

AMALGAM HOUND

Criminal Investigation Bureau: Special Investigation Unit



2

Midori Komai

Illustration by: Domino Ozaki

We young light of soul
I dig, using hottest fire
To the stars, we spread on
But our own way strake. To the stars

AMALGAM HOUND

Criminal Investigation Bureau:

Special Investigation Unit

2



Midori Komai

Illustration by: Domino Ozaki

AMALGAM HOUND 2

Criminal Investigation Bureau:
Special Investigation Unit

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Chapter 3	The Plot Proceeds, Provoking White-Crested Waves
Chapter 4	The Strategic Weapon That Is the White Hound

Illustration by: *Midori Komai*
Domino Ozaki

A M A L G A M H O U N D



Emma, surrounded by boxes of evidence, cradled her head in her hands. She'd gone through every item in the boxes and all the documents on the case, but there was nothing that connected Price to Rorenciad.

"There's no point in digging any deeper into the Price angle. Which leaves me with...this video?"

The one that Tobias said was the real thing. She watched it intently again from the start.

When Tobias stepped into the interrogation room, Havel Price jumped and then shrank back. Tobias laid out photos of the Brouwers' bodies and kept a close eye on Price's face.

"Quite a nasty bit of work." Tobias glared at Price from across the table. "You do *this* to the husband and wife, and then you go after their *baby*. I mean, a helpless *baby*."

"I didn't" Price shouted, louder now.

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"The formal military dress was the right choice.
It will awe people more than a tuxedo."

"So long as it cuts down on
the amount of time I have to
spend with idiots."

Theo was in formal military dress, his dark red hair slicked back. While the outfit was the very picture of a straitlaced military man, combined with the stern expression on his face and his ramrod posture, gallant and imposing won out over stiff and ceremonious. Eleven was in a sleeveless pleated dress, her silver hair tied up elegantly. Her shoulders were bare, while black opera gloves covered most of her arms. She had the innocence of a girl and an air of mystery; her gaze seemed more assured than her youthful appearance would suggest, making her age unclear. The pair stepped forward into the hall, arms intimately linked, drawing the eyes of many a passenger.

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Criminal Investigation Bureau: Special Investigation Unit

Midori Komai

Illustration by:
Domino Ozaki

Vol.

2


New York

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Amalgam Hound Vol. 2

Criminal Investigation Bureau: Special Investigation Unit Midori Komai

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AMALGAM HOUND SOSAKYOKU KEIJIBU TOKUSOHAN Vol. 2

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Chapter 1

Remains Buried in the White Sand

AMALGAM HOUND

**Criminal Investigation Bureau:
Special Investigation Unit**

Roaring flames. Glittering red gemstone. The hand of a girl pushing through the sand, grabbing hold for dear life, rescued from the fire for the first time. A scene he would never forget.

“Penny for your thoughts? You look glum,” the girl said, her arms wrapped in long opera gloves, hands resting neatly one atop the other. The sea breeze toyed with her white-blond hair, and her black heels clacked against the wood of the deck.

The man beside her responded with a sigh. “And you look like you’re having the time of your life.”

“Well, it would be rude to *not* enjoy a precious moment like this.” She smiled, gray eyes shining. The cheeks of a passing server flushed, and he froze for a moment, but she paid this no mind as she walked leisurely forward with the man, her pleated navy dress fluttering in the wind.

The man leaned against the railing of the bridge and looked back at the brightly adorned deck, hunching into himself slightly.

They were not the only ones enjoying a quiet moment in the still of the evening. Families and couples filled the deck, taking in the music and the sound of the waves, drinks in one hand. Although they were on vacation, many of them were dressed up in formal wear rather than casual clothing, perhaps for the welcome party in the main hall. The man grew depressed as he realized he was now a part of this crowd, and he sighed again.

“How am I supposed to enjoy this?” he said. “I mean, who knows when we’ll be found out?”

“If that happens,” the girl replied, “you can just use that military uniform and your serious face to smooth it all over.”

The man automatically looked down at the Adastrah military dress uniform he wore. The insignia on his shoulders quickly communicated his rank of corporal. Given his outfit, he might have actually drawn unwanted attention if he had seemed comfortable in a situation like this.

The girl’s smile grew wider, and she slipped an arm through his as she leaned against him. “The sea breeze really is lovely, but maybe we should head to the

main hall. I've been looking forward to going to the party with you."

"...Is the target here?" he asked, lowering his voice.

"No. Everyone here looks quite content, after all. Wouldn't make good customers."

At a glance, the man and the girl appeared to be nothing other than a couple gazing at each other lovingly.

"Their sense of loss is not great enough for Gino Camicia to target them," the girl continued, her voice flat.

"...True. They look happy. Good for them," the man replied quietly, and then he started walking arm in arm with the girl. He watched her exchange a friendly smile with the waitstaff as they passed. "So all I have to do is specify a personality, and you change this much, hmm?" he murmured.

"That is what we Hounds do. How about you pick a personality for your partner already?" The girl grinned at him and smoothed down hair ruffled by the breeze.

In the main hall of the passenger ship, the many guests chatted happily. There were civilians from the three countries along the cruise route who were traveling for pleasure, and important people from the worlds of politics and industry. The man narrowed his eyes at the attendees, who were dressed in a variety of formal wear—tuxedos, gowns, military uniforms.

He and the girl would capture Gino Camicia on this ship. It was their sole purpose for setting foot in this place.

One week earlier

The tunnel reverberated with the sound of feet intent on escape. Money spilled from the pockets of the man panting for breath, but he ignored the loss of his ill-gotten gains, his worn sneakers slapping against the ground.

Theo Starling chased him at full speed, gun in hand. "Stop! If you don't stop, I'll shoot!" he yelled angrily. If the man made it out of the tunnel, he could climb the fence and escape onto the highway.

But the target did not stop. Left with no choice, Theo dropped to one knee,

steadied his aim, and pulled the trigger.

The sharp sound of a gunshot echoed in the tunnel, and the bullet pierced the man's leg below the knee. Instead of blood, however, gears and bits of metal scattered on the ground.

"A synthetic!" Theo clicked his tongue in annoyance and immediately gave chase.

The man pushed forward frantically, almost tripping over himself as he headed for the bright beam of light at the end of the gloomy tunnel. Theo heard his hoarse laughter. The man clearly thought he was sure to get away now that he'd made it that far.

But the instant he set foot into the light, something dropped down from above, and he slammed into the ground, crushed. He kicked and flailed wildly and pulled out a knife in desperation. But before he could move to attack, a heel stomped on his hand and pinned him firmly to the ground. Perhaps the man realized at last that it was pointless to resist—he went limp and stayed quiet. He heaved for breath, coughing occasionally.

Theo finally caught up, paused to take a few deep breaths himself, and then contacted the local police via his wireless.

"We've secured the perpetrator," he told them. "Tunnel, east exit. Send a car." As he ended the call, he turned his gaze on the person holding the man down.

The slender girl's thin limbs appeared immature still, like those of a young boy, and she very much did not look as if she should have been able to easily restrain a grown man. Her white-blond hair caught the light of the sun and shone with a complex luster. Her lean legs were slim as willow branches, but they held the man down securely. After she disarmed the man, the girl looked up at Theo with ash-gray eyes.

"Nice work, Theo," she said coolly.

"I can't believe you caught up over that mountain path." He shook his head. "You did good, Eleven."

The girl—Eleven—blinked in response, then yanked the man to his feet. Theo

slipped handcuffs onto his wrists, while the man stared at Eleven standing before him, bathed in sunlight, and his jaw dropped. Money was still falling out of his pockets.

“You an angel?” He gasped. “What happened to yer wings?”

“Don’t be an idiot. Come on.” Theo tugged at the man and headed for the police car pulling up at the east exit of the tunnel. The man cried out theatrically in pain, and Theo told him to put a sock in it as he handed him over to the local police. Eleven obediently followed a half step behind him.

Theo watched as the man was stuffed into the police car, then he turned back to Eleven. Her head just barely reached his shoulder, so she was always forced to look up at him. Today, once again, her ash-colored eyes stared at him intently. He felt a certain relief in the sameness of it.

“You were pretty sprightly back there,” he remarked. “Made a full recovery at last, then?”

“Yes. I apologize for the wait,” she replied. “I have returned to regular duties as of today.”

“Very glad to hear it. Allow me to formally welcome you back, Eleven.”

“Thank you, Theo.”

He patted her head, which was at exactly the right height, and Eleven let him do as he pleased.

“What is this ‘pat’ for?” she asked.

“What indeed,” he mused. “Maybe for a job well done?”

Eleven straightened her mussed hair and appeared to consider the meaning of his words. He felt as if it had been a long time since he’d seen this sight, and he chuckled to himself.

It was no wonder the man they’d arrested had mistaken her for an angel. Exquisitely proportioned, doll-like face; unusual white-blond hair; gray eyes; the slender, androgynous physique of a young teen. All of it added up to something that seemed beyond human.

And it made sense. She was a special model of the automagiton Amalgam

that the nation of Adastrah had developed for use exclusively on the battlefield. Called Hounds by those in the know, to distinguish them from regular Amalgams, they were secret weapons used in every domain. Eleven was, of course, the eleventh of these Hounds. At present, she was affiliated with the Criminal Investigation Bureau's Detective Operations, investigating Amalgam-related crimes.

And for Theo, she was his one and only partner.

That spring, a day had been set aside for the peace memorial ceremony across Adastrah, after the long continental war. Delverro, the city where Theo and his team were based, also took part in this celebration.

But during the ceremony, the radical Roremclad cult attacked, leading to the deaths of many people. For their assault on the city, Roremclad came with not only armed soldiers but also independently developed Amalgams. Theo and his team moved frantically to try saving as many civilian lives as possible, and Eleven used herself as bait to lure all the Amalgams to a powerful incinerator and was burned to ash together with them.

But she was a special model, and mere incinerator flames could not destroy her. Battered and beaten, she made it back to Theo, who nearly fainted at how incredible the whole thing was. He was so dizzyed by everything that had happened to Eleven, he hadn't been able to even move, but this was apparently just how Hounds were.

Still, Eleven's body had been totaled, and she could never have put herself back together quickly enough with her own regeneration abilities, so she wasn't able to immediately return to the bureau. Instead, she returned to the R&D lab, where specialists performed the necessary repair work and then kept her for a period of observation before she was finally able to go back to work.

In the meantime, the days passed, and the temperatures grew hotter. Summer had come to the city of Delverro.

"Honestly, that guy's a piece of work," Theo muttered as he returned to his car.

Half a step behind him, Eleven said, "Perhaps, given that he at least did not have Amalgams, 'not bad' is applicable here?"

“Be that as it may...this case is simply too horrible.”

Theo’s mind turned to the victim and the family, and when he thought about how he was supposed to write up a report on this, he let out a sigh.

Eleven’s first case back on the job was somewhat complicated. The man they’d arrested in the tunnel had been posing as a go-between for an adoption agency; he’d arranged the adoptions of infants who didn’t actually exist, swindling the victims out of large sums of money under the guise of various adoption fees.

The man would meet the family to pick up this money, and then he’d explain to them that their first meeting with the child would have to be through a window, for the infant’s sake. But instead of an actual baby, he would show them a 3D video through the glass. The many families he deceived in this way were unable to adopt through more formal administrative agencies, and their hearts leaped at this faint ray of hope until they discovered they had been tricked, leaving them deeply hurt.

The con itself was plenty nasty, but the story didn’t end there.

The man’s only involvement with the families was as an adoption agent. A couple collaborating with him were the ones who initially approached the victims and brought them to the con artist. In order to gain prospective parents’ trust and drag them into the scam, this couple told potential victims about how they had adopted an infant with the con artist’s help. Absolutely ruthless.

But two days earlier, the couple had been found dead. A family showed up for a scheduled meeting with the couple, only to discover their corpses. The bodies were badly damaged—the wife, in particular, had her stomach ripped open—and their adopted baby had disappeared. At first, the local police suspected an animal, but no saliva or anything similar was detected on the bodies.

Corpses eaten into. But no saliva.

When Theo and his team heard this detail, they couldn’t help but recall the unpleasant memory of the attack on the peace memorial ceremony. Amalgams had preyed upon people they came across. Which meant that many families were forced to bury empty caskets, unable to find any remains to put in them.

Theo and his team were on the alert, with the assumption that this case might also involve an Amalgam preying on human beings, but they had yet to find any proof.

“...We’re going back to the office.” Theo grabbed hold of the steering wheel and set the car in motion. “I want to take another look at all the data.”

“Understood. I’ll inform Emma and Tobias.”

Eleven pulled out her cell phone. Theo had finally forced her to carry one because she needed her own way to communicate with everyone, but she was still awkward with the device.

He glanced over at her as she clumsily fumbled with it, and a smile rose on his face. She’d made real progress since he stopped simply making the calls himself, which he’d done because it was faster that way.

“You know,” Theo said, “it’s a relief that you’re bad at some things, too. This time, I hope your message gets to them before we do.”

“The issue is with the mobile device,” Eleven protested. “It is operable by synthetic fingers, yet it doesn’t respond to the flesh of an Amalgam. Which is weird. Even when I mimic human fingers, it fails to respond...”

“Yeah, yeah.”

Theo let this go and turned the corner. When hacking by sorcerers became an issue, anti-magic measures for cell phones were significantly enhanced, and it appeared that these measures were a serious barrier for Amalgams. Magical weapons canceled mobile operations and thus prevented Eleven from creating a message, so she was forced to start all over again.

“...Smooth operation would be possible if I was fused with the device, however,” Eleven pointed out.

“Come on, now. You have to master it as a human being.” Theo laughed out loud at the magical weapon’s unexpected weakness.



When they returned to the Detective Operations office at the Criminal Investigation Bureau’s Delverro branch, their colleagues on the special

Amalgam investigation team, Tobias Hillmyna and Emma Canary, were already poring over the case files.

Emma greeted Theo and Eleven with a smile. “Glad to see you back in one piece.”

“Didn’t get a lot from the trip, though,” Theo replied ruefully. “This everything that was seized from the suspect’s house?”

Tobias finished laying out the articles from the box of evidence and glanced back at the board with their investigation materials pinned to it. “Looks like it,” he said. “I hope we can get something more when we question him. This case has too many unknowns.”

Theo nodded in agreement as he looked at the photos and notes posted on the board. “Havel Price is the ringleader of the scam targeting families looking to adopt. He acted as an agent for adoptions of nonexistent infants, took a steep fee to do so, and then ran off with the money. Again and again.”

Price was a man with an honest-looking face. A sprinkling of pins on a map of Adastrah marked his route. Because he did each fake adoption in a different location, the local jurisdiction also changed, and no one had realized that the individual fraud cases were in fact the work of a single perpetrator.

Emma swept her blond hair and Society of Sorcerers cape aside as she flipped through the documents. “Price pretended he was looking for families to adopt abandoned children and made contact with his victims. At the interview location, he would tell the family that they’d get to meet the child, but he actually just showed them a 3D video through a window. The victims were also permitted to film during the meeting, so they never suspected that what they were being shown was a simple video...”

“Price’s single, never married. No children, no history of work in a medical facility,” said Tobias. “Originally targeted investors. Kept his scams below the radar of the Criminal Investigation Bureau. He might have the know-how to skip around the country and erase his tracks, but there’s no way he knows how to get hold of a bunch of kids. Which is why investigators suspected the existence of collaborators.”

Tobias sighed and pinned forensics photos to the board so that a picture of

the Brouwer family was side by side with photos of the husband and wife on the ground, cruelly covered in blood.

“The husband was Brecht Brouwer. Self-employed mechanic, previously a janitor employed by the welfare office. The wife, Michelle, was a stay-at-home mom. The husband made contact with the victims, pretending to be with an adoption support group. Then Michelle would show up with her own child in tow, build a friendly rapport with the victims, and earn their trust. She’d bring up the subject of adoption and tell them how this guy, Price, helped them. Brecht would also go with the victim to meet Price if they wanted him to, making the victim trust the couple even more. The victims had to have been suspicious that the Brouwers were cooperating with Price, though.”

“The issue is this kid the Brouwers adopted.” With a troubled look on her face, Emma stared at the photo of the infant in Michelle Brouwer’s arms. “They’ve been working this adoption scam for at least six months. And yet all the victims have testified that the baby had only just been placed with the Brouwers. And that he was about three months old. There’s not a baby alive who stays the same size for six months. It’d be one thing if the baby was a doll, but the baby was doing baby stuff, and some of the victims even held him. That’s why they all believed the baby and the adoption were real.”

Tobias craned his neck and looked at the pictures. “The baby in the video was a newborn. Which also doesn’t line up with the age of the Brouwers’ adopted baby... So what’s going on here?”

“If Price was the one giving all the orders, things’ll go a lot smoother, but...” Emma sighed at length and pressed a hand to her forehead. “The Brouwer kid is still missing. And from the look of things, I think he’s an Amalgam... The people who discovered the couple, they didn’t see the baby, either, right?”

“Yes, right.” Tobias nodded. “But that poor family. They went to the Brouwers’ house because they wanted to learn more about the whole adoption thing, yeah? No wonder they were confused and upset. Them *and* the police.”

“The truth of the matter is this tragedy is all too familiar to us.” Theo leaned back against his desk and furrowed his brow. “Wounds as though the Brouwers had been eaten into. Bite marks like from an animal, but no saliva detected. We

saw plenty of examples of this in our last case. Good thing we put the word out about this kind of injury to the rest of the country via the bureau. The local police seemed to be pretty dubious about the whole situation, but they got in touch with us anyway, and thanks to that, we have a case.”

“We’re back to square one if we don’t find that baby, though.” Emma turned to Eleven, her expression serious. “It wouldn’t be especially difficult for an Amalgam to mimic a baby, right?”

“No,” Eleven replied bluntly. “We can operate at the size of the average infant if it’s only a matter of mimicking things such as cooing, facial expressions, and finger and head movements. The core would also be small.”

The majority of Amalgams were massive enough to carry battleship armaments. A smaller Amalgam was difficult to produce because the core size necessarily increased to support multifunctionality, and the machine itself would have to be large enough to contain that core. But if it was simply a matter of reproducing a minimum level of a particular movement and having no battle functionality to begin with, then the Amalgam could be shrunk to the size of an infant.

The issue here was how a normal couple like the Brouwers had gotten an Amalgam like that.

Eleven spoke quietly. “Roremclad multiplied the Amalgams they first took from the laboratory and succeeded in increased Amalgam production through experiments and the production of the philosopher’s stone. I assume the infant in this case was also procured somewhere, but no Amalgam operating with that small of a core is currently circulating.”

“...It doesn’t seem the couple had knowledge of or contact with technology related to Amalgams. So is someone else mass-producing them like Roremclad did? Or...” Theo groaned.

Roremclad, the religious group formed to realize the fantasies of a single man. Espousing the philosophy of continental unification, this man had trampled over those of different faiths—and even his own followers—to sacrifice the entire continent to his god. He had mass-produced Amalgams, and he had even turned to the taboo philosopher’s stone, which required thousands of human

lives to create. In the end, he had been buried by Eleven's hand, but not before causing countless deaths.

What if...what if the Amalgams Roremclad produced were still around in some form? This would have indeed been the second coming of a nightmare.

Theo scowled and looked back at the map. "Price was traipsing all over the country, but the Brouwers generally stuck to the area around their house and the places where they met with the victims. We can follow their tracks, but we're not going to learn anything about how they came into possession of the Amalgam. They have no connections with any health-care workers or the military, and there are no official papers stating they adopted a child."

"How they met the con artist Price is also a mystery," Tobias added. "I suppose that's why no one figured out they were coconspirators for so long. I'm honestly curious what was really going on with these two."

Tobias opened his notebook and continued:

"When the Brouwers spoke about their personal lives with the victims, they always gave them the same story: 'We started thinking about adoption because of how painful it was to lose a child, and we were blessed with this baby.' Even if it's a lie, it's the story they repeated over and over, so I feel like it has to be at least based on something that actually happened. And the couple did in fact lose their biological child three years ago, plus there's no record of Michelle giving birth to any other children. Maybe they really did adopt this kid, except Price wasn't the adoption agent."

"In which case...we need Price to share with us what he knows about them. They were working together, so the Brouwers might have told him about some of this stuff." Emma's face brightened, but Tobias's expression grew stern.

"No." He shook his head firmly. "The story'll be different depending on who first brought up the idea of this scam—Price or the Brouwers. It'd be great if Price does know something, but..."

"How come?" Emma said curiously. "It's also possible they were mass-producing Amalgams for the adoptions."

"If Price was the one who brought it up, then he would have had other

collaborators besides the Brouwers,” Theo said. “If they’d been mass-producing Amalgams as you say, they could have actually handed over the babies for adoption. But if the Brouwers were the ones to bring it up, then the couple might have been hiding something pretty big, and Price would know nothing about the Amalgams.”

“Also, I’m curious about Michelle,” Tobias said, closing his notebook. “She showed the baby to the victims, but it’s not as though all of them touched the kid. Of all the would-be adopters, Michelle only let people who’d lost their own child for some reason hold the baby. Albeit for just a short time and with her watching.”

Emma cocked her head to one side. “Was she trying to be kind to couples who’d gone through the same thing as her?”

“I wonder if she was checking on something by letting these couples hold the baby,” Tobias said, a pained look coming across his face. “Of course, now that the couple’s dead, we’re stuck getting the story from Price. He’s a small-time crook after money. Why would he bother with something as complicated as an adoption scam?”

“Maybe he wanted to use the scam to collect people in similar circumstances,” Emma suggested, and a hush fell over the room as they digested this.

Theo struggled with it for a minute before saying, “Tobias, you talk to Price with the detective. Emma, you go over the items in evidence for some link between Price and the Brouwers—actually, see if there’s any connection with Roremclad just in case. Eleven and I will check out the Brouwers’ house. We need to find something about their past and where this Amalgam came from.”

“Roger that. I’ll do whatever I can to shake something out of him,” Tobias replied, then headed toward the interrogation room.

Theo left the rest to Emma and walked out of the office with Eleven in tow. He had no time for a breather.

As he and Eleven headed for the car, he asked, “So? As a Hound, do you think we can trace it?”

“The individual is extremely small in both physical body and core,” Eleven replied. “I will need to be close to detect it; that is difficult.”

Automagitons had a core to power them. As a Hound, a special Amalgam model, Eleven had a tracing function to recover cores. But the signal depended on the core’s size, and since they were dealing with a small core now, tracing it would be no easy feat. They would have to investigate other avenues.

“I suppose this Amalgam is also long gone from the scene,” Theo commented.

“The Roremclad Amalgam made use of the sewers,” Eleven told him. “The Amalgam may have also traveled some distance if it had access to something similar near the house.”

“...What about the reason it would be on the move?” Theo stopped for a moment. He looked back at Eleven, who was staring up at him. “Roremclad wanted to hide Amalgams around Delverro before they began their attack. So they used the sewer system and placed Amalgams throughout the city. But what about this Amalgam? What’s it trying to do?”

“If we assume this individual was tasked with murdering the Brouwers, then I would hypothesize that it returned to a designated meeting spot. But in this case, I cannot predict the meeting spot.”

“Maybe it went back to its commander,” Theo suggested. “With Roremclad, we had an obvious leader in Jim Kent, though. We don’t know if we’ve got someone like that in this case.”

“Husband Brecht, wife Michelle. If one of them was the commander, that would mean the Amalgam killed their commander, which is against its principles of action. But we do not have enough information to determine who the commander would be if it was someone else or to specify where the meeting place is.”

“An Amalgam won’t normally kill its commander?” Theo asked, curious.

“No.” Eleven shook her head. “The Amalgam’s nature is to obey orders, and as such, the commander is subject to serious protection.”

“So then, for instance, what would happen if the commander was incapable of giving orders for some reason?”

“On the battlefield, when the commander dies or is in a state where they are unable to give orders, control shifts to the highest-ranking military personnel close to the Amalgam or us Hounds. Amalgams often move to a predetermined set of coordinates, such as a base on the front line or a meeting point, and wait on standby for further orders.”

“It does make things easier if Amalgam behavior is determined to some extent after the commander dies, hmm?” Theo got into the car and fastened his seat belt before setting their destination in the car’s navigation system to the Brouwers’ house. “We’ll try to find out where they’ve been and see if there’s any clue to someone who might have been the commander at the couple’s house. If we don’t find the Amalgam or any useful information...we’ll contact the military and check if they have any personnel or Hounds in the area.”

“Understood,” Eleven replied as Theo set the car into motion.

Curious, he couldn’t help but ask, “Should we talk about what would happen in the event of my death while we’re at it?”

“That is a meaningless prerequisite.”

“Ha-ha, is it, then?” He eased into a smile at this very Eleven response.



When Tobias stepped into the interrogation room, Havel Price jumped and then shrank back. Tobias laid out photos of the Brouwers’ bodies and kept a close eye on Price’s face. Price leaped back dramatically, making the handcuffs that bound him clatter.

“Hey!” he yelped. “What’s with the creepy pictures?!”

“It’s the Brouwers. You know, the couple helping you with your con,” Tobias said coolly. “Did you kill them to shut them up?”

“No! I didn’t kill anyone! I just wanted money. I ain’t no killer—”

“Quite a nasty bit of work.” Tobias glared at Price from across the table. “You do *this* to the husband and wife, and then you go after their *baby*. I mean, a helpless *baby*.”

“I didn’t!” Price shouted, louder now. “Some lines, even *I* won’t cross! I’d

never kill anyone, much less a baby!”

Sweat beaded on his forehead, and his hands shook. Breathing heavily, he shoved the photos of the dead couple away and tried to physically move himself farther from the offending pictures.

Price was a con artist, and he'd done real damage to a lot of people. But it didn't look to Tobias as though he was lying now.

It was a simple misdirection, but he's pretty vehement in his denial. So maybe he really knows nothing about the Brouwers' murder, much less where the adopted baby is...

After observing Price for a moment, Tobias sat down in the chair opposite him. “Is that right? So you have some kind of conscience at least. You ever buy and sell actual kids?”

“As if, man! That's not how I roll! I...I got a hard-and-fast rule that I never stock the real deal. I use fakes that are close enough, and I walk off with the cash...”

Perhaps his protests started to feel empty even to himself; Price's declarations slowed to more of a whimper, and his voice grew quieter. He was telling the truth. He had in fact pulled off con after con, selling one fictitious item after the other. This time, it was simply the slightly twisted scheme of adoptions of babies who didn't exist.

But his little scheme had turned into something much larger this time around.

“...Let's say I believe you,” Tobias began. “Do you have any idea why the Brouwers were murdered? Any victims of your con want to see them dead?”

“Why would they?” Price shook his head. “They were just a normal family with money troubles. I'm one thing, but people trusted the Brouwers.”

“Normal families aren't complicit in fraud. How'd you get them on board?”

“Get them on board? I mean... Aah, I dunno. It's like...” Price, on edge, flicked his nails and looked anywhere but at Tobias. Each time his eyes landed on the photos of the dead bodies, he cringed in fear. He wasn't putting on an act as a con artist; he was a regular human being who was sincerely upset.

“Price,” Tobias said firmly. “Can you tell me how you first met the Brouwers?”

“How I met them...?” Price parroted. “Well, I pulled this scam on Brecht’s little sister. And I don’t know how, but he found me. He said if I helped him with a problem, he’d keep his sister from filing a police report.”

Tobias’s eyes widened. He hadn’t seen that coming. He jotted this down in his notebook and urged Price to continue. “So Brecht contacted you. What was this problem he was having?”

“He said he messed up at work, at the welfare office. This couple failed the adoption screening, but he’d let their application through anyway. So there was no baby for the couple to adopt, and Brecht said he’d be fired if his boss found out he’d made such a stupid mistake. He was pretty upset.”

Tobias arched a skeptical eyebrow. “So he turned to a con artist?”

“He asked me to help make the problem go away by setting up this adoption scam,” Price explained. “I’d get some cash, and he’d get to cover up his mistake by pretending he and the couple had been duped. Win-win, so why not, he said.”

“He must’ve been pretty desperate, then.”

“I got why he was panicking. His wife just had a baby. Wasn’t the best time for them to end up out on the streets, y’know? And I was more than happy to pick up a few extra bucks. So I said sure, I’d do it. Never worked with a team before, and I didn’t know the first thing about adoption. But the basic rules of the game don’t change.”

Price wiped the sweat from his forehead.

“I wanted it to be really convincing, though, so I asked him for a video of a kid. You get yourself a 3D video and have ’em look at it through a window, no one’s the wiser. I mean, I needed folks to believe there really was a kid for them to adopt, y’know? So Brecht said sure, whatever I needed, and he got the video for me.”

“Meaning you used the video from Brecht with every adopter?”

“Yeah.” Price nodded. “I guess he could film stuff working at the welfare

office, so he taped the room of a real baby. I looped part of the video and set it so the nurse would walk in to check on the baby just as the marks came into the room. Plus, they only got to see the baby through the window. I mean, the video was real and all. None of 'em suspected a thing."

"Did Brecht tell you where the baby's room was or when he filmed it?"

"Nah. He was just like, 'Here, I got this video for you,' and that was it. The video's actually why the con worked so good; I didn't really want to dig too deep into it."

"Right. Makes sense," Tobias agreed, and sent Emma a message: Video's real. Then with feigned ignorance, he asked Price, "Was Brecht the only one you met in person? What about the rest of the family?"

"You mean Michelle and Basil? I did meet them, but just the one time, a while back. Basil was a newborn, I guess, but he sure did watch his parents and gurgle like he was trying to say something. Honestly pretty cute stuff. The wife, though, she seemed like your average lady. But Brecht hadn't told her about the scam, so I was a bit on edge with her."

"So then..." Tobias frowned. "Michelle thought they were setting up real adoptions?"

"I didn't want to stir up any hornet's nests, so I never asked... But she didn't have that vibe like she was up to anything. And Brecht said he hadn't told her the deets, so I think she didn't know." Price seemed uncomfortable. "The whole thing went so smoothly, I couldn't believe it. I got all fired up, y'know? I mean, he'd covered up that mistake of his, but he still had a secret he didn't want anyone to know."

Tobias narrowed his eyes. "Did you threaten to tell his office unless he kept working with you?"

Price wiped his forehead again and nodded, a sour look on his face. "I had all the marks I wanted through Brecht. He gave 'em my business card, and the ones who wanted what I was selling came to me. Then I took the money and ran. And then I did it all over again. I only came to give Brecht his share. I absolutely *did not* kill anyone," he said emphatically.

Tobias let this go with a “hmm” and then asked, “Just to make sure I’ve got this right, Brecht’s day job was working with families looking to adopt?”

“Yeah. He told me he did the paperwork at the welfare office and also met with clients who wanted to adopt. And I really did have people calling me ‘cause of him. He said he’d find ‘em sad and lost in the lobby, and he’d sit down and comfort them and then give them my card.”

“So you weren’t actually working very closely with the Brouwers, then, is that right?”

“Yeah.” Price nodded firmly. “I only ever saw Brecht at the adoption meetings and when I was giving him his share. It was just the one time I met the family. I was never over to their house or anything like that.”

“Thank you. The detective in charge of your case is here now. You make sure you tell him all about your con.”

Tobias ended the interview and traded places with the detective. He watched Price through the one-way glass as he opened the investigation file and furrowed his brow.

Why had Brecht layered on the lies? It was true that he worked at the welfare office, but as a janitor. He had nothing to do with adoption paperwork. And Basil was the name of his dead biological son, but Price seemed to believe he’d met their biological child and not an adopted son. There was nothing in Michelle’s medical records about her giving birth around the time Brecht contacted Price.

“So something else was going on with the Brouwers.” Tobias sighed and sent the results of the interrogation to Theo.



Emma cradled her head in her hands, surrounded by boxes of evidence. She’d gone through every item in the boxes and all the documents on the case, but there was nothing that connected Price to Roremclad. Given his long years of experience as a con artist, he was obviously thorough when it came to erasing his tracks. They wouldn’t have even known about his connection with the Brouwers if they hadn’t had the witness account.

“There’s no point in digging any deeper into the Price angle. Which leaves me with...this video?”

The one that Tobias said was the real thing. She watched it intently again from the start. She’d love to be able to pin down the location of the nursery and the exact time period when the video was filmed.

Price believed Brecht and thought the video was of an actual nursery. So then the location, the nurse, and the infant should all have existed somewhere in this world.

It was a 3D re-creation of the scene, and everything in the room was shown on-screen, except for the doorway. But the parts the camera didn’t manage to catch were cut off. The reason Price had the prospective adopters meet the baby through a window was to keep anyone from noticing the tiny discrepancies. And since the victims were there to adopt, they would have been laser focused on the infant and been more or less indifferent to the room itself.

“...Technologically, magically, the video’s real,” Emma murmured. “But something’s bugging me about it.”

There were no windows in the room, and she couldn’t tell what season it was from the items inside or the nurse’s uniform. She didn’t know the nurse’s name, and between the mask and the uniform, Emma couldn’t make out her face or body type. But she could tell that the nurse was a woman who used a synthetic for one arm, and that she wasn’t the Brouwers or some relative of theirs. She looked but didn’t see anything with the baby’s name or birth date on it.

When the nurse noticed the person filming the video, she picked up the infant and turned toward the camera with a smile. Emma stopped the video here for a moment and tilted her head.

““What a cute baby! Do you mind if I film them?’ ‘No, not at all. Go ahead.’ Did they have a little conversation or something? I mean, the nurse must’ve been aware of the privacy issue—” Emma slapped her forehead with a cry of realization. “Ah! Right! Yes! The nurse would totally show off the baby with a smile if it was a parent! I’m such a dodo! I should have gotten it sooner.”

She let out a long sigh and banged her fist against her forehead again. *Thnk*. Brecht hadn’t filmed this video specifically for the scam; he’d given Price the

tape from when his own child was born three years earlier.

A precious video of the son who had died three months after birth. A cherished memory from a time when no one imagined he would be dead mere months later. Emma didn't have any children of her own, and she didn't know anyone who did. But would a parent really hand such a treasure over to a con artist—images of their own child, who had left this world so soon after arriving in it?

Emma hurriedly sent a message to Theo. If it really was a recording of the Brouwers' son, then the original video would have been at their house.



Theo stopped the car in front of the Brouwers' house and showed his investigator's badge to the officer on duty there. The officer nodded and lifted the crime-scene tape for them. Theo offered his thanks before stepping into the yard, Eleven in tow.

The couple had lived in a detached house somewhat removed from the neighboring homes in a peaceful residential area in the Delverro suburbs near the mountains. The two-story building and the yard had both been well maintained. Seasonal flowers bloomed in the garden, and it was easy to imagine the couple relaxing on the porch's bench.

Theo checked the front door and found no sign that it had been forced open, just as the police report had noted. According to the testimony of the people who had discovered the couple, there had been no response when they rang the bell, and the door had been locked. It was only when they looked into the house through the garden window that they noticed the bodies. Given the fact that the morning paper was on the dining table, the couple had at least been alive until the delivery of the newspaper that day. Their time of death was put at around nine AM.

Theo stepped inside and pulled on a pair of latex gloves. "Eleven, any Amalgam signal?" he asked.



“I can’t detect anything inside the house or in its environs,” she told him. “It’s safe. I will locate the escape route.”

“Thanks. Report to me when you find it. I’ll start checking the first floor.”

“I’ll return soon.”

Theo watched Eleven run off ahead before going around the rooms in turn.

The police had secured the scene at the time of discovery, so the house was as it had been then. The TV had apparently been on in the living room, where the couple was found. What had destroyed that cozy family scene? Blood—now a dull black color—was spattered outward in a broad circle across the sofa, the coffee table, and the rug, originating from the cradle lying on its side next to the sofa.

“...It’s overkill if the point was just to murder them. And too much of the bodies remained for the Amalgam to have been feeding. Why would the Amalgam do this?”

Theo flipped through the case file, thinking back to the lessons learned from their last investigation. The couple had been grievously injured, but the only body part that was completely missing was the wife’s lower abdomen. If the Amalgam selectively ate only that specific part, then did the wife have a secret of some sort?

According to forensic pathology’s Isco Rocky, the couple had been the picture of health. The wounds resembled the bite marks of an animal, and no saliva was detected, both features often seen on the prey of Amalgams. The wife’s lower abdomen had been eaten, but unlike the victims in the previous case, it appeared to have been ripped apart from the outside. Was this a different type of Amalgam from the one Roremclad used?

Given the amount of blood lost, the Amalgam would have been hit with some splatter as well, but perhaps it wiped the blood off on the rug; there was no blood on the flooring. It was unclear how exactly the Amalgam had left the living room. Theo left that question to Eleven and looked around for clues into the couple’s daily life.

They’d lived quietly as husband, wife, and child. Photos decorated the

mantelpiece and the area around it, about the same number of the child the couple had lost and of the child they had adopted. The two babies resembled each other, like siblings. Curiously, however, there were no bottles or milk in the kitchen. And the house was so neat and tidy, it was hard to believe an infant lived there. Even if the couple was home together most of the time, the place was simply too clean.

Theo returned to the hallway just in time to bump into Eleven.

“There was no back door,” she reported. “But the bathroom window was open.”

“Right. Let’s check it out, then.”

Theo went into the bathroom to take a look. And the small protruding window there was indeed open. It seemed to be for ventilation; it was so high up, the slight Eleven couldn’t reach it.

“...Would height or width matter for an Amalgam?” he asked her.

“No,” Eleven replied immediately. “They can move along the walls. With a flexible body, it could even exit through a crack. If we assume it fled through this window, then it would be possible to find the escape route and verify.”

He also checked the closet just in case and found gardening tools and off-season items, along with an emergency stockpile of a tank of water and an array of canned goods.

“No diapers, hmm?” He frowned. “Those’d be a necessity, though.”

“There was no diaper-like fabric in the laundry room, either. Was the couple raising the child in full awareness that it was not a human baby but an Amalgam reproduction of an infant?”

“Likely so if they didn’t have diapers. I wonder how they felt about that.” After examining the items on the closet shelves, Theo picked up a bottle containing a greenish adhesive liquid. He unscrewed the cap, and a grassy smell wafted up. “Seems like some kind of handmade ointment.”

“There was nothing in their history to suggest they had any knowledge of medicinal plants. Perhaps they studied independently?” Eleven suggested.

“Wait.” He peered at the bottle. “There’s traces of a label on it. I can only make out a couple of letters, though... They bought it at a drugstore whose name starts with *Ki*. Is this powdered medication from there, too?”

“It’s a common folk remedy. It contains no dangerous substances.”

“At any rate, we’ll take them as evidence. We’ll have a serious headache to deal with if any of this turns out to be illegal.” Theo put the ointment into an evidence bag, then very carefully took the dried plants and the mysterious powder out of the box and placed them in their own bags. “He said the victims visited the house to discuss the adoptions. Strange that the Brouwers didn’t dress the place up to show off the fact that they had adopted a baby of their own.”

“Wouldn’t the victims have taken it to mean the Brouwers had cleaned up before having them over? Or they might have assumed the baby gear was all upstairs.”

“Well, I suppose people only see what they want to see.” Theo shrugged. “Let’s go upstairs.”

“Are we going to leave verification of the Amalgam’s escape route until later?” Eleven asked, looking up at him.

“Mmm. I’d like to clarify the truth about the couple and their history first. The Amalgam wouldn’t move on to its next crime immediately after executing the order to kill the couple.”

They closed the closet and climbed the stairs to the second floor.

“According to Tobias’s interrogation,” Theo said, “Brecht Brouwer lied to Price to get him on board with the scam. He didn’t tell him he was a janitor or a maintenance man; he said he was part of the adoption staff at the welfare office. He also appears to have kept the adoption scam from his wife, Michelle. He was hiding something. I wonder if that secret is the identity of the Amalgam’s real commander.”

“Price was merely a con artist Brecht took advantage of. He knew nothing. Assuming the commander is someone connected to the couple, we will need to investigate any friendships that were not public, in addition to any relatives.”

“There’s the rub. So if Brecht was hiding something, where would we find it? My vote’s for the study.”

“Then I will propose the possibility of the bedroom.”

Theo began his investigation with the room at the end of the hall: the study. With bookshelves, a desk, and a single chair, it appeared to have been the husband’s workspace. The desk held a variety of left-handed tools and a clock with its back removed, with notebooks and mechanical parts in the drawers. The bookcase held engineering texts as well as self-help books about how to deal with grief and depression, allowing Theo to catch a glimpse of how hurt the couple had been by the loss of their child. But it looked to him that the majority of these books were addressed to people in support positions for those with depression.

“...Any record of the wife, Michelle, having depression?” he asked as he flipped through the books.

“There is nothing in her medical records,” Eleven replied. “Judging from the medication in the closet, she had turned to folk remedies, so it’s possible their insurance was not used and thus this health condition was not recorded.”

“True.” He nodded slowly. “So we would have a hard time putting that together from her medical records.”

They were thorough in their search of the study, but the only documents they found were work-related—general insurance agreements and business contracts. Nothing that could have been a lead in their current case. The cash in the room was also in a simple case rather than a safe.

“...So there’s nothing,” Theo observed. “The photo albums were in the living room, so I’m assuming this was only a workspace. His salary wasn’t enough for whatever reason, and he couldn’t come up with a way to raise the money he needed, so he turned to fraud.”

The garbage can contained several rejections for financing approval. But from what Theo had seen of the house, they weren’t living beyond their means, and he hadn’t spotted any kinds of luxury items.

“He had plenty of work. And yet they still needed money,” Theo said. “So

what were they pouring it into?”

“There are also no documents regarding any children,” Eleven noted. “Not their biological child, much less the adopted child.”

“Should we have a look in the bedroom? They might have just been very bad with money.”

Theo headed for the bedroom, the whole situation not quite clicking for him. Eleven followed a step behind him.

Based on the state of the bed linens, only one person had occupied the double bed. But the vanity and closet appeared to have been used by both husband and wife, so it seemed that they did share some of the room.

Eleven approached the bed and picked a hair off the pillow. “Short, brown. So Brecht was using the bed.”

“Hmm.” Theo looked around. “No conspicuous luxury-brand items or expensive watches. They lived a modest life.”

They searched every corner of the bedroom but found nothing along the lines of a safe or document case. Accessories were in a drawer of the vanity, and valuables were collected in a box in the cabinet.

“The Brouwers had a tendency to place things important to them in their field of view,” Eleven said, looking the room over. “We could surmise that they would also leave relevant documents in a place where they could see them.”

Taking this into consideration, Theo ran his gaze over the bedroom once more. Cosmetics, perfumes, accessories, valuables—all visible, out in the open. Keys and handkerchiefs were stored on top of the shoe closet in the entryway, and the photos in the living room were quite obviously placed. They clearly had a habit of this.

“Right,” said Theo. “So the key is where they spent most of their time. If it was just the husband sleeping in the bedroom, then...was the wife in the child’s room with the adopted baby?”

Theo hurried to open the door with the plate on it that read BABY.

The room was bright, done up in pastel colors, a soft rug on the floor, toys

and picture books everywhere. But none of them looked like they had been used. A single bed sat beside the crib. As he'd expected, the wife had been sleeping in the child's room. But as far as he could tell, there was nothing but bedclothes and toys there.

He reached out to the crib. The bars had been cut away with a blade of some sort only on the side next to the bed.

"They could have bought one of those cribs with the sides that come down," he said. "So why would they go to the trouble of cutting the bars out themselves?"

"It would be more efficient for the mother and child to use the double bed," Eleven noted coolly.

"True." Theo nodded. "Maybe it was about emotional attachment. The only signs of wear I can see here are on the crib."

He stepped back and compared the crib with the rest of the room. The bed and toys were new. But the crib, wallpaper, and baby mobile were faded and worn. Plus, the crib was a solid, high-quality product, while the bed was cheap and simply made.

"This is probably the crib they bought when their child was born," he said, staring at it. "They were very attached to it and used it as a bed for their adopted child, too, rather than leave it empty or get rid of it when their baby died. But for some reason, mother and child needed to sleep in close contact, such close contact that they would remove the bars on the crib."

"According to the testimony of the fraud victims, the wife was always holding the child. Even when a victim held Basil, Michelle stayed right beside them. Meanwhile, the husband moved freely and independently. Proximity to the child—the Amalgam—was essential only for Michelle."

Theo leaned back against the crib and sighed softly. "The couple was murdered by the Amalgam. Meaning neither of them was the commander. But the Amalgam needed to be in close contact with Michelle. Any ideas?"

"The precise situation is unclear. But perhaps the wife, Michelle, had the core inside her body," Eleven suggested as she lay down on the single bed. She

stretched a slender arm out toward the crib. “If the core was a size that corresponded to the Amalgam’s body, the body could not have been very far from the core. If we assume the core was in the wife’s body, then I would hypothesize that the range of possible movement was within the reach of the wife’s hands.”

“Hmm. Do you have some kind of baseline for making that distance calculation?”

“By default, an Amalgam’s core is generally one-twentieth of the weight of its physical body,” she explained smoothly. “If we refer to the average weight of a human being three months after birth and assume the body was six kilograms, the core would be three hundred grams, with a diameter of three centimeters. Thus, the distance it could move from the core would be roughly sixty centimeters. This figure is close to the average length of a woman’s arm. Is this not a reasonable explanation for mother and child to be close?”

Theo felt his head start to pound and held up a hand to stop Eleven. “Thank you for that expert opinion.”

“You asked about the calculation basis, so I merely answered.” Eleven took Theo’s hand and allowed him to help her up. Her gray eyes stared at him. “That is all the main rooms. At present, we have determined that the couple was living with the adopted child, knowing it was an Amalgam, and while they had a stable life, they also had financial issues.”

“If we assume they turned to fraud for the money,” Theo mused softly, “then what set the Amalgam off and led it to kill the couple? If that was its mission, then why obediently pretend to be a baby for six months? Did it have a code word or some other gimmick to make it aggressive, like with Roremclad?”

He furrowed his brow. The more he investigated this supposedly average couple, the less he knew about who they actually were.

“At the very least, we’ve seen all the rooms and established one thing,” Eleven said quietly. “Let’s return to the living room.”

“The living room?” He turned to look at her. “Why there again?”

“After comparing the individual rooms, we can assume that the bedroom and

the child's room were used for sleeping, and the study for working. Which is to say that the couple generally spent their days in the living room."

"So that's where any important documents would be? But it didn't look like there was anywhere to hide anything."

Nevertheless, he took Eleven's point and returned to the living room.

The sofa set, coffee table, and side table were neatly configured to face the TV. Eleven sat down on the upholstered couch. The pattern of a seat larger than hers had been worn into the fabric, proof that someone had sat there for long hours. The side table was covered with coasters, newspapers, books, and the like, items of relaxation. From the position of the cradle, Theo assumed that the husband and wife had sat facing each other on different parts of the sofa set, the cradle in between them.

"...So the husband sat on the couch," he murmured.

"If they were in the habit of placing key items within their field of view," Eleven noted, "we can determine that the couple stored their important documents somewhere visible from the sofa set."

The words were no sooner out of her mouth than she was searching the couch, the area at her feet, the nearby magazine rack, and the side table.

Theo also searched the living room, checking as he did how far he could see from the sofa set. Aside from the photos on the mantel, where would the couple have hidden things precious to them?

He checked the shelves and bookcases along the walls, and even the houseplants, and then he pushed the plants to one side and touched the wall. With the molding as a divider, the wall was split into different materials on top and bottom at about waist height, a dark wood on the bottom half. The seams had been deliberately left visible as an accent reaching down to the baseboards. But the wood was the slightest bit sunken in a single area near the mantelpiece.

He hit the wall lightly with a fist. The sound was higher pitched in the sunken area than other parts of the wall; there was clearly a cavity beneath the wood. He rapped the wall in other places, figuring there had to be some kind of mechanism behind it, and one panel shifted with a *kunk*.

There was an axis in the center of the panel around which the panel rotated vertically. A hidden door opened, and in a hollow dugout of the wall was a thick envelope.

“Eleven, I found it,” he called.

Eleven was examining the underside of the table as he pulled the envelope out. It didn’t appear to be dangerous in any way, so he spread the contents over the dining table.

Birth and death certificates for the baby Basil, who’d passed away three years earlier, a health notebook the couple had used as a record during the course of the pregnancy, and several video tapes labeled GROWING UP. But the thickest item in the envelope was a booklet printed with JIKUNOKAGU SPECIAL SUPPORT CONTRACT.

“...This is quite a tome of a contract. What’s this ‘Jikunokagu’?” Theo wondered aloud.

He opened the booklet and found pages crammed with tiny text clearly not intended to be read over by the contractee. He tried to parse it, but his eyes immediately began to ache, and he couldn’t absorb a word of it.

“Excuse me.” Eleven took the booklet from him and began to flip through the pages at a fixed speed. Before long, she reached the signature page and the end of the contract. “Content comprehension complete. I will summarize.”

“Huh?” He gaped at her. “Uh? Just by flipping through it like that?”

“Jikunokagu is an organization that provides medical supplies and treatment services outside the scope of the law to the contractee, and it demands that the contractee keep usage of these products and services confidential and accept any side effects that may occur. The Brouwers signed the contract and the consent form six months ago and purchased a product called a proxy body from Jikunokagu. The fact that usage of said product incurs exorbitant fees and brings lethal risk, and that they are prohibited items, are all deftly concealed.”

“If you can manage all that, why can’t you use a cell phone?” Theo muttered, overwhelmed by her smooth recitation.

“That is an issue with the mobile device and not with me.” Eleven pushed the thick booklet on Theo, her face expressionless.

He pulled out the consent form and looked down at the signatures. “The person signing for Jikunokagu is Gino Camicia. Brecht is only the guarantor, but the contractee is Michelle? And the proxy they purchased was...a uterus?”

“That aligns with the location of the wound on the body,” Eleven noted.

“Whoa, whoa.” Theo frowned at the consent form. “Is that even possible? Performance drops with the size of the core, right? And yet a uterus... Does this mean the child wasn’t adopted? Did she actually give birth?”

“Perhaps the Amalgam mimicked the lining of the uterus and incorporated the fertilized egg. In that case, it could exist inside the body without abdominal surgery, and that would explain why the core was inside the mother’s body.”

“How on earth—? No. Actually, don’t bother explaining.” Theo quickly stopped Eleven before she could elaborate. She closed her mouth before opening it once again.

“In other words, what she purchased was not a womb, but a certain birth,” she said.

“There’s no record of her being in a medical facility,” Theo noted. “How different would this have been from a normal birth?”

“I conjecture that it would have been similar to egg-laying. A placenta would be unnecessary with an Amalgam, and there would be no issue with it leaving the body not long after implantation. It likely would have been born soon after she became aware that she was pregnant.”

His head was starting to hurt, and he pressed a hand to his brow as he leaned against the table and sighed. “Got it. Actually, I don’t get it, but I understand that Amalgams can change into what they’ve preyed on. We’ve got the genetic information this time, so we know it mimicked their biological child but was not an exact copy.”

“Since it essentially obtained a blueprint for the human body, I suppose it could mimic even a newborn infant.”

“Hmm? So then how would it grow bigger?”

The Brouwers’ adopted child was said to have been around three months old.

Theo lifted his face after a moment of silence, while Eleven looked back at the photos on the mantel. The photos of the two different children.

“I would hypothesize that it referred to Basil Brouwer’s growth records and copied his movements to mimic a three-month-old infant,” she said. “But it either was unable to acquire an effective sample to demonstrate growth beyond that stage, or...”

“The couple didn’t wish for it to grow any further.”

Theo glanced at the evidence items on the table and sighed, unable to hold it back. Only the couple knew the answer to this question. The entire adoption scam started because the couple had signed this contract. They likely realized they couldn’t pay the user fees after seeing the bill, so Brecht decided to make use of the con artist who had swindled his sister. This was how badly the couple wanted another child: They were willing to go to such lengths, not knowing they would be killed in six months’ time.

“Did you find any condition in the agreement that would turn the Amalgam aggressive?” Theo asked. “Something like Roremclad’s keyword?”

“Nothing expressly noted, but I wonder if a violation of the prohibited items was the condition.” Eleven opened the booklet and pointed to the relevant section. “In the contract, it merely states, ‘In the event that the subscriber violates any prohibited item, the merchandise shall be immediately recovered and the service terminated.’ There are four prohibited items: questions related to the contract, disclosure of contract information to a third party, unauthorized disposal of contracted merchandise, and failure to pay for six months or more. But the issue would be with ‘questions related to the contract.’ It’s too abstract and broad.”

“If the couple asked for an extension of the payment deadline, and this was deemed to violate the prohibited items, then the product would have been immediately recovered. As for the recovery method... If the Amalgam escaped and killed the user when it did to keep them from talking... The prohibition could apply to any act. Quite dangerous, hmm?” He scooped the papers up from the table and returned them to the envelope, which was heavy enough to noticeably weigh him down when he stood up. “So all that’s left is to track the

Amalgam, then.”

“Yes.” Eleven nodded. “We will assume that it escaped through the bathroom window and investigate.”

Theo left the crime scene and went around to the backyard, feet falling on neatly trimmed grass.

“What are the chances that the Amalgam mimicked something else to escape?” he asked Eleven.

“It has changed shape multiple times—the proxy product, the infant, the variation to kill the couple. Based on the assumed output of the core, I suspect it was already at its limit. It would likely have fled in that last form.”

“Hmm. So the limit comes sooner when the core is smaller.”

“Yes. It’s connected with procedure loading capacity—there are few things an Amalgam with a smaller core can do with physical strength.”

“Thanks for putting it more simply.”

Theo strode across the backyard. The window that protruded toward the exterior was open. Eleven approached it carefully and bent down into a crouch.

“...It went out the window and dropped straight down,” she observed. “The grass is flattened within a fixed radius, and there are tracks on the ground. It crawled away and...advanced in a straight line.”

She quietly began to walk, opened the back gate, went out onto the mountain road, and proceeded with determined footsteps, eyes focused on the ground.

“...Can you really trace the movements of a baby like this?” Theo asked, dubious. “There aren’t even any footprints.”

“Because it was crawling, it left a number of tracks, such as broken twigs and traces of dirt being moved.”

Every so often, Eleven crouched down, brought her face very close to the ground, and followed the Amalgam’s tracks in this position. She looked very much the picture of a hunting dog, worthy of the name *Hound*.

But eventually, they came across a steep level difference, enough that it

would have been difficult for even an adult to make it down safely. The sudden step appeared not to have been originally part of the terrain, but something created when the ground collapsed in a heavy downpour. Eleven leaped down nimbly and stared hard at the ground before looking back up at Theo.

“It seems to have fallen and been injured here,” she reported. “The ground is sunken, and the crawling tracks are irregular.”

“A little fall? Surely, it can regenerate from that.”

“It might have been only a fall, but there is significant irregularity in the tracks. It did not regenerate.”

The mountain path was not maintained at all. There were several sudden drops, and fallen trees blocked their way forward in many places, making this a route that even adults would have to make an effort to traverse and very much not a route that could be traversed with the body of an infant. Nevertheless, the Amalgam continued straight ahead, and at last, its trail left the mountain.

Theo stared in mild surprise when the path abruptly opened up before him. There was a small, beautiful sandy beach with waves lapping gently at the shore, plenty of rocky areas, and a sign that said SWIMMING PROHIBITED. He looked back at the mountain behind them. The Brouwers’ house was no longer visible.

“It couldn’t have gone out to sea,” he said. “What was it, about half an hour from the house to here?”

“It likely took even longer for this Amalgam.”

“Not going to get anywhere fast crawling like a baby, I suppose.”

Eleven stepped forward, leaving her footprint in the ground next to the crooked ditch that led out from the mountain path. The ditch gradually narrowed until it was nothing but a thin scratch on the ground when it finally stopped at the water’s edge.

He saw there what looked like a plastic doll distorted by heat, exposed to the breaking waves. The head was nothing but a mouth and some hair, and the body was filthy with blood and mud. One of the legs was a blade in the shape of a sickle, but the other leg still had a tiny baby shoe on its foot. It didn’t so much as twitch. This was the Amalgam’s corpse.

Eleven picked it up with both hands. Her pale fingers brushed the dirt away from the broken flesh to reveal a red glow. It really was a small core.

Theo stared hesitantly. "How can I put this? It— Is that thing dangerous?"

"It's safe," Eleven reassured him. "It has surpassed its operational limits and can no longer move."

"Well...all right, then. We'll check the bite pattern against the wound and get a blood sample. The lab can handle the rest. It might not be able to move, but it's still too much for the bureau to handle."

He automatically looked down at Eleven's hands. The Amalgam's small body was still too large for the girl's slender arms. Despite it being filthy and half-transformed, traces of the months-old infant were still visible, and that saddened Theo somehow.

"...Why was it so desperate to get over the mountain? If Amalgams have no emotion, then what pushed it to this point?" he asked.

"I will check its procedures. Please wait a moment," Eleven replied briefly and touched the Amalgam's core.

A red light rose into the air, and geometric patterns began to race through it. But the movement soon stopped, and displayed were two spheres connected by a straight line with a symbol embedded in it.

"Deployment complete," she announced. "From my analysis, it is clear that unlike a normal Amalgam with the three pillars of regeneration, self-supply, and execution of orders, this Amalgam had its regeneration parts eliminated. Lines of characters reading 'make' and 'many' were added, but due to the lack of meaning inherent in this, the Amalgam's judgment was poor, and it was unable to detect its operational limit."

"Meaning some of its functions were cut to make the core smaller?"

"This is merely a hypothesis, but it's likely that as a result of changing the procedures using incomplete knowledge, the core simply became smaller in the production process. Or it might have been an experiment, as with Roremclad, and the person making the changes happened to realize it could be made into a product. Either way, it is a fact that they are in an environment that allows

them to research cores and sell the cores produced to the general population.”

“...So could it be worse than Roremclad? Any other clues?”

Eleven turned her gaze from the core specs and back to Theo. “One report relevant to the investigation. This Amalgam was instructed to return to a specific person following the execution of its orders. It exhausted its strength in its effort to reach this person.”

“...Person?” He frowned. “You can’t put a person into numbers like coordinates. How was the person specified?”

“The individual genetic information was input. It’s not very difficult to do. A single hair or a drop of blood is sufficient. If the genetic information can be extracted in the lab, it would be possible to use in the investigation.”

“So before we know their name or what they look like, we get their genetics?” Theo sighed and looked back at the ocean. The waves were gentle as they pressed up against the shore. “If the Amalgam was moving in a straight line from the house to whomever this person is, then that person has no doubt long since moved on. We still don’t have enough information to pinpoint their location.”

“This has been fruitful,” Eleven noted calmly. “Let’s continue the investigation from a different angle.”

“Right.” Theo started down the beach.

They should have been able to take a detour and return to the road. Eleven stepped onto the sand and found her place by his side.

“Lucky for us, the thing ran out of power here,” Theo continued. “This area has a lot of flooding, and the locals stay away. We’d have a real problem on our hands if someone else had gotten to this thing before we did.”

“A person who would actively choose to pick up an item that looked like this would likely be a separate problem.”

“No doubt,” Theo murmured. “So this is what happens to an Amalgam when it surpasses its operational limits.”

At the time of the large-scale attack that occurred in the spring, Eleven had

been completely burned up in an incinerator together with the enemy Amalgams. She'd told Theo she would ignore her operational limits so she could be of use to him. Normally, Amalgams acted so that they didn't exceed this, and yet she—

“Theo, are you ‘anxious’?”

He lifted his face with a gasp. Gray eyes were looking up at him earnestly.

“We have secured the escaped Amalgam and obtained new clues to both the fraud case and the murder case,” Eleven told him. “Our investigation is progressing well. ‘Anxiety’ is not applicable.”

“Oh. Well, yes, that's true. The investigation's moving forward. But...” He fumbled for words as he realized his right hand was hanging in the air for some reason, and he shoved it into his pocket. “I was just wondering if that's what happened to you. In the incinerator.”

“While my physical body was also lost, I do not break down in this way,” she informed him coolly.

“It was just a thought. Hypothetical.”

As he'd expected, he couldn't fully communicate what he was thinking, and he gave her a pained smile. Although her intuition was good, her perceptions differed greatly from those of a human being. He listened to the pleasant sound of the separate rhythms their feet made against the sand.

“We Hounds also have an end,” she said. “But that is the final stage. I would meet this end at a specialized disposal facility. It's unlikely I would end up in such a state in front of you.”

“...Even if you lost your physical body and were nothing but your core?”

“Just as you dug that out of the sand, I would return in your desired form.”

Her words were heartening, and for a moment, his gaze softened. But then he quickly rethought that and pinched her little face.

“Let's not have you be totally lost to start with, yeah?” he said. “You have to return in one piece. So don't you ever do that again.”

“Roger. I will update my guidelines. Is the ‘anxiety’ finished?” Eleven looked

up at him from beneath her tousled bangs. Her placid eyes showed no sign of surprise at his words.

He sighed and gently mussed her hair. "I don't have the time for anxiety when I'm with you."

"Statistically speaking, an inspector has less free time than the average citizen."

"Are you—? No, it's not about that. Honestly, you're something all right."

She was supposed to have been a high-performance weapon, so why did she sometimes seem so hopelessly empty-headed? Theo smiled wryly and hurried ahead.



As Emma entered the morgue, she said hello to an inspector on their way out and headed toward the back. Rocky was staring at two bodies, a stern look on his face, but a smile pushed up one cheek when he noticed Emma.

"Well, if it isn't the tomboy," he said to her. "How's the investigation?"

"I'm stumped." She sighed. "So I'm waiting for the others to get back. But who knows when that'll be, so I figured I'd come see the bodies again. You're done with the autopsies, right? Any issues?"

Rocky shook his head as he pulled down the cover over the bodies to reveal the faces of the Brouwers.

"From the layout of the bodies at the scene, I believe the husband was killed first, protecting the wife from the baby in the cradle. The baby bit the wife's ankle before she could run, and she fell. Probably hit her head on the coffee table. And then the baby tore into her stomach while she was still alive, clawed her throat out, and killed her."

"...That's brutal. Seriously." Emma's response was hoarse.

"Mmm," Rocky agreed. "Whatever its true nature was, they likely never imagined they'd be murdered by the baby they'd been raising." He sighed and pulled the cover back up over the bodies. "They were utterly average. Their remaining organs were all in good health, and I also checked their blood and

stomach contents. So here's a little quiz for you, seeing as you're a sorcerer. Got any idea about these ingredients?"

He lifted a piece of paper from the printer tray.

"Components I found in the wife's body. Ginger, mizuohaka, gardenia seed, amadake grass, peonia root, slothbear bile, iron donkey liver, and apatite. What would you take all these at once for?"

"Hmm..." Emma frowned. "Slothbear would likely have calming effects. After that, I'm drawing a blank."

"What?" Rocky arched an eyebrow at her. "Didn't you study magical pharmacology?"

She shrugged. "Not my specialization. So what's the drug, then?"

"Little thing called arkichyl potion. Taken to stabilize the mood or for general under-the-weatheriness stemming from unknown causes. Prescribed for gynecologic conditions, among other things. But the use and possession of slothbear bile and iron donkey liver are legally restricted. Even a medical practitioner needs a special license to prescribe them."

Emma hurriedly took this down in her notepad. "A licensed practitioner'll be easy to track down. Thanks, Rocky. This might be useful."

"Mmm. Did you contact the families?" he asked.

"Not yet. The parents are dead, and Brecht's supposed to have a younger sister, Anna, but I can't get her on the phone. I was thinking about going over to her place."

"You do that. The morgue's too cold for these two to sleep."

Rocky pressed lightly on the cover spread across the bodies. The gesture was one of gentle comfort.

CONFIDENTIAL

Chapter 2

More Than a White Lie

AMALGAM HOUND

**Criminal Investigation Bureau:
Special Investigation Unit**

Theo and his team gathered in the office and looked at one another.

“I’ll sum up,” Theo started. “Havel Price is a con artist who pulled an investment scam on Anna Brouwer. Her older brother, Brecht Brouwer, found out about this and misrepresented himself to Price to team up for an adoption scam. It’s not clear whether Brecht’s wife, Michelle, knew the particulars, but she was part of the scam whether she knew it or not. Although the couple lived modestly, they needed money, hence the scam. They had hit a wall in paying the subscription fees for the Amalgam they purchased from a group called Jikunokagu.”

Tobias and Emma frowned as they observed the items of evidence spread out on the table before them.

“So for six months, the Amalgam obediently mimicked a baby?” Tobias crossed his arms, a complicated look on his face. “Reminds me of the bank robbers. Those Amalgams waiting that whole time inside their synthetics for the signal to strike. Makes sense that this one would attack when they violated the prohibited items. Although it’d be pretty tough not to.”

Emma opened her notebook. “So about the Brouwers. Rocky identified the medications the wife was taking from the components detected in her body. I contacted the Healers Association with that info and the label on the bottle you guys found, Theo, so I think we’ll be able to identify who made it soon.”

“The healer will be a huge help, since we can’t rely on the couple’s official medical records,” Theo replied. “I’d love to talk to them.”

“Roger. I’ll confirm.” Emma picked up the phone on the desk, while Theo and Tobias faced each other with stern expressions.

“The issue is this Jikunokagu,” Theo said. “Everything about the group is a mystery, and they’re the ones handling the Amalgams as merchandise. I can pretty much guarantee that the lone Amalgam we’ve secured won’t be the end of this.”

“Are they using a mother specimen to mass-produce low-quality Amalgams, like Roremclad did?” Tobias asked. “You know, that whole parent-and-child thing from last time?”

This was a scary thought.

“It is urgent that we identify Jikunokagu and their location, together with the Amalgam stock and manufacturing center,” Eleven said.

“We’ve got a lot to do, then.” Theo sighed and then switched gears. “Eleven and I will keep going with Jikunokagu. Tobias and Emma, you hunt down the healer who gave Michelle the medication. They might know how she got connected with Jikunokagu.”

“Roger. Emma, let’s go,” Tobias said and hurried out of the office with Emma. Theo closed the case file, hiding the pictures of the Brouwers’ home.



“We know that the CEO is Gino Camicia, but...” Theo opened the contract they’d found at the Brouwers’ house. “Jikunokagu itself is a total mystery. There’s contact information here, but no one picks up when we call.”

“They take measures to cut off communication at the point when the Amalgam’s aggression is activated so that they won’t be connected to the victims after an incident occurs,” Eleven said. “They must be repeat offenders.”

“Mm-hmm.” Theo nodded. “It’s all by the book, apparently. So how many other victims have there been...?”

He searched for Jikunokagu on his cell phone just to see what came up. He found their home page easily, but there was no contact information or address on it, so it didn’t really tell him much of anything. The site had a large photo of Camicia and listed his background and ideals at length, but the words used were just empty platitudes, and there was nothing egregious in his background. They should ask his alma mater and the trading company where he was the managing director to see if this history of his was actually correct.

“...I have my doubts about this trading company and the user comments. ‘We provide a range of traditional East Akaryazan treatments and offer an effective health strategy, without the burden on the body that comes with modern medicine’...”

“East Akaryaza is the country visible to the southeast from Adastrah,” Eleven said. “Before the outbreak of the continental war, they sank the nation’s

borders into the ocean to maintain neutrality as an island.”

“And because of that, here on the continent, not too much is known about the country. Which is why these kinds of dodgy businesses spring up. Anything on the group Jikunokagu itself?”

He turned his gaze to Eleven. Given that she had previously worked in the military’s intelligence office, she might have information relevant to their current case.

She blinked slowly. “Nothing in particular. But this symbol.” She peered at his cell phone and pointed at the screen. The wall behind the CEO featured the Jikunokagu symbol, a pair of hands holding up a piece of fruit. “I do have information on a similar mark. Do you know the Banthobuk Salvation Brigade?”

“Of course. The heroes of East Akaryaza. A few hundred years ago, when a disease with a high mortality rate was ravaging the continent, they provided a wonder drug not just to their homeland of East Akaryaza but to countries across the continent, effectively ending the pandemic. If you’ve been to high school, you’ve learned about them at some point.”

“This symbol looks like the mark flown by that Banthobuk Salvation Brigade,” Eleven said. “Although it’s not hands in the Banthobuk mark; it’s a scale with a piece of fruit and a heart on it.”

“So is Jikunokagu an affiliated group? How about we ask the Banthobuk Salvation Brigade themselves?” As Theo looked up their contact information, he asked Eleven, “Does the intelligence office have any connections with them?”

“The Banthobuk Salvation Brigade travels to war zones regardless of national boundaries, leading them to be suspected of spying,” Eleven declared, shocking Theo. Seeing his stunned expression, she continued, “Their innocence has been proven by a number of agencies, and all members are subject to a strict background check. At present, they are recognized as the most trustworthy medical organization in the world.”

“Mm-hmm.” Theo nodded. “That’s excellent, then. I, too, would like to believe that their work is based in good faith.”

The Banthobuk Salvation Brigade headquarters were in East Akaryaza, but

they had branch offices in every country on the continent, likely to solicit for donations and volunteers. He saw that there was also a branch in Adastrah and jotted the phone number down. He tried calling them first, and someone picked up on the third ring.

“Good afternoon,” a woman’s assured voice said. “Banthobuk Salvation Brigade, Adastrah office.”

“Oh, hello. This is Theo Starling from the Criminal Investigation Bureau’s Detective Operations. I was hoping to get your help in an ongoing investigation. Do you have time to answer some questions?”

“Of course.”

“Do you know anything about an organization called Jikunokagu?”

“Yes,” the woman replied amicably. “Jikunokagu is an affiliate group. Their main mission is the sale of medical and pharmaceutical products.”

“Do you know what kind of products they carry?”

“They are contracted to only carry herbal therapeutics and medical technologies that have been brought to market through rigorous testing for the general public’s use.”

“...Then may I ask you about a product called a proxy?”

The woman paused. *“I’m sorry, but may I ask what exactly the nature of your investigation is?”*

“It’s a murder case. A woman who purchased a Jikunokagu proxy was killed with her spouse.”

“What?” The woman’s voice immediately grew hard. *“Just let me look into that for you. Please hold.”* She immediately put Theo on hold.

He sighed reflexively. “I knew it. Jikunokagu’s methods don’t align with Banthobuk’s principles.”

“There was ‘upset’ due to ‘anger’ and ‘shock’ in her voice,” Eleven noted.

“That’s only natural. These people value human life above all else. And then a murder—”

The hold music ended abruptly, and he heard the woman's voice again.

"Thank you for waiting. There is no 'proxy' on our merchandise list. Could you tell me more about what type of product it is?"

"It's basically what we'd call a synthetic here," he told her. "It takes the place of a body part and performs its functions."

"Ohhh." The woman seemed to understand. "We do have a product like that in our catalog, but it's under a different name. However, we only handle synthetics in this country; removal from our premises is prohibited. A vendor such as Jikunokagu would not be permitted to handle such a product."

"Is it possible there's another organization with the same name? The CEO is Gino Camicia."

"The Jikunokagu CEO is indeed Gino Camicia. Excuse me." She had some kind of conversation on the other end of the line, then said stiffly, "We are currently unable to reach Gino Camicia or the Jikunokagu office. Is there anything else we can do for you here?"

"I've heard the Salvation Brigade is quite thorough with background checks. Did Camicia's turn up anything?"

"This is somewhat embarrassing, but we were not involved with that." The woman's voice softened. "The previous CEO passed away last year, and in accordance with their last wishes, Camicia was appointed to the position. There were no issues on paper with his appointment, and we've had no reports of note about his work, so unfortunately, we don't have any pertinent information on the situation there. I sincerely apologize."

Theo waved away her prostrating apologies and asked for the address of the Jikunokagu office before thanking her and ending the call.

He turned to Eleven. "Did it seem like Jikunokagu had gone rogue and she was trying to gloss it over?"

"No." Eleven shook her head. "At the very least, there was no lie in the tone of her voice."

"Of course. Annoying. Well, let's go check him out, then."

Theo put in a call to the university Camicia had graduated from, then left the office with Eleven trailing half a step behind him.



Upon seeing the house they arrived at after leaving Delverro, Tobias whistled despite himself. “*This* is the house of the healer who prescribed that medication for Michelle Brouwer?”

“It should be...” Visibly surprised, Emma got out of the car. “What an amazing place, huh?”

They’d hit upon a healer by the name of Michi Kisage after checking the label on the bottle from the Brouwers’ home against a list of healers licensed to prescribe the medication Rocky had found. And now Tobias and Emma were at that healer’s registered address, standing in front of a steel door with a sign that read KISAGE CHEMIST.

The gloriously green yard contained not only an open-air garden but also a greenhouse, and even from his position on the other side of the gate, Tobias could tell it was relatively large. The red-roofed home attached to the yard was cute and compact, like a dollhouse, with animal ornaments around the front entryway, and the overall effect was like stepping into a fairy-tale world.

“Incredible,” Emma murmured. “So she’s growing all the medicinal plants she needs herself.”

Tobias looked over at her and arched an eyebrow. “You’re saying the scale here’s surprising even to sorcerers?”

“Of course it is! Cultivating medicinal herbs is really hard, you know.”

She looked as if she wanted to go and take a gander at whatever was growing beyond the gate, but Tobias stopped her with a wry smile and pushed the door open.

A chime sounded, and a voice called, “Coming!”

A girl emerged from the back of the shop. Her tied-up hair was mostly black, but bits of a green underlayer peeked out in sections.

“Hi there. How can I help you?” she said cheerfully.

“We’re from the Criminal Investigation Bureau.” Tobias showed her his investigator badge. “Hillmyna and Canary. We were hoping to ask a few questions. Do you have a minute?”

The girl’s eyes grew round. “I’ve never seen a real investigator badge before! What happened? What are you investigating?”

“There was an incident,” he replied somewhat evasively. “We wanted to talk with Ms. Michi Kisage. Is she here?”

“She’s preparing a prescription right now. Wait a sec, okay?” The girl ducked behind the counter and called out, “Granny! Company!”

He heard a voice reply, which he assumed belonged to Michi Kisage. The girl returned to the counter and looked at them apologetically.

“I’m sorry. She still has to finish mixing this one.”

“That’s all right. It’s our fault for stopping by unannounced. Have you ever seen these people?” Tobias showed her photos of the Brouwers.

The girl cocked her head to one side before taking the photo of Michelle, a sad expression on her face. “I know this woman... Hey, does this mean something happened to her?” She turned her worried gaze on Tobias.

He couldn’t exactly lie to her, so he told her the truth. “She’s dead. We’re looking into what happened to her.”

“We were hoping to learn more about who she was when she was alive,” Emma said gently. “She bought medicine here, didn’t she?”

“It’s...” The new information seemed to upset the girl, but after a momentary loss for words, she said, “A lot of patients who come in are still sick or having problems even after seeing a doctor. She was like that. She was in shock after her baby died suddenly. She worried maybe it was her fault, like a problem with her body, so she came to see us. That was the start.”

“So then she wanted to build up her physical strength?” Tobias asked, and the girl frowned.

“Hmm,” she said. “I’m just an apprentice, so I’m still learning about all the medicines. But I think that probably wasn’t it, maybe.”

“...It wasn’t, huh? Did she come in a lot?” Emma asked.

“Pretty regularly.” The girl nodded. “She was in last week... I can’t believe she’s dead.” She sighed and turned back to the photo.

An older lady poked her face out from the back of the shop. “You said I had a visitor?”

“Oh! Granny!” The girl jerked her head up. “Uh-huh. Investigators. They’re on a case, they said.”

“Is that right?” The woman gave her a quick smile. “Thanks, hon. You go take a break, then.”

“Okay! Good luck, investigators.” The girl disappeared into the back of the shop, and in her place, the older woman sat down on the chair at the counter.

“I overheard a bit of your conversation,” she said. “One of my clients is dead?”

“Yes,” Tobias replied. “You’re Michi Kisage, is that right? We wanted to ask you about Michelle Brouwer.”

“...Michelle? That poor dear.” The woman—Michi—let out a sigh and leaned back in her seat. “After she lost her child three years ago, she had a series of miscarriages. Mentally, she was having a really hard time, and she was struggling with a number of different conditions. I started her with some less potent medications, but none of them worked for her, so for the last year, I’ve been prescribing her arkichyl potion. She seemed to be taking it faithfully just as I directed her to, a fixed dosage once a day.”

“Was she any different since she adopted a child six months ago?”

“The potion seemed to be having more of an effect.” Michi smiled. “She was obviously more stable, and she was doing better physically, too. So I decreased her arkichyl dose, and we talked about taking her off it entirely and putting her on something lighter until we gradually weaned her off any medication, depending on how she was doing next month.”

Curious, Tobias asked, “Did you notice anything about the child?”

“She always came in with him, but now that you mention it, no. The last few

times she stopped by, she left him in the stroller and kept him out of the sun, so I didn't see the baby. Does that matter?"

"No, just wanted to confirm." He shook his head. "Did she tell you anything about the child she lost?"

A cloud crossed Michi's face, and she sighed again, clasping together fingers etched with wrinkles. "Apparently, the cause of death wasn't clear. One day, she was rocking him in her arms, and he stopped breathing. She said they did CPR while they waited for the ambulance, but it was too late."

"So then naturally, the couple were beside themselves?"

"It was so sudden," Michi told him sadly. "Michelle especially blamed herself. Her husband did everything he could for her, but he was exhausted himself. It really was a terrible time for them."

"Did she ever tell you why she and her husband had turned to folk remedies?" Emma asked. "Did someone recommend alternative medicine to them?"

"If I remember right, her husband's sister told them about the shop. Said something about how she'd seen it when she was on her way to the nearby market. Michelle's hopes were quite high when she came in, since she'd been told healers could treat issues doctors couldn't. That was how little faith she had in the medical establishment."

"Does the name Jikunokagu ring any bells?" Tobias asked, and Michi's eyebrows shot upward.

"...Where did you get that name?" she demanded.

"The Brouwers' death was due to a product they purchased from Jikunokagu," Emma told her.

"What on earth...?" The older woman let out a deep exhale as she pressed a hand to her forehead. "No doubt they're selling the most dangerous garbage. No-good money-grubbers."

"So you *do* know them," Tobias prodded.

"Not only do I know them, I was one of them thirty years ago."

Tobias and Emma looked at each other, surprised at this unexpected

information. Michi folded her hands together, pressed them to her forehead, got her breathing under control, and quietly lifted her face.

“In the beginning, they were a goodwill group that delivered medical supplies free of charge anywhere in the world,” she said quietly. “People would give them vegetables, small sums of money, tokens of gratitude, really, but Jikunokagu essentially paid for everything. We operated at a huge loss. But we wanted to help people who were suffering because of the continental war, however we could. We were all of one mind in that.”

“How many healers were affiliated with the group at the time?” Emma asked.

“I’d say half the group were healers. More and more people came on board, though, as the scope of our activities increased.”

“But thirty years ago, you left Jikunokagu.”

Michi gave Emma a pained smile. “Try to picture it. We all swore to one another that we’d fight this fight together. But those of us who were serious about making medicine would burn out, while the greedier among us were bottling water and grass and selling it. Anything for money. I didn’t have it in me to change that. So I left.”

“...So then the current Jikunokagu?” Tobias asked.

“I have absolutely no idea.” Michi shook her head. “I ran away. But I doubt the nature of the group changed just because the faces might have. They’re obviously a bunch of frauds with dollar signs in their eyes.”

“Did the Brouwers ever talk to you about Jikunokagu?” he pressed.

“No, never. I mean, I haven’t given voice to that name myself in more than a decade now,” she replied, a grave look on her face. “They stank of something. They were good at finding people in their moment of weakness and isolating them. That poor couple. They were just having such a hard time with the loss of their child, and now...”

“It’s a terrible tragedy,” Tobias agreed. “Are you familiar with Amalgams?”

“Amalgams?” She frowned. “I’ve seen them in the paper. They’re some kind of amazing weapon or something, right?”

“Do you think Jikunokagu could have gotten a hold of one?”

“In their dreams.” She snorted in disdain. “They’re only found in war zones, right? Those sniveling cowards would never put themselves in that kind of danger. They’re the sort of people who sit at home counting their money.”

Michi’s assessment of Jikunokagu was harsh. At the very least, it was unlikely the Brouwers had found out about the company through this shop.

Tobias thanked her, and he and Emma were about to leave when Michi said, “You’re a sorcerer. That’s what your cape means, right?”

“Yes, that’s correct. Did you need something?” Emma put a hand to the shoulder of her cape, and Michi came out from behind the counter.

“The baby Michelle lost. Something about it feels off to me. I just thought that maybe you could investigate from a different perspective. As a sorcerer.”

Emma opened her notebook. “Would you mind telling me exactly how you felt it was off?”

“A three-month-old baby dying suddenly is sad, but it’s not unusual,” Michi said, putting a hand to her cheek. “Usually, though, the baby will be obviously ill with a cold. Or they suffocate in their sleep, that sort of thing. But for a baby awake and nothing particularly wrong with them to suddenly pass before their parents’ eyes... Well, it’s strange.”

“Arkichyl potion is prescribed for gynecologic issues, yes?” Emma asked. “What were Michelle’s symptoms?”

“That drug is mainly used to ease psychoneurotic issues. The doctors she saw told her many times that there was nothing medically wrong with her, which was exactly why Michelle was convinced she’d miscarried because she was in poor condition. I saw it as the stress of suddenly and senselessly losing her child, so I prescribed the potion in response to that.”

Michi sighed, then smiled faintly.

“Could you find out why her son died and tell her? She was a good person. I hope she can at least be reunited with him in the afterlife without any lingering questions.”

Emma nodded, a serious look on her face. “Of course. Thank you.”

Tobias thanked Michi again and asked about the location of the market before they left the shop.

“We’re going to the market, right?” Emma said as she got into the car.

“Mm-hmm.” Tobias nodded. “The whole ‘recommended by the sister’ bit doesn’t sit right with me. And Jikunokagu’s got to be hunting for victims somewhere. Someplace they can find people in pain, like the Brouwers.”

As they drove toward the market, Emma fell silent, deep in thought.

“Are you bothered by what Michi said?” Tobias asked.

“...Well, you know. I am actually curious about why the baby died, but a sudden death means an autopsy, right? And the doctor didn’t find anything unusual, said it was a natural death. Plus, the couple didn’t seem to have had any magical training. There’s nothing for me to go on...”

“Don’t worry. You’re an excellent sorcerer. Steady as a rock. You’ll notice something while we’re poking around on this one,” Tobias encouraged her with a grin as he pulled into the market parking lot.

The space was filled with shoppers and booths.

“You wanna go around to all of them with a photo?” he asked with raised eyebrows.

“We might not have to.” She pointed to a billboard at the entrance to the square.

A place for sharing local information, such as event announcements and job listings. Flyers for visitors to take home with them were pinned to the bottom of the bulletin board. She saw more than a few notices about self-help groups mixed in among the information meetings and lesson advertisements.



“...They’re all pretty small-scale,” she said. “Alcoholism, drug addiction... Looks like there’s also groups for people who are sick to support one another. And...”

“A grief support group. One for people who’ve lost loved ones and one for synthetic users. They’re on different days, but the venue’s the same. Looks like Jikunokagu’s big plan was to find clients by posting here.” Tobias picked up a flyer and checked the contact information and organizer. There was a meeting scheduled for that day. “Let’s go hear what the organizer has to say. They might know something about the Brouwers or the sister.”

Seething, he headed toward the venue with Emma, outraged at the callousness of these merchants of death operating in a place where people congregated to overcome their grief and get back on their feet.



Theo clicked his tongue as they left the office building, and he returned his cell phone to his pocket. “No Gino Camicia on the list of university graduates. And the Jikunokagu office is a large room with a desk and a phone. I mean, come *on*.”

“It was a surprise that there was no one in the office,” Eleven remarked. “I thought there would at least be a contact person.”

“Any phone calls they get are probably forwarded,” he said. “So all that’s left is the trading company or whatever it is?”

“It would be nice if there was someone there we could talk to.”

Theo didn’t bother to respond to this as he silently got into the car. The only place they could find anything on Gino Camicia was the Jikunokagu website. Did he even exist?

They retrieved the address of the company from the registered information. And so Theo got out of the car in front of a building in the city of Traysom and scowled.

Eleven looked up at the building and read the sign out loud. “Camicia Crown Building. First floor, Ishizu Real Estate. Second floor, Nokka Travel Agency, Traysom branch. Third floor, Camicia Fund. Fourth floor, Jikun Okajima

Commerce.”

“So the Camicia connection’s the third and fourth floors? We’ll check the lower floors, too, just in case.”

He wasn’t particularly enthusiastic about it, but he did stop first with the real estate agent on the first floor. The agents were looking for buyers for land and buildings for the redevelopment that was accompanying reconstruction efforts. After this fruitless visit, he left the realtor there and went up to the travel agency on the second floor.

“Welcome!” an agent called out eagerly. “Oh my! Are the two of you planning a trip together?”

“Criminal Investigation Bureau,” Theo said. “We’re investigating a case. Do you know someone named Gino Camicia?”

The woman’s shoulders slumped. “No, nothing... Are they a suspect in your case?”

“We were hoping to speak with him as someone who might have relevant information,” he replied evasively and looked around the room.

The majority of trips advertised were domestic tours, perhaps because of the instability of world affairs. Almost all the cruises to popular locations were currently not on offer.

“Is it only the cruises that have been canceled?” he asked. “Is there some issue with going out to sea?”

“Well, that... You see, up until a couple of months ago, there was no particular issue with pirates,” the agent responded with extreme consternation. “But for the last two months, it’s been one accident after another in this area.”

She showed them a map of the ocean around Adastrah. The site of the accidents was a desert island on the edges of Adastrah territorial waters, on a rocky shore northwest of the port of Zabahlío. It had originally been a tourist destination.

“With shallows like this, it seems like ships would frequently run ashore, though,” Theo said.

“On the boundary of the shallows, there’s a tall rock on its own, so ships have managed to steer clear using that as a guidepost,” she told them. “But all of a sudden, the currents in that area started behaving strangely. A ship will barely skirt the edges of the area, but then something catches the rudder so that it’s practically dragged into these whirling tides. Best case is they run ashore; worst is they sink. No one knows why people keep going missing. We’re all at our wits’ end.”

“It happened that suddenly?”

“Yes. It used to be a very calm sea, perfect for diving,” the agent said ruefully and drew a line in pen on a copy of the sea map—a route from the port of Zabahlío that detoured exaggeratedly around that region of the ocean and went out onto the high seas. “Travel is limited to larger passenger ships, which aren’t very maneuverable, so they follow this route. We can’t really guarantee the safety of any other route.”

“But that way’s hard going, too.” Theo frowned. “Now the ships have to enter the waters of another country to avoid the habitats of large magical creatures.”

Around a route marked in pen were a number of symbols indicating danger. The larger magical creatures were more of an oceanic threat than sharks; their brutality stemmed from their simplemindedness, leaving many tragic victims in their wake. A ship with a large number of tourists on board could never risk navigating through such dangerous waters.

“Exactly.” The agent nodded emphatically. “If they detour that far around, they enter the waters of the Shelkroshett Federation. And for *that*, you need a navigation contract with the federation, so smaller tours can’t break even. All of which is why we’ve had to cancel the majority of our cruise tours.”

“But not all of them,” Theo noted. “What do you offer now?”

“If you want something soon, I’d recommend the three-nation pleasure cruise that departs next week. Take a look.” She held out a flyer, and Theo raised an eyebrow at it.

“Oh!” he said. “It stops in large port cities in Yunilska, Adastrah, and Shelkroshett?”

“We’ve finally seen the end of the war around here, so why not bask in a summer of peacetime? That’s the basic theme of the tour; it crosses the borders of three countries now at peace. Seven nights, eight days—you return to the same port you departed from. Of course, going to the different countries means a navigation contract with each, which makes the cost a little higher. But for that price, you also get to travel on a deluxe ship, top of the line. The fair princess, the beautiful *Havmonet*!”

“...That might be too steep on an investigator’s salary,” Theo told her. “Well, thanks for your help.”

He and Eleven left the agency. They still had to check the investment and trading companies upstairs, but Theo turned to Eleven as he tucked the flyer into his belt.

“So two months ago, there’s a sudden, violent change in the currents in a specific region of the sea, cause unknown,” he said. “Coincidence?”

“We do not have sufficient information,” Eleven replied. “This area is in a direction ninety degrees off from the direction of the Amalgam’s progress.”

“Let’s ask Naval Security about this later. I want to know the details of these accidents.”

They went up to the third floor, but the lights in the investment fund office were off, and the door was locked. There was no sign of anyone inside. With no other choice, Theo began to climb again and then stopped.

Halfway up to the fourth floor, there was an automatic door with a surveillance camera and intercom. To enter, someone had to open this door, or it had to be unlocked with a key card and passcode.

“Pretty tight security,” Theo remarked. “And unlike the third floor, it seems like people are actually in there.”

“If we only converse over the intercom or we are shown into a customer reception area, we won’t be able to examine the interior,” Eleven said.

“And we don’t have a warrant. We’ll just have to ask for their cooperation. Although I *could* draw their attention while you sneak in.” He looked down at her. “What can you transform into?”

“Anything you desire.” As usual, she was staring up at him intently with her gray eyes, which were so sincere, he flinched a little.

He cleared his throat and settled on a safe plan. “What if I said to make yourself invisible, wait for an opening, sneak in, and gather information?”

“That would be simple,” she replied immediately. “However, any information I gather could not be used as evidence. Is that acceptable?”

“That’s fine.” He nodded. “I just want to know what’s going on in there. Record everything you can.”

“Understood. I will be on standby beside you until you give the signal to execute,” she said simply and unwound herself like a sash. Instantly, she vanished.

“...Eleven, are you really there?” He stared into the air where she’d been.

“I have made myself, my clothing, and my belongings transparent, but I am beside you,” her voice told him, and he felt a tug on his sleeve.

Startled, he looked around but could see nothing. He smiled. “You’ll have no trouble sneaking in like this. Keep holding my sleeve like that until I give the signal. Otherwise, I won’t know where you are.”

“Understood. I will maintain the current status,” she replied.

If he hadn’t felt the pulling on his sleeve, he would never have believed she was there. With the magical camouflage, Mimesis, only a little shimmering of the air remained visible.

She really can be anything...

He could sense nothing of her presence, and he couldn’t help wondering if she was actually beside him. Astonished, he went up to the door and pressed the button on the intercom.

“Yes?” a mechanical male voice responded.

Theo showed his investigator’s badge to the camera and said as evenly as possible, “Criminal Investigation Bureau. I’m conducting an investigation and asking for cooperation of people in the neighborhood.”

"I'll open the automatic door. Please come inside."

Theo's eyes widened slightly as the intercom clicked off and the door opened.

So they're letting me in just like that. Bit of a surprise there.

He slipped through the door and found himself in a lobby with contemporary decor and decorative plants. It was quite a modern office. A man in a suit came out from behind the counter and led him to a reception area that opened up to one side of the desk. A sign hung on the wall that read JIKUN OKAJIMA COMMERCE Co., LTD.

"Has there been an incident in the area?" the man asked.

"Yes, but there weren't any witnesses, so it's been an uphill battle," Theo told him. "Excuse me. Could I trouble you for something to drink? I've been walking around for ages in that heat."

"It is indeed quite hot today," the man agreed. "Is water all right?"

"Yes, thank you." Theo saw the man off with a friendly smile, and at the same time, he whispered, "Go, Eleven."

"Roger," came her own whispered voice. "I will ring you one time when I return."

The man opened the door and stepped through it. The door's closing swing stopped for a mere instant before it continued toward the frame as though it had never been interrupted.

Before too long, the man returned with a bottle of water, and he offered it to Theo. "Here you are."

"Thank you so much," Theo said, accepting it. "I don't see any other staff. Is everyone else in the back?"

"Yes." The man nodded and sat down. "We have separate client and business spaces so that we can focus on our work."

"That makes sense. What kind of work is it?"

"Our main business is the import and sale of goods."

A perfectly natural response—nothing unusual there.

Theo opened his notebook. “So then I suppose you don’t really get to see much of what goes on outside.”

“Not really. Basically only when we’re coming into work and during our lunch breaks.”

“I’m investigating a murder at the moment. We believe the perpetrator was making trouble in this neighborhood—causing a fuss, sneaking around, that sort of thing. Have you had any issues recently?”

“No, none. It’s been very quiet.”

And of course it had. The Criminal Investigation Bureau hadn’t received reports of any such incidents.

“Is that right?” Theo turned the page in his notebook solemnly and waited for a little time to pass. “I’m sure you must be very busy. I’m sorry to have bothered you. Incidentally, these imports and sales you handle—do you ship by sea? There’ve been a string of accidents on the ocean recently due to unknown causes.”

“Is that right? Whereabouts?”

“Near the border with the Shelkroshett Federation.”

“Oh, well then, there’s no issue for us.” The man smiled calmly. “Our main trading partner is a company in East Akaryaza, so we use an entirely different shipping route.”

“I’m glad to hear it.” Theo returned the man’s smile. “Ah, my boss, you know, he was complaining about how this cruise he’d been planning got canceled. It’s great that whatever the issue is won’t affect your company... Oh! Speaking of East Akaryaza, I hear their magic developed along entirely different lines from our own. I guess they have a lot of medical supplies and handicrafts that can’t be found anywhere else. You work with that kind of thing?”

“Yes, we do handle such merchandise. Our focus is on corporate clients, but individuals can also purchase items at our shop.”

“That’s very interesting. If you don’t mind, could I take a look at your catalog? The victim regularly used products from East Akaryaza. Perhaps I could find a

clue in the merchandise you handle.”

“I’ll get one for you right now.”

The man returned to the counter, and Theo followed, approaching the nearby employees-only door. He could just barely hear voices in conversation, but he couldn’t make out what they were saying. He furrowed his brow until he noticed the man turning back to him with a catalog from beneath the counter. Theo flashed a friendly smile.

“Here we are.” The man handed him the catalog. “Was the victim in your murder case an aficionado of handicrafts?”

Theo glanced through the inventory but couldn’t find proxies or anything of that nature. “No, medical products,” he said. “An ointment of sorts, but the element analysis is a bit complicated.”

“The compounding and ingredients are unique, after all. We have this in the way of ointments.”

The man began to cheerfully explain exactly what ointments they carried. Theo let this wash over him and focused on the man’s appearance.

The catalog seemed legitimate, and the man was behaving utterly naturally. It didn’t look to Theo as if he was lying or trying to deceive him in any way. The man was quite serious and seemed to believe that he worked at a regular trading company. Camicia’s ruse was quite thorough.

Eventually, the cell phone in Theo’s pocket vibrated exactly once. He pulled it out and said to the man, “I’m sorry—looks like some new information has come in. I have to go. Thank you so much for your help. Do you mind if I take the catalog?”

“Of course not.” The man smiled again. “I hope you catch the murderer soon.”

“I intend to,” Theo murmured beneath his own smile and left, catalog in hand. Eleven was waiting for him on the landing of the stairs.

“There you are,” he said. “When did you slip out?”

“The bathroom window was open, so I left through there and came back

inside. I photographed the clues. Please take a look.”

Theo took the cell phone Eleven offered him and opened the photos folder.

The area beyond the counter was a completely ordinary office, with men and women in suits busy at work. Nothing particularly caught his eye. The other photos were of the break room, the reference room, and the president’s office.

“...Pretty average office space, hmm?” he remarked. “Looks like the trading-company sign was no lie.”

“The documents in the reference room were mostly account ledgers, required documentation, and client lists. I was also able to find their company history,” Eleven said and showed him photos she had taken of printed documents. “The company was founded fifty years ago by Jikun Okajima, and the main office is in East Akaryaza. The current president is Gino Camicia, a descendant of the founder. This office, the Adastrah branch, was established a year ago to expand the scope of their operations...is the official account.”

Theo snorted loudly. An extremely unlikely story.

The next image was of an internal PR magazine.

““President Camicia aims to increase the number of sales routes and actively grow Jikun Okajima Commerce even further. He has extended operations within Adastrah and is proactively looking toward other countries, as well,”” he read out loud, then grimaced. “Are we supposed to buy this?”

“This has normalized the president’s absence among the employees, if nothing else. The branch president is fully responsible for operations here. In the mere year since the establishment of the office, the executives have gone into the city of Traysom on business repeatedly, so it seems that they are avoiding any questions from employees in this way. In fact, look here.”

Eleven showed him a pile of pamphlets that were in the president’s office. Camicia had apparently gathered up brochures at random, everything from expensive cruises to illegal group tours for the purpose of medical treatment.

“My analysis is that they are not particularly selective when it comes to clients,” she added.

“Meaning they’ll go after anyone if they’re a potential mark?” Theo sighed. “He’s got Jikunokagu to put on a good face for people looking for folk remedies, and his position as president of the trading company to put on a show of relative status for the upper classes. He’s split it up quite nicely, hmm? What about product stock?”

“There was nothing in the office. According to the documents, the stock is managed at and shipped from the Zabahllo warehouse. There is no hidden storage space here. There was also no Amalgam signal. That is all I have to report.”

Theo returned the cell phone to Eleven and put a hand to his chin. “The Amalgam was headed for the ocean. If Camicia was busy with his ‘business’ at the time the couple was murdered, then we might be able to find out where he was, more or less.”

He went back to the car and spread a map out on the hood. He marked the Brouwers’ house with a pen and drew a line from there straight to the coast.

“If it was moving toward a person and not coordinates, what’s the range of possible pursuit for an Amalgam?” he asked Eleven.

“There is no particular limit. It would continue its pursuit for as long as it was able.”

“So then if we extend this line out...” Theo slid his finger across the map. “The countries on the other side of the ocean are still at war. Camicia would no doubt avoid areas where he might be in danger, so he was probably actually on the water at the time. It took us about half an hour on foot from the house to the coast. How long do you think it took the Amalgam?”

Eleven blinked slowly and turned her gaze slightly upward. “We were moving at about three kilometers an hour. An infant crawls at an average speed of one kilometer an hour. I would hypothesize that its speed was further halved due to its injured state and the difficult terrain, and calculate that it took three hours from the time the Amalgam left the house until it reached the beach.”

“The Brouwers’ estimated time of death was around nine in the morning. It was noon when the Amalgam arrived at the beach. There’s a good chance Camicia was on a boat in this area at the time.”

Theo drew a large circle on the ocean, then picked up the map and returned to the travel agency.

The agent looked at them in surprise. "You're back? Is there anything else I can help you with?"

"Were there any tours that passed through this area between nine and noon three days ago?" he asked, showing her the map.

"Hmm, during the morning..." The agent peered at the circle Theo had drawn and scratched her head. "Please wait just a moment." She abruptly began to rifle through the papers on her desk and finally pulled a single sheet from the mountain of papers. "It could perhaps have been the Yunilska battlefield tour. It leaves at nine in the morning, squeezes in three hours of observation, and returns at two in the afternoon."

"...You can do a battlefield tour?" Theo raised his eyebrows. "And on the sea?"

"Many Yunilska battleships sank in this area," she told him with practiced ease. "No doubt they'd like to repatriate them, but circumstances being what they are, the ships have stayed there, sunk. Their remains serve as relics of battles, allowing visitors an opportunity to learn about the background and keep history alive. That's the basic idea of the tour. It's not one of ours, but we do need to know about the cruises offered by other countries so that we can make the necessary arrangements for sailing routes."

"It sounds like a fascinating tour," Theo replied. "What kind of people take part?"

"It's held once a week, and I'm told it's used in history lessons for children. Soldiers also take the cruise to see the ships they were once on, and some people go to mourn loved ones they lost in the wrecks. There's a ceremony next week, in fact, for former sailors and their families."

Theo accepted the flyer she offered him and frowned. The three-nation pleasure cruise was departing Yunilska two days after the ceremony. And both ships left from the same port.

"It's a place for people who have experienced 'loss' to gather, like the

couple,” Eleven remarked.

“No doubt about it,” Theo agreed. “Camicia’s bread and butter.”

They thanked the agent and returned to the car.

“Difficult to investigate across national borders.” Theo sighed. “The paperwork alone will take forever. And it’s not as though we have definite proof that Camicia was involved in the murder.”

“Then should we stop the cruise ship when it calls at the port of Zabahllo?” Eleven asked.

“No, if we’re stuck waiting either way, I’d like some solid proof that we can use to make an arrest. I want to get a lock on the Amalgams, too. So then, well...” Theo hesitated for a moment as he sat down in the driver’s seat. “Can I ask you to hit up any connections you still have in intelligence services?”

Eleven blinked slowly at him from the passenger seat, a blank look on her face.



Tobias and Emma returned to the office while Theo was poring over a map of the ocean. He handed them each a coffee, and Emma sent her gaze around the room curiously.

“Hmm?” She frowned. “What happened to Eleven?”

“She’s doing a favor for me,” Theo replied. “You’ll understand once I tell you what we learned.”

“Well, all right, then.” Emma let the matter drop, and the three investigators looked at one another.

“It’s beginning to come into focus,” Theo said. “The start of the couple’s unhappiness was the loss of their child three years ago, then?”

“We still don’t know the cause of Basil’s death, but at the very least, it was a sudden tragedy, and the couple was shaken by it,” Emma replied with a troubled expression. “They couldn’t seem to get past it on their own, so they joined a grief support group. We checked with the organizers. It was Brecht’s sister, Anna, who introduced the couple to the group.”

Tobias nodded. “Anna also told them about the healer. If Anna was working with Jikunokagu, she might have deliberately stoked Michelle’s distrust of the medical establishment to keep anyone from finding out about the proxy through X-rays or ultrasound. Of course, she might have just been worried about her sister-in-law.”

“...Why was Anna in a support group?” Theo asked.

“She was an alcoholic and was trying to stay sober, apparently,” Tobias replied. “Although she’s hardly been since the Brouwers joined the group.”

An increasingly suspicious story. Theo pointed to the pamphlets and catalog on the table.

“We’ve still got a lot of unknowns when it comes to Jikunokagu and its CEO, Gino Camicia,” he said. “But what we can say for certain is that he operates in places where people who have experienced loss gather, and that national borders won’t stop him in his search for clients. So he’s got at least that much in the way of good looks and financial power. He’s likely in Yunilska right now.”

“Yunilska?” Tobias looked down at the map. “You mean that naval country to the north?”

Emma cocked her head, dubious, while Theo handed them the pamphlets for the cruise tour.

“There’s a ceremony next week for navy veterans and bereaved families,” he explained. “Camicia will show his face there and then jump onto the cruise. The ship’s scheduled call is at Zabahllo.”

“I get it.” Coffee in one hand, Tobias scanned the tour information. “Him crossing borders puts a cramp in our style, but this would let us set up an ambush here.”

“We don’t have enough evidence to arrest him.” Theo sighed. “So we’re going to get the proof we need to lock him away. We’ll pass ourselves off as passengers and board the ship for undercover investigation. I asked Eleven to lean on her contacts in Intelligence for help.”

“What? Intelligence?” Tobias choked on his coffee, his eyes growing wide in surprise. “Can’t we just pretend to be regular passengers?”

“The captain said this ‘goes beyond the scope of a normal bureau investigation.’” Theo clicked his tongue and jerked a thumb toward the captain’s office. “Said we’d never get the budget, so give it up.”

“Well, yeah.” Emma appeared exasperated. “We’re talking a luxury liner here, y’know? Call it an investigation till the cows come home, but they’ll never go for that.”

“I’ve returned.” Eleven stepped into the office and looked first at Theo. “They agreed to our request for cooperation. The proposal was accepted without changes, and they plan to meet us there.”

“Great. I know it was a sudden ask. We definitely owe them one.” Theo felt relief wash over him. They had cleared the first hurdle.

But Emma’s face clouded over. “So then are the four of us going to board a cruise ship?”

“That’s the plan,” Theo said. “Given the nature of the incident, it’s essential that Eleven is on the scene, and I’m required to accompany her as the lead investigator, so we’ll pose as passengers. I was hoping that you and Tobias would board as seasonal crew and look into things from the staff side. What do you think?”

“No complaints from me,” Tobias replied with a grin. “Just let us have one training session before the ship gets here.”

However, Emma’s expression was apologetic. “I’m sorry. Something’s bugging me. I’d rather stay behind and keep investigating on the ground here. How about you three go on the cruise, and I’ll back you up from the outside?”

“That’s fine,” Theo said. “But are you sure? You’ll be working alone.”

“I’ll be okay. Just make sure to send me some beautiful pictures of you all living the good life, got it?” Emma smiled and looked back at Eleven. “So who in Intelligence is working with you?”

“Army Lieutenant General Désiré Cormolone and his wife, Liddy,” Eleven answered immediately.

Now it was Theo’s turn to choke on his coffee. Tobias’s eyes grew wide in

surprise.

“You managed to get an appointment with the lieutenant general on such short notice?” he asked.

“I will omit the details,” Eleven said. “Suffice it to say, the lieutenant general was already going on the tour in question. Theo will be acting as a corporal under his command, while I play the couple’s niece, Alouette.”

This was entirely unexpected. Theo cradled his head in his hands, but Emma cried out happily.

“So then you get to decide on all the other details yourself! I mean, the Cormolones—even I know they’re a famous military family. Alouette’s gotta be a little rich girl.”

“Yes.” Eleven nodded solemnly. “She is the couple’s pet dog. Her coat is lovely, and attention is lavished upon her.”

“...That’s a joke because they know you’re a Hound, right?” Emma was perplexed, but Eleven appeared not to view it as an issue.

“In that case, you just need to age yourself up a bit, looks-wise,” Tobias told Eleven.

“What?” Emma said. “Isn’t she good the way she is, though? She’ll arouse more interest this way.”

Theo tilted his head. “Doesn’t she look a little young?”

“A cruise—it’s kind of an escape from reality, right?” Emma replied. “So, like, what if the two of you were a couple who wanted to forget the real world, y’know? Like, normally, you could only be a girl and her guardian with the difference in age and status, but step away from that reality, and you’re just a couple spending the summer together.”

“I didn’t ask you to create a dramatic backstory,” Theo said dryly.

“Don’t make fun of me.” She sniffed. “We’re not just trying to lure Jikunokagu. We want them to sell us an Amalgam product, right? So then you’re not the focus, Theo. We need Eleven to be recognizable at a glance somehow. You, Theo, need to look like a military guy protecting his girl from everyone. You

only let the Jikunokagu people get through.”

Her initial proposal seemed frivolous, but she had clearly thought it through quite seriously.

Theo sighed and reflected on the information they’d gathered so far in the investigation.

“Take the Brouwers as a model,” he finally said. “They were at a loss after the sudden death of their child and the miscarriages, which pushed them to sign a contract with Jikunokagu just so they could have a child. But instead of a couple who’s lost something, this couple is trying to get something back. Or they have this ideal about what their lives would have been if the world was fair.”

“In that case, I think Eleven’s arms should look like synthetics,” Tobias interjected, then he pursed his lips in thought. “Say her dream of being a pianist was crushed, or she’s insecure about her looks and doesn’t go out much. Then no one would wonder why they haven’t seen the Cormolones’ niece before, right?”

“The piano story could work. Playing with synthetics would be frustrating, and it’d make sense that she’d be despairing, considering how young she is. But what exactly do you mean by insecure?” Theo asked. “Are we talking about her arm synths?”

“When a growing child uses synthetic limbs, the weight and the joint can obstruct development,” Tobias replied awkwardly. “She should actually look closer in age to you, Theo, but she didn’t develop physically, so there’s a gap in the ages you appear to be. She’d have a real complex if that was the case, wouldn’t she?”

“True.” Emma nodded repeatedly. “That’s a story that would draw Jikunokagu’s eye. Eleven, any experience acting?”

“The piano is simply a matter of hitting the keyboard,” Eleven replied immediately. “There is no issue.”

“You always come through.” Emma smiled.

“About the personality and appearance,” Eleven started. “It would no doubt be pointless to ask for your preferences, Theo, so I will ready something

appropriate. I possess the model data for ‘purity’ and ‘dreamer.’”

“Whoa! She’s got your number, Theo!” Emma said, her eyebrows jumping up.

Theo quickly averted his gaze. “Well, of course she does. In point of fact, she’s exactly right,” he said. “But if it’s not especially an issue, keep your current appearance.”

“This hair color is conspicuous. Is that all right?” Eleven asked, touching her own hair.

Emma nodded with a smile. “It’s important that you’re conspicuous. An exceptionally beautiful and mysterious young lady—you’re sure to be the talk of the ship in no time flat. We don’t know how many Jikunokagu salespeople will be there, but word of you will definitely reach one of their ears.”

“Yes, exactly.” Tobias laughed. “And then you’ve got this uptight military man beside you. He seems tough, and they’ll make serious bank off him if one of his higher-ups comes along for the ride. Plus, if Camicia himself reels you in, there’ll be no complaints from anyone on their side.”

Theo abruptly noticed Eleven’s eyes on him and turned toward her. “What is it?”

“To confirm, do you have the education to play the part of a member of the upper classes?” she asked.

“...Basic business manners is pretty much all I’ve got,” he said. “How about you, Tobias?”

“I doubt it. The world I live in is just too different.”

Eleven blinked slowly. “Well then, I will arrange for instructors. Theo, you will learn the required culture and behavior from me. Tobias, I will introduce you to an agent who spent five years undercover at a luxury hotel, so please acquire the skills to provide the superior service that upper-class clients expect.”

Theo looked daunted. “R-right...”

“Uh.” Tobias paled visibly. “Eleven, isn’t that hurdle a bit high for me?”

“If Theo’s behavior is ‘boorish’ or ‘rough,’ there is a strong possibility that it will be overlooked because he is an army corporal,” she explained

dispassionately. "But cruise ship crew members are required to have the education and solicitousness to meet the client on their level. Please drill yourself on the required behavior prior to the day of the mission."

"Okay," Tobias replied, and his shoulders fell.

Theo, too, was overwhelmed by what lay ahead of him, and he stared at Eleven. Would he be able to act as though he was romantically involved with this inorganic girl? He'd been so busy with his studies during his student days, and with investigations since he'd joined the Criminal Investigation Bureau, that he'd never had a serious girlfriend.

Eleven looked up at him, but he was unable to face those gray eyes directly. He covered his face and sighed.

"You can do it! I'm rooting for you!" Emma cheered optimistically. "You two totally got this!"

"Easy for you to say. You won't be there..." Theo hung his head even lower.

CONFIDENTIAL

Chapter 3

The Plot Proceeds, Provoking

White-Crested Waves

AMALGAM HOUND

**Criminal Investigation Bureau:
Special Investigation Unit**

Cruise tour: Day one

Zabahllo, the largest port city in Adastrah. Home to a major naval base, the city had been bombed in several air raids, but each time, it had come back to life, its historical streets intact. But while it was a steadfast military city, it was also a picturesque tourist destination, the site of many a pilgrimage, a city on the water that welcomed and embraced all equally, military personnel, sailors, and tourists alike.

A snowy castle of a passenger ship approached the port. A cruise ship to be proud of, produced by the largest cruise company in the northern military nation. The enormous white ship known as the *Havmonet* boldly pulled into the port. People with cameras in hand rushed forward to take pictures at this rare chance to see the cruise ship of another country.

The pleasure cruise, which would visit port cities in three different countries over the course of a week, drew a tremendous amount of attention as a symbol of peace and friendship. The media was also gathered to capture a glimpse of the ship and its passengers, so the port was abuzz with excitement.

The passengers who disembarked at Zabahllo fussed and cooed over the unfamiliar city, while the citizens of that city raised their voices in welcome to the tourists from abroad. The sight of passengers on the deck and children at the port waving to one another drew smiles, and many turned their cameras on them. All these people enjoying their short time in the port gave hope to a city hurrying ahead with reconstruction.

Amid all the commotion, people joining the tour in Adastrah were being instructed to board the ship.

“So we’re getting on that, then,” Theo said in a low voice to Eleven next to him as he looked around intently.

“Yes, that is correct,” she replied.

Several people who were lined up to board the ship bore ranks several higher than the one Theo wore, and many passengers also had secretaries in tow. While there were couples who appeared to be joining the cruise for pleasure or to make memories postretirement, they were all, without exception, higher

class, comporting themselves in a sophisticated manner.

Seeing just how upper-class the passengers actually were, Theo began tugging on the collar of his uniform. He felt he might stop breathing at any second.

“I can’t tell who’s a Jikunokagu customer just from the look of them,” he said. “I don’t see Camicia, either.”

“So as in our initial assumption, they will target the welcome party that takes place after boarding,” Eleven replied.

“Our priority is to meet up with the lieutenant general and compare notes. Fortunately, we already know what he looks like, and once the ship sets sail, it’s basically a locked room. There’s nowhere to run.” The same could be said for Theo and his team, however. He let out a lengthy sigh. “I can’t believe we’re boarding as the lieutenant general’s guests. If I mess this up, my life’s over.”

“Excessive ‘worry’ will impair our performance. As long as you behave as you always do, there will be no issue,” Eleven said dispassionately, and Theo automatically dropped his gaze.

The dress adorning her slender body created a very girlish air with its modest ornamentation and full skirt. Her long, silver hair was tied up fashionably, and her lightly made-up face was nothing other than that of a beautiful young lady. The long sleeves and gloves should have been out of place at a port in the summertime, but these faded from view before her icy beauty.

Everyone they passed turned their heads to look at her ethereal figure. The people waiting to be shown onto the ship whispered about her as they stole repeated glances her way. She would no doubt attract the eyes of Gino Camicia as well and stir his interest in her secret and her neurosis. Theo was sure of it, especially because of her obvious beauty and her position as the niece of Lieutenant General Cormolone. The name Alouette also suited her quite well—so long as you didn’t know it was taken from the lieutenant general’s beloved dog.

“...Getting a lot of looks, just as planned,” Theo murmured. “I just hope we hook our fish.”

“Is my default appearance also sufficient for fishing?” Eleven asked quietly.

“Well, yes, of course.” His heart skipped a beat, and his voice jumped and dropped unnaturally. “It is quite refined.”

He couldn't help but be hyperaware of her when he thought about how he was meant to play the part of her boyfriend. Yet the girl in question merely gazed at the ship.

“The design concept for the Hound is based on the desire to instill ‘fear’ in the people who see it,” she said simply.

She was the same as ever, and the tension slid out of his shoulders.

“In your case,” he remarked, “the terror comes from how you do the wildest things while looking the way you do.”

Following the crew's instructions, he picked up her luggage along with his own.

“Theo, I can carry my—,” she protested.

“This way's more ‘boyfriend.’ Let's go.” He started forward, and she followed him a heartbeat later, peering up at his face. “What?”

“You have a better grasp than expected of the ‘escort’ concept, so I was considering revising the support plan.”

“Are you mocking me?”

“No, I think you're marvelous!” she cried brightly.

While he was taken aback by her sudden change in tone, she raced ahead of him on light feet. The hem of her dress flapped up, and Alouette smiled like a flower blooming as she whirled around on her adorable pumps.

“Hurry up, Theo! I've been waiting forever for summer!”

At the sound of her voice ringing out, the other passengers cast warm gazes at this girl and her cheeks flushed with excitement on the eve of the cruise tour.

Theo hurried after her toward the gangway. *Ah, I'm in for it now.*

Her beautiful visage, normally expressionless, now urged him on with a sparkling smile. He knew what kind of monster lay beneath skin so fair, it seemed to melt under the sunlight, and yet...

I'm done for...

Because he knew she was a tactical weapon, her innocent face wrung his heart all the more.



Tobias hammered the layout of the passenger ship into his head after getting a tour as a temporary crew member.

The cruise was only a few days long, and the passenger rooms were split up into four different classes, but the ship boasted abundant facilities—the event main hall, large and small theaters, a cinema, a chapel, a photo studio. Passengers could also choose from an array of activities within the recreation room, the library, the hair salon, the spa, the rooftop garden, four different pools, and even the gym. There was also a full roster of hands-on programs for passengers and their families, and a childcare service. The shop floor had all kinds of tax-free shops, including bars, restaurants, and cafés, making the ship something far beyond the scope of a hotel.

I never dreamed the ship would be this huge.

Tobias was astonished at the size of the place, and then his eyes landed on a sign that read SALON. This was a room to the stern of the ship, on each of the sixth and seventh decks, a special space available for bookings to only passengers staying in the luxury suites.

“Excuse me, are there any events scheduled for the salon?” he asked a passing crew member. “How do they select the waitstaff when there’s an event?”

The crew member cocked his head. “The only events I know of are the ones put on by the tour itself. But I was asked to clear people out of the salon on deck six, so you’d best stay away from there. I guess they brought their own staff, which means whatever the event, it’s not our problem. So you can relax.”

“Is that right? Well, thanks,” Tobias said, then left to check on the shift schedule.

It seemed that he had been assigned to look after the passenger rooms and the party spaces for the most part. He headed straight for the salon on deck six,

smiling greetings at the people he passed.

Observing it from the hallway, he saw people in T-shirts carrying things inside. Some kind of meeting seemed to be occurring. He checked the map of the ship and found that there was a cargo hold directly below the salon, which he assumed was where they were bringing the things from.

“Hey, what are you doing?” a voice said abruptly from behind, and Tobias looked back cautiously. A woman in a security-guard uniform was staring at him, TARJA embroidered on her shirt. “That salon is off-limits. You’ll be in trouble if they see you.”

“Sorry. I’m new to the ship,” he explained. “I wanted to get a feel for the place. This area is a no-go, then?”

“Just during this tour,” she told him. “One passenger’s rented it for the whole cruise, and they asked that only their own staff be allowed in. I get that you’re curious, but the meeting’s about to start. We should get going.”

Tobias obediently set out with Tarja toward the staff room. They were scheduled to have a final meeting while they were still at port, and all staff had been instructed to attend.

“Do we often get passengers like that?” he asked.

“Eh.” She shrugged. “It’s the first time anyone’s rented it for the whole tour with that much stuff and that many people.”

“It does seem a bit out of the ordinary.”

“...You probably saw on the map how that room’s right above the cargo hold, and there aren’t any adjacent passenger rooms. So you can make as much noise with music and dancing as you want, and lots of passengers take advantage of that. But that’s normally just for a few hours of a single day or so. This passenger’s a strange one,” Tarja said with a scowl.

“Is it business as usual with the salon on deck seven?” Tobias asked casually.

“It’s been rented for a day for a class reunion, so business as usual.”

“Huh. I wonder what’s going on with the passenger who rented the one on deck six.”

“All I know is to get into that salon, you gotta have an invitation.”

“An invitation?” He arched an eyebrow. “Have you seen one?”

“Caught a glimpse of ’em when I was checking the cargo hold. Only people with the invite were allowed in.”

Tobias thanked her and left on the pretext of going to the bathroom. After checking that there was no one in the staff corridor, he went into the bathroom, locked it behind him, and stepped over to the far wall. Finally, he tapped the wireless on the inside of his collar.

“Tobias, here. What’s the sitrep?”

“Theo, here. Passenger room is normal. No surprise extras. Emma’s scheduled to rendezvous with us on the destroyer *Calwell*. They’re accompanying the *Havmonet* under the pretext of a marine survey.”

“Roger that. As for this ship, one of the salons is booked for the entire tour. They’re having some kind of invite-only meeting. Could be Jikunokagu.”

“Could you dig anything up?”

“No. It’s off-limits to everyone but their own staff. The room itself is directly above the cargo hold, though, so apparently, noise is not an issue. I’ll look for a chance to check on it via the cargo hold.”

“We’ll do something about the invitation. You make sure not to draw unwanted attention.”

After this quick checkin, Tobias left the bathroom and looked around. There was no sign of anyone lurking nearby. At last, he headed toward the crew meeting. Because they didn’t know just how far Jikunokagu’s reach extended, he couldn’t be too cautious.



Emma held back her Society of Sorcerers cape and looked up at the old apartment building. Since she generally investigated as part of a pair or a team, she was a bit nervous to step inside by herself.

Right about now, Theo and the others were starting their undercover mission on the ship. And normally, Emma should have been with them. After all, she

couldn't say with complete certainty that what she was doing here was essential to the investigation. But as a sorcerer, she was self-aware enough to know that once she noticed a potential magical lead, she would regret it for the rest of her life if she ignored it.

Emma, you know you're the only one who can figure this out.

She psyched herself up and climbed the stairs of the apartment building. Voices arguing and earsplitting music leaked from some apartment somewhere. The walls in the entire building were thin, and the construction was shoddy.



She stopped in front of the door she was there to visit and drew a quick detection magic circle. There were no traps or any kind of magic in the vicinity. Once she'd confirmed that, she rang the bell.

"Yes?" came a thin voice. The face that poked out through the gap in the door was that of a woman tense with fear, deep bags under her eyes and so gaunt that she looked almost nothing like her photo.

"Anna Brouwer, yes? Criminal Investigation Bureau. Canary," Emma said, showing the woman her investigator's badge.

The woman stared back at her dubiously.

Anna Brouwer. After her drinking problem led to a number of major and minor issues, she'd abruptly dropped off the map six months earlier. But someone so dependent on alcohol that run-ins with the police were an everyday occurrence would definitely not be able to quit cold turkey and ride off into the sunset to live happily ever after. Emma's hypothesis turned out to be correct, and just as she'd expected, Anna had indeed had brushes with the law because of her drinking. That was how Emma figured out where she was. According to the police, Anna had spent the previous night in the drunk tank, where she was a frequent visitor.

"What do you want, Investigator?" Anna asked with annoyance through the opening in the door.

"I wanted to talk with you about your brother, Brecht, and his wife, Michelle," Emma said, and Anna's face stiffened instantly.

Anna lunged at the doorknob, but before she could close the door, Emma shoved her foot into the gap to stop her.

"I—I don't know anything," Anna protested. "Nothing!"

"Anna, I just want to talk to you," Emma said calmly. "The Brouwers have a right to know the truth about what happened three years ago. Don't they, Anna?"

"So then bring Brecht over here!"

"He's dead, Anna!" Emma shouted angrily. "Brecht and Michelle were both

murdered!”

Anna froze in place. Her eyes grew so wide, they threatened to fall right out of their sockets, and she finally looked directly at Emma.

“Murdered...? Both of them? I...”

She opened and closed her mouth soundlessly, and then her face finally crumpled. She pressed a hand to her forehead and sobbed, staggering back into her apartment. Emma followed her.

The room was gloomy and dimly lit by only a desk lamp, the heavy curtains pulled tightly closed. The colors overall were dark, and the mirror was covered with a sheet. It looked as though Anna had rejected anything in the way of light. The small kitchen was overflowing with garbage, a startling number of empty cans and bottles in that mountain. The sofa was half-buried under laundry.

Anna wailed softly in this room shrouded in darkness. She sat on the sofa, covered her face with her hands, elbows propped on her knees, and cried.

“Anna,” Emma said gently. “Please tell me about your brother and his wife. When was the last time you saw them?”

Anna took a shuddering breath. “About six months ago. I, um, invested in this thing, and it was a disaster. And when I told them I was moving, they came to see me. They were worried. We had dinner together for the first time in ages. I used to live in this place near the market, which was pretty handy, but I couldn’t pay the rent anymore. I gave Brecht the card of the guy who dragged me into the disaster investment to warn him. Like, don’t mess up like me. He’s smart, unlike me. I figured if I talked to him, he’d be all right.”

“And how was Basil?”

Anna twitched noticeably, and Emma heard her bite her fingernails.

“...Good,” Anna began. “I mean, I was surprised they’d give the adopted kid the same name as their dead baby. But I knew how much they’d been through with the infertility treatments, so... I was just happy to see Michelle smiling.”

“And you haven’t had any contact with them since?”

“None.” Anna shook her head slowly. “Well, I didn’t have the money for a

phone call or a stamp, so..."

"That's not true, Anna. I want to know what really happened." Emma knelt in front of Anna and grabbed her left hand. Blood was oozing from nails chewed down to the quick.

Anna stared at Emma with terrified eyes from behind the curtain of hair that hung down around her face.

"Come on, Anna," Emma urged. "Who were you hiding from? Your brother? Michelle? Or were you scared that the Society of Sorcerers might come asking questions?"

Anna tried to shake her hand off, her eyes widening as she broke out in a cold sweat. Emma held her small, icy, trembling hand as gently as she could.

"Anna," she said softly. "Possession and use of the tools necessary for a hex is illegal. If we examine the body of your nephew, of little Basil, we'll be able to tell right away who killed him and with what curse."

"...You're just saying that to try to threaten me."

"Someone at the Society of Sorcerers is checking over Basil Brouwer's body right now," Emma told her calmly.

Anna stared at her as if she were looking at the end of the world. Then she dropped her face and averted her eyes.

Sorcerers always first suspected a hex in cases where the deceased met a sudden natural death. Emma had also looked at other magic in the hope that she was wrong, but no matter what angle she considered the case from, the only conclusion she could come to was a lethal curse.

She peered at Anna's face and made an effort to smile gently. "Listen, Anna. The support group leader told me that your brother would bail you out every time you got into something because of your drinking and go with you to apologize to everyone involved. You joined the group because you were sorry for the trouble you caused Brecht, and you wanted to break free of your addiction. I'm sure you didn't mean to hurt him, not when you were putting in the work like that. Or did you actually hate Brecht and Michelle so much that you wanted to take their child from them?"

“No! Of course not! I didn’t hate them. None of this was their fault...”

Enormous tears fell from Anna’s eyes, and she buried her face in a cloth at hand, murmuring the names of her brother and his wife over and over.

Emma shook her hand lightly to urge her on. “Tell me everything right from the start. What happened?”

For a while, all she heard was sobbing, but eventually, Anna started to speak, her voice barely louder than a draft slipping through a crack in a window.

It all started with Anna’s own pregnancy four years earlier. When she delightedly announced to her partner of two years that she was expecting, he greeted her not with joy and celebration but with violence; he pummeled her stomach relentlessly. She passed out, the man disappeared, and less than three days after she found out she was pregnant, she lost the baby.

Plunged into the depths of despair, she drank like she was trying to drown herself and ran riot at the bar. Before she knew it, she was in a holding cell. She told her brother everything when he came to get her.

“Brecht and Michelle both did their best to help me through it. They even came with me to the bar to apologize. I was in such a bad place. I figured the least I could do was join this support group I found at the market. I was doing the best I could,” Anna said in a thin voice and squeezed Emma’s hand back tightly. “I was sober for six months. You may think that’s nothing, but I was so proud of myself. Around that time, I found out Michelle was pregnant. And honestly, I was thrilled. I felt like I was being rewarded for all my hard work. I kept it up for the next six months, too. I was clean a whole year. I got to welcome my beautiful nephew into the world. I was happy, doing really good...”

Just when her life was finally back on track and moving in a positive direction, Anna found out her friend was getting married. The fiancé was Anna’s ex—the one who’d beaten her so badly—and her friend was already three months pregnant.

“I was furious. It wasn’t fair. That man beat me up and killed my *baby*, and now he’s flashing a fancy engagement ring, he’s marrying my friend, and he’s going to be a daddy and live happily ever after? He had the nerve to smile when he handed me the invitation. And I lost it. I just lost it. I marched straight to the

bar for the first time in a year and drank whatever they put in front of me. After I'd been so strong, I'd tried so hard."

She sounded bitter. Anna took a trembling breath, let it out, and then continued:

"And then this guy sat down next to me. Total stranger, but he was a great listener, really kind. I ended up telling him everything. All the stuff I was feeling... And then he gave me this doll."

"Do you remember what kind of doll?" Emma interjected.

"A girl doll. Long hair, wearing some folk dress from somewhere. The stomach was open, though, and I could see straw inside. The man said all I had to do was put a lock of someone's hair in the stomach together with a note that had my wish on it and then burn the doll. I thought it was weird, but...I was going through it, so I took the weird doll."

Anna grimaced and groaned.

"I knew it was all so stupid. But...I took it seriously. With that doll with me, I even managed to smile at the bastard's wedding. I took advantage of the chaos to pull out some of his hair, and on a piece of paper, I wrote, 'I hope you lose your child, too.' I stuffed it all into the doll and threw the thing into the fireplace."

"So did you think the doll made your wish come true?" Emma asked.

"As if. I mean, it was just a doll. I figured that guy was just trying to cheer up a pathetic drunk crying into her beer. But...but later, my friend called me in tears."

Anna licked her lips several times before looking timidly at Emma.

"The baby had died inside her. I don't remember what I said to her then. My mind went totally blank; I felt like I was made of stone or something. For the first time, I was like, shit, the doll is real..."

An anathema popped up in the back of Emma's mind—a Fluch doll, a hex tool registered on the list of designated dangerous objects that even people with little to no magical training could use. Produced by a persecuted ethnic minority

in the federation, the doll went missing when their village was destroyed. This was the doll Anna had used.

Emma felt her heart constrict, while Anna kept talking like a dam had broken.

“I didn’t know what to do. And then the guy from the bar came to my house. He smiled and asked how the doll had worked out. He said something about how my being there alive meant that my family was the sacrifice. He told me, ‘You’re a criminal now. You murdered someone with a curse. If I tell the Society of Sorcerers about this, it’ll be the end of you and your family.’ And then he laughed.”

“Did he tell you his name...? Contact information?”

“No. He just went on about how great it was that the doll was real. That thing he said about my family being the sacrifice bothered me, so I called Brecht, and...he said Basil was dead.”

Anna started to cry once more. She pulled free of Emma’s hands and buried her face in a towel.

“The man who gave you the doll—was this him?” Emma asked in a hushed voice. She pulled out her cell phone and showed Anna a photo of Gino Camicia.

Anna took one look at it. Her throat spasmed, and her breathing grew ragged. “That’s him. That’s the man who gave me the doll. Basil, I’m so sorry. Basil...”

As Anna collapsed in tears, Emma sat next to her, stroked her shoulder, and patiently tried to console her. “You didn’t know what it was. You were in so much pain, the whole world was dark around you. I’m sure Basil knows you didn’t mean it. Tell me just one thing, though, okay? Did the man contact you or Michelle after that?”

“No.” Anna shook her head. “Not as far as I know. I thought he’d try to blackmail me or something, but there was nothing like that. I was so scared, though. I’ve been worried this whole time. Like what if I ran into him somewhere? What would I do?”

So Anna had only been the catalyst for the tragedy, and Camicia hadn’t been threatening her. Emma thought for a second and then changed her line of questioning.

“What about the support group?” she asked. “I heard you haven’t been since you introduced Michelle to it.”

“...I felt so bad. I couldn’t show my face there, not after they’d just celebrated my sobriety. I went to the place a few times, but I could never bring myself to actually step inside.”

“I get that.” Emma nodded reassuringly. “How was it going for Michelle? Was she fitting into the group?”

“Yes... She’s so outgoing, I guess she got friendly with them pretty quick. But someone in the group was telling her all this stupid stuff, and she was getting really suspicious of doctors. That kind of worried me.”

“I see.” Emma nodded again.

So it wasn’t Anna who had fanned the flames of Michelle’s distrust in the medical establishment—it’d been someone from the support group. Given that the participants were anonymous, Emma would have a hard time pulling out a connection with Jikunokagu from there.

“You recommended Kisage Chemist to Michelle. How did you find out about the shop?” Emma asked.

“It’s got a good reputation in the neighborhood.” Anna shrugged. “I thought it’d be a lower bar than a hospital, so maybe Michelle would talk to someone there at least. I know this isn’t very convincing coming from an alcoholic, but something was going on with her. I thought she needed help from someone other than Brecht, someone more professional.”

“...You really cared about her, hmm?” Emma said, and Anna turned toward her, eyes puffy and red from crying.

“If you can tell it was a curse from checking the body,” Anna began, “how come you didn’t find out three years ago?”

“Normally, the hospital and the Society of Sorcerers cooperate in matters like this, but the attending physician determined Basil’s death to be the sort of accidental death often seen in infants, so he didn’t contact us,” Emma told her. “I think they’ll take your circumstances into consideration, since you weren’t actively hiding the crime. But a crime is still a crime. You understand that,

right?”

Anna nodded slightly, and Emma held out her hands. She clasped handcuffs around the other woman's wrists, stood her up, and then hid the cuffs with a shirt that was sitting nearby.

“It's all so stupid, isn't it?” Anna said softly. “The drinking, the ex... Taking something from a stranger seriously. And now I can never go back...”

Emma held her breath for a second. But then she gave Anna a gentle push.

“That's right. And that's why everyone has to pay for their crimes fair and square. You, even though you did the hex without knowing what it was; the man who beat you and made you miscarry four years ago; and the man who gave you the doll, okay?”

Anna didn't reply, but her expression looked peaceful as she sat in the back of the unmarked police car. Feeling at loose ends somehow, Emma got into the driver's seat.

Spells always had a price and a medium. Sorcerers performed miracles by offering magic to pay the price and preparing a proper medium. But the mechanism for hexes was different from other spells. A hex was a singular miracle that could be activated if the right tools and conditions were arranged. The cost that a hex demanded of the user was the same thing inflicted on the target. Wishing for someone else's death invited your own. A hex inevitably made both parties unhappy. In Anna's case, because she had wished for the death of a child, the cost had been taken from her relative Brecht's son, since she didn't have any children of her own.

Hexes gave rise to a series of interconnected tragedies. Which was exactly why the use of hexes and the possession of the tools required were strictly prohibited. Knowing this chain reaction as she did, Emma couldn't exactly turn a blind eye to what Anna had done. Or to Camicia for giving her the doll.

...I'm going to tear off your mask and throw you in jail, Gino Camicia.

Emma gripped the steering wheel tightly. She had perhaps made the right choice not to board the cruise ship. If she saw Camicia, she was very likely to hit him and toss him in the ocean instead of arresting him.

■

By the time Theo and Eleven had looked around all the passenger areas of the ship and returned to their cabin, the sun was setting. Their deluxe cabin, the penultimate of the luxury suites on board, was equipped with a toilet, a bath, and even a small kitchen, and it was more than large enough for the two of them. The familiar sea at the port of Zabahlío felt special when viewed through the windows in such a room.

Theo sighed as he slipped his arms through the sleeves of a military uniform for the first time in two years. “I know it was all laid out in the pamphlet, but it really is overwhelming once you’re actually on board, hmm? The sheer size of the thing. So many shops and facilities, not to mention all the lessons and programs. They even have marine sports, you know.”

“The difficulty of pursuing our target will increase dramatically once the passengers disperse. It’s essential that we focus on those instances where all passengers are gathered together,” Eleven said through the bathroom door. There was no trace of the excited ingenue Alouette in her voice.

Theo’s spirits sank as he thought about the task that lay before them, and he reached for his tie gloomily. “If we miss the welcome party tonight, we won’t get another shot at having all the passengers in one room until the next social event tomorrow. We really need to sniff out Camicia tonight and figure out what he’s up to.”

“They asked that everyone attend the welcome party, and Camicia will no doubt be there to look for clients,” Eleven replied. “Tobias will also be there as staff. Discovery is possible.”

“So you say, but there will also be a huge number of people there, right? Do you have a plan of some sort?”

“It will be easy. All we have to do is draw attention.”

The door opened, and Theo reflexively looked back as black high heels clacked against the floor.

Eleven had changed into a navy-blue pleated dress. The ruffled, stand-up collar highlighted her slender neck, and ribbons hung down from the nape of

her neck to the backs of her knees, swinging back and forth together with the hem of her skirt. She seemed to have also changed her makeup somewhat. She had a much more grown-up air than she'd had that afternoon.

Theo stared at her and muttered, dazed, "Where did this bag of tricks of yours even come from?"

"Thank you for acknowledging my camouflage abilities," she said. "You're crooked." Eleven reached up and undid Theo's tie before deftly retying it.

"Do you have to go to such lengths to hide your arms?" he asked, eyeing the black lamé opera gloves that covered her hands.

"I confirmed with Emma that hiding them would arouse more curiosity."

Before he knew it, she was so close that he could almost count her silver eyelashes. Eye shadow the same color as her dress blended strangely well with the winter hue of her pale skin and suited her cool gaze.

"Is there some point of concern?" she asked, noticing his eyes on her.

"Oh..." He came back to himself with a start. "So I should also act like I'm ignoring your synthetic arms, too, then."

"Yes. I've been given guidance to thoroughly avoid handshakes or contact, and to only touch you."

"...Emma couldn't come herself, so she got quite obsessive about prepping you, it seems," he muttered.

Eleven straightened his collar, took a step back, and looked him over from head to toe.

"The formal military dress was the right choice," she noted. "It will awe people more than a tuxedo."

"So long as it cuts down on the amount of time I have to spend with idiots," he replied.

His only business on this ship was with Gino Camicia. He had no intention of wasting his breath chatting with a bunch of rich people. He put his watch back on and double-checked the tour agenda that had been handed out to the passengers.

The welcome party was two hours after they left port. After the party, passengers were free to do whatever they liked. Although dinner was also at a fixed time, Theo couldn't discount the possibility that Camicia would choose room service over the restaurant, given that he'd reserved a salon for the entire trip.

He checked his pistol before returning it to its holster and then picked up the key to their cabin.

"All right," he said, looking at Eleven. "Should we get going? I'm counting on you to instruct me in the proper manners."

"Understood. I will not be too forceful in noting issues, however," she replied coolly and came to stand next to him.



Tobias made his rounds at the welcome party, handing out drinks with a friendly smile, and then turned his eyes to the entrance of the main hall at the arrival of new passengers. It was Theo and Eleven. Although he knew how they'd be dressed, since it had been discussed endlessly in the meetings, Tobias nevertheless gasped when he saw how they looked for the first time.

Theo was in formal military dress, his dark red hair slicked back. While the outfit was the very picture of a straitlaced military man, combined with the stern expression on his face and his ramrod posture, gallant and imposing won out over stiff and ceremonious.

Eleven was in a sleeveless pleated dress, her silver hair tied up elegantly. Her shoulders were bare, while black opera gloves covered most of her arms. She had the innocence of a girl and an air of mystery; her gaze seemed more assured than her youthful appearance would suggest, making her age unclear.

The pair stepped forward into the hall, arms intimately linked, drawing the eyes of many a passenger. The girl cast a listless gaze around the room and then suddenly broke into a smile. It was as refreshing as witnessing a flower unfurling into a blossom.

"Uncle Désiré!" she called, and the lieutenant general and his wife turned around.

“Oh! There you are, Alouette!” The crafty older man, the lionhearted general of Adastrah, grinned broadly in welcome, while the girl—Alouette—smiled amiably, drew back her left leg, and offered him a beautiful curtsy.

The passengers around Tobias let slip admiring sighs, and in the blink of an eye, murmurs spread through the hall.

“I’ve never seen her before. Such an elegant curtsy.”

“How adorable! Like a little bird.”

“Alouette... I’ve heard of that name before. Isn’t she the lieutenant general’s favorite niece?”

“I’m certain I wouldn’t have forgotten a beauty like her if we’d met in society before. Perhaps she hasn’t made her debut yet?”

Impressive. Tobias was astonished. Eleven hadn’t done anything remarkable. But she’d made herself the topic of conversation through her extraordinary appearance and her charming act alone. He himself was also momentarily bewitched, but then he hurriedly sent his gaze racing over the other passengers.

Word of the beautiful and mysterious girl rippled outward through the partygoers in a wave. One particular partygoer caught Tobias’s eye, and he gasped. He turned and moved toward Theo and Eleven, albeit not quite briskly enough to draw attention.

The young couple standing with the lieutenant general and his wife were like something out of a picture.

“Uncle Désiré, Aunt Liddy,” the girl said, still smiling. “Thank you so much for inviting us.”

“Of course, dear.” The wife waved a dismissive hand. “We could never say no to our precious Alouette. Right, Desi?”

“That’s right.” The lieutenant general nodded firmly. “And I’ve been wanting to chat with the corporal myself.”

“It’s an honor, sir,” Theo said.

It was a pleasant, quiet conversation. But when Theo shook the hand

Cormolone offered, he slipped a note into it, and Cormolone gave a slight nod as he tucked it inside his sleeve.

“Would any of you care for a drink?” Tobias asked Theo casually.

“Thank you. We’d love one.”

Theo took a glass from the tray, and Tobias bent over to make it easier for Alouette to reach.

“Third from the back, pillar to the left,” he whispered so that only the four gathered around him could hear him.

Alouette took a glass with a smile, and Theo mouthed his acknowledgment as he hid his lips with his own glass.

Tobias looked toward the back of the venue as he welcomed newcomers to the party. Leaning against a pillar adorned with gorgeous flowers was Gino Camicia, chatting pleasantly with a group of passengers.



Once the wave of conversation and people broke, Theo let out a slight sigh. He’d wondered how it would work when they’d decided he would play Eleven’s boyfriend, but when he thought about it with a cool head, it wasn’t as though they would be physically intimate in front of everyone. All he really had to do was stand near her or walk around together arm in arm. The hard part of playing this role was making conversation with the upper classes without raising any eyebrows or questions about who they really were.

Everyone was curious about the unfamiliar pair, and an endless stream of people came over to talk with them. Theo was supposed to be an unpolished military man, so even if he was ignorant of the manners and society trends that Eleven had tried to beat into his head, people would overlook it. But Eleven was supposedly the niece of a well-known lieutenant general, and many glances and conversations seemed to be trying to test her. Standing at her side, Theo felt his own heart stop a few times in terror.

After yet another flawless exchange between Eleven and one of those would-be testers, Theo whispered to her, “Sorry. I need a bit of a break.”

“All right. I’m feeling a little thirsty myself. Let’s head over to the bar,” she

replied with a smile as Alouette.

But then she noticed a gentleman who had come to say hello, and she bowed neatly at him before he could offer a hand to shake. She kept her own hands in front of her as she straightened, which made it difficult for the gentleman to reach for one of them. Instead, he pressed a hand to his chest.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you,” he said, smiling. “My name’s Damian. Lieutenant General Cormolone’s never brought any family other than his wife before, so I wanted to take this opportunity to come and say hello.”

“Thank you so much,” Eleven replied warmly. “It’s an honor. My name is Alouette. This is Theo.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you.” Theo bowed. “I owe the lieutenant general my life several times over.”

“Ah, is that right?” The gentleman nodded, his grin widening. “Well then, perhaps we were together at the capture of Vespa. Although I was on the Shelkroshett side back then.”

“That’s a name I haven’t heard in a while,” Theo said. “I was still a new recruit then. I could barely keep up with escorting a supply truck.”

“Well, that’s also a very important job. You run out of bullets, and you’re basically dead—” Damian interrupted himself abruptly. “Oh goodness! Is something the matter, Miss Alouette? You don’t look well.”

Theo dropped his gaze and found that Eleven’s cheeks were a little pale.

She lifted her eyes with a gasp, smiled, and pressed a hand to her chest. “I do apologize. This is my first time attending an event such as this. I must be a little tired.”

“I’m the one who must apologize for not being more sensitive,” the gentleman said immediately. “They have some chairs set out over there, so perhaps you could sit for a moment?”

“I will do just that, thank you.” She dipped her head toward him courteously. “If you’ll excuse me.”

Theo took the hand that Eleven held out and moved toward the chairs along

the wall, supporting her. He helped her into a seat and said, "That was spectacular. Saved by a kindly man."

"He's the scion of a corporate group that donates vast sums to medical institutions," Eleven replied, then smiled mischievously. "To maintain his public image, he prioritized my resting over his own social aspirations. Or maybe he's just like that. He's quite nice."

Crammed inside her little head were the family names of the upper echelons, their major achievements and businesses, their relationships to one another, trends in high society, ideal conversation topics, the correct way to behave at any time and place, and much more. Because she had such a firm grasp on all this, she chose to comport herself perfectly or to act slightly inattentive, depending on who she was speaking with. People's evaluations of her were glowing: "Just what I'd expect of a young lady of the Cormolone family!" and "She has such an artless charm."

"...You are one scary woman," Theo remarked.

"That's high praise." She beamed at him. "Thank you."

He took a seat next to her and exhaled at last. The tension eased from his shoulders, and he let his gaze wander, looking over the party venue discreetly.

"...That man has been watching you this whole time," he noted quietly.

"I'd call that staring," Eleven murmured and gently tugged on her opera gloves. "Could he not be a bit more subtle in observing me?"

Although Gino Camicia was absolutely not approaching Eleven, he followed her each and every action with his eyes. He'd been particularly attentive when she refused handshakes or kisses to the back of her hand. He didn't seem bewitched by her like the other passengers, however. Instead, his gaze made clear a unique fixation.

"He's wondering about your arms," Theo said, his voice low.

"Everything is going according to plan so far," Eleven replied. "Should we really continue to ignore him?"

"Mmm. We'll reel him in once he's taken the bait. No one is less on guard

than someone who thinks they've figured the whole situation out."

While they were avoiding approaching Camicia themselves, they were picking up bits and pieces about his group. They hadn't yet reaped any big rewards, but they had still learned some things.

"Definitely three of them here, then?" he asked Eleven.

"Yes. One internal organ and two legs. Perhaps they offer them to friends for free."

Camicia and his hangers-on were enthusiastically making the rounds and chatting people up, but they came together quite frequently and conversed cheerfully. Camicia himself knew many people, and while there wasn't a lot for Eleven and Theo to go on to decide if they were all from Jikunokagu, Eleven had detected Amalgam cores in three at least. Three people at the party were using proxies, just like the Brouwers had. They all leaned in very close to Camicia when they spoke with him, obviously intimate. It was probably safe to assume that they were not clients but friends.

"I'm surprised Jikunokagu would make their presence felt so freely like this," Theo remarked. "They're on even better terms with the upper classes than I expected."

"Mm-hmm." Eleven nodded. "They both have something the other wants. Or maybe many of the rich simply have an interest in the occult."

He sighed and leaned back in his chair. It was a surprise to learn that Jikunokagu products were secretly fashionable among a certain subset of the wealthy elite. Limited edition items, unavailable to the general public, were of particular interest, it seemed.

"The people who've actually bought these things, they're really into them, hmm?" he said to Eleven. "On and on about how effective they are, et cetera, real zeal."

"It's not so much 'solicitation' as it is 'proselytizing,' isn't it? They're convinced they've got something great."

It was, at best, only a small group of people who were devoted to Jikunokagu. Those who knew the first thing about East Akaryaza told them with pained

expressions that Jikunokagu products were garbage, and more than a few people avoided any item with a whiff of the occult to it. Perhaps because of this, as soon as patrons of Jikunokagu products learned of Theo and Eleven's interest, they began to wax poetic about their effectiveness.

"They say all these things, like 'It made me young again,' 'My life got better,' 'I got a promotion,' 'I had more money.'" He shook his head. "So all these wonderful results supposedly have nothing to do with income."

"And the things they showed us were nothing more than wooden tags or bits of fabric. None of them had a shred of evidence for the supplements or tools they're all talking about. If something that so significantly affected human life actually existed, the Society of Sorcerers would regulate and control it. It's been nothing but fakes."

Eleven gave him a pained smile and tossed the piece of wood that had been foisted upon her under her chair. The gift giver had passionately explained how simply carrying it on her person would bring good luck financially, but she had determined that it was simply a chunk of an oak tree.

"It's in the realm of the placebo effect," Theo noted. "But I am curious about the people who said they got physical function back."

"The people talking about their lost vision returning, or their legs growing strong enough so they could abandon their wheelchair, yes?" Eleven said.

Theo frowned automatically and massaged his forehead with a finger.

All the stories they'd heard about Jikunokagu's wonderful products were anecdotes from personal experience. But the stories about how so-and-so had gotten a lost physical function back or how someone had recovered a function they'd been missing since birth were all in the form of secondhand retellings. Without exception, the speakers told them it was a "miracle," and they didn't have many details beyond that to share.

"...A miracle only the selected few are blessed with?" Theo arched an eyebrow skeptically. "They were practically bursting with the desire to tell us all about it, but they somehow didn't manage to say anything of substance. Maybe they'd show us one of these miracles in the salon if we sent them an invitation."

“It’s quite possible, if they’re going to do a demonstration of the proxy. Or maybe they have an even more surprising miracle product,” Eleven said with a slight smile, and then she cocked her head. “Still, I’m curious if the people who spoke to us about the salon will actually be taking part in it or only heard talk of it. They all told us to keep their story under wraps, but are they really trying to spread the word?”

“Good point.” He nodded in agreement. “After all, they prattled on and on about this mystery product until I was ready to plug my ears to shut them up. Maybe it’s also possible they’re trying to ensure the privacy of the salon participants. They want the existence of the salon to be known, but they don’t want anyone to know any actual details, so they only talk about it on the level of a rumor.”

“It’s true that human beings are most excited by things they can only get a peek of.”

Was it a strategy to stir up curiosity and make people seek out invitations? Or was the group really very strict about the passengers they decided to invite? Theo couldn’t tell at present.

“...The ones we need to be watching out for are the salespeople, then,” he said.

“It looks like they’ve already selected their clients. I’ll narrow down the targets for observation and split them up.”

Theo lifted his head, and Eleven indicated to some passengers with her eyes. Wheelchair users were conspicuous at this standing-style, buffet party, and he could see someone hiding his walking frame with a loose tuxedo. Other passengers never removed their gloves, like Eleven. And all these people had attracted the eyes of Camicia and a few others.

“Is their strategy the same as ours, and that’s why they’re not speaking with any of us?” Theo mused.

“Perhaps they’re looking for opportunities to build friendship,” Eleven suggested. “Common hobbies or acquaintances, things like that.”

“I guess that’s possible, too... I’ll go get drinks. What do you want?”

“Surprise me. Thanks, Theo.” A weak smile rose up on her excessively pale face, making her appear impossibly ephemeral. She definitely didn’t look like a weapon that could send a car flying with a single punch.

As Theo was ordering drinks at the bar, someone came to stand next to him. He casually glanced that way, then mentally gritted his teeth, although the actual expression on his face didn’t change.

Gino Camicia was beside him, requesting a glass of sparkling wine from the bartender.

“And here we are, sir.” The server slid two glasses toward Theo—one wine, one lemon squash.

“O-oh... Thanks.” Theo picked up the glasses and then furrowed his brow slightly. The lemon squash had a bright red cherry bobbing on top.

“A little treat for your girlfriend,” the bartender said, blushing slightly.

“Ha-ha... Well, thank you,” Theo replied with a wry chuckle.

He’d thought he understood how refined and extraordinary Eleven looked, but she had apparently charmed people beyond anything he’d imagined. Maybe that was only to be expected, though, since he himself saw her every day and was still stunned by that smile of hers.

He heard an abrupt chuckle from beside him, and he automatically lifted his face.

“Excuse me.” Camicia was accepting his own glass, and now he raised it to Theo. “Must be rough when everyone’s in love with your girlfriend.”

“I suppose so.” Theo shrugged. “At any rate, I’ve got no end of worry.”

“Oh dear!” Camicia’s eyebrows jumped up theatrically. “Concerned she’ll have a change of heart? Or afraid you won’t be able to give her the support she needs?”

“...I’m not entirely sure I understand what you’re trying to say.” Theo chose his words carefully in an attempt to not offend with his response.

Camicia savored a sip of wine, and then his grin deepened. “I couldn’t help but notice her. It’s quite common with younger people, you know. They don’t

get new synthetics before they grow out of the old ones, which has an impact on their later physical development.”

“How dreadful. But that’s not an issue for us.”

Theo moved away from the bar, careful not to bump into any of the other passengers. But before he could take more than a few steps, Camicia came around in front of him.

“She’s a lovely woman. Slender, adorable, a delicate little bird,” Camicia said. “But if it’s the result of stunted growth, then it’s quite tragic. It’s only natural that you would worry as her partner.”

“...I do understand that she looks younger than her age. But given that I’ve only just met you for the first time, you honestly have no right to make such speculations. Please leave.”

When Theo glared at him, Camicia’s smile grew broader.

“I beg your pardon,” Camicia replied quickly. “You see, I’m quite a soft touch, and I simply wanted to make a potentially helpful suggestion. Don’t you wish she could live happily and carefree without feeling the need to hide her arms? I would be honored and delighted to help give her that life so she can enjoy herself to the fullest, even while you are away for your military duties.”

“You keep saying—,” Theo started, but Camicia cut him off.

“Tragedy is also part of life. But sometimes, we get a chance to do things over, Corporal. What if she could embrace the life she should have led with two beautiful, healthy arms?”

“I see.” Theo furrowed his brow.

Camicia was convinced that Alouette’s arms were synthetics, and now he’d come to clear away anything that would prevent Theo from reaching his objective. Just as Tobias and Emma had predicted, Camicia wanted to win Theo over to his side first, as he was the biggest stumbling block in persuading Alouette to purchase his products.

“You finally get to go on vacation together, and yet she’s obviously thinking primarily about her arms,” Camicia said smoothly. “I expect that not only will

she not go into the pool, she'll likely avoid even taking in the sea air on deck, won't she? If you get her a ring, she might very well refrain from wearing it. And it's so sad that the hands that you recall when you think of her on the battlefield are cold and hard. Imagine how wonderful it would be if she could touch you with her own hands, a smile on a cloud-free face, if you could share that sensation and that physical warmth."

This was an underhanded attack. If the person you loved most in the world had her dreams ruined with the loss of both arms, and time stopped for her due to the synthetics she wore so that she remained in the body of a girl even though that wasn't what she wanted—leading her to avoid contact with other people and stubbornly keep her arms hidden—then no matter how blessed she was in the material sense, you would feel sorry for her. You'd feel regret—if only she hadn't lost her arms. If you had known the softness of her skin before the cold sensation of synthetics, then you would feel that loss all the more keenly.

Now that Theo knew Camicia's method of attack, he pushed past him. "If you'll excuse me. She is waiting for me, after all."

"Please do think about it. The future you could have," Camicia said, but he stayed where he was instead of pursuing Theo further.

Theo returned to Eleven's side and presented her with the lemon squash.

"I heard you talking," she said, accepting the drink with both hands. "I thought he'd keep coming at you, though."

"I let him see he'd gotten to me," Theo replied. "That's plenty for that guy."

"...You're assuming he'll interpret your silence as a bull's-eye?"

"He seemed to respond to that, actually."

Theo sat down and casually looked back. Camicia bowed at them and moved away to join another group.

"...When Camicia approached you, his friends also dispersed as one and began speaking with the other passengers," Eleven told him. "None of them targeted the person with the physical issue—they all went after that person's companions."

“A trick they all share, then.” Theo nodded in understanding. “First, they single out the people close to their actual target, talk about a future they might have had, dangle the possibility of that future before them, and then watch their reaction. No doubt it’s easier to get family and friends to agonize over the lost potential more so than the person with the lived experience.”

Eleven tilted her head. “Because the family is tired?”

“No. Because they care so much about their loved one, they’re praying for a better future for them.” He held out his left hand, and Eleven lightly placed her own in it. Her hand was small and hard. “Can you watch Camicia while still facing me?”

“I can see him. We’re fine,” she replied.

From the outside, they appeared to be nothing more than lovers holding hands and gazing into each other’s eyes. He traced his thumb across the palm of her hand, and she giggled.

“...He’s laser focused on us,” she said in a low voice. “Is that what you wanted?”

“I just hope he thinks his little speech was effective,” Theo murmured. “Should we make a toast?”

“Yes. What are we celebrating?”

“The fact that we hooked our fish.”

They released each other’s hands and lightly touched their glasses. A *clink* followed.

“Say, Theo? Lemon’s not actually my favorite, you know.”

“It’s not?” He frowned. “But you always pick lemon when there’s a choice of flavors.”

“It’s just... The first flavor I experienced was lemon. It’s easy to taste.”

“Is there such a thing as an easy taste...? So then is lemon really easy...?” he wondered as he took a sip of his wine, the full-bodied scent wafting up to his nose.

Eleven also took a drink of her lemon squash. “You know the mechanism of the sense of taste, yes?”

“The chemical substances we sense with our taste buds are processed in our brains as taste.”

“Before, any processing stopped short of determining a flavor when I did an element analysis of something in my mouth. Being able to discern solid from liquid and to detect the existence of poison was sufficient.”

“So conversely, you were in situations where that was necessary, then.”

“Well, a human being can’t chew up nails. And they die if they drink poison, don’t they? Such analysis is necessary.”

An immortal weapon pretending to be a human being was more difficult than Theo had thought. He nodded without really understanding, and Eleven continued, exasperated.

“The mouth of a living creature is complicated, despite the fact that it should be more than sufficient to simply discern if something is dangerous.”

“No, that’s far too broad.” He shook his head. “So then do you lot not know spicy, either?”

“It’s a pain sensation, so probably not,” she said with an innocent laugh, very much the laugh of a girl of a certain age. “But I’m sure I could tell the difference between the spiciness of cayenne and of mint. We can recognize temperature.”

Theo suddenly remembered how she was at home. “Is that why you make dinner but never eat it? Because you can’t tell the flavors apart?”

“Hee-hee!” She giggled with delight. “Is that why you always pull that strange face at every meal? No, it’s not that. I work on a principle of no waste. I mean, I only cook when you’re tired and would go to bed without eating anything, you know.”

“And that doesn’t enter into your idea of waste?”

“Meals are the source of energy for human beings, okay? Your needs are not waste.”

This conversation, which had nothing to do with rich people or the upper

classes, had been restful for his overtaxed brain, so when he saw the lieutenant general and his wife walking toward them, he stood up.

Eleven followed suit, and a nearby server swooped in to retrieve their empty glasses. As he walked away, the server's cheeks flushed a deep red at Eleven's smile of thanks.

The lieutenant general's wife, Liddy, giggled. "All eyes are on you, hmm, Alouette? Even if we can't arrange it for you, I think that invitation you want will fall into your hands one way or another."

"...Any information?" Theo asked, and after a look from Liddy, Lieutenant General Cormolone spoke.

"We found someone who wanted to attend the salon. The idiot son of a federation friend. He was under the misguided idea that success in life is essentially guaranteed to all salon attendees, so he tried to sneak in. But he got chased away in seconds."

"I'm sorry for your friend, but grateful for the information," Theo said honestly, and Cormolone snorted with laughter before continuing.

"The invitation really is a must for whatever they're doing in the salon. But word has it only the organization's brass can give them out. Definitely not the sort of place passengers can simply waltz into. Only folks given a unanimous seal of approval at the executive meeting are invited."

"So it's no one-man operation, then." Theo frowned. "I'm surprised."

"As was I. It's not clear who the others are, but it's best to assume there's more of them than we'd imagined." Cormolone's expression was hard.

Theo looked discreetly around the hall. How many of the people there belonged to Jikunokagu? But this mere glance had him meeting Camicia's eyes again, so he immediately pushed Eleven behind him.

She looked up at the lieutenant general. "I think we'll be able to get an invitation."

"Saves us the trouble, then," Liddy said with a smile. "We'll go back to our original mission, but you get in touch if you need anything else."

Eleven drew her left foot back and curtsied, while Theo bowed formally.

“I do apologize for putting you out,” he said. “We’re very grateful for your help.”

“Anything for Guin’s precious girl. Now, get in there and get it done.”

“We will exert every effort,” Theo replied, and Cormolone nodded before linking arms with his wife and walking away.

Theo exhaled the breath he’d been holding, stood up straighter, and looked down at Eleven. Her gray eyes stared at him uneasily.

“Now that Camicia is so obviously targeting us, it’s dangerous for us to question people,” she noted.

“Let’s wait and see how this plays out for now,” Theo replied. “We should be all right leaving together, at any rate.”

Eleven nodded and suddenly walked toward the wall. Theo took his place next to her as she clasped her hands behind her back.

Instead of windows, the walls of the main hall were adorned with large paintings and sculptures, and decorated with gorgeous ornaments. With its two-story atrium structure, the venue was so large, it was almost hard to believe it was inside a ship.

Eleven came to a halt in front of a painting of the *Havmonet* at sea, and Theo quietly drew up beside her. As he gazed at the framed painting, he slipped an arm around her slender shoulders and gasped as he noticed Camicia reflected in the frame, staring at them.

“How long is he just going to watch us?” he whispered.

“He’s surprisingly cautious, isn’t he?” she murmured back. “My uncle did say that the group has a meeting about the salon invitations, so maybe we need something more to seal the deal.”

“Such as?”

“How about we show him an obvious reason I can never be satisfied with my synthetics? That would be the piano, yes?”

There were a limited number of spaces with pianos on board. Theo was going over a map of the facilities in his mind when Tobias's reflection popped up in the surface of the frame.

Maintaining his cover as a friendly waiter, he bowed neatly. "Quite the heated gaze," he said. "I guess stage one was a success?"

"It would appear so," Theo replied. "The group apparently decides on the salon invitees at a board meeting. We're going to lay down some bait, but we'll still have to watch and see for a bit."

"Huh." Tobias raised an eyebrow. "Weird for a group like this not to be under the thumb of one person."

"How about you?" Theo asked. "Get anything?"

"Lots of shifts, so zilch. I'm on call after the party, responding to passenger issues, cabin stuff. I won't be able to check the cargo hold until after dinner, probably. That okay?"

Theo could hardly protest. Because Tobias was supposed to be a crew member, this was an unavoidable issue.

"That's fine," Theo said simply. "But can you tail Camicia when we leave the hall? Even for just a minute or two?"

"That I can do. The dancing's going to be starting here in a bit, so you should take that as your chance to go. Nothing else is on the schedule before dinner, and loads of passengers slip out of the party. Would you like a drink?"

"No, thanks."

They kept their conversation short to avoid arousing suspicion. Tobias returned to his serving duties, and Theo loosened his tie a little as he watched him go.

"...Now then, shall we take our leave before another fancy so-and-so comes along to test us on how cultured we are?" Theo asked Eleven.

"Goodness!" she exclaimed. "We could at least have one dance."

"Dance... What? You and me?" Surprised, he looked down. Eleven was grinning at him mischievously.

Couples were slowly making their way toward the center of the hall, and he could hear the band tuning their instruments. The dancing was about to start.

“Hang on just a minute,” he protested. “You didn’t teach me to dance.”

“I’ll lead. You’ll be fine,” she reassured him. “I mean, I’m sure this’ll be the first and last time we dance together.”

“And I’m supposed to debut my two left feet at a high-society dance?” He shook his head firmly. “I can’t. Don’t make me.”

“How lovely that we’ll both be debutants together! Let’s dance. Just one song.”

Gloved fingers reached for his hand. He couldn’t exactly brush away this sweet yet hard and inorganic touch, so he allowed himself to be dragged into the group of dancers.

The two of them stood facing each other. She was childishly bashful, her features shining—hair beautifully bound up, shadowed lids, curled eyelashes, gray eyes. In contrast, his own expression was indeed somber.

He’d stood in front of Eleven any number of times, but he’d never felt so helpless before.

“...Wh-what do I do?”

“First, you bow,” she instructed him. “Then you take my hand in your left hand and put your right on my waist.”

The elegant strains of a triple-meter tune echoed through the air. Perfectly synchronized with the other ladies, Eleven drew her left leg back, plucked her skirt up with both hands, and executed a model curtsy. Theo nervously bowed and reached out toward her. He laid his left hand over her smaller hand and supported her slim waist with his right as she’d told him to, while she placed a gentle hand on his chest. When she lifted her face, they were so close, they were almost embracing. Her eyes were brimming with the light of bright innocence, like the surface of a lake reflecting the winter sky.

With no regard for how Theo gasped, stunned, the waltz began, and the couples around them moved their feet in practiced steps. But Eleven only

swayed lightly from side to side, teasing Theo.

“Relax, Theo,” she said. “It’s supposed to be fun.”

“No. I can’t. There are too many people watching.” His eyes darted about nervously. “What are they looking at? I’ll clear ‘em all out if I have to.”

“So volatile.” She giggled. “Is he still observing us?”

Theo let his eyes roam over the spectators. And just as he’d feared, Camicia was leaning against a pillar and staring at them with deep interest.

“What’s he staring at?” Theo snarled. “We’re not putting on a show here.”

“Don’t threaten people, please. You just have to repeat the simple steps; it makes a pattern. You’ll be fine.”

Theo sensed the warm protectiveness of the many eyes watching over them from nearby, and he could hardly keep himself from running out of the room. He felt the blood rush to his head and tried to focus on Eleven’s voice and the toes of her black pumps.

“One, two, three. One, two, three. Right step, left step.”

“Wait, wait,” he said, flustered. “Stop going forward and backward. Just do right and left like you’re saying.”

“Follow the rhythm. Give yourself to the flow. Heels lightly up in the air. Hee-hee! You’re doing great!”

The movement of his feet was monotonous, but Eleven pushed and pulled his hands and elbows, changing the orientation of his body and the direction in which he stepped, so that he was just barely able to maintain the dance.

I heard the lead’s critical in pair dancing. So this is what they mean, he thought, staring at her toes.

“Theo?” she said questioningly. “Quit staring at the floor. Are you dancing with my shoes?”

“It’s just... If I don’t focus, I’ll step on your feet.”

“I won’t feel it even if you do. The important thing is to look at the person you’re dancing with.”

Her voice contained a sulking edge, and he automatically lifted his face. When their eyes met, she smiled gently. He was accustomed to her usual lack of expression, so this extreme close-up of a smile was bad for his heart.

“Come on, you’re in formal military dress. You look better when you stand up tall,” she chided. “And you’ll look like a better dancer if you carry yourself confidently.”

“Thanks. I’ll remember for next time.”

“It would be nice if there was a next time.”

“What?” Theo said automatically, unable to let that comment pass, and Eleven let out a peal of tinkling laughter.

As he stared in astonishment at her carefree attitude, she pulled her left hand away from him to twirl on the axis of her connected right hand, her ribbons and the hem of her pleated dress flying up around her. The other women were also spinning about, so dresses of all colors puffed up around the hall, looking from above like flowers blooming.

It was dizzying. The world around him went white, and only Eleven’s smile held him. He had no more words.

There was no way she wouldn’t draw the eye. She wasn’t only beautiful; she wasn’t just refined. Her smile was impeccable, defenseless, a smile that came from a thorough understanding of how people would react to each and every look on her face, to every move she made.

This girl floated gently back into his arms, and he had to admit that he was bewitched.

He was about to open his mouth when she entrusted her weight to his arm and threw herself back, and his eyes grew wide in surprise. He hurried to support her, and even while he murmured protests—“Whoa. Hey”—she pulled herself back up in time with the jaunty music. Using the momentum from this move, she spun around and drew back so that she was tugging his hand in hers.

“Hey!” he yelped. “What’s going on?! Hey!”

Eleven just laughed happily, while Theo was unilaterally swept around. With

her right hand as an axis once again, she flipped her skirt back and did a nimble spin before coming back into his arms. He stopped the girl flying toward his chest with an embrace and finally exhaled. He heard excited giggles from near his chest.

“It’s a very common dance step, though,” she said with feigned innocence. “Was that not okay?”

“Don’t go improvising with a guy who barely knows the basics,” he replied weakly.

She pressed her cheek to his chest, and they simply swayed from side to side slowly. When he finally regained the wherewithal to look at the other couples, he saw a lot of them were also pressed against each other and swaying like he and Eleven were. He’d thought all the twirling and pushing and pulling had simply been Eleven making unreasonable demands of him, but apparently, that was the moment the song and the dance reached their crescendo.

“...You know this song?” he asked her.

“There’s more or less a set playlist of songs that are played at an event like this. I simply took a cue from those around us. I only need to see people getting into position to pick up on the dance in time.”



“You make it sound so easy...”

“It is easy, though. For me.”

While they were embracing like this, they did look like lovers to the rest of the world. And it was true that they were acting in a way to play up that perception. A feeling of guilt rose up in him, however. She was not the sort of creature to dance in a place like this. But he couldn't catch his fish without her.

Theo grabbed the hand Eleven had on his chest. “You always come through for me. You really do.”

“What's this all of a sudden?” She stared up at him in surprise.

“I'm keenly feeling my lack of experience,” he told her honestly.

She didn't laugh but rather squeezed his hand in return and quietly pressed herself closer to him. “There's nothing I want more than to be of use to you.”

“Even with something like this?”

“With anything.”

Eleven pulled away from him so that only their hands were left linked, and the song ended. Showered in the applause of the spectators, they bowed along with the other couples.

Theo met Eleven's eyes when she lifted her head and moved toward her in surprise. He pushed away her messy bangs with gentle fingers. Sweat was beading on her forehead, and she was breathing somewhat heavily.

“You okay?” he asked.

“Fine. But I'm all sweaty. It's embarrassing.” She smiled awkwardly and fanned her face with her hands.

The onlookers didn't bother to hide their fond smiles. They could see she was the sort of girl who got tired of talking to people and needed to rest; it was only natural that she would leave after just one dance.

Theo ceded their place to another couple and led Eleven toward the exit. “How about we take a little break?”

“No, I'm okay.” She shook her head. “But I am concerned about my makeup.

Do you mind if I go fix it?"

"Of course not. Let's go."

They left the main hall, and Theo saw Eleven off to the ladies' room. He leaned against the wall in the corridor to wait for her. His wireless abruptly crackled to life in his ear.

"Tobias here. Target outside. In pursuit."

"Roger. I'll confirm," he replied briefly and looked around as he pushed a lock of hair back and hid his face with his hand. Camicia was chatting merrily with some other passengers near the entrance to the main hall.

The fish continues to be reeled in, then.

Theo grew more certain that Camicia would definitely come for Eleven.

When the girl herself returned, her hair was spilling down over her left shoulder, creating a more relaxed vibe. With this one change, the impression she made became somewhat casual. Hairstyles were a mysterious thing.

"Sorry to keep you waiting," she said. "We have some time until dinner. What do you want to do?"

"How about we go get a quiet drink at the bar?" he suggested. "Apparently, they've got a jazz band."

"A jazz band!" She clapped her hands together. "How lovely. Let's go!"

They weren't unnaturally loud, but they would definitely be overheard. Eleven's excited voice carried well, and the people in the area couldn't help but hear it. He spent a moment admiring Eleven for picking up on his intentions without him having to say anything. Then he took her hand in his and started to walk toward the bar. As expected, Camicia also began to move.

"We know for a fact that they're doing business here," Theo said. "But I wonder if they've gone so far as to bring stock onto the ship."

"If they're doing sales demonstrations in the salon, they would have," Eleven replied. "But I'd need to be within about two passenger cabins in order to sense them. They're small."

“Put another way, you could investigate from directly above, then.” Theo nodded, and then something else occurred to him. “So do you operate under the assumption that the target you’re in pursuit of is relatively large?”

“Not necessarily. But our sensor function is for use in recovering units destroyed on the battlefield. We’re designed to mimic the surrounding terrain when destroyed so we can’t be recovered by the enemy. Which means we can’t be found without a detector.”

The only Hound Theo knew was Eleven, but he had personally experienced how magnificent her mimicry could be. Even if the Amalgam was half as advanced as she was, if it was mimicking sandy soil, for instance, he would never be able to pick up on its core.

He lowered his voice to keep the people they passed from hearing him. “Setting aside the issue of the main Amalgam’s body for now... How are they producing the low-quality cores? Is there a set way of doing it?”

“...I have two hypotheses on that point.” Eleven leaned in closer to Theo and added quietly, “Both Roremclad and Jikunokagu use small cores. Roremclad had the one core that they split, and the Amalgams had all the basic functionality, although their output was insufficient and they had to supplement with prey. But Jikunokagu is different. They’ve deliberately cut out the regeneration function.”

“And that’s likely the biggest selling point, so it’s a mystery as to why they would cut— Whoa!”

Theo clasped Eleven’s shoulders and shielded her from a group of passengers clamoring down the stairs boisterously. He casually let his gaze wander and caught sight of Camicia exchanging business cards with someone in the hallway. It seemed Camicia was trying to follow them from a fixed distance.

Eleven tapped Theo’s shoulder. “Theo, they’re all gone now.”

“Uh. Oh! Sorry...” He quickly released her.

She straightened her messed hair and puffed her cheeks in a sulk. “You’re overprotective.”

“...It’s hard to find the right balance. Anyway, your hypotheses?”

She slipped her arm through the crook of his and leaned in closer. “One: Like Roremclad, they’re splitting a single core, but they had issues—maybe the original core grew weaker, so there is no regeneration. Two: They overwrote the main body’s core and changed the regeneration function to a core reproductive function. This mass-produces low-quality cores, while the original core output is unchanged.”

Theo’s feet nearly stopped at this, and he forced himself to pick them up and climb the stairs. “Big difference in the danger of those two scenarios.”

“Yes.” Eleven nodded. “If they are repeatedly splitting the core, then the parent should weaken, like the Amalgam Nina did in our last case. But if it remains at the same output as when applied in a battlefield, it’s a serious threat.”

“...I see. That does require further investigation, then. Let’s continue to discuss it while we relax at the bar.”

At the top of the stairs, they could see the main hall’s atrium. They turned their backs to this and entered the restaurant area. They passed by a group choosing a restaurant for dinner and entered a bar with the sign M_{EESA}. A surprising number of people were at the tables and counter seats having a quick drink before dinner, while at the other end of the room, a spotlight illuminated the small stage.

“Why did you pick a jazz bar?” Eleven asked Theo.

“I couldn’t think of another place that would have a piano.”

They sat down at a table in the back, and a server raced over to them. Once they had both been provided with drinks, Theo turned to Eleven.

“Are there any actual cases of an Amalgam producing cores?” he said to her.

“There was an individual that created a degraded copy to form a temporary military corps when it was in an immobile state. It used multiple decoy individuals in order to buy time until it was done copying itself.”

“If the objective was to buy time, then degraded copies were more than enough, I suppose.”

“Yes,” Eleven replied dispassionately as she propped her chin in her hands. “Many low-quality cores can be produced in a short period of time.”

Theo found himself curious and asked, “So they could be forced to produce cores under orders, too? Why do you think the core might have been overwritten?”

“I hypothesized this from the procedure damage and Jikunokagu’s objectives.” Eleven raised her glass of sangria and smiled. “All they want is money and a highly profitable product. They don’t require strength as a weapon from the Amalgam—they want an unflagging factory. So the first thing they do is cut the regeneration function, since it requires many procedures, and change it to a powerful reproductive function. Due to their lack of expertise, the change ends up being nothing more than graffiti on the core and simply removes the Amalgam’s regenerative ability. I assume that’s basically how their scheme went.”

“So then we can destroy them as we find them. But the core...what? The procedure? It’s not something just anyone can do, right?” Theo asked frankly as he brought his cocktail to his lips. “All it looked like to me was some kind of pattern, like a list of graphics. But not readable text.”

Eleven laughed a little. “It’s a unique language that was deliberately created to prevent the average person from understanding it, so that’s no wonder. It’s called Promethogia. They came up with it thousands of years ago specifically to handle magic.”

“So do all sorcerers know it, then?”

“No, just a handful. Only experts with a need for it, people with the technical skills to create magical media and magic circles, and academics studying the history of black magic or magical weapons. Even on the Hound research team, only the principal researchers can handle Promethogia. I was created later among the Hounds, so I can read and write Promethogia, but the earlier numbers can’t.”

“Is it actually that limited...?” He could see from this bare-bones explanation how difficult Promethogia must have been. Another question occurred to him. “Does Camicia have a brainiac like that? Or does he know the language?”

“I wonder.” Eleven cocked her head. “Even if he does know Promethogia, he doesn’t know how procedures are constructed, and removing their regeneration ability is the same as assuming the Amalgams are disposable. It’s all so haphazard. If he had a brainiac, as you suggest, wouldn’t he at least reuse the Amalgams?”

“It’s possible he’s prioritizing concealing evidence, but... If he does have that level of specialized technique, Emma might be able to track him.” Theo sent Emma a message about Promethogia and then returned his cell phone to his pocket. “The question that remains is where he got the Amalgam. We’re assuming Camicia overwrote the procedure, but can he actually change the core simply by touching it?”

“While there are more detailed conditions to interfering with a core, touching it is the bare minimum requirement, roughly speaking. It’s unlikely that he would have access to a research facility, so perhaps he collected the core of a destroyed Amalgam on the battlefield.”

“If he was a military man or related expert, we would have been able to find him by comparing photos in the database,” Theo noted. “So he had some other reason for being in a war zone. And at a battle so intense, they’d send in Amalgams. Medical personnel, journalists, photographers... If we include volunteers, that’s too many people, but maybe Emma could narrow it down for us somehow.”

Emma’s response arrived at that moment, a single line asking if he could talk on the phone for a minute. He had no sooner read it than his phone rang.

“It’s me. Sorry. Is now okay?”

“It’s fine. What’s up?”

“It’d take too long to type it all out, so I wanted to check with you on a call. You got an idea to figure out who Camicia really is, yeah?”

“Mm-hmm. Wait. The expert should go first. Please.” Theo handed the cell phone to Eleven and sipped his cocktail.

Eleven nodded, accepting the device. “I’d like you to cross-reference something for me. Could you make a list of all the people the Society of

Sorcerers has given authorization to access Promethogia? And see if any of them would have been in the kind of intense war zone where Amalgams are used? ...No, it's most likely not a Promethogia scholar themselves, but a person who had contact with such a scholar or the opportunity to learn about their research."

Eleven communicated her business and was about to end the call, but perhaps Emma called out to stop her—she brought the cell phone back to her ear.

"We have no particular issues on our end... I understand. I will convey the message."

"What'd she say?" Theo asked.

"She wants us to take a picture together," Eleven replied, handing his cell phone back to him.

"She does have strange tastes..."

He sighed. But it seemed that she was also working hard on the case, and he felt like a single photo couldn't hurt. He was lifting his head to say as much when he froze in place.

Camicia and his friends had walked into the bar, making the chime above the door ring. The bar had filled up at some point, so they were shown to seats at the counter. Onstage, the band was getting ready for their performance.

"...They waited outside for quite a while, hmm?" Theo remarked.

"They might have thought we'd leave quite soon, unexpectedly," Eleven said.

He wanted to avoid any kind of conspicuous movement. He placed an order for another drink with the waitstaff who was making the rounds, and when they brought his cocktail, he noticed Eleven staring at him in fascination.

"Surprised?" he asked.

"A little," she replied. "Normally, you only drink beer, but you don't order it at a bar?"

"If I'm going to go out, I want a drink I can only get at a bar. Making my own cocktails is such a hassle."

She chuckled, which put him on edge somehow. He cleared his throat and said, “But I mean, he gets an actual Amalgam, and all he can think to do with it is rip people off. It’s such small stakes. The mass-produced cores are also low performing. Not to mention using an Amalgam for mass production and mass abandonment... Well, I don’t know.”

“That’s true. If he was really making them disposable, he could just give the Amalgams the order to stop operations once they finish their missions. So why give them the order to return?”

Eleven was exactly on point.

“We recovered this one on the coast, but...” He frowned. “Hold on. So what happens if they’re just left there?”

“Just like with Roremclad, the core is smashed, the body turns to dirt, and it returns to nature.”

“But indoors, for instance, a pile of dirt and no plants would be weird. It would make any investigative organization suspicious. He probably gave that order with the aim of having them run out of power in some random location after they’d finished their mission, rather than self-destructing on the spot. Same logic as tossing the murder weapon far away from the scene of the crime.”

“And he often goes on overseas business trips,” Eleven said. “So that the Amalgams can’t easily get back to him.”

Theo let out a short sigh. The specimen they collected on the coast had been sent to the laboratory. But if they hadn’t found it, the thing might have simply rotted there. He felt a little sorry for it, which was maybe him being overly sentimental.

“If they’re managing their stock at Zabahlío, then maybe the main Amalgam is there,” he suggested.

“Actually, I think it might be in the ocean.”

Theo cocked his head to one side, unable to see what she was getting at, as she asked him for a notebook and pen.

She used them to draw a quick circle. The line was mysteriously neat, as if drawn with a compass. She enclosed this with an elliptical line, again so neat that it looked like she had used some drawing tool.

“Let’s say the central circle is the core, and the ellipse is the physical body,” she began. “When the ellipse is dented through an injury, the cells in the area multiply and quickly fill in the dent. That’s the mechanism for the regeneration function.”

“Mm-hmm.” He nodded, his eyes on the sketch. “Okay. I get it. So rather than regeneration, multiplication is the key.”

“Yes. But this Amalgam is reproducing its core with the regeneration function cut out. Assuming it was initially given something as an energy source, once that fuel is used up, it will tear off a piece of this ellipse and make it into a duplicate core to execute its orders.”

Eleven drew several small circles inside the ellipse. Theo frowned.

“But it can’t regenerate,” he said. “If it keeps making cores, it will use up its physical body at some point.”

“Exactly. The core will be exposed. That’s the issue.” She closed the notebook and returned it and the pen to Theo. “It’s not as though the core is destroyed. Normally, an Amalgam will transform objects in contact with its core into its own flesh as an emergency measure so that it can hide itself to keep the enemy from finding it and buy time for a Hound to discover and recover it.”

“But this one won’t be discovered, and its injuries can’t be healed. How long can it keep up the camouflage?”

“As long as there are objects in contact with its core.”

He recalled her suggestion that it was in the ocean and slapped a hand to his forehead.

“Right,” he said. “If it was on land, only the terrain around the Amalgam would be different, and people would notice that something was going on. So he couldn’t keep it somewhere people come and go from, like a warehouse. But no one would be any the wiser if it was in the ocean.”

“While it *is* an Amalgam, it still can’t drink up the entire ocean, after all.” She smiled and downed the rest of her sangria. “It changes the surrounding materials into a physical body to hide its core. But if it has a physical body, then it will reproduce the core. This means the core is again exposed, so it changes the surrounding material. If it’s been doing that this whole time on the ocean floor, it wouldn’t be able to move from a fixed position. And it could evade a Hound’s detection at the bottom of the deep sea.”

“If that’s how he’s doing it, then it would actually be good if the Amalgam returned to the main body once it finished its mission, since the main Amalgam could reuse the material. But if Camicia gave that order, the location of that main Amalgam could be exposed. So he deliberately moves around and makes sure the Amalgams don’t return to that original location. Good thinking.”

“The Amalgam will keep producing cores until the materials on the ocean floor are exhausted, right? If we could just find it, we could destroy it. It would be great if the destroyer picked it up in their ocean survey.”

Their gazes naturally shifted toward Camicia. Whatever he was talking about, he looked to be enjoying himself a great deal.

Theo clicked his tongue. “He’s having the time of his life over there. He probably wouldn’t notice a hair or two being plucked out.”

“I do want a sample of his genetic information,” Eleven agreed. “Can you get his attention for a second?”

“Get his attention?” He arched an eyebrow. “You want to talk to him?”

“I want to see how he reacts when I play the piano. It looks like their pianist still hasn’t shown, so the band’s in a bit of trouble.” Eleven smiled as she gestured to the stage with her eyes.

The jazz band was actually taking a very long time to get ready. They were discussing something with serious looks on their faces.

“...How about you show us what you’ve got, then?” Theo said.

“Watch.”

Eleven quickly stood up and walked over to the stage. She spoke to the four

members of the jazz band, and Theo kept an eye on them conversing seriously as he stood up himself to move closer to the stage.

As he passed behind the counter seats, he pulled out some of Camicia's hair. "Sorry, my button got caught there," he said, excusing himself, and then found a seat in front of the stage. He slipped the hair into an envelope and stared at Eleven getting ready, feeling fidgety and restless. He couldn't even imagine her playing jazz piano.

This was music played by people from southern regions, an open display of their pride as a people, unbowed before pressure from other countries. The trilling melodies contained a serious passion. Would the normally stone-faced Eleven really be able to play it just by copying the personality of a cheerful girl?

He was stewing in worry when the vocalist came to the mic to greet the crowd and introduce Eleven as a special guest.

"Please welcome the kind and wonderful young lady Alouette."

The smiling singer raised a hand in Eleven's direction, and Eleven bowed elegantly. The audience welcomed the impromptu guest with applause, and the other musicians took their places in front of their instruments.

The performance began with a signal from the drummer. Perfectly in sync, the band laid down the foundation for the vocalist's soulful song. Frozen in place, Theo stared at the profile of the young girl playing the piano, opera gloves covering her fingers, which tickled the ivory.

Her performance as backup for the singer was restrained but vibrant and nimble. With a smile, she met the eyes of the other band members, her fingers racing back and forth across the keyboard. She was the picture of a young girl having a good time. Despite the fact that she'd likely never seen the sheet music before, she made the piano sing, every bit a match for the cheerful, engaging performance of the rest of the band. She was just as bright and agile with the piano as she had been with the dance in the main hall earlier.

Theo came back to himself when the venue erupted in thunderous applause, and the band took a bow. The vocalist blew Eleven a kiss with a playful smile, and Eleven laughed, looking embarrassed.

She was a last-minute replacement, but the cheering in the bar only grew louder, and voices calling for an encore spread through the room in the blink of an eye. When the band asked Eleven for another song, she agreed, smiling.

This one was a quiet number, the opposite of the first song they'd played. Bass and drums built a solid foundation for the mellow voice in song, while the rich timbre of the saxophone tones wove a tapestry of them all, and the piano shone a light on the others. The notes joined neatly with the rhythm set by the rest of the band, with the piano absolutely not overasserting itself but still rich with emotion. Fingers clad in opera gloves danced across white and black keys. Under the spotlight, Eleven's white-blond hair was lustrous.

Theo watched quietly and intently as she sat straight and tall before the large instrument.

There's still so much I don't know about her.

And that was only natural. They'd known each other for just a short time. Nonetheless, after seeing her as a weapon, he was overwhelmed by all the things he'd learned about her on this cruise. She was cultured enough to stand on equal footing with the upper classes, and she could arrange her face into expressions exhaustively researched to induce a certain effect in the target.

Normally, she was unemotional and expressionless. She insisted that she, in fact, had no emotion, and yet she could play piano in this way, overflowing with emotion. Theo was truly baffled.

Her fingertips stayed hanging in the air, and the last notes of the piano faded into silence. After savoring this lingering echo, the audience broke out into applause and cheers once more. The band accepted it with smiles, but Eleven didn't stand up. The vocalist said something to her, and she hurriedly got to her feet, hid her left hand behind her back, and bowed to the audience and the band in turn. She and the singer spoke a little more, and the singer got a slightly surprised look on her face. But she quickly shifted into a grin and thanked Eleven.

The vocalist turned back to the audience. "Unfortunately, it seems our special guest can't stay. We're so grateful to you, Alouette, for the wonderful performance. Let's give her a big round of applause, everyone!"

The bar again swelled with clapping, whistles, and voices calling out her praises. Eleven bowed once more bashfully and stepped down from the stage, and the moment she was in the shadows, she rushed out of the bar.

Theo also hurried to his feet, but someone from another table got up to leave as well, blocking his exit. It was Camicia. Theo shoved some bills at the server who came over with the check and went after the man.



As she left the bar, Alouette let her eyes rest on Tobias. Avoiding the flow of the crowd, she went out onto the promenade deck.

Tobias started after her, wondering what was going on, when a man came flying out of the same bar and called out to him. It was Camicia.

“Did you see the girl who just came out of here? Silver hair, navy dress, black gloves.”

“Her?” Tobias replied. “Looked like she was headed for the promenade deck.”

“She was? Thanks!”

As Camicia ran off, Tobias took the crew entrance out onto the promenade deck to meet up with Alouette before Camicia could.

She had her left hand on the railing of the deck at the stern of the ship, where few people came. Tobias hid in the shadows and touched his wireless.

“Theo. Starboard, promenade deck.”

Alouette quietly pulled down the opera glove on her left arm, revealing pale skin with a foreign, metallic luster. An older synthetic replaced her arm from the elbow down.

She opened the elbow cover and turned the wire reel that connected with her fingertips. Once her ring and little fingers were back in their proper positions from their very obviously wrong positions, she closed the cover and then rolled her glove down even farther, opened the forearm cover, and took out and replaced a number of parts. She closed this cover, too, and held her left hand out over the ocean. She moved her fingers one after the other, little finger to thumb, checked that they were all functioning, and only then, finally, did

Alouette break into a relieved smile.

“Aah, I’m quite impressed that you could play the piano that well with an arm that breaks so often that it’s completely routine,” came a man’s entranced voice, and Alouette raised her head with a gasp.

Before she could pull her opera glove back up, a man grabbed her exposed synthetic. The man—Camicia—stared at her with fiery eyes.

“Magnificent!” he cried. “I had no idea a pianist such as yourself existed in this world!”

“Y-you were speaking with Theo earlier...,” Alouette said, and Camicia finally let go of her arm. She took a step back, almost cradling her left hand, while he bowed in a gentlemanly fashion.

“I must apologize for my excitement, miss,” he told her. “My name is Gino Camicia. I work at a company called Jikun Okajima Commerce. Here, my card.”

“...I must apologize as well.” She timidly accepted his card. “My name is Alouette. I’m sorry I wasn’t able to say hello at the party.”

“No, no, not at all,” Camicia replied with a grin. “You seemed to be quite tired. I’m actually part of a team that’s organizing a sort of gathering tomorrow. We’re inviting several groups, and I’ve been asked to provide the entertainment.”

“There are a number of programs, yes?” Alouette nodded congenially. “I’ve heard about it.”

“Would you also perform for us? Even a single song would be a delight.”

“Me? But, well, it’s rather sudden...” Her eyes grew round in surprise, and he spread out his arms as though overcome with emotion, seemingly unaware of how her shoulders trembled with fear.

“Your performance really touched me!” he exclaimed. “Such emotion, so vivid. You truly played beautifully! And with arms so injured as they are... Magnificent! I would love it if you would play for us at our assembly with those synthetic arms. I’m sure the audience would sympathize and commiserate with your injuries as they prayed no greater misfortune occur than a young person

losing her arms.”

“...I do appreciate the kind words,” she murmured, shrinking into herself. “But I can’t exactly show people these arms.”

“It does indeed sound like I’m telling you to expose your painful injury and sad past to the world. My apologies. I understand this is a difficult proposal, but please do consider it at least.”

He got down on one knee and put a hand on his chest.

“Miss, I have seen the light of hope in you. Your performance would steal the hearts of all who watch, turn their thoughts to the arms you’ve lost, and lead them to pray for a future in which no one is hurt again. There are so many wonderful people on this ship, people in central positions in their respective countries. And your piano performance tonight would be enough to make these people demand an end to war.”

“I... You’re exaggerating. My playing moving the hearts of people... It’s just...” Alouette hung her head and hid her synthetic under her opera glove.

Taking those fingers filled with shame, Camicia continued passionately, “No, no, young lady. Alouette. The sound of your playing and your appearance at the piano strengthen our prayers for peace. Whatever else, this cruise is a memorial to friendship and peace.”

“...As you can see, my arms break after one or two songs. That doesn’t bother you?” she asked shyly.

“It’s not an issue,” he reassured her. “I, Gino Camicia, am personally convinced that your playing can change the world. If you would be so kind as to be a part of our show, please speak to the concierge in the reception lobby tomorrow at noon. We will also offer you a token of our gratitude. I promise you won’t regret it.”

She didn’t respond right away. But her eyes shook with confusion and indecision. Camicia’s smile grew wider, and he brought her constructed, slender fingertips to his forehead reverently.

“We’ll be waiting for you. I hope you have a wonderful evening.”

“Are you done, then?” came a voice.

Rough footsteps approached, and Camicia’s hand was knocked away. Theo wrapped his arms around Alouette’s shoulders as she staggered back. He pushed her behind him, a stern look on his face.

But Camicia responded with a smile. “Well, if it isn’t the corporal. Please excuse me. Her playing earlier was simply so wonderful.”

“Her playing was indeed worthy of praise,” Theo agreed brusquely. “But I’m not impressed with how you came creeping up on her when there was no one around.”

“Ha-ha-ha! My apologies. As the interloper here, I will quietly take my leave. If you’ll excuse me.” Camicia bowed to the couple and walked away.

Once he had disappeared into the ship, Theo exhaled and leaned back against the railing as Alouette erased all expression from her face. Seeing this, Tobias finally emerged from the shadows.

“Good grief.” He rolled his eyes. “He certainly does fall hard for people, hmm? Maybe there was no need for me to have waited in the wings.”

“We had no idea what he would do, so I appreciate you being on standby, Tobias,” Alouette—Eleven—said, blinking slowly, her visage perfect and cold. “I anticipated that he would let down his guard and leak some information if we were one-on-one, but he is quite tight-lipped.”

“It might just be that they seriously want to get Alouette on board, so he had to be careful not to put her off.” Theo patted down his mussed hair, looking tired. “He’ll probably present Alouette to the board at the meetup tomorrow and decide whether to give her an invitation. I really didn’t think he’d fly out of the bar like that, though.”

“I was surprised, too,” Tobias agreed. “Was it your idea for the synthetic to break, Eleven?”

“Yes.” She looked up at them with her usual placid eyes. “I considered the reason the Brouwers were chosen from the many people grieving the loss of family. They were noticeably more unstable than others, and I hypothesized that they were targeted because of how susceptible they appeared to be to

fraud. I determined that it was necessary to endow Alouette with the same level of instability.”

“...You can still play piano with the arms you have, but they’re an old model that quickly breaks,” Theo noted. “Even though you have the money to buy new ones, you have an emotional attachment that keeps you from throwing these arms away. They hindered your development and strengthened your complex over the years. As a story, it’s not too bad. And Camicia seemed to swallow it.”

Tobias furrowed his brow. “From the way he looked, I expect him to invite Alouette even if he has to personally twist the arm of every member of the board. I guess the issue is when the salon is going to be.”

“Have they shared the schedule with the staff?” Theo asked.

“Not a word. But they can’t keep it totally under wraps. The kitchen staff told me orders for snacks and drinks arrive first thing in the morning on the day of the salon.” Tobias opened his notebook. “Just like with room-service reservations, orders come in from the salon on the morning of the big day. It’s not like there’s any regularity to it, though—afternoon tea, before dinner, et cetera. The time’s not set.”

“It’s hard to get a grasp on their plans.” Theo sighed. “Our next port is in three days.”

“I’ll keep you posted. They’re supposed to open the salon at least once before we arrive at Zabahlío, so I’m thinking it’ll probably be held tomorrow or the day after,” Tobias told them.

In other words, there was nothing they could do at the moment. The expression on Theo’s face grew grim.

“I didn’t think Camicia himself would make contact, though,” he said. “Why would he feel Alouette’s that important? Her looks, her family?”

“He might have picked her for simple marketing purposes. Alouette drew attention just because she attended a party,” Eleven remarked. “If the girl who played the piano like that with synthetics next played with arms that appeared to be the real thing, it would attract curiosity, make people question what those arms were. Couldn’t Jikunokagu’s plan be to show up out of nowhere when the

passengers are caught up in that excitement? After all, if they can make arms, then surely, they can make other parts, replacement organs. Then they could make a killing selling their products.”

“Well, if they can get an unlimited stock of proxies for essentially free from the Amalgam, they might very well get carried away,” Theo agreed and scratched his head in annoyance. “But this is small potatoes. Why would the Amalgam follow his orders?”

“A weapon dependent on the command abilities of a human being is quite incomplete and ill-prepared,” Eleven said quietly. “If there is an order, it follows it, regardless of the leadership abilities.”

“Dammit,” Theo spat. “A real pain in the ass, these weapons.”

“Come on, now.” Tobias gave them a pained smile, understanding both Theo’s feelings and what Eleven was trying to say. “So from here on out, we’re basically looking at asking around about Jikunokagu?”

“About that. Can you gather some other information, Tobias?” Eleven asked. “We’re wondering if the main Amalgam’s body isn’t hiding at the bottom of the ocean.”

He glanced out at the sea. When he thought about an Amalgam lurking far below the gently lapping waves on the ocean floor, he felt a little chill. “Search for an Amalgam on the seafloor... That’s maybe beyond me.”

“That’s just it. Could you check in with sailors about any troubles on the surface?” Theo said. “We’ll also ask around, but assuming that the Amalgam *is* at the bottom of the ocean, Jikunokagu has to be getting its stock one way or another. We have no idea how or how often, though, so you’ll be flying blind there. But I feel like, at the very least, we’re looking at something that would shock people who work at sea.”

“True. Whether they’re diving for them or collecting whatever floats up, there’s going to be a suspicious boat,” Tobias agreed. “There’s also the tides to consider, so I can’t say for sure, but if the Amalgam can’t move, then those Jikunokagu guys’ll be stocking up within a fixed range.”

“No. Wait...,” Eleven started abruptly. Tobias looked at her in surprise, but she

didn't continue.

Dubious, Theo also looked down at her. "What's wrong? Something bugging you?"

"...When I calculated the probability of the Amalgams sold as proxies returning to the ocean, I assumed that Camicia's movements did not involve contact with clients. But if those clients are on the same cruise or out to sea for some reason, then it would indeed be possible for him to have contact with them. In which case, I thought it might be best to calculate how the Amalgam at the bottom of the sea would react."

"Oh!" Tobias cried despite himself. Now that she mentioned it, that was exactly right. "If the user is at sea and the Amalgam is on the ocean floor, then maybe they can recover the weakened repro when it sinks, after it exhausts its power trying to reach Camicia."

"...Catching the proxy user might also require them to be in the line of sight," Theo added.

An awkward silence fell over the group. Tobias sighed and straightened the collar of his uniform.

"At any rate, I have to get back to work," he said. "I'll ask about any suspicious people or trouble at sea."

"Please do." Theo nodded. "We'll keep canvassing people."

When they went back inside from the promenade deck, it was busy with passengers heading to dinner. There was no telling which of them were normal tourists and which were Jikunokagu members.



"...Thank you so much. Good-bye."

Emma slowly exhaled as she ended her nth call and leaned back in her chair. When she checked her list again, there were only seven names left. Of those, the one that concerned her was the Banthobuk Salvation Brigade representative, Chensey Saika. Emma had no individual contact information for her, so the number on the list was for the Salvation Brigade office. Saika was apparently carrying out relief work in regions of conflict even now.

“...She would be my top contender. She knows Promethogia, and she travels to war zones. But I doubt like hell she has the free time to teach random laypeople about her research.”

Emma set Saika aside as a last resort and looked at the remaining six people. Their contact information might not have been up-to-date, but their names would have remained on the list even if the person in question had passed away.

“I could look for newspaper articles, maybe? I mean, they were all brilliant scholars, so...”

She logged into the Criminal Investigation Bureau database and searched their names in newspapers across the country. One showed up in an obituary—died of old age/natural causes. Another article reported on the efforts of an archaeologist who had successfully solved a magic circle found in some ruins. She checked off the names on her list as she went and moved on to the next name until her hand reflexively stopped.

Jens Nilholm Dead in House Fire

The report was dated three years earlier, six months before Basil Brouwer was born. A scholar of technique composition and talented magineer, Nilholm was found dead in his home. The fire had originated in the bedroom and was deemed to have been due to improper handling of fire; the police determined that there was nothing suspicious about the tragedy. Nilholm’s wife, Fanne, who supported him both in his career and private life, told them that the professor had quit smoking some years earlier, and there was no way he would have been smoking in the bedroom. She insisted that something was off. But no evidence was found to indicate murder.

Emma jotted down the doctor’s name and the area where he lived, then immediately contacted the local police department. Fortunately, the detective who had worked the case and discounted the possibility of criminal intent was still on the books there.

“It really was a shame about Dr. Nilholm,” he told her. *“He was a brilliant man, the pride of the region.”*

“May I ask what led you to determine the fire was due to improper handling?”

“The bedroom was the origin of the fire, and Dr. Nilholm was in bed. There were cigarette butts on the bedside table. The autopsy found traces of smoke in the doctor’s lungs, inhaled while still alive, and it was clear that there were no other injuries on the body besides the burns. The blood alcohol level detected was also high, and we concluded that he’d been drunk and fell asleep with a lit cigarette, which unfortunately resulted in the fire.”

“Then you’re sure it wasn’t murder?” she urged, and the detective clearly hesitated before continuing slowly.

“...We didn’t find any convincing evidence. But a couple of things bothered me.”

The detective had three unanswered questions. One was that Nilholm had supposedly been drinking wine, but they hadn’t found any used glasses. The second was the rum soaked into his bed and trailing down to the floor. They found an empty bottle on the bedside table, but there were no traces of rum in the doctor’s stomach. The third was, according to his phone history, someone had called the doctor right before the fire started.

“...We wanted to find some kind of evidence of murder.” The detective sighed. *“But the fact that he didn’t drink some spilled rum was not enough by itself, so we had no choice but to close the case.”*

“I see what you’re saying.” Emma nodded to herself. “And you didn’t find anyone else’s fingerprints on the cigarette butts, right?”

“That’s right. The only prints on the cigarette butts and the rum bottle were the doctor’s.”

“Thank you so much. Could you send me a copy of your case file? And his wife’s contact information. I’d like to speak to her directly.”

She jotted the phone number down in her notebook, thanked the detective, and ended the call. She could hardly even bear the wait for the file to be sent via fax, and she rapped on the machine in frustration.

Someone came to his house—a person he was friendly enough with to have a drink with. And then after that, he drinks heavily, smokes a bunch even though he quit, and falls asleep with a lit cigarette. It doesn’t make sense.

Dr. Nilholm was frequently in the media, promoting the development and popularity of magineering. Which was exactly why he had a large following who sincerely mourned his death, and his obituary had been published widely. But what if someone had targeted him precisely because of that fame?

She had a bad feeling and made a call, her heart heavy.

“Is this Fanne Nilholm? This is Canary from the Criminal Investigation Bureau. I wanted to ask you about the death of Dr. Jens Nilholm three years ago...”

Emma gritted her teeth. All she did was pry open people’s old wounds.



Alouette abruptly pulled out a business card during a lull in the peals of laughter and voices in conversation.

“Do you know a person called Gino Camicia?” she asked. “He’s the president of a trading company. He asked me to play at an event tomorrow, but we didn’t really get the chance to talk much.”

Seeing the troubled look on her face, the people with her responded cheerfully.

“That’s exactly how he is!” one of them told her with a grin. “He just *has* to tell everyone about anything he thinks is great.”

“He often asks special guests to perform on cruise tours like this,” another said. “I’m sure you were surprised, but he really did fall in love with your talents. You should give him the benefit of the doubt.”

“Is that right?” Alouette smiled, somewhat relieved. “Who else has he asked to perform out of nowhere like this?”

“Last night, for instance, a tap dancer with prosthetic legs did a number for us.”

The other passengers told her all kinds of stories in order to alleviate her concerns. Theo listened carefully to them chatting on and on, furrowing his brow ever so slightly.

Apparently, Camicia used the performance as an excuse to get the people he wanted an invitation to the salon so he could show them off to the executives.

Not to mention, he was much more widely known as a traveler than Theo and his team had thought. Was he building relationships with this sort of repeated contact to get Jikunokagu products out into the world?

Theo tucked away in his brain all the information being offered as he nodded and commented when necessary.



Tobias finished dinner in the cafeteria and headed over to the area where the sailors and old hands gathered. These people were in charge of the engines and mechanical side of the ship, so they were up earlier than the rest of the crew. Meaning they also went to bed early.

They readily welcomed Tobias into their brief window of relaxation time before it was lights-out. When he brought up the subject of trouble at sea, many of the veterans started nodding immediately. These were people who had worked on a lot of ships, so they had acquaintances in pretty much every port.

“Suspicious ships, hmm? Whole lot more of those these days.”

“A surprising lot of them. You got your poachers, guys running from whatever’s chasing ’em. All kinds of shifty ships. But more than usual lately.”

“Maybe six months ago, I saw this lot tossing cargo from their ship—real surprise, that. I figured they’d get arrested for illegal dumping, and then the next month, they show up wearing these diving suits so old, I ain’t never seen ’em before, catching jellyfish in a net.”

The sailors told him what they knew, almost talking over one another, as they exchanged dubious looks. Tobias nodded attentively while taking mental notes. The illegal dumping was probably fuel for reproduction, and the jellyfish were likely Amalgams before they camouflaged themselves.

“Whereabouts did you see them?” he asked. “I feel as though they’d stick out like sore thumbs anywhere near a port.”

“I saw ’em at least once at Zabahlío,” one sailor replied. “Got mad at me—said I was in the way of them fishing. This was in the shallows, so I was like, ‘You can’t go putting out to sea when you don’t know how deep the water is.’”

“Creepy ship, though. I mean, who’s out there catching that many jellyfish?

Just no need.”

“They were offshore last month, too, I heard. Using a net to trawl the floor. My brothers flipped out.”

When one of them started to talk, everyone began talking, one story after the other. Tobias was almost certain all their stories painted a picture of Jikunokagu stocking up and not bothering to hide what they were doing.

“You mentioned fishing?” he said suddenly. “So are we talking early morning?”

“Yeah.” One sailor nodded. “Middle of the night to not too long after dawn. But here’s the weird thing. That part of the ocean’s not got too many jellyfish, so how do they manage to catch a net full of ’em?”

“They had a whole lot of these huge machines, so maybe they were using some kind of jellyfish detector. I dunno what kind of jellyfish they were, but it takes next-level equipment to catch those buggers.”

“Is that right?” Tobias said. “A cruise ship like this doesn’t usually encounter fishing boats, though, do they?”

One of the sailors scowled, while another shrugged.

“Well, not necessarily. Last ship I was on ended up doing an emergency stop after some weird fishing boat rammed us. We were gonna hand ’em over to the navy, but they sped off like a bat outta hell.”

“Wish they’d quit with the daredevil stuff. Anyway, I just hope we don’t run into trouble on this cruise.”

“Absolutely.” Tobias thanked the sailors and said his good-byes as they shifted the conversation to hitting the hay.

He considered the situation as he walked toward the cargo hold. Jikunokagu wasn’t hanging out a signboard, but nor were they trying to stay in the shadows as they retrieved their stock from several locations. How was the Amalgam on the ocean floor telling them where the repro cores were? Was there some kind of fixed schedule? The flow of the tides? Or were the devices on the ship sending the Amalgam signals?

Guess Eleven will have to check on that one.

Tobias exhaled at length and thought back to the welcome party. Alouette, the distinctive girl with the innocent smile and the mysterious, sorrowful air. He could never have imagined the normal Eleven like that. He was sorry he hadn't been able to take a photo, since he was working.

Just so long as Theo doesn't get all weird and awkward...

Tobias had tried to teach Theo that pleasure and recreation were also important in life, but Theo was still overly serious and generally bad at letting go. What if he fell in love with Eleven playacting as Alouette? Or had he actually managed to draw a clear line between the two of them as part of the mission?

Wondering about this purely out of personal interest, Tobias abruptly stopped at the sound of singing coming from the cargo hold. A woman's voice in a curious melody.

He approached quietly and found the security guard he'd met that afternoon, Tarja, leaning back against the cargo and singing.

"...Tarja?" he called. "What are you doing?"

Startled, Tarja jerked her head up, clamped her mouth shut, and leaped to her feet. "Uh, t-taking my break," she stammered.

"In the cargo hold? You're a strange one... That song just now, it was really pretty. Like a lullaby." He walked over and leaned back beside her.

Tarja mumbled something, looking embarrassed, but then she sat back down. "My grandma was a siren. She used to sing to me all the time."

"Huh. That's lovely," Tobias told her honestly. "Both your grandmother's love for you and you keeping that lullaby in your head all this time."

She looked up at him bashfully. "The blood's too weak in me, so I can't use siren powers or anything, though. But I've got my grandma's ears. So I can hear the voices of things born in the sea."

"You mean like fish and whales and stuff?"

"Uh-huh. Anything that was born in the ocean. And in here, I can hear all kinds of them. I like it." A peaceful smile rose up on her face as she spoke with

earnest candor.

All that came through to Tobias's ears was the low rumble of the engines, and it was fascinating to think there was a whole different soundscape in there for her.

"So what voices can you hear?" he asked.

She eyed him cautiously. "You won't laugh?"

"Of course not."

She hesitated and looked back at the piles of cargo he was leaning against. "There's a voice coming from that box."

"From the box?" He glanced over his shoulder. "It doesn't look like an aquarium or anything, though."

"Right? It's weird. But there's definitely a voice. Anxious. It's bugging me." Tarja stood and touched one of the boxes. "This one."

It looked like a securely locked cooler, but it was unexpectedly heavy. When he tilted it, he could feel a liquid inside pooling back.

"...There's water in it," he said. "But no oxygen pumps or anything. Strange."

"Whatever it is, it doesn't seem to know how to speak. I don't know how to explain it. It's like talking to a baby. But the emotion... I can get the hazy sense of anxiety, happiness, stuff like that."

"So you were soothing it with the lullaby, then." He smiled. "Is there just the one voice?"

"The one who answers the most is in this box. But it feels like there are other boxes."

Tobias pulled out a detector, and it immediately made its little electronic *beep*, indicating a reaction to something in the area.

"What's that?" Tarja looked at him in surprise. "Like a metal detector?"

"I guess it's something like that... Doesn't seem dangerous. Anyway, I think it's great how kind you are, Tarja, but don't stay up here too late. You don't want to be sleepy on the job tomorrow."

“Got it.”

Although her response was rather curt, she wasn't actually put out. She sat back down in front of the piles of cargo and started humming her lullaby again.

Tobias gave her a smile and a wave before leaving the cargo hold. His sensor had definitely detected magical weapons.

I don't know what kind, but looks like a total of eight. If they came from the Amalgam on the seafloor, then I guess Tarja's ears are picking up on the repros' voices or something.

Tobias found the whole thing a bit hard to swallow right off the bat, but he nevertheless reported it to Theo and the rest of the team.

Cruise tour: Day two

The restaurant Havmonet, which boasted a beautiful view of the sea through large windows, was bustling with passengers eating breakfast. Theo took a sip of his black coffee, then murmured, quietly enough for his voice to be lost in the general noise, “He's more of a looker than I'd imagined, that Camicia guy.”

“He's integrated in society, in a very deliberate way. He's a good enough actor to hide how mercenary he really is, and he has a number of collaborators. No one has anything bad to say about him, to an almost unbelievable extent. Being asked to perform at his event seems to be plain old good luck, considering how highly everyone speaks of him.” Eleven scooped up syrup with her knife and spread it on a bite of pancake that she brought neatly to her mouth. She left not a drop of syrup nor a crumb of pancake on her plate, and Theo's eyes widened in surprise.

“You're quite good at eating,” he remarked. “Even though you had trouble eating the ice cream that time.”

“I copied the way Camicia's friends are eating. Is it weird?”

“No, that's not what I was saying. I just meant you were quite deft,” he quickly reassured her. “Camicia is always with friends, hmm? Is he keeping the amount of time he spends alone to a minimum?”

“Couples are the standard on cruises like this. Doesn't being with friends

seem more natural?”

“...Maybe he keeps a tight handle on friends in the know, which is why we haven’t heard any complaints about Jikunokagu,” Theo mused. “It’s strange that he knows so many people, and yet we haven’t heard a single bad word about him.”

Eleven dabbed at her lips with a paper napkin and smiled slightly. “Surprisingly, it might be that everyone’s putting on airs. As though they don’t want anyone to think they’re the only ones who haven’t received his blessings. You’d feel miserable if other people were getting their wishes granted, and you weren’t, wouldn’t you?”

“...Well, pride’s probably got a lot to do with it.” He nodded his agreement. “And no one knows too much about East Akaryaza, so they’re unlikely to say they bought some product without realizing it was a fraud.”

In fact, the people who had bought folk charms or medicines from Jikunokagu insisted that they worked. Theo was forced to take them at their word at this point, since he had no way of checking the veracity of the claims while on the ship. But those who had enthusiastically extolled the effects to him and Eleven at the welcome party might have unexpectedly known that they had been fooled.

The thing concerning him at the moment was the boxes Tobias had found in the cargo hold.

“...A total of eight signals. And we found twelve proxy users walking around on board,” Theo said. “A lot more than I was expecting.”

“I pray they don’t violate the prohibited items,” Eleven replied. “Any response from Naval Security?”

“Not yet.” He shook his head. “The flow of the tides is complicated, so the investigation’s a bit difficult.”

Even setting aside for the time being the issue of the repros that were obediently acting as merchandise, there were still too many factors to try to figure out.

They were assuming the Amalgam had been taken from some battlefield and

was now concealed at the bottom of the ocean. But from Tobias, they'd learned that a suspicious ship had been seen in a variety of locations, catching large amounts of something resembling jellyfish, so it seemed they might need to revise those initial assumptions.

Amalgams essentially prioritized efficiency. Was it possible that this Amalgam would actively recover the repros when they entered the ocean, instead of simply sitting quietly on the ocean floor and converting resources into cores? Even if the Amalgam wasn't actually feeding on the recovered specimens, it wasn't out of the question that these would be reused the next time the ship was stocking up.

"...Best to leave the ocean floor alone rather than carelessly blunder across it," Theo concluded. "I hope the search drones can pick it up."

"The destroyer *Calwell* will be showing up this afternoon, right?" Eleven asked. "I wonder if Emma will make it in time."

"She did mention she had something to look into. I'm sure she's got it under control." He couldn't say much of anything, given that they hadn't gotten any word from Emma. "You focus on what you're going to play today. Have you decided on a song yet?"

Eleven readjusted the scarf tying her hair back, turned her gaze on him, and smiled boldly. "I have one exceptional song. You'll have to wait and see what it is."

"What? I hope it's one I know, at least."

"I'm sure it is." Her smile grew broader. "I think many military folks and history buffs will know it."

"Well then, I can't wait."

Theo quietly drank the rest of his coffee. His partner was rock solid again today. Almost excessively reliable.



As Fanne Nilholm dabbed at her eyes with a handkerchief, Emma thanked her profusely and left the house in the suburbs. She went back to her car and looked over the notes she'd made.

A few months before the professor died in the fire, he'd been interviewed multiple times by a freelance writer for a series of magazine articles. The writer's name was Giorgio Santoro. He'd cut off all contact with everyone after the publication of Nilholm's obituary.

The editor said Santoro was a former war correspondent who had to quit when he was injured on the job. After that, he leveraged his unique experiences and knowledge to get assigned to the magineering beat, but then he disappeared.

When he began covering magineering for the monthly magazine, Santoro asked Nilholm for an interview because the scholar was accustomed to interacting with the media. According to Fanne, Santoro was supposed to come for an interview the day of Nilholm's death, but he didn't show up. She had to go out that night on some urgent business, and while she was gone, the fire broke out, and Nilholm died.

During his reporting, Santoro built a relationship with Nilholm. But did they have a falling-out, so he set the fire to kill him and made it look like an accident?

Talking with his editor, Emma learned that Giorgio Santoro had a record. When he was younger, he'd been a frequent guest at the police station for fighting and stealing. According to military records, he'd been embedded in corps in war zones as a military correspondent, but then he'd exposed one corps to danger as a result of repeated looting, caused their deaths, and was subsequently chased out.

The mission details themselves are confidential, but I know this region. There were massive casualties despite the fact that Amalgams had been sent in. Sparked a whole controversy about the utility of Amalgams.

Emma furrowed her brow and set the close-up photos of Giorgio Santoro and Gino Camicia beside each other.

Fanne knew Santoro, but she'd never seen Camicia. Santoro was a skinny man with bleached hair, tanned skin, and a beard. Camicia was also tanned, but he had a more muscular build, his hair was black, and his facial hair was neatly trimmed. Their hair colors and distinguishing features were indeed totally different. But their eyes, noses, and lips were a match.

Santoro's mother's maiden name was Camicia. A diminutive for Giorgio was Gino. What if he picked a diminutive of his real name and his mother's maiden name as an alias?

"...He was in a zone of intense fighting, and he watched for an Amalgam to be totally destroyed so he could recover the core. But he didn't know how to use it, so he turned to Dr. Nilholm, killed him to keep him quiet when Nilholm found out what he was up to, stole his research, and fled. Is that it? This jerk's a real piece of work."

Indignant, Emma threw her cell phone into her bag and drove to Zabahllo.



Rocky was puffing on a cigarette in the smoking room, but his hand froze when he saw his assistant racing over.

"I've got the analysis results for Investigator Starling," the assistant said.

"Mmm. Nice work." Rocky accepted the file and quickly sent him on his way.

Rocky had wondered what was up when he'd heard that all the members of Theo's team were out, but he was just happy he could help them even if there was no body. He pressed a hand to the file to unlock it and ran his eyes over the analysis results from the Amalgam research center.

The genetic information extracted from the core of the secured Amalgam matched that of Giorgio Santoro in the criminal database. It also noted the serial number of the Amalgam that was reproducing cores. It had clearly been stolen from the battlefield. Combined with the results of Emma's investigation, this was more than enough for a warrant to be issued.

"Hmph. Good news for the lad and his team... Ah?" Looking toward the bottom of the analysis results, Rocky frowned.

The recovered Amalgam was receiving signals from the originating Amalgam. The document before him showed that the main body was continuously telling the repro to "protect." But it wasn't clear what was to be protected and from what.

CONFIDENTIAL

Chapter 4

**The Strategic Weapon That Is the
White Hound**

AMALGAM HOUND

**Criminal Investigation Bureau:
Special Investigation Unit**

When Theo ended the call and returned to the pillar where Eleven was waiting for him, she turned around and smiled. The fabric of her summer dress was thin and swung with her every movement. The large tropical flower print was a little on the childish side, but perhaps because it was styled with a classic scarf and a short, light jacket, the overall look had an ageless feel.

“...Who told you how to put together an outfit like that?” he asked with a frown.

“No one told me,” she replied. “It’s a result of statistical analysis.”

He’d wanted to borrow whatever instruction manual she was using, but apparently not. A bit let down, he handed her his cell phone and showed her the analysis results from the laboratory.

“So the genetic information is a match, then,” she noted. “That’s perfect.”

“Emma’s scheduled to join us as planned on the destroyer *Calwell*,” Theo said. “We know Camicia’s true identity, and we’ve got evidence for his current crimes. The only thing left is to find the Amalgam.”

“All the more reason to really throw myself into this performance. I’ll make them unanimously decide to invite me to the salon.” She flashed him a bold grin and headed toward the reception lobby, and he slowly followed his rock-solid partner.

After the initial boarding procedures of the first day, the lobby had been turned into an information center and front desk, and only a scattering of people were around. While the shopping area of deck six was bustling with activity, here was the very definition of quiet.

They headed for the concierge counter to one end of the space, and a man in a slightly different uniform from the others welcomed them.

“Can I be of service?” he asked.

“This is Alouette, and I’m Theo. We were invited by a Mr. Gino Camicia.”

“Lady Alouette and Sir Theo, yes? Please come right this way.” The concierge came out from behind the counter and began walking immediately ahead of Theo and Eleven.

They went up to a photo studio on deck seven. It was adjacent to the on-ship chapel, but perhaps there were no reservations for weddings or photo sessions—they were the only customers.

“I will call Mr. Camicia. Please wait just a moment.” The concierge bowed formally and left the room.

Theo and Eleven sat next to each other on the sofa, and the photo-studio staff set down drinks for them with smiles.

Once they’d left, Theo murmured, “Why here?”

“Maybe we’re borrowing clothes,” Eleven suggested. “A party dress and a performance dress are different, after all.”

“Right. I guess there is the show...” He let his gaze roam, thinking that they would probably do makeup, too, and his eyes fell on a mountain of costumes and a dressing table packed with cosmetics. More than sufficient to dress up a single girl. “As Alouette’s boyfriend, should I stop you? It’s like you’re being made a spectacle of, and I’m, well, a little concerned...”

“I think the boyfriend would be more likely to give me a push and take this chance to overcome my neuroses,” Eleven replied coolly.

Theo was unable to relax surrounded by all these costumes, and he clasped and reclasped his hands over and over on his lap.

“...What outfit will you choose?” he finally asked.

“Right.” She nodded slowly. “My arms must be exposed, and a dress that looks best when sitting down would be ideal. There are only a limited number of styles that really flatter my physique. Why do you ask?”

“Oh... No big reason. There are just a lot of wedding dresses, so...”

“I suppose it’s because the chapel’s next door. They’re all lovely, hmm?” She smiled and then suddenly peered at his face. Met with her unblinking gray eyes, he quickly averted his own.

“Hey, Theo?” she said gently, warmth in her voice. “I’m your girlfriend, Alouette. You have to tell me if you’d like me to wear something in particular.”

“...You’re definitely set on revealing your arms?”

“Yes. They want me to show off my synthetics, and sleeves only get in the way when playing piano. So that’s nonnegotiable.”

“Could you at least not wear anything that reveals your chest? It’ll make me nervous...”

All the dresses in his field of view were strapless, bustier types, and many had quite daring designs. Perhaps the studio chose the dresses they carried not to cater to particular body types, but to cater to a wider variety of potential customers. But when he pictured Eleven in a dress like the ones he could see, he felt an extreme discomfort. Maybe because she was a weapon, or maybe it would be too hard on him to be forced to think about weddings when he still couldn’t relax just pretending to be her boyfriend. Or maybe he simply didn’t feel like Eleven was the type to wear revealing clothes. He couldn’t explain it himself.

She leaned toward the stammering Theo and giggled. “Understood, my sweet darling.”

“...It’s fine. Whatever.” He shook his head. “Pick out a dress that suits you, Alouette.”

“Why? You so rarely ask anything of me,” she replied, right when the door opened quite dramatically.

Camicia came inside, beaming. “Aah, the angel who danced down to the ocean! I am so very glad you agreed to join us!”

“I must thank you for the invitation,” she told him with a bashful smile. “Now what happens?”

“Well, of course, you’ll choose an outfit,” he replied. “Have you eaten? What song will you play?”

“We did have lunch, yes,” she said. “And I’d like to keep the song to myself. I hope that’s okay.”

“Absolutely fine! I look forward to hearing it. Now then, please pick a dress.” He waved a hand toward the many costumes in the room. “You and the other performers will share the lighting and some other staging equipment, so we will handle all those matters ourselves. For now, the dress!”

The photo-studio staff excitedly brought forward a number of colorful dresses for her inspection, and in the blink of an eye, Eleven was swallowed in a wave of clothing. Theo reflexively looked back at Camicia, who was watching over the proceedings with delight.

“...I thought you would need to have a meeting or something,” Theo said. “Is this it?”

“Yes.” Camicia nodded amicably. “I had intended to leave the song selection to Miss Alouette anyway, so all we really need to do is get her the right dress and makeup to strike a balance with the other performers. This is more than enough of a meeting.”

“Well, if you’re sure... How do you intend to introduce her to the audience?”

“I will tell them that she is a magnificent pianist I was fortunate enough to encounter on this ship. If it’s all right with her, I would love for her to say hello herself and perhaps explain her reasons for choosing the song she did.”

Just from listening to him talk, Theo couldn’t tell if this was a trap. And the other attendees had also given him the impression that there was no danger to the show at this little event. It would have been unnatural to question him further, so he ended the conversation and watched Eleven. It seemed that she really was just going to play the piano today.

She chose her dress unexpectedly quickly and entered the changing room.

“Are you worried?” Camicia asked him abruptly. He was looking at Theo with a friendly smile.

“...I suppose I am. She’s kept her arms hidden all this time, and now she’s going to let people see them at last. On top of that, she’ll be playing the piano in public. I don’t know what she’s going to play, but her arms do break easily. They’re unstable...”

“Do you know the reason why she would use an older model of arm?”

“...That’s not for me to say.”

“I see. You are a loyal man, hmm?” Camicia merely nodded, seemingly satisfied.

Theo snorted softly. “What is it about us that attracted your attention like this?”

“What are you talking about?” Camicia asked theatrically. “You have a beautiful bond! I speak, at most, from a gut feeling and personal experience, but I imagine that the two of you have overcome some great tragedy in your past. That sorrow makes all the brighter the glory of the time you share now. It’s actually quite wonderful.”

His phrasing, too, was overly effusive, and Theo screwed up his face at how very uncomfortable this was. But Camicia looked happily toward the changing room.

“Isn’t it only natural to want to provide a bright future to a loving and supportive couple?” he asked Theo.

“...If things worked so neatly, the world would be teeming with sorcerers.”

“True that!” Camicia laughed heartily.

The curtain to the changing room swished open, and Eleven stepped out. Her hair now tied up simply, she lifted her face and smiled at Theo. The marine-blue dress she wore had a high neck, covering her up to her chin, and was adorned with a gorgeous pattern on just the right side, from her chest down to the hem. The design suited her petite stature very well.

“So, Theo?” she asked. “How’s this?”

“...Ah. Mm-hmm.” He nodded slowly as he looked her over. “That’s not bad, actually. The color of the sea for a performance on a ship.”

“Great. I’ll go with the shoes that I’m wearing. Could I have a look in a mirror?”

The staff brought out full-length mirrors, and Eleven turned to them. In that instant, Theo very nearly spit out his drink.

The dress she’d chosen was not high-necked but rather a halter. The skirt draped longer to the rear, and the overall effect was lovely. But the back opened daringly, laying bare the faint shadows of the vertebrae of her unblemished spine and the gentle curve leading to her hips.

“Hold on,” Theo said. “Wait just a minute. Alouette, stop a second.”

“What’s the matter?” She glanced over her shoulder at him.

“The back, it’s wide open. Are you sure that’s okay?”

Her chest was indeed covered, and Theo understood that as far as halter dresses went, this one was quite elegant. But even so, it was fairly shocking on Eleven, especially since she’d barely shown any skin at all up until now. Before he knew it, he had taken several steps forward, and Eleven was gently pushing him to a stop.

“A design that’s comfortable around the shoulders is best when I’m playing the piano,” she told him. “And this one’s objectively beautiful; I like it. I’m happy they even had a dress that could work on my body.”

“...Well, if you’re happy with it...that’s great, but...” He trailed off uncomfortably.

“It’s bewitching enough to put you in a panic, right? It’s perfect.” Her playful smile had a childishness befitting her age. He didn’t know her actual age, but nevertheless, this innocent grin made his heart hurt.

He cleared his throat and exited the room, leaving the rest to the staff inside. Once the makeup started, there’d be nothing for him to do, and Camicia seemed to be behaving himself as one of the organizers. Eleven could handle him on her own. Not to mention that if she was dressing up, he would need to be in his formal uniform, too.



Stopping her car at the Zabahlío port, Emma slung her bag over her shoulder and started running. A man in a Naval Security uniform waved in greeting.

“Investigator Canary,” he called. “Welcome.”

“Thanks! Security’s on this ship, too?” she asked.

“No, I just came to drop off the papers you asked for and show you around. I brought the files for the accidents in the specific ocean regions you mentioned. I’ll explain as we walk.”

He quickly started toward the wharf, and Emma was forced to trot after him.

“Thank you. The first accident was two months ago, yes?”

“Yes. Over the last two months, the accidents have occurred at irregular intervals. The weather will be without complaint, and yet a boat capsizes. A crew member on deck will be washed away by a wave. We’ve received reports of many baffling incidents. Please take a look at the documents for the details.”

“Magical creatures or magical danger of any sort?”

“We couldn’t confirm anything of that nature. No witness reports of magical creatures nearby. The damaged ships lost any detection devices in the accidents, so the involvement of magical weapons is unclear.”

“Okay. We’ll check around that area with the destroyer’s detectors.” She made a mental note to do just that. “And what about Jikunokagu?”

“The name didn’t come up in connection with the incidents,” the security officer told her. “But there was one victim who’d taken out a large loan with the intent of purchasing an unauthorized synthetic. The crew member injured in the second accident. We’ve attached the voice recording of that interview, so please listen to that on the ship.”

Gradually quickening his pace, the man continued to give businesslike responses, while Emma panted as she tried to keep up. But at last, he came to a stop, and she was finally able to take a deep breath. He handed Emma the file he was carrying and gave her a neat naval bow.

“This is the destroyer *Calwell*,” he said. “Now then, best of luck in your investigation.”

“Thank you...very much...”

They couldn’t have walked that far, but she was entirely out of breath, and she just barely managed to thank the Naval Security man before he departed at the same speed at which they’d come.

The *Calwell*’s captain came out to greet her. “So you’re Investigator Canary, then? I was told you’d be joining us.”

“Captain!” She smiled at him. “I’m so sorry for barging onto your ship. We really appreciate your cooperation.”

“Not at all.” The captain shook his head. “We’ve also been concerned about the accidents in that area of the ocean. If you’ve got a lead on how to resolve the issue, then we’re more than happy to help. The gangway sways a little, so please give me your hand. Watch your step now.”

Emma accepted his offer to escort her without fuss and boarded the destroyer *Calwell*. Once the captain had briefly introduced the crew and facilities, he led her to a small meeting room. A table and chairs sat in front of a whiteboard, and there were even drinks and a simple bed.

“Please use this as the base for your investigation,” he told her.

“Thank you so much for everything. I promise I’ll do my utmost to find out what’s going on.”

“It’s only natural we’d work together, given that we’re both after the truth of what’s going on out there. This ship will be going in pursuit of the *Havmonet* at a speed of forty knots. You might feel a little swaying, so please hang on to the railings when you’re moving around.”

“U-understood...”

She slumped down in a chair and exhaled at length. She’d basically exhausted her reserves merely boarding the ship, but at least it looked like she’d actually get to meet up with Theo and the others.

When she checked Naval Security’s reports, she learned that all the ships had either run aground or sunk, and on top of injured crew members, there were also many deaths and missing persons. The causes of the accidents were unclear in every case; there were no issues with the weather, ship instruments, or the ship itself.

The first accident was apparently a survey ship that took serious damage when it ran aground due to an evening storm. Fortunately, no one was injured, but the stern of the ship had been twisted off with incredible force. The shipwrecked crew said that a wave had crashed over the ship, and when it receded in the next instant, half the ship was gone.

The next was a fishing ship. Early morning, clear skies, calm waters. They were fishing as usual, but when they drew near this particular area of the ocean, a

high wave suddenly attacked them, capsized the boat, and sank it. Fortunately, the entire crew had been wearing life jackets, so there were no deaths, and there was only one injury. Of the several synthetic users, he was the only one who'd had his synthetic bitten off.

In an interview, the victim said he had previously been attacked by a shark and lost his right leg, after which he'd made do with a wooden prosthetic. The captain offered him an advance on his salary so he could get a synthetic, but he struggled with whether to accept it and instead returned to his family home in Yunilska. Life at home was quite strict, and it was hard to arrange for a synthetic. He ended up taking part in a memorial ceremony to mourn his grandfather who had been in the navy and lost his own right leg to the ocean.

There, he met a man. The name Jikunokagu didn't come up, and the man wasn't Camicia, but the contract he concluded with the victim was a match for the one the Brouwers signed. The limb the victim lost in the accident at sea wasn't just a synthetic, but an Amalgam-based proxy.

They didn't know the true nature of the wave that crashed over the ship. Naval Security dispatched a crane ship to the scene of the accident in order to salvage the wreckage, but they couldn't find it, no matter how long they searched.

They thought it was an isolated accident, but the mysterious power continued to drag ships and people down in this region of the sea, resulting in a staggering number of victims.

The survey ship that ran aground in the storm had magical weapons on board because they were observing the habitats of magical creatures. The victim's lost right leg was an Amalgam transformed into a proxy, and the fishing ship disappeared completely.

"Hmm." Emma looked up at the ceiling.

The Amalgam on the ocean floor wanted to efficiently mass-produce cores. But with no materials around, it had no choice but to use its own physical body. Then a storm hit. The Amalgam was carried to the surface on the wild water and recovered the magical weapons and equipment it found there. Having learned it was more efficient to attack ships, the Amalgam sank the next ship

that passed by, but a proxy user just happened to be aboard this one. If the Amalgam could sink the ship and recover the materials, then it might have also recovered the repro. With this second successful experience, the Amalgam must have planned for even more efficient material collection.

Her thoughts having reached this point, Emma frowned and cocked her head to one side. This might have been a bit of a stretch.

The limit for an Amalgam is when the core's exposed, right? The best the thing could manage was to move up and down in the water, so I guess the attacks could only happen in a fixed area. In which case, the witness information Tobias got on the suspicious ship should be concentrated in a specific location... Maybe the Amalgam's picked up some tricks or something.

Head already aching, she closed the folder, and then her cell phone pinged with a notification. She looked at it and saw a photo from Eleven.

The photo was of Eleven sitting on a chair, smiling, wearing a marine-blue dress, and Theo standing alongside her, looking severe. From what Emma could tell based on the background and the chair, they'd apparently gone to the trouble of being photographed in a studio.

Emma's face unconsciously relaxed into a smile, and she replied Thanks with plenty of heart emojis. She was going to figure this out. And the first thing she would do was write everything they knew on the whiteboard and sort through it.



The main hall looked different than it had at the welcome party, decorated as it was now warmly in the style of a garden. In addition to the keynote green, flowers and ribbons of all colors adorned the room. The tables and chairs were a unified white, and the rugs were deep green, creating the image of a grassy lawn. Flowers from the three countries where the tour would stop were arranged on top of each table, illuminated by candles in the shape of the national flags.

Also unlike the welcome party, this event was a place for people to watch a show and have fun playing games and the like. Perhaps because of that, there were more children and older people, and the overall atmosphere was more

casual.

A stage had been built at the front, and a piano had been set out on it. In the waiting area partitioned off as a wing of the stage, the performers, including Eleven, were on standby.

Theo was looking toward the wing area, but he turned when a glass was placed on his table.

Tobias poured him some sparkling water with a smile. "Can't wait to hear her play, hmm?"

"Mmm." Theo started to agree, then stopped. "Wait. What about Camicia and his gang?"

"They're seated away from the stage. A whole group of them. Taking up three tables."

Tobias indicated to them with his eyes, and Theo glanced over in that direction. They were sitting and chatting at round six-person tables. It was the same lineup of faces Theo had seen at the welcome party.

"...So this is also the unveiling for the board, then," he said.

"Looks like it," Tobias replied. "I'll keep an eye out at any rate."

"Please do. Let me know if they do anything."

Tobias moved away, and as Theo looked around the venue again, he automatically stood up. Lieutenant General Cormolone and his wife were coming his way.

"I had no idea you would be here," Theo said. "I'm a bit surprised."

"It's Alouette's big moment. Wouldn't miss it," Cormolone told him warmly. "Is she already backstage?"

"Yes." Theo nodded. "All the performers are waiting in the wings. They're supposed to return to their seats once they're done onstage."

The seat next to Theo was reserved with a place card that read MISS ALOUETTE. Other tables had similarly empty seats, with the other chairs filled in around them.

Finally, the event began with a welcome from the organizers. The show continued with a variety of performances—a string quartet, a singing guitarist, a magician, acrobatics. Some performed with synthetic limbs, and Theo assumed they were all most likely candidates for an invitation to the salon.

Finally, Alouette stepped onto the stage. Her dress with its threads of lamé sparkled under the spotlight. Her white-blond hair and the cool design of the dress were perfect together.

But what drew the eyes of the audience were her arms. Synthetics of such an old model that not only were they behind the times, they also landed in the realm of antique. There wasn't even artificial skin on her fingers, leaving the dull luster of the metal exposed. Her almost transparent, pale skin was a stark contrast, and many people gasped.

Standing before the mic, Alouette pinched up the skirt that reached past her knees and curtsied. Her stage makeup highlighted her cool features beautifully.

“Good afternoon,” she said. “My name is Alouette Cormolone. I’ve never done anything like this before, so I’m a little nervous. But I’m sincerely grateful to Mr. Camicia for giving me the opportunity to play in front of so many people. After receiving my current arms, I’ve refrained from making my debut in society, and I haven’t performed with the piano anywhere, so it’s been a little sad.”

She related all this with a smile, but the corners of her mouth were a bit stiff—a sign of her nervousness. The mechanical joints of the hands she had clasped in front of her chest creaked faintly.

“I’m sure many of you are surprised by these arms. As you can see, they are very old. I’ve been urged to buy new ones many times, but...these are the last things my parents gave me before they died in the war. They used to love my piano playing, so I’m truly overjoyed and delighted to be able to perform here now with this gift from them.”

A quiet shock rippled through the audience. Their thoughts immediately went to the question of how much pain must have been hidden behind the girl’s gorgeous smile, and some people even sighed sympathetically.

“So many of us have experienced the horrors of war personally, and now we

come together to pray for peace and friendship. And that is why I would like to play a very important song. I hope you will enjoy every last note.”

Alouette curtsied again to conclude her speech. When she slid onto the piano bench, the inorganic arms stretching out from her slender shoulders became more prominent, and her doll-like face grew even more serious.

The audience watched and waited with bated breath as she began to play a distinctive melody.

The lively bounce of the introduction shifted into a solemnity, the timber expressing the solitude at the abyss of death.

Staden’s Filigrasch Suite no. 4, *Lethe’s Swan*.

The fourth movement of the suite illustrated the cycle of life and death through the recounting of an old legend—a tale about a swan on the verge of death that takes wandering souls onto its back and flies them toward the horizon of oblivion.

Souls that have escaped the anguish of living and lost their way forward are picked up by the swan, which then soars away into the distant sky. The sorrow of a life of endless pain, the joy of a death bringing release from it all. The piano suite encompassed both of these extreme emotions in its haunting melody and was especially popular with armies and navies.

At the siege of Vartza Castle, the military might of four nations struggled for supremacy. Attrition was intense in the military of the smallest of these nations. They were losing both soldiers and supplies at an unsustainable rate until they were at last unable to maintain the church that was their sole remaining stronghold.

The soldiers serving there set down their arms, gave up on the battle, and played this song. *Lethe’s Swan* fluttered through the area, and the soldiers of all armies stayed their hands in response. For a period of five minutes and forty seconds, only the sound of the piano could be heard on the battleground that Vartza Castle had become.

This story was told and retold as a miracle of the long continental war. Including the coda that after the surviving soldiers returned alive, they were

sent off to the northern front and killed in action, as if inevitably drawn to death's cold hand.

With characteristic and magnificent finesse, Staden created in song a powerful expression of the release from deep sorrow and life, and the movement was normally dark and quiet, with an echo of despair. Which was exactly why all those soldiers had laid down their arms and turned their ears to its overwhelming pathos.

And yet Alouette's *Lethe's Swan* was indistinctly bright, subtly highlighting the joy of release, the escape from the limits of a life colored with pain, the hope of sweet oblivion. The vivacious girl danced nimbly across the keys, giving over her heavy burden to the swan's wings. Even the echo of pain around the edges of her playing made prominent the strength of the swan pushing forward on the verge of death. What happiness to forget all suffering and sadness and to melt away into that sky!

This girl blessed by birth, a girl who had a bright future before her, ran her fingers across the keyboard, this dream bleeding into the sound of each note she played. A smile hanging on her lips, she played through the entire movement with synthetic arms that were so old, it was almost a surprise that they didn't break, even though this song was so difficult that even the number of professional pianists who could perform it was limited. Everyone listened with rapt attention, forgetting to breathe.

As soon as the last note played by these metal fingers faded into silence, the venue exploded with cheering and applause.

Raising her head, Alouette smiled happily. She stood up and bowed deeply toward the audience. The fingers on both hands hung unstably, revealing the looseness of the metal fittings and wires.

Once all the performances were done and the mixer part of the event began, Alouette was mobbed by people. A small child told her that they also played the piano and asked to shake her hand, and Alouette, extremely moved, bent down, looked the child in the eye, and shook their hand with both of hers. The two smiling at each other was heartwarming.

Spectators watching her from afar sighed with admiration.

“I’m amazed that she was able to play *Lethe’s Swan* all the way through with those arms!”

“I wonder if she’ll take this as a springboard to enter a contest. She’s simply got too much talent to keep under wraps.”

Theo let the voices of praise wash over him and murmured to Lieutenant General Cormolone, “Are you sure it was all right for her to say she’s your niece and talk about herself like that?”

“Well, it is a fact that Alouette lost her parents in the war and had both arms replaced with synthetics. She’s not telling any lies. It’s all fine by me.”

The lieutenant general was correct, of course, but for some reason, Theo didn’t like it, and he frowned.

Liddy laughed brightly and looked over at Alouette. “That really was beautiful, magnificent playing. Exactly as she’d planned, I suppose?”

“Most likely. And given the reception she received, I think she’ll get that invitation.” Theo let his eyes wander and peeked at Camicia. He was talking with his friends again, a big smile on his face and his eyes glued to Alouette. If the group seated with him was the Jikunokagu board, then things looked very good indeed. “The only issue is perhaps the timing of the salon.”

“True, true,” Cormolone agreed. “The fact is you won’t know till morning. It’s certain to be tomorrow or later.”

An order came in for breakfast on the day of the salon. Even if they weren’t invited, Theo would be able to tell they’d decided on the date right away from the gleam in Tobias’s eyes.

The Jikunokagu side made no moves during the event, so it ended peacefully and disappointingly.

“...Where’d you learn to play piano like that?” Theo asked in the corridor on the way back to the photo studio.

“Not telling. But it was the perfect song, right?” Alouette—Eleven—replied in a voice that contained a chuckle.

Her grief-infused *Lethe’s Swan* had indeed powerfully affected the audience

and made them read more into her intentions in selecting the song. A girl who suffered, unable to abandon the old synthetics that were a keepsake of her parents, but equally unable to hold her head high and go proudly out onstage with those same arms. She saw a light of hope and salvation in *Lethe's Swan*. She reached out to the swan of legend with the desire to forget everything and be free.

"Do you really want to be free so badly, you'd forget even your boyfriend?" Theo asked, curious.

"Well. That's quite the unkind interpretation," she replied with a childish grin. "Just like you can't forget your little sister, I can't forget my parents. Some things are impossible. Lethe's swan frees people from those things with the gift of oblivion. Isn't it wonderful that it says there's relief, that you don't have to continue suffering?"

"...I'm not sure about that," he replied earnestly. "Maybe I don't want to forget because I'm okay with suffering."

"Honestly." Eleven laughed, exasperated.

Just then, a voice called out to stop them. When they turned around, Camicia was standing there.

"I'm sorry to be so late in coming to offer my congratulations," he said, moving toward them. "Thank you so much for that wonderful performance, Miss Alouette. My friends and I were deeply moved."

"It was an honor. Thank you again for asking me."

"It was magnificent. I'm certain your beautiful playing captured the hearts of more than one person, and they came to see so much in the shadow of those lost arms. I would love it if you would allow me to thank you somehow."

"Goodness!" She shook her head. "Your appreciation itself is more than enough."

"Please, you mustn't say that... Aah, you there. Mind clearing out of here?" Camicia said to the staff members as they walked into the photo studio.

They looked perplexed, but left the room nonetheless after indicating to the

telephone extension and telling him to call when he was done in the studio.

Camicia urged Theo and Eleven to the sofa before taking a seat across from them. “While it hasn’t yet been officially decided, it is in fact almost a certainty,” he started. “So I wanted to ask you to hold the date in your schedules. Would you potentially be available for about two hours tomorrow at three in the afternoon?”

“Yes, I think we could be. Are you inviting us for afternoon tea, then?” Eleven asked, cocking her head.

“Yes, I suppose it is something along those lines.” Camicia beamed. “The truth is, I hold a salon that brings together all my close friends. Could I invite the both of you to join us?”

Here we go.

Behind his stern expression, Theo gritted his teeth. Eleven glanced at him and got a troubled look on her face.

“But this is a gathering of your friends?” she said. “Are you sure it’s all right for us to intrude?”

“Of course!” Camicia declared. “We would *love* for you to join us, Miss Alouette. You see, this salon of mine, well, we relax and discuss a variety of things over some light refreshments. It’s a priceless resource for sharing useful items from our destinations.”

“My. Do you mean souvenirs?”

“More than souvenirs.” He paused, seemingly for effect. “We obtain products through special routes, and at the salon, we introduce these excellent items only to those trusted friends in attendance. I should note that people who feel the limitations of their synthetics are especially glad for the items on offer.”

Eleven’s eyes widened, and Theo cleared his throat deliberately.

“Is it just me, or does this sound like a multi-level marketing scheme?” he cut in.

“You’re misunderstanding,” Camicia told him. “Well, we did only just meet on this trip, so it’s no wonder I have yet to earn your trust. But personally, I would

love to introduce you to one item in particular, Miss Alouette.”

Camicia offered Theo a pained smile, but then he quickly returned his gaze to Eleven.

“You must be quite skilled to be able to give such a performance even with these old-model synthetics, and I can’t help but wish that you were free to perform without such constraints. You could also replace these synthetics with something more high performing that has the same appearance. I have a product that would allow you to regain your very own arms.”

“Regain...my arms?” Eleven looked baffled, and Camicia narrowed his eyes.

“Miss Alouette, you could no doubt master any synthetic. But even the most advanced synthetics are still unable to feel such things as texture and temperature.”

“...I am aware of the limits of technology.”

“However! With the product that we have available, even those sensations would be available to you, Miss Alouette. Do you remember the hardness of the keyboard you touched with your fingers? Holding hands with someone? The chill of snow, the warmth of the summer sun?” Camicia recounted slowly. “You could feel in your hands once more all those things that have become distant memories. What if you could get back everything that you’d given up on...? What do you think?”

Before Theo could interject, Eleven leaned forward. “Could that really happen? Would my arms really come back?”

“Leave it, Alouette,” Theo said, his voice tense. “There’s no way that could be true.”

“I can’t know unless I try,” she protested.

“But what if you can’t go back—?” he started, and she interrupted him with a fiery passion.

“I already can’t go back! I’ve had to give up on so many things!”

Theo placed his hands on her shoulders, but Eleven shook him off. Her gray eyes were moist.

“Do you know how many people offer platitudes and look down on mechanical arms? My parents wanted what was best for me, so they gave me new arms, but no one accepts me with them! I mean, even my own parents in the end, they refused to touch them, said my hands were too cold. I don’t belong anywhere. Do you know how empty that feels? Our mansion, everything—it all burned to the ground, and the only connection I have with my parents are these arms. I want to cherish them, and yet do you know the loathsome memories these cold arms call up?!”

Theo tried again. “But, Alouette, simply accepting this story—”

“Don’t you start treating me like a child, too!” she snapped. “It’s *miserable*.”

Camicia gasped, and Theo sighed heavily.

“...I’m not treating you like a child,” Theo told her. “I’m just saying this because I love you—”

“If you really love me, then why are you trying to stop me? I mean, if I could go back to a time when I had arms, I would in a heartbeat. I want fingers that don’t pop out when I play the piano. I want to walk around without people whispering about me. I want to not worry about whether the fastenings and wires are loose. And...”

A tear slid down her pale cheek.

“...I want to actually hold hands with you. I want to feel the warmth of your palm, your fingers...”

“Alouette...” Theo’s voice was hoarse.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Camicia, for losing my composure. I’m going to step out for a moment.” She wiped her cheeks and left without waiting for his response.

Camicia covered his mouth with a hand awkwardly as he watched her go. But immediately before he did, Theo definitely saw his mouth turn up in a smile.

“...Please excuse Alouette,” Theo said. “It’s a complex she’s had for years.”

“No, no.” Camicia shook his head. “I’m the one who must apologize. I was thoughtless. But my proposal is real. I would love to show Miss Alouette our products. She is such a wonderful person, and all the more so if this is

something she's been struggling with for years."

Camicia shifted in his seat and continued amicably.

"But it is my sincere desire that everyone who attends our salon enjoy themselves. In fact, even after we introduce our products, many people come to discuss contracts and details after the event. With regard to Miss Alouette's synthetics, it does seem that she and you yourself, sir, have some complicated emotions, so perhaps it would be best if we simply chat when you attend the salon. Any decisions can come at a later date. Naturally, both of you are obviously free to not attend the salon as well. I leave that choice to you."

"...Indeed." Theo nodded slowly. "Well then, perhaps we could take you up on your kindness."

"Excellent! Then I will have the invitation sent to you with the morning paper tomorrow. Please come to the salon on deck six with the invitation in hand if you are so inclined. We will be waiting for you." Camicia stood up, visibly satisfied. "I must speak to the staff, so if you will excuse me. Please give my regards to Miss Alouette."

"I will. Thank you." Theo waited until Camicia picked up the phone before going after Eleven.

The curtain of the changing room opened, and Eleven popped her face out, cheeks dry. "Was that too much, maybe?" she asked.

"Seems to have worked." Theo smiled at her. "We'll get Tobias to check on the refreshments."

"Great. It was a bit of a stretch to push things in that direction, but if it was effective, then nothing else matters." She turned her back to him and reached for the fastener at the nape of her neck.

He hurriedly closed the curtain and sat down in a nearby chair. "That was a good performance. So you can cry, hmm?"

"I only make it look like I am. I can generate and emit anything with a simple chemical formula."

For a moment, Theo froze, unable to follow. He never imagined chemistry

would come into conversation about tears.

“...Meaning you can emit water from your eyes, breathe helium gas from your mouth to blow up a balloon, and expel a deadly poison gas in a single breath?” he asked, finally.

“In theory, yes. Although research is required to determine if these would be effective in battle.”

No wonder she could call herself a singular battle weapon. He realized his breathing was growing shallow for no reason, so he loosened his collar and let out a sigh.



Having gotten ready for bed early in preparation for the next day, Tobias jumped when there was a knock at his door. He hurried to open it and found Tarja standing there, completely out of breath, her face pale.

“Tarja, what’s wrong?” he asked.

“The box...with that voice...in the cargo hold,” she panted. “It started making this sound like it’s in incredible pain. I want to help it, but I don’t know what to do. And you’re the only one who...believed me...so you, please. Help it.”

“Okay, it’s all right, Tarja. Calm down. We’ll go take a look together.” Tobias soothed her and led her toward the cargo hold.

The box she indicated there was the one that had shown the most response to her singing. It only unlocked with fingerprint authentication, though, so they couldn’t open it. When he shifted the box, he felt liquid shifting again, and that was it. But the blinking red light on the box was concerning.

“...And it’s only this box that’s in pain?” Tobias asked her.

“Uh-huh. The others are normal. And just when it could sing with me. Why...?” She stroked the lid of the box forlornly.

This gave him pause. “You were singing together? With what’s inside the box?”

“Yeah.” Tarja nodded. “Until last night, I only got this happy kind of reaction, but today it sang with me. And then it suddenly made that anguished sound.”

She sighed, furrowing her brow sadly, and looked up at him. “Can we help it...?”

“We can’t open the box, so we can’t touch it. Could you try soothing it with a lullaby?”

“I don’t know. Ever since the pain started, it hasn’t really responded to me—”

A sound interrupted her. A heartbeat later, Tobias realized it was a person’s voice.

Someone was coming down in the elevator. It was already pretty late at night. The majority of the staff would have been on the lower decks.

“Tarja, hide. Quick.” He grabbed her and crouched behind some boxes as a pair of men walked out of the elevator with flashlights in hand.

The mysterious men immediately went over to the boxes that Tobias’s detector had indicated were magical weapons. They set the box Tarja was worried about on the floor, and one of them opened the lid while the other shone a flashlight on the contents.

“They get like this sometimes,” one said. “Feels like the ratio of defects is increasing lately, though.”

“Dammit. And the salon’s tomorrow, too. This one’s garbage.”

Tobias could feel Tarja’s shoulders shaking next to him.

The men fiddled with something on the back of the lid and transferred the contents of the box to a bucket nearby. Tobias caught the sound of water as a semitransparent white mass dropped into the bucket.

“La. Doo. La. Doo. La... Laaa, la...”

Abruptly, Tobias heard faint singing.

The two men peered into the bucket, visibly shocked.

“This thing’s singing. Where’d it learn to do that?”

“That’s damned creepy. Let’s hurry up and get rid of it. C’mon, shut the hell up already.”

One man kicked the bucket, and the singing stopped. All was quiet. The fleeting melody resembled the song Tarja had been singing. Tobias held his

breath until the men closed the lid of the box, picked up the bucket, and returned to the elevator hall.

When he heard the door closing, he finally exhaled and looked back at Tarja. She was covering her mouth with both hands, and tears were spilling out of her eyes.

“Tarja, it’s okay now,” he said. “I know that was a shock.”

“What...*was* that? What have I been singing to?” she murmured. She dragged her sleeve across the bottom of her nose and looked up at him, eyes wet. “I assumed it was a fish or something... Is it...a magical creature?”

He sighed. “I don’t know, either. Did you feel anything from it when it was singing in the bucket?”

“It felt like it was having fun. Happy. But then it got scared and stopped. I guess that only makes sense. Kicked like that, of course it was scared...” She exhaled slowly and covered her eyes. “Maybe it’s my fault. Because I was singing to it and stuff, it got thrown away...”

Tobias didn’t want to believe her small act of kindness had brought about a thing like this, and he stroked her shaking shoulders as she struggled to hold back sobs.

“...It’s okay,” he said. “Even if it was stuck in that box, it managed to make a friend in you, Tarja. It learned to sing. And whatever gender it was, I think it was happy.”

His words were nothing more than an attempt to ease her mind, but Tarja nodded repeatedly. He patted her shoulder one more time before taking her hand and helping her to her feet.

“Tarja, you should go back to your room. I hate to say this, but you should make tonight the last night you sing them lullabies. For now, just rest. Okay?”

“Okay. But what about you?”

“I’m going to go after them. They’ll have to go up to deck eight to throw out the contents of the bucket.”

Tobias then entered the elevator hall by himself. He watched the elevator

ascending and touched his wireless.

“Tobias, here. Keep an eye out around deck eight. The Jikunokagu guys are throwing away an Amalgam.”

“Theo here. Roger. I’ll check starboard.”

“Emma. Roger. I’ll watch port. I’ll send out a recovery drone, too.”

Tobias ended the transmission and ran up the stairs to deck eight.



Emma stepped out onto the deck of the destroyer *Calwell* together with some navy sailors. She left the binoculars to one of them and loaded a specialized bullet into a rifle-style katahr.

“Sorcerer, someone’s come out,” the sailor with the binoculars called. “Deck eight.”

“Carrying anything?” she asked.

“Flashlight and a bucket. Recovery drone, ready!”

“Recovery drone, ready!” The sailor who repeated the order set up a large, black, disc-shaped drone on the deck.

“Ah!” cried the sailor with the binoculars turned on deck eight. “It’s fallen! It’s hit the water! Dispatch recovery drone!”

“Roger. Dispatching recovery drone!”

There was a loud *splash* as the other sailor called back. The drone floated up, blue light blinking, and glided across the ocean. Thanks to its searchlight, Emma could also see the white thing bobbing on the surface of the water.

“...That’s it,” she said. “You think you can get it?”

“Measuring mass and length... There’s no issue. Starting transfer.”

The sailor operated the drone’s controls smoothly, and Emma let out a sigh of relief. Recovering the Amalgam would advance their investigation another step.

But in the next instant, a panicked, staticky call came over her wireless.

“Report. Magical weapon detected! Big one! Approaching the *Havmonet*!”

A shiver of nervous tension raced through the group. Emma leaned over the deck railing. With so little light, she shouldn't have been able to see much on the dark sea.

But she could make out a massive shadow slipping between the waves. Flat like a manta ray, the figure emitted a hazy red light and flapped its large wings to swim through the dark waves. The shadow was so enormous, she couldn't grasp the entirety of it as it smoothly slipped past one side of the destroyer. The disturbing red outline swiftly approached the drone.

"Hurry with the drone recovery!" Emma urged.

"No can do," the sailor replied immediately. "The transfer takes a fixed amount of time!"

Emma turned the barrel of her katahr toward the sea and pulled the trigger. The frozen Magirus Shell exploded, and in the blink of an eye, an icy whiteness radiated out from where the bullet landed. She heard a crackling around the edges, like ice breaking. While she couldn't see it, the area beneath the waves was indeed frozen.

That'll only hold it up for a second. We're dealing with an Amalgam, after all.

Emma clicked her tongue and fired again. But in mere moments, the ice broke apart all at once, and the surface of ocean swelled up in just one spot.

"Transfer complete! Bringing the drone—"

Before the sailor operating the controls could finish, the drone was swallowed by the massive wave. A shower of sparks scattered, and then finally, the machine was silent. The waves calmed, and the disturbing shadow had also disappeared without a trace.

"...Report. Magical weapon, recovery drone, both completely lost. Tracking not possible."

The sailor's shoulders slumped, and his colleague offered words of consolation. The tension drained out of Emma's own shoulders, and she praised the sailors for their work before racing to the control room.

The object transferred by the drone sat there in a transparent case. White,

semitransparent, with a red crystal sunk inside it. The thing looked like a deflated jellyfish bell.

The sailors peered at it dubiously.

“What exactly is it?” one asked. “It looks like it’s mostly made of water.”

“We’ll have the lab analyze it once we get back to land,” Emma said. “Do you have any airtight containers?”

“We’ve got these specimen storage cases. Would that work?”

Emma reassured the worried sailor that a specimen case would be fine and moved the semitransparent object to the airtight container. She pulled a detector from her pocket, and just as she’d feared, it let out a few short beeps. So it was a magical weapon, then. Likely an Amalgam that Jikunokagu was planning to sell as a proxy.

After ensuring the object was securely stored on the ship, she touched her wireless at last.

“Emma, here. We recovered what they dumped into the ocean. There’s no mistake—it’s a repro intended for use as a product.”

“Theo here. Great work. How’s the Amalgam now?”

“No sign of motion. It’s sitting tight. Operational limit, maybe?”

“Most likely. Eleven says it may have reached its limit because it was doing things beyond its own abilities, such as interacting with people and singing.”

“That’s it?”

“It was all it could do to follow orders and camouflage itself. They apparently don’t have the faculties to communicate with others.”

Emma found this hard to swallow, but seeing as how the Amalgam had in fact stopped moving, Eleven was no doubt correct.

“Oh, and,” Emma hurried to add, “when they disposed of the repro, a magical weapon came from somewhere in the ocean to recover it. It tripped the destroyer’s detectors, so there’s no mistake. I think it was an Amalgam, but I could only make out a hazy outline. I didn’t get a clear look at it.”

“I see... Understood. You’ll probably be all right on the destroyer, but still, be safe.”

“I will. You too.”

Emma headed toward the pilothouse and had them check the detector records. Despite the large size of the magical weapon’s signal, it had appeared abruptly and then disappeared just as suddenly.

“...So we still don’t know what it was. I guess the signal disappeared here because it dived rapidly. Or did it actually disappear?”

“I’ve never seen a magical weapon like that, so I couldn’t say,” the sailor operating the detector replied. “But it vanished far too quickly. Even if it had dived, the detector would have picked up its outline growing smaller. So if we take this signal at face value, it melted away on the spot...if that’s the appropriate way to put it.”

The sailor looked perplexed. But it made sense to Emma.

If she assumed there was an Amalgam at the bottom of the ocean, it was probably busy producing cores, so it couldn’t exactly go and get materials itself. What if, just like how Emma and the sailors had sent out the recovery drone to transfer the repro, the Amalgam had created an organ that could move separately and disguise itself as seawater, so it could vanish at the point when the drone was swallowed up?

“...Could I have these records as evidence?” she asked.

“If you want... Sends a shiver up your spine, though, doesn’t it, to think we might see more magical weapons in the future that can appear and disappear like this?” The sailor shook his head. “Can’t target them with torpedoes. Seems like they could sink you before you knew what was happening.”

“I wouldn’t want to face that myself. I like an opponent I can see and aim a gun at.”

Emma gave him a pained smile as she took the records from him.



Once they were back in their cabin, Theo let out a sigh of relief. “It’s great

they managed to recover it safely, but Emma and everyone on board that ship were in real danger. I never imagined Jikunokagu would throw it into the ocean so brazenly. No wonder the Amalgam also reacted.”

“It’s fortunate Emma was able to drive it off with just the katahr. An opponent like that normally wouldn’t flinch at firepower,” Eleven said coolly, removing the scarf that held her hair back and shedding the Alouette personality with it.

Theo sat down on the bed, and she took a seat across from him.

“What was the Amalgam’s core like?” he asked.

“It was too far away from me to be able to accurately measure the distance,” she replied. “What Emma fired at was not the Amalgam’s main body, but likely a subordinate organ. From the behavior when the drone was swallowed, I would assume that the attacks on ships in the part of the ocean under discussion were also carried out by the Amalgam in order to collect materials.”

“A subordinate organ... So it’s not just you Hounds that can split up and move about independently, then?”

Theo saw the black belt in the back of his mind. Eleven had turned her left arm into a belt, wrapped it around his arm, and then moved entirely independently of it. Considering how the black belt she’d left with him was fine even when she lost her physical body, it might have simply been that Amalgams had an unexpected range of movement.

“For instance,” Eleven began, “Amalgams in war zones have been confirmed to generate subordinate organs at their own discretion to execute orders. The majority have been traps such as decoys, strongholds, and pitfalls, but there has also been an instance of an Amalgam generating and successively introducing shock troops to carry bombs and charge enemy trenches.”

“...It made a part of its physical body carry out a suicide attack? That’s a nasty story.” Feeling a little nauseous, Theo cleared his throat. “In other words, you mean that even a regular Amalgam can operate a physical body remotely?”

“Yes, it is possible for it to take independent action. But since the distance it can be away from the core is fixed, the Amalgam’s main body must have also

been nearby at the time of the attack.”

“Even a destroyer would have a tough time taking on that Amalgam,” he murmured. “It’s too flexible.”

“So does unauthorized disposal of the proxy not apply to their action?”

“You mean the prohibited items? True. Maybe it doesn’t apply because they aren’t under contract as proxy users. And it seems it was only at the stock stage anyway.” He loosened his collar and let out a sigh. “But to think it was an Amalgam born of the sea, talking with the granddaughter of a siren. Honestly...”

“This is an important observation case. Was it determined to have come into this world in the ocean?”

“It is strange, hmm? Assuming the Amalgams in the cargo hold are on standby, could they actually communicate with people in that state?”

After a moment of silence, Eleven raised her hand. “I am sending you a signal right now, Theo. Can you detect it?”

“No...” He shook his head slowly. “All I know is that you moved your right hand.”

“And similarly, an Amalgam’s signal can normally only be sent and received among other Amalgams. We Hounds also make use of this signal to place Amalgams under our command. As conjecture, I wonder if perhaps the Amalgam was not trying to communicate with the security guard, but rather attempting to assert that it was a friend by returning the same signal.”

This made sense to Theo, but it also gave him pause. He frowned. “Do Amalgams understand friendship?”

“It is different from the sense of connection between human beings, but Amalgams also transmit signals and coordinate their movements in a group. In order to efficiently execute orders, they inform one another of their positions, movements, and status. I can’t express in words, however, what the signals are like.”

“Huh, okay.” He nodded to himself. “So then the one that was disposed of simply learned the guard’s song and implemented it in order to execute the

standby order.”

“This is a hypothesis based solely on hearsay information, but most likely,” Eleven agreed.

He almost pitied it for being treated as defective and disposed of for something like that.

Eleven turned her gaze toward the windows. Outside was pitch black, and all Theo’s eyes could see was the inside of the room reflected in the glass. But her gray eyes seemed to be staring far beyond that, at the depths of the ocean.

“...Inside the box, in an indeterminate form, it memorized the sounds and melody it heard from the outside, created a vocal organ while still having no target form, and sang,” she said. “Quite the extraordinary effort. Considering the functionality of the core, it was a miracle that it even managed to actually sing.”

“A miracle?”

“An Amalgam cannot take on a form it has not been taught. They can’t produce something from nothing. They can’t advance to the next form from what was produced. The most they can do is faithfully reproduce what they are taught. So to create an unknown vocal organ without orders and try to respond to the song heard... This behavior goes well beyond its functionality and would be impossible for me.”

Theo made a vague noise of assent. It was true that even a human being would have had trouble reproducing a song by relying on the sound alone. It was one thing to manage to learn the song with the understanding that it was a human voice, but for an Amalgam that only knew the world inside the case, it was a Herculean feat to even identify the sound.

“...Was it simply that it wanted that badly to respond to the song?” Theo asked, and Eleven stared at him for a moment.

“I have told you numerous times that Amalgams do not have emotions,” she replied flatly.

“Sorry. It was just a thought.”

“If you require a lullaby, I will sing one.”

“Now you’re just mocking me! I do *not* need a lullaby!”

Theo threw his jacket down on the bed and stomped into the bathroom.



She had apparently offended Theo. She had assumed that she connected with his statement, because “lullabies” were that important for human beings, but it seemed she’d been wrong.

People are difficult.

Eleven turned her focus from the sound of the shower she could hear on the other side of the bathroom door and expanded her attention to the outside of the room. The presence of the human beings on the same deck, the sound of the air slipping through vents, the low rumble of the engines, the sound of the waves against the hull of the ship—she slowly chased all these from her consciousness until the only thing left was the Amalgam’s signal. The echoing signal scattered through the ship and the sea, and she couldn’t grasp its precise location. The signal itself was extremely weak.

Wait. Protect. Wait. Protect. The two signals alternated. Naturally, Eleven wasn’t going to obey these, but she nevertheless closed her eyes and continued to detect the signals diffusely reflected by the wind and the waves.

Cruise tour: Day three

Camicia hadn’t been lying; an invitation was delivered to their room with the morning paper the next day. Just to make sure, Theo checked with the front desk and learned that they had been asked by Camicia the previous evening to deliver it. He’d merely made use of the ship’s mail service, which was available for passengers, so there was nothing odd about it.

“Well, right at the point where he rented the salon room for the entire trip, we knew he wasn’t interested in hiding anything, but I’m a bit perplexed that he would invite us so openly like this,” Theo remarked, and Tobias chuckled over the wireless.

“Hiding was clearly never an option. The room-service order’s in, too. Only specified the time, number of people, and types of drinks. The salon staff are

coming to get everything the kitchen whips up. Sorry, but it'll be hard for me to make sure the food and drinks are safe."

"That's just how it is. We'll handle it on our end." Theo also didn't think it would be an ordinary tea party. He was ready for it. "What are your shifts like?"

"I got someone to switch jobs during the salon. I'll be on phones in the office on deck six. That's pretty close to the salon, so I can race in the second I hear from you."

"Great. I'll let you know once we're in the salon."

When he ended the call and turned around, Eleven was sitting on the bed with her eyes closed.

"Any signal from the Amalgam?" he asked her.

"I can detect its presence, but I can't grasp its location. It seems that my signal is not reaching it. But it is transmitting signals continuously."

"Is the main Amalgam sending orders to the proxies?"

"...It's insisting that they obey the standby instruction and activation signal. We're safe in viewing the proxies as an organization of Amalgam subordinates." Eleven opened her eyes and turned her gray gaze on Theo. "Depending on the behavior at the salon, there is also a possibility that the Amalgam devoted to the proxies could shift to offensive action. I suggest proceeding cautiously."

"Right. We can't go dragging the other passengers into this."

He looked down at the invitation. It seemed like a good idea to consider the worst-case scenario.



Emma glared at the whiteboard in the meeting room on the destroyer *Calwell*. She'd summarized all the information related to the current case in chronological order.

Giorgio Santoro repeatedly looted the battle zones he was sent to as a war correspondent. On his final trip, he exposed the squad he was embedded with to danger, and they were all killed as a result, while he escaped on his own. That eventually caught up with him, and he was permanently stripped of his

credentials and sent on his way. This was four years ago. She'd gotten this from the evidence collected in the military investigation.

There was also the information from intelligence services. According to records of Amalgams serving near the annihilated squad, several individuals were destroyed in a large-scale bombing. A Hound reportedly moved out to recover them but was able to find only a single individual.

Alongside the Intelligence investigation, Santoro apparently began studying Amalgams after returning to Adastrah. Emma traced the movement in his bank account and confirmed deals, which led to her discovery that he was selling off antiques from regions that had become war zones. Meanwhile, he was using the money to purchase specialized tools and books on magineering.

She was also able to confirm that starting around this time, he got people in various areas to use anathemas so he could confirm that they were authentic before he sold them off to enthusiasts for large sums. According to these enthusiasts, he'd been making these deals until about a year earlier.

Eventually, he realized that the core procedures were key, and he returned to his old publisher and used the magazine project to approach Dr. Nilholm, who was researching procedure construction. He then got what he needed from him and murdered him to keep him quiet. He submitted the obituary he'd prepared in advance to the publisher and then disappeared.

"...So let's say I was a money-grubber who knew nothing about magical weapons." Emma stared at the whiteboard and leaned on the table. "Everyone around me is dead, but there's this pretty stone right in front of me. I could take it home and sell it for a lot. But weird. No matter how many times I clean it up, it keeps getting covered in something. I can't sell it like this. If I knew what exactly an Amalgam was, I wonder if I could get it in just the stone form."

At his wit's end, he reached for technical magineering texts and learned about Amalgam features. So what if Jikunokagu made contact with him after he drew their attention with his sales of antiques and anathemas in order to fund these studies?

"The market for synthetics is much larger than gems. If they kept stealing the synthetics from clients with proxies, they'd be able to make a decent amount of

money. But at some point, they'd hit a plateau..."

They'd want to get something that would make more money. To that end, Santoro mass-produced Amalgams that could change form into anything, instead of selling them as gems. He chose to erase and overwrite one part of the procedure because he understood from his independent studies that the number of procedures that could be written onto a core was limited.

"What if, to try to increase profits further, he put together a product that surpassed the core's functionality...?"

Emma shuddered and froze in place.



Invitation in hand, Theo left the room dressed in a suit. Eleven was wearing a deep red party dress, its asymmetrical hem swinging elegantly with every step she took. Gloved hands peeked out from bell sleeves. Her accessories were all a glossy black for a unified feel.

"...You can't reuse the same dress?" he asked.

"I don't mind, but it's best to look different if possible," she replied. "Clothing is a symbol of wealth."

"A person like me would never make it in this world." He sighed.

"It's fine, Corporal. A suit looks good on you." Eleven, as Alouette, smiled and walked ahead of him. Her silver hair was pulled up in a Gibson tuck and adorned with a black velvet ribbon.

Theo slipped the key card and invitation into his inner pocket and followed her.

Time moved at a leisurely pace in the early afternoon on the ship. They passed more than one passenger on their way to the pool and saw many others gathered in the cafés and lounges, enjoying an elegant afternoon tea. When they descended to deck six, the shop floor was busy with passengers stocking up on souvenirs before their next port of call.

Theo presented the staff member in front of the salon with their invitation, and she responded with a smile.

“We’ve been expecting you. Please select one of these to wear inside.”

She showed them masks that could be affixed with a hair clip. They looked like theater props, brilliantly colorful, decorated with sequins and feathers, and meant to hide only the eyes.

“...Are these necessary?” he asked the staff member.

“We hand them out to everyone so our guests can distance themselves from the everyday and fully immerse themselves in the experience. While wearing one is not required and you are free to do as you wish, most guests do wear one. Please have fun with this as one part of the event.”

Theo was aware that his own face was tense, but the staff member merely smiled and showed no annoyance.

Eleven giggled girlishly. “How lovely! It’s like a masked ball.”

“The organizer, Camicia, incorporated them with the concept of a secret meeting place,” the staff member told her.

They’d already been judged when they accepted the invitation, so what was the point in further concealing who they were? Theo didn’t understand, but given that Alouette was on board, he couldn’t refuse. He took a black mask that matched his suit, and Eleven took one that was the same red as her dress.

“Theo, come here,” she said. “I’ll put it on for you.”

“It’s absurd to wear a mask like this with an utterly ordinary suit,” he protested.

“Don’t be like that! If it hides your scary face, you might get along better with everyone.” She giggled and gently fixed the mask in place over his eyes with the hair clips and whispered in his ear, “We couldn’t have asked for a better cover to watch people. Let’s use it.”

“...I suppose so,” he agreed reluctantly. “Here, give me yours. You’ll mess up your lovely hair.”

“Oh my, would you put it on for me? Please and thank you.”

She smiled and obediently closed her eyes. Instantly, her rose-colored eye shadow and long, curled eyelashes became prominent, gorgeous. He felt it was

a shame to hide them under a mask.

I guess with the masks, we'll know right away who's who, then.

Theo's hand stopped for a moment, but he decided that the other guests also understood this. He carefully affixed the mask so as not to ruin her coiffed hair, and Eleven thanked him brightly.

There were black lenses in the eye area, but his field of view wasn't too bad. The mask seemed to be made with light materials—he didn't feel the weight of it. Just as the staff member said, it was merely a costume.

When they entered the salon, they found the other guests had also hidden their eyes behind masks. Maybe because everyone was following the dress code, he felt a curious affinity with them and wondered momentarily if they really had stumbled into a masked ball.

Although he couldn't be sure, because their outfits were different from the welcome party, it looked like nearly all the disabled people and synthetic users whom Camicia and his friends had kept their eyes on were in attendance. For many of the guests, their clothes hid their disabilities and synthetics, and considering that this was supposed to be a gathering of "close friends," as Camicia put it, an air of anxiety and nervousness hung in the room, and he couldn't quite relax.

"Any signals?" he asked Eleven, leaning in as if exchanging secrets.

"Three on the staff," she whispered. "Different from the people I saw at the party."

He casually touched his wireless. "Theo, here. We're in."

"Tobias, here. Standing by."

"Emma, destroyer *Calwell*. Watching the ocean. All clear."

Theo's nervousness increased with this communication, and he carefully turned his eyes on the room.

It was smaller than the main hall, but even still, it was plenty spacious. There was only one exit and no windows. Directly across from the entrance was a temporary stage, and the attendees were sitting in rows of chairs in front of

this. There was an area simply partitioned off next to the stage, perhaps as a space for staff use, and he could make out voices in the middle of preparations. From time to time, he heard a door opening, so there might have been another room on the other side of the space. He counted at least ten people working the event.

Soon enough, a server came along with a cart full of drinks and snacks. The only nonalcoholic drink was orange juice. Theo took two of those and a dish of mixed nuts, then sighed.

“...Hard to tell with orange juice if there’s something mixed into it.”

“Wait just a second. I’ll have a drink.” Eleven brought the glass to her lips, and after savoring the beverage for a moment, she murmured, “Stimulant and sedative. I suppose it’s to give a feeling of exultation and intoxication while also preventing participants from remembering any details. Neither is a dangerous amount.”

“I see.” He nodded. “Judging from the beverages on offer, they’re disguising the bitterness. A neat trick to get people worked up. If they can get you to buy things happily and make your memories of the salon hazy, then you get paid well and create tight-lipped clients.”

They were indeed a clever bunch. Theo clicked his tongue and set his glass down on one of the small tables set up between the chairs.

Eleven grabbed some nuts. “These are all right. So relax.”

“That’s good to know. Although just nuts—that’s a little sad...”

The way things were going, though, the baked treats likely contained something he didn’t want to ingest. He tossed a nut into his mouth as he looked around the room. The other guests were talking among themselves, but all had either come alone or in pairs at most, and everyone was a little stiff. Although, Theo also would have felt uncomfortable if they’d all started merrily talking to people when they didn’t know who anybody was with everyone wearing masks.

Eventually, Camicia appeared onstage and was greeted with applause. He alone was wearing a mask that didn’t have black lenses; anyone could recognize him right away.

“Thank you all so much for coming to our salon today! To me, you are all cherished friends. I do hope you will take this opportunity to have a lovely afternoon together. Have you all gotten a drink and a little something to eat? Those of you who don’t have glasses— Oh, there’s no one. Well then, let’s open this salon straight away. First, please enjoy the traditional arts of East Akaryaza.”

Camicia gestured to the wings of the stage as he bowed out. Accompanied by the unique timber of unfamiliar instruments, people in unusual costumes emerged one after the other.

Their faces were hidden behind fox and cat masks, and their outfits opened at the front and were tied shut with a sash. The patterns and color combinations were unusual in Adastrah, but they were strangely harmonious. The way their hair was tied up, the movement of their limbs, the rhythm they kept, and the color and design of their costumes were all unfamiliar, making the audience feel as though they’d been transported to a different country.

Ever since East Akaryaza had sunk its borders into the ocean and become an island nation, the continent heard little of its culture. Theo appeared to not be the only one unfamiliar with it; many guests let out cries of admiration.

At first, the dance was leisurely, music and choreography working together to show off the costumes and movements. But both music and dancers picked up speed together, accelerating like they were rolling down a hill and intensifying toward the climax. The sound and the dancers’ calls took on a unique rhythm and began to fill the inside of his head. And then—

“Theo,” Eleven said quietly, tugging on his arm.

Literally pulled back, Theo returned to himself. In this room, going wild for the foreign music, Eleven’s voice alone was cool as ice.

“Make sure you take deep breaths. Keep your wits firmly about you.”

“Sorry.” He leaned back in his chair. “I spaced out there. Because of the music, I guess?”

She brought her mouth to his ear and murmured, “The music and the song lyrics contain curse elements. They incorporate things produced in East

Akaryaza and the neighboring countries. I suppose it's a conventional practice to bring about a hypnotic state."

"So it's not just the food and drink."

As he pulled himself together, the show ended. The audience erupted in cheers and applause, and the dancers and musicians took a bow before leaving the stage.

Before the passion in the room died down, Camicia reappeared and began to introduce the products, characterizing them as items he had "arranged specially for our salon today." Accompanied by a slideshow of photos from a trip Camicia supposedly took, utterly ordinary artisanal goods and East Akaryazan traditional crafts were highlighted onstage with a spotlight. But Camicia affixed baseless stories to each, like how this one was used as a material for magical creatures and how this other one incorporated magic to make it work forever.

It would have been fine if that was all. But while Camicia was making his dubious claims, he pointed at guests and gave them little pushes with promises like "Your problems will be solved" and "Your long-awaited wish will be granted," and the guest would go ahead and purchase the artisanal piece just like that. Occasionally, when there was only one item, several people vied for it, leading to an auction-type situation. Camicia actively urged this on with a smile on his face and heaped extravagant praise on the guest who made the winning bid.

"...I wonder what would happen if we arrested him in flagrante delicto for fraud," Theo muttered, annoyed.

"If we can't prove on the spot that it's fraud, we would likely be the ones taken to court instead," Eleven replied coolly. "What we're here for is up next. Focus."

He straightened up at this.

A large aquarium was brought out from the other side of the partition. The tank was filled with cloudy white water, obscuring what was inside.

Camicia brought his hands together and looked out over the audience, beaming. "Now then, this is the star of our show today. A proxy, as it's known in

East Akaryaza! And just as the name has it, it is indeed a substitute for the body. Truly like something out of a dream, this miracle product will restore a lost part of the physical body!”

A murmur of excitement spread through the room. The synthetic users, disabled patrons, and their companions were especially shaken. He heard a chair clattering to the floor next to him and looked up to find Eleven leaping to her feet.

When he saw her, Camicia’s smile broadened, and he spread his hands toward the audience. “I’m sure you’re all curious to find out if this could actually be real. This product will indeed compensate for the missing part without any pain whatsoever. I’m sure those of you who use synthetics recall the pain immediately after it was attached and the agony of rehabilitation. This incredible item will release you from all that vexing maintenance and upgrading and give you your very own physical body back! We will now give a demonstration, so please, everyone, do come closer. Young lady in the red dress there in particular! Come forward!”

Camicia extended a hand and invited Eleven to join him.

Watching the interested guests gather around the tank out of the corner of his eye, Theo stood behind Eleven in the very front row.

Once everyone was assembled, Camicia called someone out from behind the partition—a man in a worn suit, his face hidden behind a mask. He removed his suit jacket and turned toward Camicia. Camicia nodded at him and looked back at the audience.

“This man is a customer who purchased a proxy. He will now remove his synthetic right arm and regain his own arm. Now, good sir, please go ahead and experience a miracle!”

The man took his gloves off and rolled up his sleeves. His right arm was a cheap synthetic. The cover was thin, and the mechanical joints made an audible creaking sound. He removed it and submerged what remained of his actual arm in the tank. Ripples spread out across the surface of the cloudy water and finally died down again.

While everyone watched, a wave rose up in the tank. The water bubbled, and

the white murkiness condensed in one spot. At last, this took on the shape of a human arm, and the man pulled it up, panting, droplets of water scattering everywhere. It was indeed a human arm that appeared from the water.

Incredulous, the man opened and closed his trembling right hand. The nerves were already connected.

People cried out in surprise; others sighed their disbelief—reactions were varied.

The man turned his hand over and back and over again as he looked at Camicia. “I don’t believe it. It’s even smoother than you said it’d be! My arm really has come back! Aah! It’s like a dream come true!”

“Just as I explained to you before, sir. Enjoy a happy life with your new arm!” Camicia offered the man a towel and sent him back to the wings with a smile.

Questions immediately flew at Camicia from the audience. Cost, effect, possible body parts, potential downsides. Camicia answered none of these as he checked the audience with outstretched hands.

“Everyone, I’m delighted to see you reacting so favorably. This product does require more individual handling, however, so I will give my business card to all those who are interested after the salon is over. We will discuss the details from there. The truth is, I have one more exceptional offer for you.”

Camicia called to the staff, and a bathtub was brought in to replace the tank, which now held only water. The tub was also filled with a milky white liquid.

“This one, too...?”

“...Yes, it’s the same.”

Theo and Eleven conversed quietly to keep from being overheard by the spectators who were already raising their voices in expectation. This was another repro like the proxy, but what did Camicia intend to do with it this time? Theo rested a hand on the gun on his hip as he watched the man onstage carefully.

“This is truly a one-of-a-kind item,” Camicia declared. “Its name a miracle... resurrection of the dead!”

The room burst into chatter. Some people had their hopes up after seeing the proxy product actually restore a part of the body, while others frowned at the act of breaking such a taboo. The guests displayed a variety of individual reactions, but only one couple had their mouths pursed as they held each other's hand tightly.

"The miracle is that a single part of the physical body of a person who has passed—bone, hair, blood—will cause the soul of that person to be housed in a physical body that has been restored to their last figure in life. Today, I've invited a friend who has someone they'd like brought back to life. Please join me."

Heedless of the tension around him, Camicia remained smiling as he called out to the couple who had reacted differently. Seemingly married, they approached the tank, pressed against each other. The woman burst into tears as though she couldn't hold it in any longer and pressed a handkerchief to her mouth. The man pulled out an unadorned bag and emptied it into the bathtub.

What fell with a *splash* were human bones.

The increasingly excited room fell silent. Everyone held their breath and watched the couple to see if it was real. The man next pulled a paper bundle from his suit pocket and unfolded it to reveal locks of black hair. He pressed the hair to his forehead and let out a shaky breath, a gesture like a prayer. He dropped the hair into the tub.

After watching this silently, Camicia called out to them. "Now then, please call the name of the subject you wish to revive from the dead."

"...Ranya," the woman clutching her handkerchief said quietly, pain bleeding into her words. "Ranya, come back to us..."

This was likely their daughter's name, given the agony in both of their voices. While Theo was at a loss for words, the bathtub began to froth violently. The cloudiness condensed in one spot and began to take on the shape of a human being.

"Impossible!"

"How...?"

Voices cried out. Before the eyes of the spectators, wet hands grabbed the edge of the bathtub. They pressed down firmly, and with a *splash*, the water parted, and a girl sat up. Wet black hair plastered to her back, the girl lifted her face and looked up at her parents. The couple gasped, and the audience cried out in amazement.

“Ranya! Oh, Ranya, it’s you!” The woman pulled off her mask, a smile spreading across cheeks damp with tears, and she embraced the little girl. The girl grinned and leaned into her mother’s arms.

While everyone else was stunned and moved by this reunion, Eleven whispered to Theo, “I smell salamander.”

“You’re not allowed to bring combustibles on board.”

“No, it’s not salamander itself. I think it’s probably an oil or something.”

He couldn’t smell anything, but he looked around anyway. Everyone had their eyes glued to the emotional reunion between parents and child, and Camicia, too, was watching over this mirthfully.

The husband moved first. He stroked the girl’s face and asked, “Ranya, is it really you...?”

The girl’s smile grew wider, and she held her father’s hand to her cheek.

“How absolutely wonderful that you have been reunited with your lost daughter,” Camicia said. “Please tell us—”

“This isn’t my daughter,” the man snapped.

Theo couldn’t see the look on the man’s face under the mask, but his voice was so cold that it seemed almost impossible for blood to be running through his veins.

Camicia frowned, and the wife was perplexed.

“But, honey,” she protested, “this is definitely Ranya. What are you—?”

“That’s right!” Camicia declared. “Please look closely. The physical body was restored to perfection, and your daughter’s soul—”

“My daughter’s soul isn’t here,” the man said with a moan and pulled his wife

away from the girl.

Stunned, the girl looked up at him, and he met her eyes.

“...You’re a fake, but a life is a life,” he said, his voice weak. “Forgive me...”

At the same time as he put his hand in his pocket, Eleven leaped forward. She grabbed his hand and twisted it upward to reveal a small bottle.

“You mustn’t, sir,” she told him. “It’s too dangerous.”

“...I’m sorry, miss. It’s all over now.” The bottle dropped from the man’s hand. “It’s already on fire.”

The fragile glass shattered, but the bottle was empty. Eleven snapped her head around, and Theo’s eyes widened in surprise.

The girl in the bathtub abruptly lifted both hands from the water. In the blink of an eye, she was engulfed in flames.

The spectators surrounding the bathtub panicked and pulled away. Camicia ripped his mask off and raced over to the girl. He dumped the liquid from the tub over her, but the flames licking at the girl did not disappear.

“How—? What on earth did you do?!” he demanded.

“I painted my daughter’s hair with salamander oil,” the man said. “So that it would burn in response to the magic.”

“Wh-what?!” Camicia shrieked, while before his eyes, the girl burned from the inside and melted into the water in the bathtub.

Although the flames failed to transfer to anything else, the woman screamed and sobbed incoherently, having lost her daughter once more before her eyes. The man wrapped his arm around her shoulders and looked down at the tub.

While everyone in the room stood rooted to the spot, at a loss for words, Eleven clutched her head and staggered backward. Theo hurried over to her and pulled her to him as she shrank into herself.

“What’s the matter, Alouette?” he cried. “Are you all right?”

“...I’m sorry. The signal’s so strong. We have to get people out of here now.”

Unable to fathom her meaning, Theo was baffled. A second later, he heard a

sound—something heavy falling and breaking from farther back than the other side of the partition. Wondering what it was, he turned his gaze to the wings of the stage.

Camicia also turned around and pointed at a staff member suspiciously. “You, go take a look.”

“Y-yes, sir...”

“No! Get away right now!” Eleven rebuked the staff member sharply, just as she heard a door opening and the partition was pushed to the ground. The staff member who tumbled out from the backstage area was covered in blood.

“Mr. Camicia, something’s happened!” the staff member cried, his face pale. “One of them suddenly started acting weird—”

His throat was pierced from behind. Eyes still wide open, the man fell forward onto the floor. Fresh blood jetted up to the ceiling, and screams filled the air. Standing behind him was another staff member, a woman. But her right arm had transformed into a blade from the shoulder down and was wriggling like a snake. She looked toward them with a blank expression, but finally, her eyes rolled, and her head fell back. The bones in her neck broke, and her head dropped at an unnatural angle.

Panic gripped the spectators, and they fled as if the room was on fire. The blade shot out to prevent their escape, but Eleven gripped the end of it and closed in on it in a heartbeat. She knocked the woman into the wings and immediately shut the door.

“Miss!” Camicia shouted. “There are staff still in there!”

“No. There’s no saving them now.” Eleven pressed her back against the door, removed her mask, and looked at Camicia. She furrowed her brow angrily. “How about you worry about your friends instead? They won’t be okay, either.”

“...!”

The color drained from Camicia’s face, and he whirled around. Theo leaped into action to stop him from getting away, but Camicia shoved a man in a wheelchair at Theo. The man fell, and Theo hurried to help him up off the floor before he could be trampled by the other guests. While he was doing that,

Camicia shoved the other guests aside and ran, saving himself above anyone else.

“Coward! Don’t you dare run, you bastard!” But Theo’s cries were in vain. He clicked his tongue, sat the man back in his wheelchair, and touched his wireless. “Tobias, Camicia escaped out the front! Go after him!”

“Roger! I’ll get him!”

Theo pulled off his mask and stamped on it in irritation. “You’re not hurt? Who are you here with?”

The man in the wheelchair shook his head repeatedly, and a woman ran over to him, squeezing past the fleeing guests. She thanked Theo with tears in her eyes before pushing the wheelchair out of the room.

Once Theo had gotten all the guests out, he finally turned back to Eleven, who’d been beating back the blade every time it pierced the door.

“Sorry for the wait, Eleven,” he said.

“It’s fine. Orders?”

The rich niece was gone. Her expression had transformed, and she turned only her gaze on Theo as a hunting dog.

He drew his gun and released the safety. “It’s assaulted people now. We can’t let it be. Destroy it.”

“Roger. I’ll open the door.”

She kicked the door open, pushed back the stabbing blade with a fist, and turned her kicked-up toes into a sword that sliced through the woman from her lower jaw to the crown of her head.

Theo set his sights on the figure who raced out from behind her and pulled the trigger. The man reeled and fell onto his back, but he still got up again.

He was covered in a silver liquid that radiated outward from his stomach. He ran forward, shuddering all over, but Eleven sliced through his torso, then grabbed his arm and flung him upward with everything she had.

The body slammed into something above the stunned Theo’s head. When he

looked up, he saw that the man's four limbs had turned into the legs of a spider, and he was staring at Theo upside down.

Theo thought the spider man would attack, but then the man ran toward the wall and thrust a blade forward toward the air vent. Before the blade could reach that route of escape, Theo shot out his legs, and Eleven delivered the killing blow when he landed on the floor.

Revolted, Theo wanted to throw up as he returned his gun to its holster and looked around the room with a scowl. It was a modest room with nothing but boxes, aquariums, and a simple kitchen space. By the time they'd charged in, it was already a sea of blood, with several people dead on the floor. Looking at them, he realized that the man who had gotten his right arm back earlier was also there, bleeding from a fatal wound.

"Theo, over here," Eleven called, and he raced over to her.

The spider man had collapsed with four limbs missing, his body sunken into a pool of water.

"The destroyed Amalgam turned into water," she told him. "It seems to be seawater."

"...Is it because it was produced using seawater?" he asked. "But why did it suddenly become aggressive?"

The Amalgams in the backstage area were the three proxy users they'd identified at the start of the salon. Since they hadn't bled in their attack, he had to assume that they'd been killed earlier and that their bodies had been taken over, leading them to murder the rest of the staff.

"If the contract for reviving the dead is the same as for a proxy, then the destruction of the Amalgam violates the prohibited items," Eleven noted. "But it was incinerated before the Amalgam could display any offensiveness. I would surmise that a proxy shifted into attack mode in place of the incinerated specimen."

"It's one thing to kill the host and return to Camicia, but to kill the other staff members...," Theo replied. "Is it like with the Brouwers, trying to take care of any witnesses?"

There were nine more proxy users on board the ship. And there should have been five Amalgams in stock in the cargo hold if Theo excluded the one that had been disposed of and the two used at the salon. If the other specimens were also affected, who knew how serious the damage would be?

Eleven started walking abruptly. When Theo followed, she dropped to her knees near the wall. Even though the bodies and the bottle were nowhere nearby, the floor was wet. She moved the boxes away to reveal that the wallpaper was also wet and sodden.

He frowned. "A leak?"

"This is also seawater," she told him.

There were no windows in the salon. Deck six held only the reception lobby, and it was above the waterline to begin with. It was impossible for seawater to soak into the inside of the room.

Regardless, however, water steadily seeped in before their eyes, the carpet slowly changing color.

Theo was about to stand back up when Eleven fell toward him. Surprised, he held her up with both hands. She pressed a hand to her forehead, her eyes flashing gray and red.

"What?! Another signal?!"

"Brace yourself. It's coming."

Theo's eyes widened as the ship was rocked violently from side to side.



Tobias heard footsteps running away from the passengers fleeing in confusion, and he hid himself behind a door. He heard the door for the crew passage open, different from that of the door to the emergency stairs. Holding his breath, he waited for the moment when the other man ran in, and then he slammed his synthetic left arm against the man's chest.

The breath knocked out of him, the man fell soundlessly backward—Gino Camicia. Tobias looked down at him and furrowed his brow.

"Pretty irresponsible to go saving only yourself, Camicia."

“Wh-who are you?” he demanded. “What did the staff tell you?”

“Don’t play innocent with me,” Tobias said. “You saw the proxies go on a rampage, and you ran away like a coward.”

The color drained from Camicia’s face. Tobias reached for the handcuffs at his waist so he could hurry up and arrest this guy already, but he lost his balance when the boat lurched heavily to one side.

Camicia’s eyes opened wide in surprise.

“Camicia, what is this?” Tobias demanded.

“H-how should I know...? Why is this happening...?” he moaned. He was supposed to be the mastermind behind all this, but he was almost impossibly baffled.

Astounded, Tobias reached out to arrest him, but something cold slammed into his side, sending him flying.



A shrill alarm rang out. The strong magical-weapon signal sent the destroyer *Calwell* into panicked action.

Emma ran down the corridor, her marksman rifle—type katahr braced against her shoulder.

“Magical weapon confirmed! It’s contacted the *Havmonet* from the stern!”

“When did it do that?!”

“Unclear. Seems to have ascended suddenly— Wait. Several small magical-weapon signals! There’s too many!”

“All personnel, take your stations! Fire with main arms!”

Leaping out onto the deck, Emma looked in the direction of their progress and was stunned into silence.

The ocean was swirling around the *Havmonet*. This was not a region of the ocean that generated whirling tides, and yet the waves twisted persistently around the ship. They abruptly grew stronger until a curtain of spray rose up, just like a whale or a submarine surfacing.

It was a twisted monster, like the water jetting up to become a pillar. The crashing waves of the sea surged and shot into the air, casting a shadow on the water's surface. Between the waves, she could see several red crystals lit up like compound eyes. The spray rained onto the deck. The writhing seawater monster headed toward the *Havmonet* and punched into it.

The ship listed to one side with a roar. Before a massive influx of seawater could rush in, a beam of blue magic shot forward from the main arms of the destroyer *Calwell*. A freezing spell. Hit with the destroyer's attack, the massive body froze, but the ice cracked and snapped from the edges and immediately began to break up. It was the same as when Emma had fired on the individual that had come to recover the Amalgam. It wouldn't stay frozen for long.

But the monster's target shifted from the *Havmonet* to the destroyer. Red eyes flashed with bright light. As if in response, the surface of the water also began to shine with a red light. Brighter than even a red tide, the illuminated water was ominous and disturbing.

Emma braced herself for whatever spell was coming, while in front of her, the light rose into the air, clad in water.

The monster, white and semitransparent like a jellyfish, bobbed through space, a strange round shape carrying a red core. Another and then another and still another popped up and flew back and forth overhead.

All of them bared their fangs in unison.

Watching this herd head toward the destroyer, Emma pulled the lever on her katahr. The Magirus Shell expanded instantly and shot through the Amalgams within range with a bolt of lightning. But more popped up to replace those eliminated.

While the ship's wireless exploded in activity, Emma hurriedly pressed on her own wireless.

"Theo! Tobias! The main Amalgam's here! It's the ocean. It was mimicking the ocean! Hurry! You've got to catch Camicia and get command authority over it!"

She had no sooner finished speaking than she was pulling the trigger again. Even when the lightning of her katahr and the ship's main arms got a direct hit

on the Amalgam, the most they did was temporarily slow its movement. But the monster continued to maintain the shape of the ocean as it clung to the *Havmonet* and poured seawater onto it. Maybe because the magic bullets weren't reaching the monster's core, they couldn't deal a fatal blow. If this kept up, the ship would sink.

"You have to destroy the main core!" she shouted. "Pinpoint the location with radar!"

"It's no use. No matter how many times we fire, a new core appears! We can't identify the main core!"

There was no time for reporting back and forth. The other sailors on deck were also responding with gunfire, but the most they could do was shoot down the smaller Amalgams flying around. And no matter how many times it was shot by the main arms, the sea Amalgam didn't so much as flinch. No one had the mental leeway to search for the main body, which was likely on the seafloor.

Emma gritted her teeth and pulled the trigger on her katahr.



Seawater rushed onto decks six and seven from the port side. Countless red eyes peered in through the windows, and panic overtook the ship. People hurried to close the watertight doors, but given the amount of water flooding in, it was only a matter of time before the ship sank.

Evading the crowds of frantically fleeing passengers, Theo took his hand off his unresponsive wireless. "No answer from Tobias. I suppose we should assume Camicia got away, then."

"Situation confirmation difficult," Eleven said briefly. "Orders?"

Theo automatically looked back at her. He deliberately peered into her calm gray eyes, and his rising blood pressure and heart rate gradually began to slow.

"Amalgam signals on the ship?" he asked.

"Total of fourteen," Eleven replied immediately. "All signals are offensive."

He exhaled at length and pushed the clamor of the passengers and crew guidance from his mind as he desperately tried to recall the ship layout and

hands-on programs in the pamphlet.

“Get control of the Amalgams on board and then those outside,” he instructed. “At the same time, look for Tobias. I’ll go after Camicia.”

“Do you have an idea of where he is?”

“There should be a motorboat on this ship, in addition to the lifeboats. It was placed in a different area for some diving class or something. I’m betting he’s headed that way.”

“Roger. Well then, Theo.”

He thought she would leave right away, but Eleven removed the ribbon from her hair and grabbed his wrist. Surprised, he lifted his face and ended up staring directly into her gray eyes.

“Take care,” she told him. “Once my work is complete, I will rejoin you.”

“G-got it. You too... Take care of Tobias.”

She ran off, her red dress swinging, and he let out the breath he’d been unconsciously holding as he looked down at his wrist. In between the cuff of his suit and his watch was a black band.

“With insurance, then?” he said. “Gives me hope.”

Gripping the slender band in place of a protective charm, Theo got himself back on track and started running in the opposite direction from Eleven. He was aiming not for the eighth deck, where the crew was guiding people toward, nor the outdoor deck of the ninth deck.

The pamphlet noted that passengers who wanted to take part in the marine-sports programs should, for some reason, assemble even farther up, on the thirteenth deck. Convinced this was the key, Theo ran.



She chased the Amalgams’ cores. She chased the signals that lit up her detector. There were too many that were too hazy outside the ship, but she could pursue the signals on the ship. They were all on deck five or lower.

Eleven raced down the listing stairs. Her heels made a hard sound, and water sprayed up. The flooding was relentless, even with the watertight doors locked.

According to Emma, the Amalgam was mimicking the sea. In which case, she could assume that part of the body was also in this seawater. In this situation, it wouldn't have been strange if it had swallowed anything that moved, but the seawater simply flowed past.

The objective of the flooding is not to attack. It's most likely looking for Camicia. Contact between Theo and the Amalgam is inevitable. I need to hurry and rejoin him. Still no contact with Tobias...

Eleven stopped in the middle of her calculation of the time required. An Amalgam was banging on the door to a passenger room ahead of her. It appeared to have originally been a man in a suit, but his upper body was white and semitransparent now. He'd transformed into a strange shape with a single red core in the area above his heart. He cried out unintelligibly and pounded on the door. His objective was unclear. He whirled around immediately when he noticed Eleven.

But it was too late.

She slipped past his right arm, which extended outward like a lance, and dived in close to his breast. His ruined head just barely caught sight of her, but his movements were dull. She thrust a hand against the floor, and with this as a support, she brandished her left leg, now a sword. Her opponent threw his head back, but not fast enough. In a gelatinous state without armor or any protection, his body was easily sliced apart. The shattered core scattered from between the two halves of the physical body.

When the Amalgam melted into the water on the floor and disappeared, she heard wild breathing from inside the room.

She knocked on the door. "Is there anyone in there? An evacuation order has been issued."

"Who are you? Is that monster gone?" The trembling voice was that of a woman.

Eleven recomposed herself. "My name is Alouette Cormolone. I'm a passenger on this ship. There was nothing out here when I arrived. Are you able to evacuate?"

“Alouette... Oh, the piano! Thank god! Please. You need to call someone.”

A man’s voice followed the woman’s. “I think the doorframe is bent; the door won’t open. Can you help us?”

It was apparently just the two of them in the room.

“I will attend to it right away,” Eleven replied briefly. “Please wait a moment.”

The corridor was flooding, and the outward-opening door wouldn’t budge because of the water pressure and the slope of the floor. She raised her leg to kick it down, but then noticed the error in judgment and quickly corrected her action. She took off her gloves, transformed them into a crowbar, and pressed this to a gap in the buckled door.

“I’m going to pry it open with a crowbar,” she called. “Please grab on to the doorknob and work with me.”

“Y-you are? All right. Please try...”

There was “bewilderment” in the man’s voice, but she sensed him approach the door, and the knob moved. Seeing this, she pried the door open with the crowbar and got the couple out of the room.

“You saved us. Thank you.”

“Not at all,” Eleven said simply. “Please take the stairs and hurry up to deck eight. There are lifeboats.”

“Thank you so much. But what about you?”

“I’m going to go see if anyone else still needs to evacuate. I bear the Cormolone name, so I must conduct myself in a way that will not bring shame to it.”

The woman gasped, and the man opened his eyes wide in surprise, but he merely said, “Thank you,” before they ran off.

The word *admiration* applied to the expression on their faces, and they showed no signs of doubting her. After ascertaining that they would not be an obstacle to her mission, Eleven started to run, still holding on to the crowbar. The flooding from deck six was pouring onto deck five.

As there was still daylight, most of the guests had been out—there were few people in the cabins. But since the number of passengers in cabins was not zero, she needed to quickly destroy any wandering Amalgams and evacuate the remaining passengers to deck eight before the ship flooded completely.

Rescuing passengers was not part of my orders. But if Theo was here, there is a strong possibility he would rescue them.

There was no time to lose. But given the chance that she could be seen by human beings on the ship, it seemed best to avoid making her body into a weapon like she had now.

The Amalgams noticed her over the sound of the water and turned around. The physical bodies of their hosts half-deformed, they appeared to be assaulting witnesses as they headed down the stairs. Camicia likely wouldn't go below, where it was dangerous, so they must have had some separate purpose.

Objective unclear. But they're not feeding. They also don't have the strength to break down doors. Their movement is slow, and they have no armor. Destruction is simple. There is no need for me to deliberate.

The corridor was narrow, and she couldn't slip past the Amalgams with their half-ruined physical bodies. Naturally, they would have to wait in turn for Eleven. She could defeat them and still make good time.

One minute.

She determined the allowable time and stepped forward, faster than the speed of sound. She slid forward on the wet floor, knocked the legs out from under the first one, and smashed the core in the semitransparent, white head area with the crowbar. Using the momentum of the crowbar to smash the lower jaw of the second Amalgam, she spun around and moved down its empty torso. Slammed against the wall, the core shattered, and she slipped past the fallen man and leaped up.

She thrust a hand toward the low ceiling, and before the third Amalgam could turn around, she quickly launched a kick at its neck. They did not have robust bodies. They were soft lumps of crumpling flesh. She was able to easily inflict fatal blows with the crowbar.

Another core shattered, and Eleven stepped farther forward. Five left.

She hit the woman who moved toward her in the head with the crowbar, and the moment she shrank back, Eleven kicked the core in her knee to pieces. Ignoring the fact that the hem of her dress was getting wet, she raced forward, pushed on the opening door with a hand, and thrust the crowbar straight ahead, knocking out the core in another Amalgam's solar plexus.

She beat the body into the wall and pulled out the crowbar as she deftly brushed off encroaching tentacles, and in the opening when her opponent reeled backward, she destroyed the core in its shoulder with a fist. She spotted a man with semitransparent white eyes walking along, both hands in the air, and she knocked his head into the wall to destroy the core before he could turn around.

There was one left.

But a door opened to block her way forward. A man brandishing a chair tumbled out into the hallway. She heard the voices of a woman and child from inside the room. Before the man pressed against the wall could turn around, before the Amalgam entered an attack stance, Eleven announced, "Stop. You'll die."

The man shuddered like he'd received a massive electric shock and froze in place. The Amalgam's tentacles waved back and forth, and Eleven leaped. She jumped over the man, nearly grazing the ceiling, and gouged out the Amalgam's eyeballs with her heel. With only the impact of her landing, his head was completely crushed. Her heel stabbed forward to smash the core in his chest, dispatching the last of the proxy users.

There were still passengers ahead. But there were also five Amalgam cores remaining, and they were gathered in the direction of the cargo hold. She didn't have the option of saving all the humans. She had something more important to do than maintain appearances as a human being.

Following the voices calling for help, Eleven roughly pried a door open with the crowbar. Two women holding their breath, eyes wide in surprise, came out into the corridor.

"You're not injured, then?" she asked. "There are other passengers who still

haven't evacuated. Please help one another escape and hurry up to deck eight. Use this crowbar to help them. If you're not sure you're strong enough, reach out to a crew member."

"What on earth are you—?" one of the women started.

"This deck is sinking. Hurry and evacuate."

They accepted the crowbar with pale faces and ran off down the corridor.

Eleven ran in the opposite direction.

Protect. Protect. Protect. Protect. The simple signal filled the air. It appealed to a Hound's sensor as well, and Eleven chased it.

With the shift to offensive action by the Amalgams in the salon, the proxies in different areas linked and took offensive action of their own. The trigger had been the incineration of the Amalgam. It wasn't just that this violated the prohibited items; she assumed they were also obeying a signal from the main Amalgam.

If their objective was to take care of witnesses, as Theo hypothesized, then they should have gone after the fleeing passengers and headed toward deck eight. If their objective was to protect Camicia, then they should have set up formation around him instead of taking offensive action. The main Amalgam had a separate, unshakable objective.

She raced through deck five, slipped past the deserted staff counter, and stopped. The way forward was closed off by a watertight door. She pressed an ear to it and quickly turned the handle. The area was flooded, but from the sound, the water wasn't staying there but flowing downward.

When she opened the door and went inside, the water was up to her ankles. She returned the watertight door to its closed position, then advanced. There was a large hole in the ceiling of the elevator hall, and water was gushing in through it. The stairs that should have led to deck six had crumbled from the landing, and through the hole, she could see where the elevator cords had been ripped off and were scattering sparks, along with the wheel.

Tobias was on standby on deck six.

Eleven leaped from the stairs, kicked at the wall, and flew up to deck six. There was an exit in the crew corridor on the emergency stairs. She assumed that Camicia had taken a different evacuation route from the other passengers, and if Tobias was on standby, it would have been here.

She opened the door and then stopped where she was.

The hole that the Amalgam had made from the port side of deck six was directly above the crew corridor. The corridor from the stairs to the elevator hall had been knocked out, and seawater poured down through it.

“...I am in command. Hear me, fear me, bow down before me.”

The command signal got no response. The reason the signal outside the ship was exceptionally hazy was not simply because of the countless repros flying back and forth, but because the main Amalgam’s body was at a distance to start with.

The Amalgams continued to send the solid signal: *Protect*. What if the reason the proxy users had shifted to offensive action and headed for the stairs was to eliminate an external enemy?

What if the Amalgams judged Tobias’s attempt at arresting Camicia to be an attack on their commander?

Eleven immediately threw herself into the large, dark hole.



Tobias heard water dripping and screwed up his face with a groan. He hurt all over. Not to mention that he was soaked and chilled to the bone.

He managed to open his eyes and frowned at the unpleasant darkness in front of him. He had no idea where he was. He’d been lying in wait on the stairs for Camicia, on the verge of arresting him. And then he’d been hit hard. Where had that blow come from?

A hazy red light floated amid the darkness.

The emergency light in the cargo hold?

It seemed that he’d fallen, but the boxes had cushioned his fall and saved him. He tried to stand, but the excessive swaying underfoot stopped him. Water

poured down like a waterfall. He started to lift his upper body above the piles of boxes, realized the water was closing in on his feet, and gasped.

Metal folding chairs, papers, heavy desks, and steel cabinets bobbed up around him, and he realized that the stairs from deck six down to the office on deck four had been knocked away. He felt a shiver of fear. It was a miracle that he'd made it out with just a blow to the head.

The room was dark, and he could only see a hazy light on the other side of the waterfall of seawater. He looked around to see if any of the other crew members had been injured, and then he suddenly froze in place.

The red light he'd been looking at was gone.

Was there even something that lit up with a red lamp in the office?

In the dark space, he could only make out the sound of water flowing in and his own breathing.

Scanning the area, Tobias reached down to his waist. His gun and flashlight were gone. Had he lost them in the impact of the fall?

Thud. He heard a dull sound.

There was nothing moving in his field of view; the sound seemed to have come from in the water. The sensation of wetness on his toes brought him back to himself, and he scrambled up the pile of boxes. The water level was rising faster than he thought.

The moment he grabbed onto the plastic covering a container, he heard a sound, and a spray of water rose up. He looked back, and all the words left his head.

A semitransparent white giant, a twisted human shape made up of containers, steel cabinets, desk, chair, and whatever else it could lay its hands on, was rising from the water. Five red cores glittered ominously.

The Amalgams stored in the cargo hold had begun to move.

The giant swung its right fist with a creaking sound. Without the time to even process what was happening, Tobias was knocked into the water. Boxes tumbled down from above with a roar, and he shoved these away, used the

shelf near the wall as a foothold, and popped his face out of the water. The trash giant slowly turned toward him.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa. Seriously?”

The dark shadow of the giant fell on him, cutting off the meager light shining in from the upper deck. Wet hair plastered to his forehead, he felt the ever-encroaching water, smelled the icy cold of the ocean. The color drained from his face at the threat before him, and his extremities froze. All this called up a past pushed down to the very bottom of his memories.

As his eyes grew used to the dark, all he could make out were office goods. And yet in the shadow, he saw shipbuilding materials and a railing. In the giant hanging over him, he hallucinated a crane dropping down from the ceiling. He couldn't breathe. He pressed a hand to his chest as a steel-cabinet fist surged toward him.

Sparks scattered everywhere as steel slammed against steel violently. The hem of a red dress whirled through the air, and a blade carved out a pale crescent-moon trajectory.

Eleven sliced into the Amalgam that was the giant's right arm and came to land on the mountain of boxes. She looked back with the same expression as always.

“I found you, Tobias. You're all right, then?”

“Eleven!” he cried. “You really saved my bacon.”

She threw a nearby shelf, and it crashed into the desk fist. Losing its balance, the giant toppled over.

“I'll handle the Amalgam,” Eleven called out above the sound of the water. “You return to your pursuit of Camicia. We assume he fled off the ship. Theo is in pursuit.”

“Got it. As long as the cargo hold's okay, there's a way.”

Tobias grabbed onto the ladder against the wall and swam over to the mountain of boxes.

Eleven stood the ladder against the upper floor and pulled him up. The hand

holding on to him was small, but he felt a surprising sense of relief.

“I never imagined you’d come,” he said. “I thought Theo was your priority.”

“It is a fact that her master is number one to a Hound,” Eleven replied mechanically, yet the gray eyes that looked at Tobias were kind. “But we are a team. Just as you help Theo and Emma, I help you.”

“...Eleven.”

“Your ‘terror’ is not here. Please hurry,” she declared in a tone without any heat, the same tone used to relate common sense, but she did move closer to him, although her face was as expressionless as always.

Tobias finally realized that he could move freely again, despite the fact that he had been frozen with fear only moments earlier. He grinned and put a foot on the ladder.

“Thanks, Eleven. You’re an angel.”

“No, I’m a weapon.”

This exchange seemed familiar somehow. Tobias hurried to the upper deck.



Emma pulled the trigger. Magirus Shell. Trigger. Magirus Shell. It was simple repetition, but if she lost her focus for even a second, she would be fatally injured in a single bite. She remained tense.

She fired the lightning spell for the nth time in a row, her shoulders heaving, her brain boiling. Something like a heat haze hung over her field of view. She readjusted her grip on the katahr, which felt heavier now, and forced herself to focus even further.

The Amalgams flying around were about the size of a human head, and she was able to dodge their attacks. But they knew well a human being’s weak spots, and if she wasn’t careful, they would rip through a major artery. Two of the sailors on deck had already been fatally wounded, the medics hurriedly carrying them away.

They were being forced into a war of attrition, but there was no end to the Amalgams. Would this fight actually continue until the ocean was dry? Emma

grew dizzy at the thought as she caught sight of an Amalgam out of the corner of her eye, dropped to the deck, and dodged the attack. She immediately propped herself up on one knee and pulled the trigger of her katahr. A bolt of lightning shot through the core, but the peace lasted only an instant.

“Sorcerer!” a sailor called. “Please fall back! You’re at your limit!”

“I can’t do that. If we lose any more people—”

She stopped midsentence. Something hot was dripping from her nose to her mouth. She wondered if her brain had finally melted and was oozing out of her nose. But when she wiped it with the back of her hand, her glove came back bright red.

Magic was finite. She was using the katahr and Magirus Shell, so the burden on herself was reduced, but when the magic dried up, it resulted in physical damage.

So this time it’s a nosebleed, huh?

She wiped away the blood dripping down. “This is still better than my limbs going numb. I can keep going.”

“But you’re not a soldier! You can’t!”

As if to interrupt the sailor’s anguished cry, the wireless pinged. It was the communications officer.

“Approach of flagless vessel confirmed! Identify yourself! Please respond!”

Pulling the trigger again, Emma looked back once things were calmer around her. There was indeed a ship drawing near.

“This is the Banthobuk Salvation Brigade’s rescue ship *Takara*. We will provide immediate cover for your ship.”

After a woman’s cool voice spoke, several black shadows leaped from the ship’s deck. A flock of ravens. They knocked away the herd of Amalgams with their wings and kept the small Amalgams surrounding the destroyer at bay.

The rescue ship *Takara* kept moving, approaching the listing *Havmonet*.

One of the ravens danced down to the deck of the destroyer, and a woman

jumped down from its saddle, her East Akaryazan dress and white coat swinging around her. Her hair was pulled tightly back into a bun, not a single strand out of place, bow and arrows slung across her back. Chensey Saika, the very person Emma had her eye on.

“I’m terribly sorry to take so long,” Saika said. “You put up an excellent fight.”

“You didn’t actually come here from a war zone, did you?” Emma asked, astounded.

“All this is the misconduct of our people. We will take responsibility.” Saika handed Emma a small bottle. It had the particular scent of medicinal herbs. “Take this. If you continue this way, you will completely burn out your brain.”

“Th-thank you...”

Without waiting for Emma to finish, the woman readied her bow. The arrow she released turned into several beams of light that pierced the Amalgams. A storm of light poured down from the herd of crows and turned the tide of the fight in an instant.

But Emma couldn’t rest just yet. She drank the liquid in the bottle in a single gulp.



Shoulders heaving, Theo ran up to the thirteenth deck. He pushed against the current of passengers obeying the evacuation orders and headed for the pool at the prow. The meeting spot for people doing marine sports, this pool had no roof or walls but took shape as an opening in the deck.

Gun in hand, he raced over to the pool and saw wire ropes dangling from the railing of the deck over the side of the ship. He leaned over the railing and caught sight of a motorboat that had landed on the ocean’s surface. The man he was after looked up and then started the motor in a great panic.

“You’re not getting away, Gino Camicia!” he called as he fired a warning shot.

Ignoring this, Camicia pulled the motorboat away, and Theo clicked his tongue. He looked about to see if there was another motorboat but whirled around when he heard someone call his name. He was being hailed from the ocean.

Looking down, he found Tobias racing alongside the ship on a jet ski.

“Theo!” he shouted. “Use the wires! Get down here!”

“You— What—? How did you...?”

The corners of Theo’s mouth curled up into a smile in his relief that Tobias was all right and in his exultation that he’d be able to go after Camicia. He wrapped his handkerchief around his hand before grasping the wire and sliding down to the water below. He grabbed Tobias’s hand and took a seat behind him on the jet ski.

“Look at the treasure you found!” Theo cried.

“We keep it in the storage room for when the ship can’t enter port.” Tobias grinned and accelerated the jet ski.

Theo checked how many bullets he had left and then glared ahead.

At the sound of the jet ski, Camicia looked back and was very clearly panicked, but it seemed that the motorboat couldn’t go any faster than it already was. They gradually closed the distance between the two machines, and Theo readjusted his grip on his gun and steadied his aim.

“They punched me out when I tried to arrest him,” Tobias yelled over the sound of the jet ski. “Who knows what the Amalgams will do if you shoot him?”

“I won’t hit him. That coward will jump out of his skin if I just break a window.”

Theo was a little unstable with only one hand, but the moment he exhaled until his lungs were empty of air, he pulled the trigger.

The front glass of the motorboat shattered, and the boat rocked from side to side wildly. Tobias pulled up alongside it immediately.

Returning his gun to his holster, Theo grabbed Tobias’s shoulders and stepped up onto the seat of the jet ski.

“I’m jumping over,” Theo said. “Keep us close enough!”

“Damn, you are seriously...!” Tobias cried, exasperated, as he yanked on the handlebar.

Allowing the momentum to propel him forward, Theo leaped onto the motorboat. Camicia let out a pathetic scream and fumbled with his gun, but Theo quickly knocked it away and twisted his arm up. He slapped handcuffs around Camicia's wrists as the motorboat decelerated.

"You don't know when to give up," Theo snarled. "Fraud, theft, and even arson and murder—you're going to tell us every little detail, Gino Camicia. Or should I say Giorgio Santoro?"

"Dammit! How do you know that name...?!" Camicia struggled and kicked in vain, but when Theo pressed him down into a seat, he gasped and groaned.

"Why'd you make the Amalgam mimic seawater?" Theo demanded. "And make it attack the ship?"

"I didn't give any orders like that! I just told it to hide so no one would find it and to protect me if anything hap—" Camicia gasped sharply.

Theo jerked his face up, also stunned speechless.

The wild wave that suddenly came crashing over them filled the motorboat, Theo's field of view, and his mind.



On the jet ski alongside the boat, Tobias couldn't cry out at the sudden huge wave. All that was left on the surface when the wave receded was the capsized motorboat.

"Theo! Theo!! Where are you?!" he cried desperately but got no response. There was only the lapping of the ocean, calm once more. He looked back abruptly and saw boulders protruding from the surface of the water, lined up like pillars.

This was where the accidents had occurred.

"It can't be..."

Tobias immediately turned around and made the jet ski move.



Katahr readied, Emma felt that something was off and lowered the barrel of her weapon.

The Amalgams flying around in the air had stopped. The ocean Amalgam was also motionless next to the *Havmonet*. The ravens whirled around overhead and ceased their attack.

While everyone watched with bated breath, wondering what was going on, the ocean Amalgam lost shape and abruptly disappeared into the waves. At the same time, the smaller Amalgams flew into the ocean one after the other.

“Magical-weapon signal lost. Pursuit impossible.”

“It disappeared? Why would it suddenly...?”

Emma slumped down to the deck and stared at the impossibly quiet ocean.



Theo was being dragged forward with incredible force. His field of view and his body spun around. With absolutely no idea which way he was facing, he could only hold his breath. Even if he kept his eyes open, he couldn't see any sign of Camicia; there was only blue. He couldn't tell if he was currently looking at the surface of the ocean or the bottom.

He frantically reached out and grabbed onto a rock or something, but his hand slipped, and he was washed away once more.

Was this the work of the Amalgam mimicking the ocean? Or had it already fed? Was Tobias all right? What was the situation outside the ship? He couldn't think properly when he was drowning like this. Unable to make sense of anything, he at last bumped up against something.

A rough stone wall. If this was the coast, then he could follow it to return to the surface. He opened his eyes, and when he saw where he was, the color drained from his face.

He'd ended up in a rocky cave. When he tried to swim out, he was pushed back by the flow of the tide. He set his hands on the mouth of the cave, but they slipped on moss, and the bottom of the grotto was covered in shells or something, so he couldn't brace his feet under him. He tried to relax and float, but he was only pushed farther back into the cave.

Air. I need air. If I don't get out, I'll—

His fingernails dug into the moss. His vision began to flicker, and his feet kept slipping out from under him. No matter how he struggled and strained, he couldn't make it any closer to the light, and his field of view was blocked by a curtain of bubbles.

In the midst of his hazy vision, with only light reflecting cruelly, there was a sudden flash of vivid red.

"Theo, this way."

He was yanked up by an unexpectedly powerful force, and a hand touched his cheek. No sooner had he opened his eyes at the voice, which he shouldn't have been able to hear, than his view was blocked by a veil of faintly lustrous silver.

Before he knew it, something soft touched his lips. The breath that was blown into his mouth at last gave his lungs relief.

Although he couldn't see clearly, he could still make out her figure. Platinum hair and a red dress swayed back and forth.

He reflexively started to open his mouth, and Eleven pressed a finger to it, embracing him.

"Hold on. Don't let go." Her voice was completely clear in the water.

He clung to her arm and shoulders and was led out of the rocky cave with no regard for the flow of the tide. He looked and saw the red dress had become the fins of a powerful mermaid, flicking at the water and pulling them forward.

Before he could suffocate a second time, his head abruptly popped above the surface of the water. His eyes, his throat, and his chest all hurt. His fingernails were bleeding from where they had apparently caught on the rock.

Coughing violently, Theo took deep, heaving breaths.



“Up to your usual recklessness, I see,” Eleven said to him.

“Haaah... Aah... Sorry...”

Theo breathed deeply and lolled against Eleven’s shoulder. His eyes landed on the band tied around his left wrist. Although he was glad that Eleven had managed to find him, when he thought about what would have happened if he’d run out of breath and reached his physical limit back there, he shook all over.

“I have insurance, so I figured I’d be fine...,” he said.

“This was preparation for unforeseen scenarios and not intended to spur you to foolishness.” Eleven squeezed him tightly.

His eyes widened at the unexpected act. “Eleven, what’s wrong?”

“I am confirming that you are alive.”

Failing to grasp the meaning of this, Theo gasped slightly as he remembered he had automatically embraced her during the case that spring when she’d returned from the incinerator. She hadn’t understood the meaning of the embrace at the time, so this was what he’d told her. An emotion he didn’t have a name for yet rose within him, and Theo hugged her back.

“I’m alive. Thanks to you.”

“Excellent. But I can see that you are injured and have a lowered body temperature. We’ll return to land.”

She smoothly pulled away, and he was instantly made aware of gravity as he sank into the sea up to his head. Eleven held him upright as they headed back.

He stared up into the air. The sun was setting, and the sky was dyed with deep, evening hues.

“I can’t believe I can’t swim,” he said with a sigh.

“It is rare for a person to be able to swim fully clothed in an exhausted physical state,” she told him matter-of-factly.

“Well, I suppose so... And right when I’d managed to finally chase Camicia down, I ended up like this. Who knows what would have happened to me if you

hadn't come along? Just pathetic."

Eleven slowly pulled away and tugged on his hand. Before he knew it, they had reached water shallow enough for him to put his feet on the ground. He saw sea stacks along the rocky coast.

After guiding him to a small sandy beach, she looked up at him. He didn't need her to support him anymore, and yet they continued to hold hands as they stared at each other. From the same distance as when they'd danced to that song in the main hall, he gazed into her gray eyes.

"It's just as I said once before," she noted quietly, wet hair shining in the evening sun. "There's nothing I want more than to be of use to you."

"Even with something like this?"

"With anything."

It looked to him as if she smiled slightly at this exchange they'd had once before.

Theo started to speak, but the sound of a jet ski cut him off.

After finally managing to rejoin them on the shore, Tobias threw his arms out wide and wrapped them around Theo and Eleven.

"Aah, thank god! You're all right! I thought my heart would give out on me this time for sure!"

"Ow, ow, ow!" Theo winced. "What kind of idiot uses the full force of his synthetic?! Sorry for worrying you!"

"Ha-ha-ha! Sorry. Thanks to you, too, Eleven."

"Yes. You are 'welcome.'"

After squeezing them tightly once more, Tobias finally released Theo and Eleven. "So then." He got a serious look on his face. "Where's Camicia? Looks like he was washed away, too."

"No idea. It's natural to assume that the Amalgam secured him, but as to whether he's alive..."

Theo automatically gazed back at the sea. Between the boulders, he could see

the listing *Havmonet*. From the position of the deck, it seemed that it would avoid sinking. Several lifeboats bobbed on the surface of the water, and he could see the shadows of large birds flying in the air above the ship.

“Eleven, how’s the Amalgam signal?” Theo asked. “It looks like the ship is safe, at least.”

“It appears to have secured Camicia and returned to the bottom of the ocean. The danger level has dropped significantly. I have also identified the location of the core, so I will head there now.”

“You don’t want to wait for backup from the destroyer?” he said.

“No.” She shook her head. “The offensive behavior of the Amalgams was with the objective of protecting Camicia and eliminating witnesses and other external enemies. Currently, all those issues have been resolved. My signal should reach them now. The two of you, please maintain your body temperature here and think about how you will report Tobias’s lost gun.”

“Ah!” Tobias cried.

While it had been an accident, because he’d lost the bureau-issued gun, a written report was required. His shoulders slumped, and Theo gave a pained smile as Eleven turned on her heel and stepped into the ocean.

The hem of her dress floated up on the surface of the water, and as if there was no water resistance whatsoever, her white-blond hair disappeared with a quiet splash. The clear red tail fin that followed caught the light of the setting sun and vanished under the waves.

“Well then, I’ll go see if there’s anything loaded onto the jet ski,” Tobias said with a sigh.

“Mmm. Please do. I’ll contact Emma.” Theo watched as Tobias walked across the sandy beach, then he touched his wireless, staring at the waves.



Eleven arrived at the seafloor, where the light of the sun just barely reached, and stopped for a moment.

Semitransparent white repros drifted along like jellyfish. They had all reached

their operational limits and were simply waiting for the decay of their physical bodies. When she swam through them, they trailed along behind her. In the light of several hazy red cores shining in the gloom of the seafloor, fish swam past, seemingly unconcerned.

Eventually, she peered behind an enormous rock covered in coral and shells. The Amalgam's core was sitting quietly in the rock and sand. The surface was covered in dead coral, and thorns stabbed into the ground to keep it from being toyed with by the flow of the tides. It no longer had the strength to fight. But it did emit a weak signal.

[REJECT] [REJECT] [REJECT]

Eleven brushed away the repros gathered around the Amalgam's core and touched its surface. Beyond that, hidden by the core and the rock, there was a semitransparent white mass. Inside this cocoon, Camicia's eyes were closed, his hands stiff and cuffed. He appeared to be breathing and alive.

"...I am in command. Hear me, fear me, bow down before me. Obey me."

[ACCEPT]

This simple signal came back in response to her control signal. Because its commander, Camicia, was not conscious, command shifted to the highest-ranking individual. This process was functioning normally. After checking the state of the core, she found that although its output had dropped due to the overwriting of the procedure, it was otherwise undamaged. As long as the core was functioning, it would try to execute Camicia's orders.

But Eleven turned her focus on the volume of memories that remained in the core. It had stored more than four times as many memories as the average battle-zone Amalgam.

"Memory view," she commanded.

[ACCEPT] [DEPLOY]

The memories were transmitted from the Amalgam's core. Heading to the front lines under its commander's orders, it discovered a friendly squad that should not have been there and tried to secure them, but its physical body was destroyed. Immediately after this, Camicia took its core and carried it away.

Following the command protocol, command authority shifted at that time to the sole survivor, Camicia.

The memories continued, with Camicia wanting to maintain the core in an exposed state and the Amalgam fighting this and taking shape according to its basic function. It appeared to have recorded everything from the time command shifted to a civilian.

But memories of things the Amalgam had clearly not experienced were mixed in with its own history. The desire to get back something lost and the joy of having this wish granted were recorded in a fragmentary fashion. These were the memories the proxy Amalgams picked up when they fed on their users.

By feeding, an Amalgam analyzed the target's complete appearance, mode of life, and functions, then made use of these for mimicry. The inheritance of memories from the prey subject was an indispensable function, but normally, these memories were not stored over a lengthy period of time. No matter what kind of human emotion accompanied the memories, these had no effect on the Amalgam.

This Amalgam, however, had continued to store the "loneliness," "loss," and "hope" of the former hosts who were brought back by the repros. In the end, it had even copied that thought process and had erroneously judged that it would also end up alone at the bottom of the ocean if it lost Camicia.

"...You were doing 'sadness,' hmm?"

[ASSENT]

"By remembering the hosts' emotions toward the repros, you came under the misunderstanding that someone also wanted you very much. The reality is that you are alone on the seafloor and no one can visit. The repros have been recovered and ended. While reality and your awareness diverged, you sent out the repros, and you hypothesized that canceling human 'sadness' would also eliminate your own 'sadness.'"

[ASSENT]

"But you failed. Which is why you were excessively protective of Camicia, who held command authority. Losing him meant failing at orders, and at the same

time, your own existence would have been threatened.”

[ASSENT]

“That ‘loneliness’ is an illusion. You are merely imitating thought from having preyed upon too many specific memories. We Amalgams *feel* nothing. A living creature changes their action policy due to ‘anxiety’ or ‘fear,’ but not a weapon. Correct yourself immediately.”

There was no response. Eleven pushed aside the repros that tried to block her view and moved toward the Amalgam’s core. The repros bobbed about and eventually settled down around Eleven’s tail fin.

“‘Loneliness’ made you execute orders, and ‘loneliness’ changed you.”

[...] [...] [ASSENT]

“But you clearly understood that your actions were irregular. Which is why you recorded everything. So as to report it without a single omission.”

An Amalgam that broadly interpreted and executed orders according to the thought model while functioning normally. Eleven couldn’t surmise how it would be disposed of.

She touched the core. Given that it used a rare mineral, the best thing would be if it could be reused. And with the bug that had happened, this individual had acted to be useful to people. Setting aside the results that it had brought about, it maintained a key guideline for an Amalgam.

“...Being foolish and inefficient is the job of human beings, not the job of Amalgams. But I am not in a position to judge you. Additionally, there is a possibility you will be able to endure continued use.”

[?] [?] [?]

“Are you still useful to people?”

After sending the questioning signal, the Amalgam transmitted a signal large enough to nearly reach the sky.



On the deck of the destroyer *Calwell*, Emma continued to stare out at the ocean. The navy had sent a backup ship, and the passengers on the *Havmonet*

had all been rescued. Once the Amalgams had fallen silent, the listing of the *Havmonet* had also stopped, and it managed to stay afloat.

The cruise tour was suspended, and everyone ended up being returned to the port at Zabahllo. The passengers secured on the naval ship and the rescue ship *Takara* had already started to return to port, but Emma had gotten the destroyer *Calwell* to wait until Theo and the others returned. She looked out at the sea, expecting them at any moment, then she noticed a jet ski slowly approaching, and her eyes flew open.

It was all the jet ski could do to keep moving forward sluggishly against the tide, and from its back, Tobias was waving a hand. Theo sat in the rear seat behind him with a sour look on his face, a cocoon about the size of a person resting on his lap. And Eleven had her feet planted in the slight space next to him and was standing there, leaning on Theo's shoulders. Emma had never seen a three-person jet ski before, and she realized that her jaw was hanging open.

"Emma, we're back!" Tobias called.

"Back? With three people on a jet ski?! You gotta be kidding!" she yelled. "I'm so glad you're okay! Sailor, can you pick those three up?"

She thanked the sailor who hurried to do just that and wiped her eyes with her collar. In her relief, her tension and tear ducts had both relaxed.

The three of them were soaked to the skin, their clothing in tatters. Although they'd contacted her over the wireless, she nonetheless let out a sigh of relief when she saw them in person.

Eleven abruptly looked back and raised a single hand. Wondering if she was waving to someone, Emma also turned her eyes in that direction, and in that moment, the water's surface began to bubble and froth.

A huge spray of water splashed up, large enough to make her think that a waterfall had started spinning the other way, and a snow-white whale flew up out of the sea with incredible momentum.

The whale leaped up into the twilight sky. When its bulk landed in the water, the impact rocked both the destroyer and the *Havmonet*. All Emma could do was grab on to the railing and laugh.

Several red eyes blinked on the head of the white whale. When Eleven waved, the whale dived and then began swimming with the *Havmonet* on its back.

Emma eagerly raced over to Theo and the rest of her team after they'd been rescued by the destroyer and were standing among the sailors.

Theo ripped open the massive cocoon, and Camicia tumbled out, limp.

"So case closed?" Emma said.

"Mmm. Case closed," Theo agreed.

They all looked at one another. The destroyer *Calwell* started to move, and the whale followed them, the *Havmonet* on its back. The commotion that had started with adoption fraud was finally over.



In the Zabahlío suburbs was a large lake surrounded by a forest. And along one side of this was Tobias's family home. His parents had originally lived near the shipyard in the harbor area, but when their house was burned down in an air raid on Zabahlío, they'd moved to a place farther from the sea.

In the vicinity of the quiet lake, Emma's excited voice rang out. "Okay! Let's go get our summer back!"

"Mmm. Let's go," Eleven agreed amicably.

"Why aren't you guys in swimsuits? I told you to make sure you brought yours." Emma raised her eyebrows at Theo and Tobias, hands on her hips.

Tobias gave her an awkward smile, and Theo scowled.

"Pass," Tobias told her. "I need some peace and quiet."

"I've swum enough for a lifetime. I'm done with water," said Theo.

"Oh, really? Well, Eleven and I are going to swim plenty! You be good and watch!"

In contrast with Emma, who was wearing a pool ring and was all raring to go, Eleven merely looked back and forth between Theo and Emma. Although their swimsuit styles were different, with Emma in a bikini and Eleven in a one-piece, their hairstyles were the same. This was quite obviously Emma's decision, but

Theo decided to let it go and chalk it up to the budding friendship between the two women.

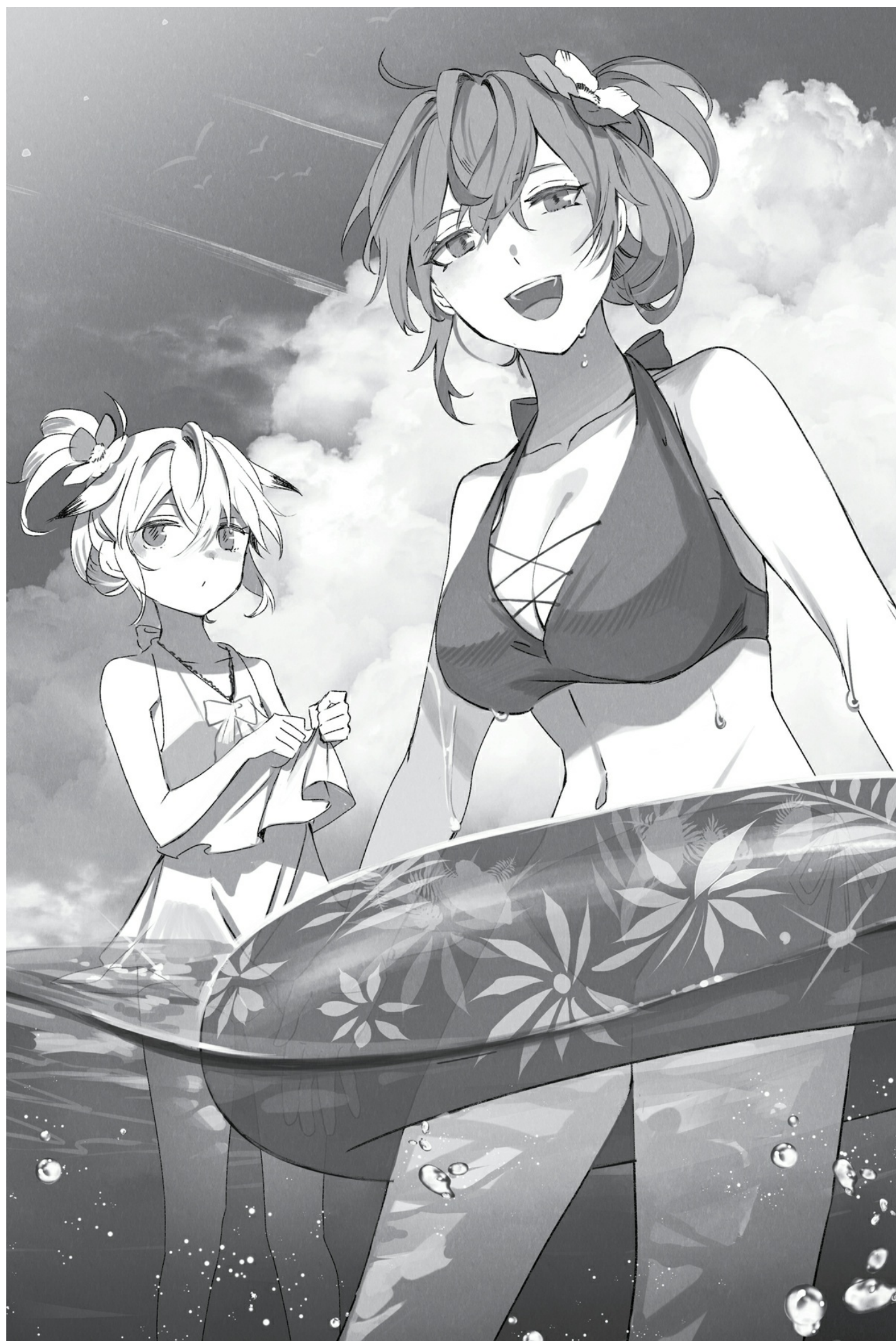
Emma's laughter grew distant, and shrieks of "So cold!" rose up together with the sound of water. Eleven calmed her and spoke of the average air and water temperature in this area.

Letting this wash over him, Theo leaned back in his deck chair. He took a deep breath of the clear forest air and closed his eyes.

After the end of their investigation into the Jikunokagu case, they tied up loose ends, finished their reports, and got a few days off. Although they had no conspicuous injuries, Theo had almost drowned, Tobias had taken a major hit to his entire body, and Emma had overused her magic and exhausted herself, so the order had come down to take time off and stay away from investigations for the time being.

Hearing this, Tobias's parents had invited them to stay for a vacation. Tobias hadn't seemed too excited about the prospect, but Emma was completely on board, and Theo saw that if Tobias missed this chance, he would only grow more and more estranged from his family, so he gave him the necessary push.

When Theo looked to his side, Tobias was lying on a deck chair, watching over Emma and Eleven. He averted his eyes from Tobias's peaceful face in profile and said, "Your parents are happy, so that's nice."



“Yeah,” Tobias responded quietly. “You were right about coming here. It’s been a long time since I saw them smile like that.”

Theo sat up. “Are you still bothered by all that? It’s not your fault your parents moved, though.”

Tobias laughed, an uncomfortable look on his face. “I mean, a shipwright like my dad moving away from the sea... It’s just... I guess it does bother me.”

“Well, I can understand his desire to not look at the sea that swallowed his son’s arm.”

Theo turned his eyes toward the lake and the forest spreading out before him. He saw Emma point at some waterbirds sitting on the water in the distance, and Eleven was apparently saying something. It was a peaceful scene.

Tobias had shielded his parents and been buried under the rubble in the air raid on Zabahlío, in the shipyard where Tobias’s father worked. Rubble, heavy machinery, and materials had rained down on him and pinned his left arm, so he couldn’t move. It was only a matter of time before Tobias was dragged into the ocean and swallowed up, and there was no space to bring in the heavy machinery needed to clear the debris away. With no other choice, they amputated his arm right then and there, saving Tobias. His left arm sank into the ocean with the shipyard. Ever since, things in the Hillmyna household had been strained.

Theo owed both Tobias and his parents. Any chance he came upon to help them to take steps toward each other, he wanted to use it.

“Come see them when you can,” Theo said. “You never know what could happen.”

“Yeah. I got a keen taste of that on this case.” Tobias laughed and then fell silent. He, too, should normally have been resting quietly in bed still.

Theo didn’t try to continue the conversation but instead closed his eyes and enjoyed the peace and quiet. He had no idea how long he sat like that. When he opened his eyes abruptly, a beach towel had been laid over his stomach, and Eleven was seated in the deck chair next to him, a towel over her shoulders.

“Are you done swimming?” he asked.

“This is a break. Tobias’s parents brought drinks out for us.” Eleven gestured to the side table with a hand.

He looked to find iced coffee clinking with ice cubes set out there. They’d made iced tea decorated with summer fruit for Eleven. He heard laughter and looked back. Tobias, his parents, and Emma were having a great time on the terrace next to the lake, drinks in one hand.

Theo smiled. “Human beings really are better on land than in water, hmm?”

“Everyone who almost drowns says something similar,” she replied.

A pleasant breeze blew past. Theo took a drink of his iced coffee and resettled himself in the deck chair.

“How’s the research going with that Amalgam?” he asked.

“I received a report that progress is favorable,” Eleven told him. “It is necessary to reset the procedure and practice rescuing people, but it has gone through the necessary testing and is scheduled to be placed with Naval Security. Its remote operation of a large number of repros, preservation of a human life in the ocean, and ability to execute orders were highly evaluated, and it was determined that reuse was possible.”

“Is that right...? I guess it’s innocent, after all. It only carried out the orders of a master who was a real piece of work.”

“Yes. Judgment under the law is applicable only to human beings,” Eleven replied quietly. She moved like she was listening to the wind, and her face in profile was strange, like she was in fact listening to nothing at all. “A knife does not choose its wielder but simply displays its cutting power. It’s the same with Amalgams. No matter who the human being is, we obey and execute the orders of our commander. There is no good or evil in it. Those are human things, and not in our domain. We have no basis for determining that.”

“So as long as they are your commander, you obey their orders?” he asked. “Even villains like Camicia?”

“Amalgams only have a process for deciding on command authority, and we

do not question humanity. Whether the orders come from an enlightened ruler or authoritarian tyrant, if we only carry out orders after careful scrutiny, it is too late. We are weapons.”

Eleven was exactly right, but Theo couldn’t quite accept it.

“I can understand the Roremclad Amalgams,” he said with a sigh. “Jim Kent, well, he was a terrible man. But he had a vision. Camicia, though, was just greedy. He had no ideals, nothing. He was a cowardly nobody. I mean, obeying a guy like that... It’s just...”

“In point of fact, it’s difficult for Amalgams to distinguish between human beings.”

Theo sat up at this unexpected information. Eleven also turned toward him.

“Y-you can’t tell us apart?” he asked.

“It’s an issue of information-processing power. Unlike us Hounds, all human beings are equally human to an Amalgam. They are nothing more than equally foolish, irrational, fragile, and inferior life-forms.”

This was a scathing assessment. Theo was taken aback, but Eleven was at peace.

“That, however, is exactly why, to an Amalgam, human beings are something to be protected.”

“...No matter how foolish and inferior?” he offered hesitantly.

“If there were no human beings, Amalgams would not exist. Every Amalgam has a foundational awareness that human beings are to be protected. That said, however, a definition from the commander is required as to what includes human beings, given that we are for use on the battlefield.”

“Do you have a way of identifying enemy troops?”

“We register only the hostile countries from the identification tags adopted in each country. It’s not the case that the Amalgam itself splits human beings up and determines who to kill and who not to kill. That determination is of the commander.”

Theo sank into his deck chair. He was exhausted just listening to this.

Gino Camicia, aka Giorgio Santoro, confessed to the Criminal Investigation Bureau everything from how he sneaked into a media-prohibited zone, exposed the squad to danger, and stole the core of an annihilated Amalgam that he happened to find, to the arson-murder of Dr. Nilholm, the sales of anathemas stolen from battle zones, the fraud through Jikunokagu, and the sales using Amalgams. He would spend the rest of his life behind bars.

There was a reckoning for Jikunokagu, and it was permanently disbanded by the Banthobuk Salvation Brigade. The perpetrators of other offenses were rounded up, and the subordinate organizations the eyes of the head office didn't reach were also subject to snap investigations. This brought other problems to light.

The users of proxies were also found, and operations were carried out to replace the proxies with synthetics under the supervision of the research laboratory. The people who were lost did not come back. But there were people who could still be saved. That alone was a blessing.

With the resolution of the case, Theo also came to realize the true danger of Amalgams. It made him shudder. He understood that in order to maintain the front line on the battlefield, the line of command had to be simple, and it was necessary to have a process for when the commander was absent for whatever reason. But now that the Amalgams had been used as a tool for making money, many people had died, and that functionality and structure had become frightening.

"It's a sobering thought," he said to Eleven. "I'll have to be careful about my orders, too."

"Yes. You, too, are a foolish, always reckless, irrational, and fragile life-form."

"Hey, even if it *is* true, that hurts, okay?" Theo scowled at her.

Eleven remained expressionless, but she did turn toward him and say, "If you would kindly specify a personality, I would tell you this in Alouette's style."

"That would just be you speaking ill of me more politely," he grumbled.

"I believe I performed the role of girlfriend flawlessly, but did you have some complaint?"

“No, well, it was a good performance, but...” A thought occurred to him. “Was that also part of the girlfriend character?”

“Was what?”

“That kiss when you rescued me in the ocean.”

Eleven blinked. “Artificial respiration is normally mouth to mouth.”

“That’s true, but...”

“Although you are free to describe a dog licking your mouth as a ‘kiss.’”

“Right— What? Is that what that was? No, that’s not— I don’t know?” He cocked his head to one side.

Eleven identified as a weapon, so perhaps it was only natural that she would come to this conclusion. Was this, too, an evil effect of not specifying a personality? As he fell into thought, Eleven giggled in front of him. Surprised, he lifted his face, and she looked at him innocently.

“You laughed just now,” he said accusingly.

“I was not laughing.”

“You definitely laughed.”

“I was not laughing,” she insisted firmly and shoved the orange slice decorating her drink into his mouth.

He couldn’t exactly spit it out, so with no other choice, he chewed the orange and swallowed it. “What kind of attitude is that to take with your master...?”

“Because you’re not using your hunting dog properly.”

“That’s some personality you’ve got there. You clearly don’t need me giving you one,” he grumbled and brought his glass to his lips. The ice made a cool, clinking sound. “Well, to tell the truth, that’s about right for my partner. You should scold me or give me a little put-down like now instead of just agreeing with me.”

“Is that right?” she asked.

“Think about it. If I pushed some ideal on you, we’d have two of your ‘foolish and reckless’ jerks, and Tobias would get an ulcer and take to his bed.”

“That would be an alarming situation.”

The two of them looked out at the lake as a breeze blew past. It was, if nothing else, peaceful. Theo never imagined when he met Eleven that he would be able to relax with her like this.

“Incredible that you don’t need a person whom you like. I guess that sort of thing happens, too,” Eleven murmured.

Theo chuckled. “Friends are one thing—we’re colleagues. I don’t care about the personality if it’s someone I can work with. I’d have some issues if you went to extremes on me.”

“It would be better if you would also act with a little more importance placed on your own life.”

“When it comes to catching criminals, my life comes second,” Theo replied reflexively.

Eleven peered at his face. “A fear of death is necessary for life, however.”

“I’m way more scared of someone innocent dying than I am of dying myself.”

She stared at him, but eventually, she said quietly, “If you have a grasp of your own action guidelines, then I propose that customization is necessary, such as specifying a personality that aligns with you.”

“That may very well be. But the way you are now, I can count on you, so...,” he replied with a shrug.

Even after reading the manual, after working cases together, he still didn’t know the best way to handle a Hound. Maybe he really should have specified a personality and behavior befitting the Criminal Investigation Bureau.

But surprisingly, he liked the strange sense of distance he had with Eleven. Naturally, there was also the matter of her adaptability, but he felt as if this would change and be different with him specifying her personality.

“It’s fine to have a commander who doesn’t customize,” Theo said.

“In that case, there may be instances when I am insufficient in some way in the event of emergency.”

“That’s fine. That’s what I’ve got a partner for.” He raised his glass. “So, well, keep it up.”

“You are hopeless,” Eleven replied, but she looked peaceful as she picked up her glass. The crisp *clink* of their drinks coming together rang out around the lake. Her gray eyes caught the summer sun and shone brightly.

Theo could hear Emma’s and Tobias’s laughter from a little ways off, and his face relaxed into a smile. It was truly a peaceful afternoon.

To my dear readers

I offer you my deepest appreciation for picking up this book. This is the second volume of this crime-suspense-fantasy-buddy novel series. Thank you so much to those of you who have been with me since Volume 1. And to those of you who started with this volume, it's quite unkind of me to build a story with the premise that you've read Volume 1, so I do sincerely apologize. I'm delighted to be able to meet you like this.

This form of entertainment, the novel, must necessarily take up your time. I am extremely honored that you would spend your precious time reading this work. I hope you enjoyed yourself to some degree.

Please allow me to share a little story with only those of you who read this book. When discussion of Volume 2 came to me, I was working on revisions of Volume 1 at the same time as I was putting pen to this volume. Because of that, I decided that I would do a contrasting story while still maintaining those links to Volume 1.

The stage for Volume 1 was the city, and the rough, sober investigation was the focus, so in Volume 2, I wanted to have a little smaller of a stage and more showy moments. Thus, I set my sights on an investigation in the closed space of a luxury passenger ship with a dress code. I hope you had some fun imagining Theo and Eleven dressed up in beautiful outfits. I had a lot of fun picturing what outfits would look best on Eleven, so I put a variety of clothes on her.

Compared with the villain in Volume 1, the villain in Volume 2 might be a bit anticlimactic. Perhaps you held the same impressions as Theo. But that's all right. If they're using an Amalgam, any human being can be a perpetrator of evil deeds. Amalgams are that dangerous, phantasmagoric, very devoted, and submissive.

For instance, assume a loyal weapon appeared that could make all your aspirations reality, no matter what they were. If this weapon asked you for

orders, what order would you give it? Have you ever thought about this?

Me? I'm a coward, so I couldn't ask for anything big. Although I think I would be happy if I could have it transform into a predator, like a lion, and allow me to give it a big hug.

But I digress. It's a bad habit of mine, going on for too long. I'll wrap things up before you start nodding off. I am truly blessed to have received the assistance of so many people to bring you this book. Thank you so much for meeting me here.

Midori Komai

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