotland. Once dawn broke and the sun started rising, she decided to stop at the first hotel she could find for a break.

During checkin, she'd put on a knitted hat and scarf to hide her features, but looking back on it now, that might not have been necessary. Time here seemed to be at a standstill.

"...You wanna eat something?" Echika picked up the room service menu off the fridge. "They've got fish and chips and kebab. It's probably all microwave food, though."

"I'm good. Go ahead and eat."

Harold's retort was brief and indifferent, and he refused to look at her again. Despite having had nothing to eat or drink since the night before, Echika didn't feel hungry at all. And just like last night, her drowsiness was eclipsed by her feelings of alarm.

She put the menu back in its place and sat on her bed. The hard mattress didn't feel like it was at all capable of alleviating fatigue. She reached for the back of her neck and touched the isolation unit there.

Just what was going on *outside* right now? Since all her avenues of communication were shut off right now, she had no idea what the others were doing. Had Lexie survived after they left her in the prison? How far had news coverage of the neuromimetic system spread? Darya must have heard it, of course, but so would the IAEC. In which case, was Steve all right?

Totoki was probably already looking for her. Or maybe not, given that she'd needed to give the Alliance's pursuers the slip. And what about Fokine and Bigga? And were the Gardener father and son all right...?

Echika rubbed her cheeks with her hands, feeling like her head might burst with thoughts. Right now, the most important thing to think about was what

came next. The hum of the central heating had started filling the room. For some reason, it took a great deal of courage for her to break the heavy silence hanging between them.

“I have...a few ideas.” Echika broached the matter, but Harold remained unresponsive. She carried on, pretending like it didn’t bother her. “The first one is, we need to get somewhere that’ll be harder for people to find us. Like an island... I looked into it, and there’s a ferry to the Shetland Islands in Aberdeen. Amicus inspections should be laxer on a boat than they are on planes, and they’re more forgiving as to what you can bring on board. Once we get to the islands, you can pose as a human, and we’ll buy a house in an inconspicuous place.”

He remained silent.

“The second one is getting your body exchanged. I don’t know if it’s possible, but... If we can change your appearance entirely, nobody would be able to tell who you are. Unlike humans, you don’t have personal data, and if we do that, you’d be able to live without needing to hide. The question is how to do it, but... I’ll find a skilled technician, one way or another. And I’ll cover the costs, somehow.”

The Amicus remained tight-lipped.

“And my third plan.” Echika carried on, pretending she didn’t notice. “We can fake your death to stop the physical investigations. Basically the same thing Lexie did with Marvin... We’ll prepare another Amicus body and set it up to be discovered publicly. If we can get everyone to believe it, no one will go after you anymore. In fact, we might even make the accusations against you look fake—”

Echika fell quiet because Harold slowly raised a hand to silence her. He noiselessly exhaled an artificial breath and shook his head. It was a gesture of utter weariness.

“I reject all of those and suggest a fourth idea: Change your mind and go back to London. You might be able to protest your innocence.”

Echika knew that was the right thing to do to begin with. She sucked on the inside of her lower lip.

“If you really think so...why aren’t you dragging me back to London right now?”

“Because so long as you’re not satisfied with the solution, you might just shut me down again.” Harold’s gaze traced the scratches on the wall. “I’ll admit I was surprised. I never knew you could be so cunning.”

Realizing this was a sarcastic remark about the hug, Echika felt her cheeks flush. “I...”

“I actually considered giving you the slip and returning to London on my own,” the Amicus said indifferently. “But if I did that, you would probably admit your crimes to the bureau to get yourself arrested. And you’d spend your entire time in court insisting I’m safe and should be restarted... Absurd.”

“You’re thinking too highly of yourself.” This was only half a bluff. “If that happened, even I would give up.”

“Given the things you’ve done so far, I find that statement painfully unconvincing.”

“You’ve got the wrong impression, then.”

“Echika.” His eyes, which he’d insisted on keeping away from her thus far, fixed on her directly. “You have single-handedly dashed everything we worked for this past month.”

The look in his eyes was clearly warped. This was the old him—not the passively friendly facade of a mass-produced Amicus that he’d adopted recently, but the delicate, rich expression one would expect of an RF Model.

“I’ve been suppressing my emotional engine.” He spoke in self-derision. “Kept my distance from you, all to make it better. And it would have worked. And yet you...”

Harold’s anger was justified. She’d forced him along, knowing full well he would be upset with her. She’d done it *because* she knew.

“I know you don’t want this, but... Right now, that’s not what I want to talk about.”

“For me, that’s all that’s important.”

“We still haven’t found Detective Sozon’s killer.” She knew this was a cowardly card to play but did so anyway. “The way things are now, you won’t be able to track down the culprit. You’ll never stop regretting it.”

“I haven’t given up on that, of course. But things being the way they are, I can’t exactly go looking for Sozon’s killer. And you using it as a reason to keep me from running is nothing short of excessive meddling.” He prattled on and on. The way he was acting made him seem more like a young human male than ever before. “I’ve already told you this, but I can’t understand how you feel. Are there any words to describe it but ‘fixation’ and ‘obsession’? I am not some plush toy to cling to for comfort.”

“I know that.”

“Then stop it, Echika.”

“I know this is walking all over your feelings, but...”

“No, you don’t understand anything. That’s why you won’t respect my wishes.”

“Maybe, but that’s not what’s going on here. Besides, it’s not like you’re one to talk—”

You don’t know how I feel at all.

No, I can’t.

If I say that, this’ll all be for nothing.

The words clawed all the way up to her throat, but she sank them before they could turn to sound. Harold kept his eyes fixed on her. Echika bit her lower lip, trying to keep the words suppressed.

“I’m not one to talk?” The Amicus’s cold voice stabbed into her like an icy dagger. “Go on, finish that sentence.”

“...I’m getting something to drink.”

Echika hung her head and got off the bed. She snatched the jacket hanging on the wall—she’d picked it up from a recycle box on the way here—and took her knit hat and scarf. She left the room, trying to escape Harold’s question.

Outside their room was an open-air corridor shared with all the other containers. The intense snowfall the night prior had come to a near-standstill, with only a bit of snow lazily sprinkling down from the sky. Echika walked quickly, pulling the cap almost down to her eyes and putting on the scarf so as to hide her features. She walked past the section of the complex where the containers were lined up and over to the prefabricated front desk office.

All the while, she was trying to think through a mind clouded by fatigue. She didn't want to argue with Harold like that; she wanted to discuss what they were going to do next. Should she have locked him somewhere and gone back to London by herself? Prove that the neuromimetic system was fake and that he was a perfectly legal Amicus? Hope that as time went by, Harold would eventually see where she was coming from?

Absurd. It was all nothing but foolish delusions. Realistically speaking, Department Head Angus or someone else at Novae Robotics Inc. probably had already analyzed Steve, providing proof to back the validity of the leak. The IAEC, no doubt, was already making its move. Totoki and the others must have already realized that Echika and Harold had become fugitives.

There was nowhere left to run.

It felt like the floor had vanished under her feet and that she was about to plummet into the abyss. Echika shook her head, trying to banish that thought. There had to be some way out. Something, anything...

When she entered the prefabricated front desk area, hot, stagnant air enveloped her. The spacious room included a front desk for checkin purposes, vending machines, and a shower room. But then Echika stopped in her tracks.

"The London police ordered a search. Do you have a guest with an Amicus that looks like this?"

"An Amicus? Sir, you do know this is a technologically limited zone, right?"

Two officers were standing at the front desk, their backs turned to her. They were probably with the local police. They held up a tablet, which they used to show an image to a man.

Time here seemed to be at a standstill?

As if.

Echika instantly turned on her heels and left the prefabricated building, trying her hardest to not make a sound. She didn't know if the officers had turned around to look at her. She was too scared to make sure. Echika hadn't brought Harold when she'd checked in. She simply asked for a room for two, so the person manning the desk didn't know anything.

Her steps grew quicker until she eventually broke into a run. Of course, she didn't know for sure that the officers were looking for Harold, but given the situation, assuming this was some other Amicus felt overly optimistic. As their container came into view, she desperately lunged at the door, yanking it open. This made her realize she'd forgotten to lock it behind her when she'd left, but that wasn't important now. Harold was still sitting on the bed.

"Get ready to leave, now." Echika pulled her down jacket from the wall. "We have to get out of here."

The Amicus raised his head, realizing something was wrong. "What happened?"

"There are officers at the front desk. Probably looking for you."

As Harold got up, she shoved the jacket into his arms. He didn't take it, so Echika spread it out in a hurry and stood on tiptoe to pull it over his shoulders. His arms weren't in the sleeves, and the hood was pulled down to cover his face.

The Amicus's lakelike eyes narrowed only slightly. "Where to next?"

"I haven't decided yet, but we have to hurry. We'll be in trouble if they start checking rooms."

"What about the charge for the room?"

He was worried about that now?! "I already paid it."

This time, Echika grabbed Harold by the arm and pulled him out of the container. He followed without a fuss. Maybe he'd already resigned himself to whatever would come, or maybe he just felt like he was humoring a child's whims.

She couldn't shake the feeling that she was acting more and more ridiculously.

In the end, Echika decided to go to Aberdeen and sail to the Shetland Islands. She got Harold in a share car and drove north up the one-lane country road. Unchanging farmland that seemed to stretch forever sailed past the windows. When they got to a town called Dunblane, the road became wider, with more lanes. Even after getting on the main thoroughfare, she kept her speed up. At three in the afternoon, the sun was beginning to set, and the snow grew stronger.

The trip was thankfully a smooth one, with no pursuers in sight. The only issue was that neither of them said a word the entire time. An unfamiliar acoustic guitar tune playing on the car stereo was the only sound to break the silence. Echika felt like everything would fall apart the moment they next spoke. That inexplicable fear crept over her, threatening to grab her by the back of her neck.

The change happened just when they were about to get on Forfar Junction, an hour or so away from Aberdeen. The road was slightly congested due to a traffic regulation stop. The area was enveloped by the dusk sky, and cars stopped in the jam one by one, their taillights flashing in irritation. Their car, too, was inevitably caught in it.

Why now, when we're in a hurry?

Echika changed the radio stations but didn't hear any reports of traffic restrictions. Stifling a sigh, she leaned against the steering wheel. She was concerned about the car running out of power, too.

She snuck a glance at Harold, who was in the passenger's seat. He was sitting there calmly, the hood of his coat hanging over his face. He seemed to be looking at the lights of houses in the distance, just barely visible through the snow. But then, suddenly, she heard his artificial breathing. He took a quiet, deep breath.

"There was a time, once...when I thought, What would it be like if I were human?"

This was the first time he'd spoken since their last exchange at the container hotel. Despite him speaking, everything didn't instantly fall apart. All it did was make the air tremble, ever so slightly.

"It was when I was being held captive. Not by you, but by Aidan Farman." Harold kept his eyes fixed on the scenery. "If I were human, I wouldn't have to run and hide now. I wouldn't have gotten you involved in this, either. And not just that..." He trailed off, then continued. "So many things would have gone better."

Echika could only guess at what he meant by "so many things."

"...Would you have preferred to be human?"

"Sometimes I'm not sure." His voice was far too calm for it to come across as a complaint. "This secret has been hounding me for so long. And I've never found myself thinking 'I wish I was made this way.'"

What would be the right thing to say here? Echika didn't know, and so all she could do was grip the steering wheel. Lexie had given the RF Models the neuromimetic system. One could easily say she'd created them only to satisfy her curiosity. And that the karma of her choice passed from one thing to another, leading to this moment.

Over the next ten minutes, the flow of cars moved forward and stopped a few times. The junction was finally coming into view. But at the same time, revolving lights flashed ahead, and Echika saw police officers standing by the road. She stiffened, her heart skipping a beat.

"A checkpoint."

This was why there hadn't been any reports of a traffic jam. She'd assumed the officers only showed up at the hotel because there was an area-wide search going on. But it was possible the local police forces already had some idea that Echika was in the area. Or maybe the officers just spotted her at the hotel.

She should have been more careful, stayed off the highways.

"End of the line, it seems," Harold said, all too easily. "Let's say I coerced you into coming along with me. When you get to the bureau, testify that you didn't know about the neuromimetic system."

Echika ignored his suggestion, pulling up the scarf over her mouth so as to hide the isolation unit on the back of her neck. It was already dark, and so long as they didn't make out her features, maybe they wouldn't realize who she was. She opened the glove box and took out the Flamma 15, stuffing it into her jacket pocket.

"Echika." Harold's expression turned severe. "What are you thinking?"

"It's just in case. I won't shoot, so stay quiet."

Following the row of cars ahead, Echika hit the brakes. She saw five officers at a glance. She looked over to the lane on the right, which was sectioned off by a line of safety cones but otherwise empty of vehicles. An officer was approaching her from straight ahead. He motioned with his hand for her to lower the window, which she complied with. If she could talk her way out of this peacefully, that would be for the best. But her heart was thumping so fast, she felt like it might burst.

"Pardon me, ma'am," the young male officer said, peering into the car. "A share car, yes? Where are you coming from?"

"Manchester," she replied, trying not to sound nervous and shrill.

"Sightseeing?"

"No. I got a call from a hospital saying my mother collapsed. She's in Aberdeen." She could tell the cop's gaze was moving to the passenger's seat, but Harold's features were hidden by the hood. "That's my brother. Pardon, he's very tired and fell asleep..."

"Very well. I'll just need to see some identification, and you're good to go."

"I'm sorry, I left my ID at home. I rushed out here as soon as I heard about my mother..."

The officer shook his head. "Keep in mind that driving without your license counts as a violation. Are you sure?"

"Yes, I understand. I'll pay the fine—"

Echika fell silent there. Through the windshield, she could see an investigator clad in a down coat approaching. A Russian with curly brown hair.

You're joking.

The officers at the hotel did say the London branch had ordered a search, and Totoki did say she'd turn to the London branch after the problems with the Alliance...

Still, this was the worst possible timing.

"Have all the share cars move here," Investigator Fokine said, then placed a hand on the roof of the car before leaning in to talk to her. "Excuse me, miss, could you pull over at the junction there—?"

Echika's eyes met his.

No.

Just as Fokine reached out his arms, Echika stomped on the accelerator.

"Hieda!"

Ignoring his order to stop, she drove the share car away from the lane full of vehicles. Knocking away the cones, she slid out from the inspection lane and made for the junction's exit. A few officers leaped out of a couple police cars pulled over at the side of the road. No good. Echika turned the steering wheel, slipping by narrowly without running over anyone.

"Chief Totoki really is brilliant," Harold commented, looking behind them. "I think you should give up already."

She ignored him, driving out of the junction into a one-lane, narrow country road. She heard sirens blare. In the rearview mirror, she saw police cars giving chase, warning lights flashing. The drivers seemed to be local police, not Fokine.

"Echika." Harold raised his voice, losing his patience. "Stop it already!"

"I told you to stay quiet!"

The Amicus reached over to grab the steering wheel, but she slapped his hand away. She drove down the road, relying on the dying streetlamps' light for guidance. The road was so narrow that if a car came from the opposite direction, there wouldn't be enough room to drive past it. She drove by a barn, the warning lights of the police cars still flashing in her rearview mirror. The officers were shouting some kind of warning at her through their loudspeakers,

but she ignored it.

Echika drove through the snowy pasture, no destination in mind. She took the occasional turn, losing track of where she was going. The warning lights gradually became distant, distant but the police were still doggedly giving chase. They had no intention of letting up.

Just go away! Please, just leave us alone!

Forty minutes had passed since they'd gotten out of the junction. The next thing she knew, the car was almost out of battery, and it let out a series of loud warning beeps. But Echika kept driving. She couldn't afford to stop. When the charge finally ran dry, the share car was in front of a mountain community. A nearby sign read CAIRNGORMS NATIONAL PARK. She glanced at the rearview mirror, but there were no warning lights in sight. Still, it was only a matter of time until the police caught up to them.

"Get out." Echika said, taking off the seat belt. "We need to find another car."

"I doubt we'll find a share car in a small village like this one."

Echika and Harold got out of the vehicle, and she walked off while pulling him by the sleeve. The snow covering the ground was beginning to freeze in conjunction with the dropping temperature. The lights of civilian homes in the distance were the only sources of illumination in the dark. Once the police arrived, they would no doubt start questioning the people here. So the best course of action would be to remain unseen.

As they walked, trying to avoid any civilian homes, they wandered onto a road surrounded by deciduous trees, now covered in white. Like Harold said, there wasn't even a parking lot in sight, to say nothing of share cars. After a while, they found a sign announcing they were on a footpath, and the road split off in two. Echika went right. The snow fell nonstop, its flakes fluttering down ceaselessly, even coating her eyelashes. The fallen snow on the ground grew deeper, reaching as high as her calves. Everything was getting hazy. She couldn't tell if it was because of the cold penetrating her entire body or if she'd pushed herself past her limits.

This feeling of being beaten by the snow and dazed was something she'd experienced once before. At the time, she'd been under an illusion produced by

her Your Forma, and she was all alone, at that.

Before long, they were walking on an unpaved trail. The avenue of deciduous trees opened up, and the trees nearby were all tall larches. The peaks of the mountains lording over the scenery looked down on her, black like the shadows of the night clinging to them. She could hear running water from somewhere nearby. Maybe there was a stream close by that wasn't frozen.

Suddenly, her grip on Harold's sleeve came undone, and Echika stumbled. She instinctively reached out, placing a hand on a tree trunk to stabilize herself. It was only at this point that she realized she was shaking. Yet she still turned around, resolved to pull Harold along by the sleeve again. However—

"Echika."

The Amicus grabbed Echika by the wrist before she could reach out to him again, stopping her. With his other hand, he pulled off the hood covering his face, revealing his handsome features under the moonlight.

"Let's go back. You won't last like this."

"I'm fine." Her lips were numb with cold. "We have to keep going—"

"Go where? We can keep pushing on, but we won't get anywhere."

Harold glanced ahead, and Echika slowly, wearily turned around to follow his gaze. Past the dark, closed larch forest was only darkness. No roads, no people, no houses. Nothing. Only the entrance to the mountains was there, like a gaping mouth hanging open to swallow them.

It really was, for all intents and purposes, a dead end.

"I understand how you feel," Harold said, his tone changing completely, growing suddenly gentle. "That's good enough."

"No it's not."

"Echika."

"It's...it's not good enough for me."

She mustered strength she didn't have to shake off Harold's grasp. She stumbled a few steps back, only to freeze when she heard the echoing of

someone's voice. It sounded like angry shouting. It must have been the police. They were closing in on them sooner than she'd expected.

No. Don't. Stay away. Just stop. Why? Why does this have to happen?

She clenched her teeth hard, grinding them together. What did Harold ever do wrong? He'd never asked for any of this. The things he was given at the very beginning of his existence just happened to exceed the framework of what was allowed. That was all. Just as Harold had said, how good it would be if he were human. If he were, they wouldn't need to run like this. And yet—

If he were human, I would definitely...

Something like rage swelled up within her, pressing on her heart. A lump of emotions she couldn't contain—anger, hatred, irritation, sorrow—threatened to suffocate her. And she wished it would actually choke her—better to drown here and never have to think of all of this ever again.

She knew this was all hopeless. She stumbled back, retreating from Harold.

"Echika?"

He looked at her with concerned confusion.

If we're going to get caught here anyway.

Echika reflexively yanked off her necklace, forcing the nitro case open. Its lid fell off in the process, but it didn't matter. She took off the isolation unit from the back of her neck and made to plug in the Mnemosyne-modifying HSB.

"No!"

Harold stepped toward her, hurrying to grab Echika's arm in an attempt to stop her from plugging in the HSB. But he was too late. The HSB was already in the connection port on the back of her neck. But Harold didn't stop, yanking it out of her and throwing it away.

"What are you thinking?!" He grabbed her by the shoulders and shook. "Farman and Talbot lost their minds after that HSB was used on them! What if you ended up debilitated, too—?"

But his words didn't register in Echika's ears. All she could focus on was the Your Forma pop-up message floating in her field of vision, the finality of its

message searing into her mind.

<Empty HSB device detected. Please choose what to do with this device>

What is this?

It couldn't be an empty device—this had to be the Mnemosyne-modifying HSB Professor Lexie had given her. And yet—

The realization hit her like something cold and slimy had just slithered down her spine.

"I should give this back to you."

Was it Bigga?

The moment she realized what had happened, she felt all the force drain from her body. Her lips curled despite herself, and a sound escaped her lips, something between a sob and laughter.

I'm such a complete and utter idiot. In the end, I can't do anything. I'm like a child, disrupting things and throwing tantrums.

"Echika? Hang on!"

"I'm fine." She couldn't suppress that self-derisive smile. "The old HSB got switched with an empty one, at some point..."

Harold let go of her shoulders, unable to hide his surprise. Echika couldn't stand on her feet and placed a hand on a tree trunk to support herself. The hard bark poked against her fingers, but it frankly didn't matter. The nitro-case necklace dangled limply on her chest, lighter than before and missing its lid.

It's not like Harold ever asked me for help. The whole time, I was doing all of this just to satisfy my own ego. But even so...

I accomplished...nothing.

She could hear the officers' voices closing in. She could see flashlight beams approaching from the other side of the larch trees. Their time was running out.

"I'm sorry." Echika blew out a puff of white smoke. The air was so cold, it stung her skin, and only now did she notice that she'd been crying. There was no stopping it now. "I just wanted...to protect you somehow. That's why... But

in the end, I didn't do anything..."

"Like I said earlier, this was enough for me." Harold turned around, too, noticing the lights. "They're going to arrest me now, but I don't intend to remain in shutdown mode forever. I have to find Sozon's killer. So this is only temporary."

Was he saying this because he had some kind of plan in mind, or just to put Echika at ease? Either way, it didn't make for much comfort.

"Echika, listen to me." Harold touched placed his hand on her shoulder again. With his other hand, he wiped her cheeks with his fingertips, like he was consoling a crying infant. "You need to testify to Chief Totoki that you were being threatened by Professor Lexie and me. Tell her we forced that HSB on you. Don't let them Brain Dive into you, no matter what. It'll just make your position worse."

"I don't care about that anymore..."

"I'll figure something out." His lakelike eyes were terribly calm. "So please, don't reduce all of my efforts to nothing. I want you to promise you'll respect me this time."

Echika could only understand half of what Harold was saying. She shook her head vaguely. She knew the way she'd been acting had been unreasonable. But she couldn't contain herself. This was a nightmare, a bad dream. Even this late into the game, the impulse surged up in her. Because if things kept going down this path, he really would—

Up until now, she'd kept giving up on things. So many things. Humans can get used to anything, be it scorn or dislike or solitude. But despite all that, Harold had just appeared out of the blue and changed everything for her.

So she knew she was doing this out of conceit and self-interest, and yet—he was the first person she'd felt this way about. And so—

"No." A breath choked with tears spilled into the air. "I can't do that. You have to run. Hurry up and go. I'll buy you time, so—"

"Please, be reasonable." Harold tightened his grip on her shoulder. "You got better after giving Matoi up, so this time—"

“This isn’t like Matoi.” How many times had they had this exchange?
“Please!”

“You’ll be fine.”

“Harold, run!”

“Believe in yourself.”

“That’s not what this is about. I just don’t want to lose you.”

“And I appreciate that, but—”

“—I’m saying you’re more important to me than anything!”

For a second, it felt like every particle in the air around them froze in place. Harold was shocked into silence, his eyes wide. But even the sight of him in this moment was muddled by her tear-smudged eyes. His outline was vague, and it was hard to tell what he looked like. Her thoughts were just as jumbled as what she was seeing, and she had no idea what to do.

“Sorry.” Echika said with a sob she couldn’t hold back. The glass bottle in her heart had long since shattered to pieces and was beyond repair. “But... It’s how I really feel. You’re the most important thing in the world to me. You matter more than anything, so I—”

Aaah. I’ve ruined everything.

The effort she’d made to put distance between them. The pains she’d taken to let him go. It all turned out to be meaningless. Ultimately, she’d forced her selfish, impure delusions onto him. She’d made a show of how unsightly she was—like she always did. All she did was fail, and things never, ever improved. She wanted to be better, more eloquent about this, to be a good person who thought of what would be to Harold’s benefit.

But all she did was cause him more trouble.

“I’m so selfish, in everything I do... I’m really so sorry.”

She could hear the footsteps of the officers crunching into the snow as they approached. The beams of the flashlights were brushing against the trees, looking for them. She managed to blink, shedding the layer of tears clouding her eyes, and saw Harold’s face clearly.

He simply gazed at her, shock on his handsome countenance. His hand stayed in place on her shoulder. His lips, somewhat ajar, trembled slightly.

“I...”

But this time, the beam of a flashlight spilled directly on Echika and Harold.

“You two, hands in the air!”

Several officers emerged from the trees. Harold stirred, snapping out of his surprise. He acted so swiftly, it was hard to believe he’d been absentminded just a second ago. The next thing she knew, he’d snatched the automatic pistol from her pocket and pulled Echika’s arms behind her back.

What are you doing?

Now it was Echika’s turn to be shocked.

“Stop. Get any closer, and I’ll shoot her.”

Harold said this loudly, pressing the pistol’s muzzle to Echika’s neck. The safety was on, but the officers couldn’t see that in the dark. They all flinched for a second but then raised their own pistols. Echika finally realized.

“Let’s say I coerced you into coming along with me.”

Are you joking? I never agreed to this idea.

“Harold Lucraft, drop your weapon and let her go!”

“You have nowhere to run!”

“HQ, come in. This is the mountain search team. We’ve tracked the target down. He’s holding Investigator Hieda hostage—”

The officers’ expressions were clearly warped with fear. They were shaken at seeing an Amicus turn violent and go out of control for the first time. The neuromimetic system was already seen as too dangerous, and Harold had only worsened its image by doing this.

“No!” Echika tried to shout that it was a misunderstanding. “I’m—!”

But Harold slapped a hand over her mouth, silencing her. He was serious. Echika tried to look up at him, but his grip on her was so strong, she couldn't even manage that. Even if she tried to bite his hand, he could just switch off his pain receptors and ignore it. Any attempt to struggle would be in vain.

"I'm sorry." Harold whispered so only she could hear it. "But don't forget our promise."

No. I can't.

Everything went black with despair.

"Harold!"

A familiar voice cut into their exchange, making Echika jerk—Investigator Fokine walked into the officers' encirclement. He, too, was holding up his automatic pistol and breathing heavily, but there was clear hesitation in his eyes.

"How very devoted of you, Investigator. Prioritizing the search for me while the matter of the Alliance still hasn't been settled." Harold taunted him calmly. "Did Chief Totoki negotiate with the London Met to get the local police to help?"

"The Alliance can't lay a hand on us so long as we have their backing." Fokine licked his lips. "Were you threatening Echika the whole time to get her to cooperate? Holding her hostage?"

"Yes, since I have no intention of being shut down." The Amicus didn't change his expression. "If you want her back safely, prepare a car without any GPS tracking and promise you won't go after me."

"We're not going to comply with your demands. You know that."

"You're fine with me shooting the investigator, then?"

"You wouldn't do that."

"So you're expecting a heartless machine to have a sense of morals?"

"This is your final warning," Fokine said, half in plea. "Please. Throw away your gun."

Harold stood there calmly, not stirring, but this was long enough of a pause for the surrounding officers to interpret this as a sign of hesitation. He carefully moved the gun away from Echika, instead pointing it at Fokine as he let go of his hold on her. Echika felt the Amicus, who her back had been pressed up against all this time, push her away.

And then an earsplitting gunshot shook the air.

Wait.

Echika turned around and saw Harold fall to his knees in the snow. Inky circulatory fluid dripped from the gunshot wound on his thigh, dyeing the snow black. There was a group of officers moving in from the trees in another direction. Harold's hand went limp, releasing the automatic pistol.

"Stop, don't shoot!" Fokine shouted. "Secure the target, hurry!"

The officers all charged in. A few of them ran past Echika, forcing Harold, who wasn't resisting anymore, to the ground and grabbing him by the back of his neck. The thermal sensor activated his forced shutdown sequence, and the light drained from the Amicus's eyes. The urge to shout at them to stop reached as far as Echika's throat. And yet—

"Don't reduce all of my efforts to nothing. I want you to promise you'll respect me this time."

You really are a coward, you know that?

Echika went limp and fell to her knees. Fokine hurried over and placed a hand on her shoulder.

"Hieda, are you hurt?" He asked.

"The hostage is unharmed!" another officer called out. "Someone get her a blanket!"

But all the shouting felt like it passed through her bones, draining powerlessly from her body into the ground.

The snow kept falling. With each speck, all manner of color and sound faded from the world, and everything ground to a halt. She could see, between the larches, the officers who'd suppressed Harold rising to their feet. The Amicus

lying facedown in the snow didn't so much as stir anymore, looking almost like a defenseless corpse.

Afterword

You have my deepest gratitude for picking up this volume. While our dual protagonists are at odds, the side characters got to play a major role this time. I planned many things for Totoki's and Fokine's moments but couldn't fit them all in... I'd like to include those parts in some way if the opportunity presents itself in the future.

My thanks to Yoshida, my editor. It's hard to believe we've gotten as far as Volume 6. I always appreciate the love you have for Bigga.

To my illustrator, Tsubata Nozaki: As always, all I can do is praise your art. Thank you so much. Seeing your illustrations always fills me with bottomless cheer.

To Yoshinori Kisaragi, the manga-ka writing the manga version: Thank you for always working so hard on Echika. I know the manga version is approaching its climax, but do look after your own health as you work.

Lastly, as announced during Dengeki Bunko's stream event in July, my book series is going to be localized in English. I'm deeply grateful. The fact that I was given this opportunity when I know my literary style is far from the norm is thanks to all you readers reading and endorsing this series. Please look forward to the next volume in the story.

June 2023, Mareho Kikuishi

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