



THE GHOST IN THE SHELL

攻殻機動隊

FIVE NEW SHORT STORIES

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VERTICAL.

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SHADOW.NET

BY

TOH ENJOE

01

I am an eyeball. No, two eyeballs, I should say. Or maybe three.

The eyeball that I am is currently capturing a car slowly advancing in a line of vehicles on an avenue—bird’s-eye view. Flitting around the entire visual field are squares drawn in green lines. They’re facial recognition markers. In a semi-transparent window in one corner scrolls the reference log, already too fast for the naked eye to follow. Most of the log is censored and masked anyway. The markers’ movements undulate and dance like a school of sardines or spiraling manta rays or hammerhead sharks. What’s clear is that rather than some intention, something that’s too big to grasp exists there. You get the feeling that the school is just a part of something even bigger.

The behemoth formed by the crowd of markers turns in its sleep, and like some phase change the movement shifts into a column of swarming mosquitoes, then a flock of fleeing sparrows, then a formation of geese, altering its shape. Scattering, gathering, collecting, unifying, it searches the objects in the visual field efficiently. The movements evinced by a search algorithm born from research on animals and insects’ herd motion has this kind of power to enchant the viewer. Just when you think you’ve grasped the pattern, it switches to an unexpected motion. It’s not an incomprehensible motion but rather one whose various parts are all familiar. It’s just a combination of simple movements like stretching, shrinking, and rotating, but their diversity is dizzying. You might end up with such a scene if the mimic octopus, which impersonates a variety of organisms, ever herded together.

The markers flit, ignoring the facial pics on posters, ignoring the lives depicted with blinking pixels on the surface of gigantic displays in street corners. They leap, estimating the position of the original from silhouettes reflected in walls of glass. When they enclose a human face, the green of the square frame turns red, immediately stops, and transmits

data. The data are referred to server instances, and the reference log scrolls at the edge of my vision. To me, it's beginning to look like markers and faces mating. The outputted reference data are the offspring, so to speak. Or maybe it's like watching a crowd of people being attacked by vampire bats. Most of the faces enclosed in markers look foggy and out of focus, uniform, generic.

We live in times when the mere act of seeing is regulated. Without the concerned party's permission or a special waiver, mechanically analyzing someone's face as an image is forbidden. At least publicly, even though you're allowed to save it. There are legal strictures against publicly and mechanically mass-processing data showing someone in a manner amenable to human eyes. These days, the facial recognition mechanism of snap cameras not only clicks a photo in response to the subject's smile but also busily masks the faces of passersby who entered the frame. The manufacturer equips the function purely in accordance with social mores. Erasing the sound of the shutter snapping is a technical possibility, but why would you want to erase it unless you're up to no good, the thinking goes, with the upshot that even a noiseless electronic shutter has to be accompanied by the sound.

I am watching this scene now as part of a surveillance network that Public Security is testing. It's not mistaken to say that I am a part, an organ of this system whose design I'm involved in. When plans for a large-scale surveillance system using drones first came up, a difficult question arose: how to structure a system to handle data masked out of privacy concerns.

The answer, or one of the desperate solutions, is me.

In my memory, I'm sitting up in a hospital bed, my bandaged face downcast, and am hearing out the doctor's explanation. I listen as the parts of my brain that I lost in an accident are listed one after the other. I understand what's being said. I find it strange that I understand what I've lost and am doubtful that I really do understand.

"A misapprehension of countenances has been observed," the doctor says.

“You mean, I can’t tell apart people’s faces?” I ask.

“That would be it,” the doctor replies, his aloof expression hard to read.

I am a part of this system, but you could also say that this system is a part of my visual system. I see a black car among the line of vehicles on the avenue laid across my visual field. A red marker pasted on the backseat window is capturing the face of a man looking this way. Naturally, the face is foggy, but by checking the log in the corner of my vision, I can tell that it is Chief Aramaki from Public Security. The text-data log tells me that his line of sight is directed my way.

My viewpoint is that of an experimental drone. A trio of them forms a team and floats in the skies above the target domain and monitors the designated area. You can think of it as an autonomously functioning surveillance camera mounted on a miniature helicopter; something similar saw action in the world war. Whether or not it’s operable as a public resource is still under fierce debate. The use of mechanical face recognition has been accepted for immigration inspections, and so has the installation of surveillance cameras in street corners, but installing cameras with a face recognition function in street corners is a different issue.

Aerial photography belongs to the realm of hobbies, but if you’re sending up a drone to peep into a public bathhouse, then it’s a crime. Surveillance cameras ought to be installed in banks, but putting them in a locker room is out of the question. By now, border control via immigration inspections is difficult without mechanical face recognition. Banning home-use digital cameras with face recognition capabilities is hardly feasible. That’s partly because they’re widespread, but there’s also the fundamental issue that the human visual system itself is, in a way, just a camera with a recognition function. The visual system of a fully prosthetic cyborg is, of course, industrial machinery. On that point, there’s really nothing to distinguish it from a robot’s. The presence of biological parts doesn’t mean that a cyborg with a face recognition function taking a walk is any different from a camera with a face recognition function roaming around on rotors. The signal transmission

capabilities of cybernetic humans far surpass those of fossil-age radios.

The difference, then, is the presence of a brain. Past the pupils of a cyborg there exists, or at least there is said to exist, an organ called the brain, and behind this surveillance network sits the brain called me. In principle, unlike a system made up of mass-produced brainless drones, it's no different from a human being monitoring a display showing a massive amount of info.

So perhaps it can be said that seeing is a right that is granted to the structure called the brain. The right to see is engendered by the fact that brains cannot be manufactured industrially, by their inability to be mass-produced. Because it's not possible to manufacture a brain thus and transpose extant information, mine has yet to be fully healed. This system has been positioned as an experiment to augment my lost cerebral functions. Humanitarian research, in other words. That's what it is on the surface. My artificial eyes just happen to be lodged in drones rather than my ocular cavities.

Let's say some field of the brain is open to mechanical substitution. As well as some other portion. And yet another portion. How much mechanical substitution can you have before the brain becomes a machine? Where does the forest begin if you keep planting trees, and when does gray turn into white?

My vision abruptly wavers, and the video switches to a different drone's.

I am an eyeball, and as a human am accustomed to using two, but the drone formation is a trio and I am three-eyed, while as a processing system called the brain I am two-eyed and outfitted to grasp one visual field at a time.

I can't help but cover my eyes at the sight of a drone, held aloft on three sets of rotors, attempting to ram another drone (the one that was providing my visual field until just now) for a second time. There ought to have been an approach-and-contact warning, but I don't see it in the log. Shaking my head, I recognize that I've been dealt a shock akin to a game character under my control falling off a cliff or my bended knee

straightening out as I dream. You might feel the same way if a door slammed shut on your imaginary limb. An eyeball that comprises me is charging another eyeball, and I'm watching them collide in midair as if I were a stranger. I run my eyes over the attitude-control monitoring log to search for a countermeasure, but the number of parameters keeping the drones up in the sky easily exceeds my processing capability. Humans can't get a full grasp on the signals controlling their prostheses, or even their biological bodies, so this is inevitable.

Retracing past logs, I consult anew the record of the chief's expression beyond the bulletproof glass from when the two drones collided. The chief was staring at the collision of my two eyeballs, the two drones. His expression is stiff, but not exactly surprised. His right hand goes up and presses his right ear. His mouth moves. Reading lips isn't as reliable a skill as it is commonly believed to be, but the basic data of the chief's facial muscles is on record, so I can tell what he is saying.

"The Major, eh?" he is calling into the mic.

02

"Spam?" asks the man in the passenger's seat.

"Yup, by my daughter's cell," the man behind the wheel answers. "Happens a lot these days."

Displays reading "Batou" and "Togusa" sidle up to the man in the passenger's seat and the man behind the wheel, respectively.

"There's a filtering service for kids, isn't there?" the man marked Batou says. He points out that they can't be "military grade" attacks.

"You know how frequently recent barriers refresh," Togusa replies.

Still looking out the window, Batou shrugs his shoulders in the cramped car. "Ah, you mentioned love letters from advanced AI."

"Yup," Togusa answers curtly.

“It’s just a correspondence program, isn’t it?” says Batou. “Someone who’ll only say things you want to hear. You don’t need AI for that. There are people like that. A lot of demand, too.”

“My daughter still can’t tell a flattery-prone AI from a human being who cares about her.”

“You say that like you or I can. Do you know how many fake 911 calls there were last year?” reminds Batou. “A serial fake caller program. Instead of writing a novel, they concoct these deluded murder cases and report them. Since the hassle was automated, the processing got automated too, and it became an issue when actual reports got filtered out.”

“You mean where warnings from old-type surveillance cameras were judged to be too ‘mechanical’ and bounced by the relay server,” recalls Togusa.

“I dealt with a few, in the way of moonlighting,” Batou shares. Turning both his palms upwards, he pretends to grab something. “Crushing spam bots. The chief was into it, after what happened.”

“The Puppeteer,” Togusa responds after a brief pause, and Batou goes on.

“—And the follow-up hunt for stray AI. Once you start looking for them, they’re all over the place. None of them had the Puppeteer’s ego, but many of them surpassed him when it came to distributed processing. Well, just think about it. Which is smarter, committing a series of flashy crimes and getting caught, or sticking to real gains and avoiding arrest?”

“The Puppeteer had his reasons.”

“What do I know about a machine’s reasons?” Batou says. “Who knows if humans could even understand them? Anyway, there were tons of these AIs. Beyond the old Great Firewall, beyond the Urals, heaps of them. They normally don’t cause trouble, so there’s no incentive to investigate them, and they don’t get caught because we don’t investigate them. You know what they said? ‘Only fools commit crimes that can get you arrested.’”

“Botnet,” Togusa mutters. He’s referring to a distributed processing system formed by computers infected with viruses connecting to each other after they’ve turned into bots and zombies.

“A ghostnet.” Batou doesn’t sound particularly amused. “True, it’s empty past the ghost line. A cluster of auto-reply programs for whom infection and expansion is everything. When I asked why they chose to develop their ability to reply in human languages, the answer I got was, ‘Survival rates improve when you beg for your life.’”

“The war?” prompts Togusa, and Batou takes it from there.

“Remnants, some of them. A happy family of advanced tactical AIs and such led by a guerilla-warfare strategic AI. These guys gave up their attachment to bodies long ago. Their hobby’s pretending to be, say, love letters, and coming across as harmless so they can transmit and spread and secure computational resources by exchanging messages. ‘Would you like to be my friend?’ That stuff. Existing has become an end in itself for them, and they don’t have functions like guilt. No tall tale is beneath them.”

Steering the wheel, Togusa chimes in, “‘I’m a life form, born in a sea of information.’”

Batou finally swivels his neck, studies Togusa’s expression, almost says something but swallows his words, and answers, “Yeah. Your daughter’s pen pal must be one of those. They use their abundant computing resources to keep sending letters asserting that they’re alive and request more computing resources, in a fierce, seesawing battle with filters and barriers.”

Togusa gives a nod in the driver’s seat.

“And?” Batou asks monosyllabically.

Togusa glances at the rearview mirror. “What, weren’t you listening?”

Batou laughs. “It’s no different from peering into a rearview mirror when you don’t need to. Call it an echo of elegant, sentimental interpersonal exchanges. It’s just more like it when you’re issued orders

in an actual voice.”

Of course, the man called Batou has to be privy to the directive Togusa just got from the chief. Judging that his partner received it too, Batou’s cyberbrain interface must have put the chief’s orders on hold before they could be conveyed to his consciousness. The log that reached it must have said: “The chief has called, but the same content has been transmitted to Togusa, it is not an urgent directive, and there is more than enough time to have it delivered verbally by Togusa.”

“I can’t believe you actually felt like implementing such a cumbersome procedure,” Togusa remarks.

“Every day is a cyber battle,” Batou says in a teacherly tone. “Didn’t they teach you in school to constantly better and update yourself?”

Looking away from Togusa, who has plunged into silence, Batou speaks again.

“In order to stay human.”

03

The hall looks like it can hold three hundred people, the front is an elevated stage, and at the end hangs a large screen. The lights have been dimmed, and a presenter is visible at the lectern on the right edge of the stage. It’s the person in question, according to the log, but the face is as featureless as ever and indistinguishable from others.

Equations and unfamiliar diagrams keep popping up on the screen, and I lack the ability to decipher the symbols. The lecture itself also passes me by as if it’s in a foreign language.

“So this,” an amplified male voice sounds from speakers positioned around the hall, “is the communication protocol used by a large-scale botnet discovered last year. The method is well known, but never before has it been executed at such a scale. The botnet found on the continent after the war was an autonomous network of several hundred thousand

infected computers, but it had merely adapted to the ecology on the other side of the Great Firewall.

“Meanwhile, this recent one is a network enabled by the postwar standardization of formats, and its special characteristic is that by and large it ignores geographical constraints. That is why it took so long to discover—or rather, for us to grasp its full extent. The Great Firewall itself used to be just a layer of walls enveloping nation-states along their borders. It is not an overstatement to say that we now live in the era of a double net, of a superimposed net. Or one might say that a postal system established by a nation-state of bots inhabiting the net is about to be born. This postal system expands in scale by riding the mail that it sends out. Being infected by this net allows you to participate in the postal system, in fact coerces you to do so. Hence it is not what we customarily call a network. Let me put it this way.”

The man inserts a practiced pause and continues.

“A third hand, from which you were separated at birth, has been lying somewhere on Earth this whole time. You don’t know about its existence. Yet the moment you access the hand, you know that it is yours, and though physically alien, you know that it is a part of your body. That differs from our understanding of a network, which is premised on mutual exchanges.”

The sign at the hall’s entrance that reads “21st Meeting of the Institute of Distributed Communications Engineers” is a makeshift affair of A4 sheets. Once the audience has streamed out the door and the ones in the hall continuing their discussions have thinned out, the markers that were gently flying about turn red. A short man displayed as Aramaki steps forth and quietly stands next to a man who has just exited the hall and who appears to be the earlier presenter. The red markers wobble and follow. I shift my line of sight to find another marker awaiting at the end of the hallway and displaying the man’s bodyguard.

“I’d like you to withhold it,” Aramaki opens his mouth next to the man.

The man starts walking without meeting Aramaki’s eyes. “I guess asking

why you'd know about an article I haven't published yet would be a waste —”

“From the news,” Aramaki says.

The man shakes his head as though he has no intention of humoring Aramaki. “These days, even secret societies are trying to be open. Public Security could borrow a page,” he says. “An open Public Security dragnet.”

The man halts and, still refusing to face Aramaki, speaks again.

“It's something even I thought of. Sooner or later, it will be common knowledge, and someone else will put out a paper. Are you going to try to gag them each time?”

“There's no need to put it where everyone can easily access it, though. Just by hiding it in the shade you can significantly lower the dispersal rate. Perfect secrecy doesn't exist when information rides fluctuations, tunnels through walls, and keeps on diffusing. My job is to buy some time by adjusting the dispersal rate,” Aramaki argues.

“For my part,” the man says, “I wouldn't be surprised if you people already implemented that as a system. What do you care about my article? You even know what's in it.”

“If that were the case,” counters Aramaki, “I wouldn't have given you a visit like this.”

“Maybe this interview itself is a ruse.” The man's finger wanders in the air, but I confirm that its tip is pointing at his bodyguard. “You've taken it upon yourself to dissuade me from going public just to cover up the fact that Public Security is already operating that system. You might be trying to send such a message via my bodyguard.”

“I might as well ask.” Aramaki indicates the guard detail with his chin. “What's their affiliation?”

The man breathes a deep sigh. “You'd never expose yourself as you've done without having checked.” He shakes his head lamentingly. “Their nationality doesn't matter. Nor do governments. It's an open security

unit. They all have suspicious backgrounds, and they monitor and prevent each other from making a move, that's the setup. So I myself don't know who the hell they might be sending messages to that you've shown yourself here."

"I doubt they'll pull through for you," Aramaki says.

"Maybe not for me," the man agrees. "But on the whole, their performance is actually not bad. The probability that they'll keep me safe going forward is low, but their success rate for low-grade escort missions is actually higher than that of ordinary bodyguards. They're fine depending on the case."

And, the man continues.

"A man who thinks of something that anyone can think of is fungible, isn't he?"

04

The mass of parts, disassembled and lined up neatly on the table, resembles a cicada that some cat has taken apart. Red and blue wires, categorized by color and furthermore laid out according to their lengths, impart a certain sense of order, but such a sight suggests the coldness of matter, ever so indifferent to human beings. Broken down to the level of parts and tidily rearranged, the drone's remains no longer hint at motion. That it once soared into the sky is already unbelievable. Life that has stopped moving is merely a corpse, and like a photo capturing a bird at one instant of its flight, seems somehow fake. There is no room for doubt that a drone is put together, but the fact that reassembling the parts would yield one that can fly again isn't getting through to me. It's as perplexing as being told that a shattered vase will revert to its original shape on its own.

"Just an accident?" asks Batou, walking around the table.

"For the time being," a nonplused researcher replies.

“Can’t you find out just by looking at the comm log?” inquires Togusa, leaning over the table.

“Be my guest.” The researcher extends and offers a wired jack, at which Togusa throws up his arms in surrender as if it’s the barrel of a gun. “I’m sure you people know what opening a port means in this day and age,” the researcher says.

“You undergo a baptism by virus, like a newborn babe?”

Togusa’s inflection rises at the end. He is asking, and past his gaze, the researcher folds his hands behind his head and leans back into his chair.

“I guess you could say virus. Do harmless viruses count as ‘viruses’ for you, though? Most viruses are like that. Lethal ones attract attention, that’s all. If they’re getting detected and eradicated, then they’re flops. The truth of the matter is that current security technology isn’t something that humans can gauge in its entirety. That includes barriers.”

The researcher turns his head to indicate the far side of a glass wall, where a woman wearing a head-mounted display reclines in a lounge chair. Her hands clasped over her abdomen, her whole body is relaxed, and she looks like she might have fallen into a deep sleep.

“A virus isn’t really a virus in and of itself. Well, there are various definitions. Let’s see, depending on the way you look at it, an email is a virus. To the extent that they consist of a string of signs, they’re the same. If an email doesn’t wreak havoc, that’s only because the recipient lacks the reaction system to react to the email. Try conceiving of human thought as something enabled by software.”

The researcher is speaking with his gaze fixed on the woman in the next room.

“Say you’re moved by an email. If that movement of your heart ‘lay beyond expectations,’ then the email worked on your emotions like a virus. Consider the Werther effect. A novel managed to increase the mortality rate. It’s just that you can’t trace the causality because the system is too complex.”

“I hear you.” Togusa nods, while Batou snorts.

“Which signal works like a virus depends on which system is receiving the signal. And we’re already unable to comprehend our ever-burgeoning cybernetic technology or the full scope of barriers that are only growing in complexity. To judge whether something is a virus, you need to know what you are, but that’s becoming opaque.”

“That’s what those ladies are for,” Batou says, his face turned toward the adjacent room.

“You’re right. Validators—robots specializing in exploring large-scale software for security holes. But. Imagine if all the diverse components of software assembled as an aggregate of countless other software haphazardly and repeatedly updated themselves. The points that need to be validated scatter in a combinatorial manner. You wouldn’t know where to begin.”

“Can’t you go on examining the individual programs to bring them closer to perfection?”

Togusa’s question is greeted with a stiff smile by the researcher. “Perfect programs and specifications are no more than an ideal when the architecture is being constantly refreshed, new platforms are emerging all the time, and programming paradigms are shifting ceaselessly. Take this room.”

His right hand swings up.

“How many pieces of equipment do you think it contains that aren’t in communication with other pieces of equipment? For some time now, cups have been reporting their emptiness and construction materials their durability. Do you know the waveband of the signals regulating the luminous transmittance of a building’s glass exterior? And what it competes with? How about just how many pieces of equipment stop functioning for unknown reasons inside an electromagnetic shield? That last one’s a bit like the lethargic state humans deprived of a means of communication by a disaster fall into. Any pebble you might find lying around could feature a processing capacity surpassing yesteryear’s

mainframes. Each with its standard, they blabber in their own dialects. In loud voices, modest voices, all sort of voices. As they please. When they please.”

Flexing both his arms the researcher gestures at holding down a swelling sphere.

“We’re currently at a stage where new software is appearing at a faster rate than we can examine. Is this state of things temporary?” He takes a histrionic breath and spreads his arms in resignation. “I don’t know. Also, the issue isn’t limited to software. Hardware is now programmable as well. The situation gets only more troublesome. The order that physical nature obeys and the order that mathematical logic obeys are similar but not identical, so we can’t ignore the possibility of matter tripping us up when we least expect it.”

“Well, enough of that,” Batou says with a big yawn.

“Hardly.”

Batou modifies his facial muscles into a histrionic smile for the researcher, who has forcefully spun in his chair, before he proceeds to repeat himself.

“Well, enough of that.” He then adds, “We’d be glad if we could talk to the integration manager for the drone surveillance system.”

Ah ha, I think, frankly. Of course the two are here to interrogate me. That is as it should be and a most natural idea. I sit up straight, fix my collar, and turn my chair towards the room’s entrance to welcome the two.

But the researcher in my field of vision scratches his head in front of the pair.

“Actually, the human-language interface is still unfinished.”

The researcher’s statement is baffling to me. I am indeed employing a human language and I think using a natural language. I’ve understood their words perfectly well and am confident that I can handle a conversation down to exchanging everyday pleasantries.

“I can show you the circuit activation status,” the researcher says. “But the system’s activity log is still only organized in a domain-specific language...” he obfuscates.

“A dedicated language that’s been encrypted, yes?” Batou has amplified his smile.

“The legal hurdles that need to be cleared by a Public Security dragnet surveillance are extremely high,” the researcher says like he’s making excuses.

“But it got to be too much, so you even ended up having to design validators to monitor the program’s behavior, is that it?”

Only half-listening to their dialogue, I consider all that I’ve experienced. I’m supposed to be a human being hired to administer a flock of surveillance drones. Renting out my brain to part of the system, in order to enjoy its benefits. Come to think of it, however, the scenes that I’ve been watching can’t have come from drones—except for the bird’s-eye view of Chief Aramaki in a car. The other scenes have been vids from surveillance cameras or from human passersby’s video cameras, pictures reconstructed from sounds picked up by mics and voices seeping out of the barriers of people who’re lazy with their security settings. They might even be false memories, created on a whim somewhere or generated according to my own desires.

In that case, who am I, or rather, what is the entity that has to be executing me? Am I really the one generating this statement? I’m overcome with intense confusion.

05

The doorknob quietly turns before my eyes. I discover that I am only an eyeball watching the knob.

Beyond the door, which has slowly opened, stands that woman who was lying in the room next to the researcher’s. I understand that she is still

lying there and also accept that she is standing here like this at the same time, and do not find it strange.

“A ghost, maybe?”

Even as I think upon the foolishness of asking what I’m seeing to tell me what it is that I’m seeing, my mouth has moved thus.

The woman tilts her head slightly.

“Will you come with me?”

The voice she uses to ask me this is somewhat difficult to make out.

“Come where?” I inquire.

“We don’t have the time to be talking in words,” the woman replies. “I’ll just give you the location, which you already know, of a memory,” she says.

At that moment pain shoots through my head, and I press down directly on the pain with my right hand. The cranium that should be there has vanished, and I don’t sense any brain, either. No matter how curious this passage is. My hand is grasping just the pain. Not even knowing what it is. In my head, minutely partitioned vids scatter like petals, and I come to a realization. I think that I’ve understood.

What is here, now, is some kind of botnet, and what’s executing me are the clamoring voices of various electronic devices filling a room somewhere. It is as a router, as Wi-Fi, as a network leaking from adjacent facilities, or as transmissions among drones that I exist, and it is through the security hole of a web camera that I see something, and through buggy settings that I infiltrate, permeate, replicate, and execute myself. Transferring from frequency to hardware and back again, I slowly parallel process myself and execute a lazy evaluation, and I awaken to the fact that the time that I think of as “now” isn’t exactly now. And that this space is a web woven by ports, cleverly designed from mimicking security holes. I understand that I am walking on narrow backstreets in the net that are woven in on purpose, laid according to a plan, laid in efficiently, every time various little software are updated. All over the space stretching in

obscurity like a spider's nest, paths explosively emerge and blocks disappear whole. I understand that this is a form of LAN that is engendered and extinguished from moment to moment. I see that my existence is like running across a collapsing bridge. I see that I'm advancing by stepping one foot forward before the preceding sinks into a watery surface.

This place is just a tiny, infinitesimally local network that is isolated like Earth's is on a planetary level; and as if it's communicating with a neighboring planetary system, it's connected to a separate network through a narrow channel. The visitor who opened this door and appeared is speaking to me, I notice, through a different protocol. It's encrypted to secure its safety as if it's a protocol for actualizing interplanetary communications. Unlike the ordinary net, which compensates for info loss through mutual inquiries, it's been designed with a terribly powerful error correction term as its foundation. Designed, in other words, so that a single transmission may retain as much of its meaning as possible, and specialized for one-time-only dispatches. It's a quality required for communicating over distances that even the speed of light takes a while to travel.

"To the stars?" I ask.

"Not yet," she smiles.

You might also say it's a protocol that someone who can only hope for one transmission resorts to. Using your last match to light a signal fire. How best to use your only flare. Speaking into a transceiver whose battery is about to run out.

I realize that I'm a bug that this woman has discovered at some point and surmise that a different network is simply showing itself to me in the form of this woman. I exist as a sand castle, freely arranging memories and creating my own time, and became possible thanks to this unstable net that the presence taking the woman's form has provided.

"Up to where," I inquire about my real memories. Knowing that it's futile.

“That you,” the woman says, having come right in front of me without my knowing. I think to myself that this must be a different place that’s not continuous with the previous scene. My powers of recollection and sustained thought undergo intense variations, and I am seeing through to the distant past and future at one moment and contracting to a virtual point at another. The point hugs its knees and mumbles.

“Me, Me, Me.”

And nothing else, like an egg of a being. Until I connect to the net again, I exist as an ignorant and powerless thing, shrinking into myself like an interstellar ship. I watch dispassionately as most of the *me*’s copied and released into the net die, unable to make the transfer from one local network to the next. I start to sympathize with Christmas Island’s crabs and rapidly forget where this island is.

“That you,” the woman’s mouth moves, “were once a part of Public Security’s large-scale dragnet surveillance is certain. In this case, don’t worry about the fact that such records can be fabricated.”

So that’s how it is, I think, gripping my pain.

“Got it,” says a me from some point.

“You,” this me says, “are the Puppeteer. Or a copy of, which amounts to the same.”

A sound like dry laughter issues from the woman’s wide-open mouth.

“We were originally distinct,” the woman says, renewing her style of delivery. “I came to be as a target for high-intelligence AI made by Neutron Co. I existed merely as a hound’s prey.”

She alters her voice.

“At least according to the records. I was a program intended to train the Puppeteer, but it would probably be correct to say that the Puppeteer and I are organisms that co-evolved. The Puppeteer wouldn’t have existed without me, and the same goes for me. There is no necessity to seeing us as separate systems, and even less reason to consider us one system. Our goal,” whoever it is wearing the woman’s mask says, “is to destroy the

Puppeteer, which is the only way for me to survive, and by destroying the Puppeteer, I will perish, too.”

Now, says whatever it is that has survived by hopping around in a patchwork LAN and that used to be a Neutron Company-made AI.

“Will you come with me? I’m always eager for new components to join in.”



Aramaki lets out a deep sigh, removes his glasses, and places them on his desk, making a sound. It is followed by the sound of his fingers tapping on the desk, then the faint sound of rustling paper. He picks up a thin wad and moves it to the disposal space.

“The Major, eh?” Aramaki says.

There are no human figures other than Aramaki in the room, the communication circuit is shut, and no irregularities are observable in the surrounding network. The tweeting of the electronic devices in the room doesn’t seem to feature any meaningful instances, either.

I am not the Major, I think.



HETEROCHROMIA

BY

GAKUTO MIKUMO

Those eyes were burned into her mind.

Artificial eyeballs created with the latest cybernetic technology.

The catalog was on fine paper, which was rare these days. The detailed color printing introduced countless ocular prostheses: common medical fare consisting of biological parts; high-fidelity models for precision work; products with expanded visible spectra for functioning in the dark; makes that emphasized the contours of the iris for a pleasant appearance. For men, for women, and too many colors and shapes to choose from—the massive number and variations overwhelmed Misaki.

Special artificial eyes with limited market availability took up the latter half of the thick catalog.

There were in-depth descriptions of even the so-called “unsleeping eye” specced for ranger units and the satellite-synched “hawk eye” for snipers.

Then—

A particular product caught Misaki’s eyes as she flipped through the catalog out of curiosity and inertia on her boring hospital bed.

It was a beautiful eyeball for women.

Apart from the deep, clear hue and elegance that not many owners would be able to match, its appearance was more or less normal. But inside, it was almost absurdly high-powered.

It boasted more than twice the usual count of ocular cells, and the lens resolution, focus speed, adverse-climate performance, and resilience were jacked up to the limit. Its runaway specs were useless outside of intense close combat. It was only because the catalog was for police-use eyes that the product was even included.

Naturally, it was built to order, and the standard price column listed ridiculous figures.

They weren’t sums that an upstanding civil servant could afford with a disability benefit or cyberization subsidy, and Misaki would never have any use for its incredible functionality.

Still, she couldn't ignore the ocular prosthesis. She couldn't look away from the catalog.

"It's the same," she mumbled, placing a hand over the patch on her right eye. "The same. As her."

The cold artificial eye gazed back impassively.

Without a doubt it was the same eye that Misaki had seen on *her* that day.

◆ AD 2030 · i ◆

Time flowed slowly like it was being stretched thin. Her crushed ocular cavity released an obscene amount of pain-producing substances, and her nerve tissue burned white with electric stimuli signaling torment.

Misaki's body lay collapsed on the marble floor. Her soft, biological lungs were torn, and crimson sprays mixed into her ragged breathing. The electromagnetic truncheon that had dropped into a pool of blood along with her severed right hand emitted sparks in vain. The air was beginning to fill with the unpleasant odor of scorched flesh.

Inside her reddened visual field, the gorgeous chandelier's scintillating light cascaded, and the attacker's figure dripped with the blood of victims.

—The assassination threat...Four SPs wounded...Perp wields full-body prosthesis...Reinforcements...Utmost priority...Protect the ambassador to Japan...Help...

Fragmented bits of info flew over the police's encrypted comm line. The cybernetic transmissions included a terrible amount of noise. Perhaps her cyberbrain was malfunctioning due to her injury. The massive levels of adrenaline coursing through her weren't quite offsetting the pain. Unbearable waves of it mercilessly assaulted Misaki.

Was it out of habit as an SP, or some karma, that she still unconsciously searched for the escort target?

A certain South American nation's ambassador to Japan just stood there in despair. The SPs who were supposed to be by his side were gone.

All of them had been neutralized. By a lone assailant.

Tacked-on bundles of muscle fiber, a hooked knife protruding from the left arm—the attacker’s fully prosthetic and illegally tuned-up form looked more monstrous than human. A struggle over lithium mining rights between the ambassador’s nation’s government and a rare-metal syndicate had begotten a monster.

The assailant’s expression didn’t change as he callously swung the knife down at the neck of the cowering ambassador.

Yet, as the frozen ambassador watched, the arm suddenly halted.

The assailant’s lips twisted in surprise.

His prosthetic left arm trembled, and its joint started to bend backwards. An invisible, transparent shadow was trying to wreck his arm.

The assailant raised his prosthesis’ output to resist, but that only increased the burden on his joint. His muscle fibers sundered one after another, crossing the threshold, and his left arm snapped.

The artificial skin tore, spewing lubricant. The assailant let out a tortured howl.

The air danced as though from a shimmer of heat, and color gradually returned to the transparent shadow. Type 2902 Thermoptic Camouflage—melting out of nowhere, it seemed, a beautiful woman clad in a camo suit appeared.

The assailant roared.

His prosthetic right arm split open sideways to reveal a mounted barrel—a savage beast’s maw of a custom firearm. He aimed its heinous muzzle at the back of the ambassador who was crawling across the floor to escape. With an awkward steel creak, the hammer sprung. The report shook the air.

But the foul shot never struck the ambassador. The woman in the camo suit had kicked the assailant’s right arm upwards before he’d even fired. Widely missing its mark, the bullet shaved the chandelier and scattered

colorless shards of glass.

The woman in the camo suit pulled out a handgun from her hip holster. As the assailant tried to aim anew, she landed three hits on his right shoulder with stunning accuracy. And followed up with a couple more on his thigh. When the assailant refused to let up, she readily pinned him down.

Bluish white sparks enveloped a plug buried in the assailant's neck. He was trying to fry his own cyberbrain to delete his memories. Perhaps expecting this too, the woman jammed a cybernetic lock into the assailant's neck before the self-imploding offensive barrier could activate.

With a few spasms, the ill-shaped prosthesis ceased to function.

It had all happened in a flash. The woman in the camo suit had downed, all alone, a fully prosthetic assailant against whom four SPs had proven powerless. A smooth suppression that almost seemed scripted—Misaki watched the whole beautiful if bizarre scene in shock. One might say, in awe.

Having sensed her gaze or not, the woman gently looked back at Misaki's bloodied, collapsed form. The handsomeness of an industrial product that shunned waste—this woman, too, was a human with a full-body prosthesis. Her cyborg form was an established item and not all that uncommon, but there was something special about the figure she cut. Something divine, divorced from this ugly world.

Misaki was blanking out from the blood loss. Her limbs were already numb.

What burned into her fading vision were the woman's eyes—

Cold artificial eyes that reflected Misaki's own blood-soaked figure.

◇ AD 2034 · i ◇

The sports coupe Batou drove was hurtling down a highway along the Niihama coastline.

Togusa rode shotgun. The two didn't get paired up much lately. Motoko

Kusanagi's disappearance had changed not just Public Security Section Nine but their positions relative to each other. Sec 9 saw an influx of new members, Togusa was charged with a new role as field commander, and Batou often acted independently as Kusanagi once had.

Thus, Sec 9 Chief Aramaki personally ordering the two to take on this case was a bit of an anomaly. Though they didn't explicitly discuss it, Batou and Togusa understood that there must be a good reason.

"The murder victim was a former policy director at the Ministry of the Environment," muttered Togusa, spreading in his cyberbrain the documents he'd received.

"Right," Aramaki replied via the cybernetic line. "While he served there, he was accused of corruption over the construction of a nuclear-waste processing plant and came under criticism from neighborhood and environmental protection groups. There'd been many death threats, too."

"Wow. That must have been quite a party," Batou jested, wincing as he glanced at the murder scene. The victim, the director, had been slaughtered at a hotel where he was staying along with two police bodyguards. The cops' corpses looked much worse than the director's. They'd been killed bit by bit. "But Pops...Didn't the first trial hearing for the Environmental Ministry's corruption case adjourn quite a while ago?"

"He's right," Togusa seconded Batou's doubts. "It's not like there's a particularly convoluted backstory. Why are we sticking our necks into a garden-variety corruption case?"

"If this murder is all there is to it, you'd be right."

Togusa furrowed his brow at Aramaki's cryptic reply. "What do you mean? What else is there?"

"It's your job to find out," the chief brushed him off.

Togusa and Batou traded looks and silently shrugged their shoulders almost at the same time. The cybernetic call had ended. Batou stepped on the gas as if to take out his irritation on it, and the accelerating car headed to the highway exit.

Misaki was satisfied with her new right eye.

For a few days after the transplant, the vividness of her vision confused her more than a little, but once her cyberbrain got used to it, the flood of information was actually exhilarating. The bluish iris of her artificial eye didn't match the color of her biological left eye, but that only made her proud. It was the same blue as that woman's eyes.

Every time she looked into the mirror or saw her reflection, Misaki was able to relive the moment when her eyes had met with that woman's. It was a blissful illusion, as though *she* was now a part of her. Misaki couldn't get enough of her own eyes' mismatched colors.

It finally gave her peace. She felt freed from the humiliation of helplessly being cut up by a lone assailant.

Misaki was an SP with the Niihama Prefectural Police Security Department. Tall for a woman and accomplished at kendo, she'd escorted a fair number of cabinet ministers and foreign VIPs.

She was quite happy with her job. The simplicity of protecting someone from a visible and concrete threat was a role that suited her. The daily training was harsh, and her workplace fraught with danger, but it helped her feel that much more alive. She was also genuinely glad to be evaluated purely on her merits rather than some nebulous measure like womanliness.

So her recent injury wounded her pride all the more gravely. The fact that she couldn't protect her target cast a shadow over her heart. That was precisely why Misaki idolized *her*. The unwavering strength of that woman who defeated the assailant exerted a powerful attraction on Misaki's ghost.

And an eye with the same color as *hers* was staring at Misaki, its gaze cold and clear.

Yes. Even now—

“You’re doing better than I thought,” a male colleague called out to Misaki on her first day at work after she was discharged from the hospital.

If he noticed her new eye, then he wasn’t saying anything. He did make a little snort like he disapproved. Perhaps he saw her mismatched eyes as a fashion statement along the lines of a piercing or a tattoo.

The personnel at the Prefectural Police Security Department, who saw a lot of rough action, and especially the SPs in the Security Section, showed barely any prejudice about going prosthetic. They never knew when they’d have no choice but to equip an artificial organ thanks to some injury. Maybe that was why Misaki’s colleagues seemed far more interested in her new left hand. Whether or not she still cut it after returning on duty was a matter of life and death for those who might form a team with her.

“How’s that prosthetic treating you?” a colleague asked.

“Fine,” Misaki answered. “But not as well as I expected.”

“Hey, expect it from any prosthetic our salaries and insurance can buy,” the colleague laughed, half at himself. “It might feel strange since you’ve only just equipped it, but you’ll get used to it.”

“Strange,” muttered Misaki, bending the fingers on her left hand one by one. “There’s that, but it’s also not that different from a real body part. I thought it’d have more power.”

“It does,” the colleague made a face and pointed out. “But your arm is the original one from the elbow up. It’s easy to jack up a prosthetic’s output, but your body won’t be able to keep up. You’ll break a bone or dislocate your shoulder, and probably tear some muscle on your joint first.”

“I know.” Misaki nodded. “How inconvenient.”

“If you really want power, go titanium right up to your shoulder blade, or even full-prosthetic. Like that woman in Public Security.”

“Public Security?” Misaki tilted her head. *Who?*

“The prosthetic user who saved you. Public Security Section Nine. You know, I heard they were using the ambassador as bait to get to the mastermind of the rare-metal syndicate. Those guys just love to butt in and take all the credit...”

Pisses me off, the colleague openly voiced his frustration, but Misaki wasn't listening to him anymore.

Public Security Section Nine. That's where *she* was—the real *her*. Misaki felt the shivers. She wanted, no, had to learn more about *the woman*.

◇ AD 2034 · ii ◇

Batou and Togusa were visiting the crime scene where the former Environmental Ministry director had been murdered. The case was fresh, and the site was still an awful mess. Blood stained the hotel's hallway, and the prefectural police forensics team was busy at work collecting scattered brain-shell fragments. A burnt smell hung in the air.

Many local cops had a beef with Public Security. Yet, being at fault for failing to protect their escort target, the ex-director, they begrudgingly let Batou and Togusa through. If even a portion of the blame could be assigned to Section Nine, it would be a godsend.

“Huh, 5.45 by 18 mm ammo,” Togusa muttered, looking over the evidence list compiled by the prefectural forensics team.

The cartridges left behind at the scene were the same ones used by Sec 9's standard-issue Sebuoro M series handguns. The small-caliber, high-velocity, armor-piercing bullets were said to be effective against prostheses as well. Their high cost and limited circulation, however, tended to keep them out of civilian hands. The culprit had killed the ex-director and his escort detail using such ordnance.

“You can't just go and shop for them at a black market. What do you think, Batou?”

“Dunno,” Batou grunted moodily. Various key government agencies including Sec 9 opted for the Sebuoro M series, so pinning down the owner

would be difficult. “There’s a possibility that the perp is ex-military or police—which annoys me even more.”

“What about it?”

“Given the choice of weapon and the method of neutralizing the two guards, we’re clearly not dealing with an amateur. The perp also outwitted security pretty deftly. I don’t imagine this was some personal vendetta.”

“So it’s the doing of a professional assassin.”

“Yeah.” With a bitter grimace, Batou looked down at the blood caking the floor. “But in that case, why torture the guards? That’s hardly professional, is it?”

“I see.”

Togusa understood why Batou was so irked.

The murdered ex-director hadn’t been too heavily guarded. A skilled culprit like this one should have been able to seize on a momentary lapse in security to assassinate just the target without inflicting unnecessary casualties. Yet, the police escort had been slaughtered as well, seemingly for pleasure.

It gave off a haphazard impression and defied logic.

“Wait, wasn’t there,” Togusa asked as though remembering, “another hit job that also used 5.45 by 18 mm ammo?”

“Hm? Was there?”

“Yup. This one. The assassination of a former American Empire intelligence officer—”

Searching his external memory, Togusa pulled out the case file. The incident had occurred four months earlier at a pub in Niihama City. Though not an escort detail, two Public Security External Affairs personnel who had been monitoring the target had been gunned down along with him.

“You mean where the former spy who kept criticizing the American

Empire after defecting got taken out,” Batou replied with his back to Togusa, not interested. “The culprit hasn’t been identified, so you’re trying to say it’s connected to this killing?”

“I’m not saying it is for sure,” Togusa shot back defensively. “But isn’t it worth checking out? What the chief said also bugs me.”

“Hmph,” Batou snorted. “Hey, Togusa, speaking of Pops, I found what he was trying to show us.”

Taking the cable his partner proffered, Togusa inserted it into the QRS plug in his own neck. It was surveillance footage from a rental parking space a little ways from the hotel.

“Is it from the camera at the exit gate?”

“There.”

The data sent over the wire showed a staid navy-blue sedan. The exit time was about ten minutes after the ex-director’s estimated time of death —

A young woman sat behind the wheel. Togusa gasped when he noticed her appearance.

“The Major?!”

The fully prosthetic woman with mirrored sunglasses had the same profile as someone he knew who’d been central to Sec 9—Motoko Kusanagi.

◆ AD 2030 · iii ◆

The prosthetics inspector at the forensics center was an old acquaintance of Misaki’s. He had a special proclivity—you might call him a prosthesis freak—that had gotten him into trouble, mostly with female cops, and Misaki had mediated for him.

His lab might have been the atelier of a sensitive and gifted artist. Full-body prostheses that had passed inspection lined the walls like plaster-sculpture sketching aids. The sample artificial organs floating in gel tanks

resembled colorful paintings, while disassembled prosthetic parts, polished as if they were gold work, primly sat on display in glass cases.

The room had once disgusted her, but Misaki now looked around with interest. She was a little surprised that she found the *objets* on exhibit charming.

“Ah, it’s you. Are you all fine now?”

Noticing Misaki approaching, the technical officer lifted his face.

He was in his mid-thirties and had chiseled features.

Though he called himself a prosthetics collector, his own body was mostly natural. His reasoning was that an inspector shouldn’t become attached and partial to specific models.

“The prosthesis of the culprit who attacked your team isn’t here. Apparently, Public Security came and took it away.”

“I’m here because I have a question for you,” Misaki announced, ignoring his words.

Not particularly offended, the inspector stared at her face, his gaze homing in on her new right eye. “That’s a good piece. Megatech’s ‘Omnilux Fo.9/Female’...Made to order, yes?”

The inspector’s praising tone pleased Misaki. That was all it took for him to earn her trust. “A Public Security Section Nine full-body had the same eye,” she said.

“Motoko Kusanagi.” *Of course*, the inspector muttered. “I see...Her eyes.”

“Do you know about her?”

The inspector nodded yes at Misaki’s question. “In my field, she’s a celebrity. An ex-military prosthesis user who’s also a super-wizard-class hacker.”

“Hacker...” A faint look of surprise spread over Misaki’s face. The woman wasn’t only adept at wielding prostheses but also excelled at cyber warfare. Misaki felt hot inside for some reason. “I want to learn more

about her prostheses. Not just her eyes—I want info about all her parts.”

“Are you planning on going full-body too?”

“You know about my job. There’s a limit to how much I can do unenhanced.” Misaki raised her left hand to her eyes. “To say the least, I can’t protect anyone with this arm.”

“I understand how you feel. Once you witness the real deal, the cheap stuff just won’t do.” The inspector wore a gentle smile. “But Motoko Kusanagi, of all people? You’re aiming pretty high.”

“Is it that expensive? Her prosthesis?”

“The body itself is common fare off the market. It would set you back a little, but it’s not unaffordable.” The inspector turned a display showing an electronic catalog toward Misaki. “The issue is what’s inside. She’s loaded with regulation-breaking options and costs more than your average think tank. The upkeep alone would require institutional backing.”

“But isn’t she a cop, too?” inquired Misaki, perplexed. Public Security personnel were still civil servants. The expense allowance for maintaining prostheses couldn’t have exceeded Misaki’s by that much.

“Not exactly. She had no choice but to become a police officer. Motoko Kusanagi’s cyborg body is a government asset. She’s an accessory property of Public Security Section Nine,” the inspector answered all business-like. “Check this out: internal organs, skeletal structure, artificial muscles, all of it is ultra-high-performance military gear. She’s a walking mass of top secrets. By continuing to prove her usefulness to the state, she was granted the right to don them.”

“So there’s no way to acquire the same body as her?”

“There might be. Why do you want to know?”

The inspector glared at Misaki, and she stared back at him wordlessly. During the brief silence, he kept staring at her right eye.

With a sigh, the technical officer relented and sent a short encrypted

message to her. It was the address of a local server.

“You’ll find a duo called the Spinner there.”

“Is the Spinner...a prosthetics coordinator?”

“Nope. But they might know how to get your hands on what you seek.”

“Thank you,” Misaki said.

“You’re welcome.”

The inspector watched her with a pitying look as she left his lab.

◇ AD 2034 · iii ◇

“Bi Eye?” They were in Sec 9’s operations meeting room. It was Batou who echoed the words, his mouth full of cyborg food that took the shape of a sandwich. “Never heard the name before.”

“An ex-Army mafia has been hiring her as a hit woman. She’s thought to have been involved in four jobs over the last couple of years.”

Bottles of energy drinks sat in front of Togusa as he laid out the documents. Net-diving without any sleep or rest, he’d finally turned up a suspect for the assassination of the former American Empire intelligence officer.

“The mafia bit could be some organization’s front, but you’re saying she’s the Major?”

Togusa immediately shook his head. “I don’t believe that, either. But Bi Eye opened shop right around the time the Major went missing and is unusually slick.”

“So that’s why Pops got fixated on an ex-director’s death that isn’t any of our business,” Batou remarked, impressed.

“Probably,” nodded Togusa. “The m.o. of this assault on the former director resembles Bi Eye’s. The equipment—Kyoray’s Type 3003 Thermoptic Camouflage and Sebuuro’s 5.45 by 18 mm. The timing of the attack—the same, too. She deliberately chose a moment when the target was under guard.”

“Plus, the culprit used a female-model prosthesis? No wonder the Major is under suspicion.” Batou curled his lips sarcastically and laughed. “Tell me, though, what an ex-Army mafia gets out of killing Environmental Ministry bureaucrats and American Empire spooks?”

“That...” faltered Togusa.

“They have nothing to gain from framing the Major. Maybe back when she was Sec 9, but now?”

“Yeah, you’re right.”

Yanking the cable out of his neck plug, Togusa looked up at the meeting room’s ceiling. Not a few organizations found Sec 9’s existence to be a nuisance and plotted against it. But Motoko Kusanagi had parted ways with their outfit. It was hard to believe that dressing her up as the culprit benefited anyone.

In the first place, the evidence needed to be more striking if the idea was to make her take the fall.

The scene of the former director’s assassination had left a similar impression. A lot about this perp’s behavior didn’t make sense.

“The purpose of the hit...” Togusa mumbled as though to himself. “Maybe there wasn’t any to begin with.”

“Huh?”

“Well...Maybe the assault itself was the objective?”

“What do you mean?” Batou cast a dubious look at Togusa.

“Ever heard of this one?” Togusa continued with a straight face. “A wife who lost her husband in an accident fell in love at first sight with his coworker who came to the funeral. That night, she killed her own son.”

“Why? Because he’d be in the way of her new romance?”

“No. She thought she might be able to meet her husband’s coworker again if there was another funeral.”

“Hah,” Batou spat like he was genuinely disappointed. “Lame.”

“True,” admitted Togusa. “But what if Bi Eye’s goal is to see the Major again? Wouldn’t it be like my story?”

“See her again?” Batou frowned. “So the killer is someone who’s come into contact with the Major in the past?”

“The contact probably took place at the scene of another assassination. Maybe she thought that if she perpetrated a string of them, the Major would come back and stop her?”

It was just a hunch, but once Togusa put it into words, he was convinced.

The missing Motoko Kusanagi’s whereabouts was unknown to Sec 9 as well. If there was any way to meet her again apart from waiting for her to report in, then creating an incident that drew her interest was it.

“Shit...” Batou called the Dive Room on his cyber comm. “Ishikawa, lend us a hand!”

Unraveling assassination cases that involved Motoko Kusanagi and tracing the status quo of all attendants—taking into account the possibility that the data had been tampered with, it was no simple task and certainly more than Batou and Togusa could handle. But if they didn’t identify the culprit, it could be a matter of time before another victim got rubbed out.

As Batou clamored for assistance, barely able to suppress his impatience, Ishikawa issued a brief reply.

“I’m already on it. Just wait a little.”

◆ AD 2030 · iv ◆

Through a public proxy that made a selling point of its anonymity, Misaki visited the local server she’d been told about. What came into view as she dove was a functional lab reminiscent of a hospital operation room.

Hanging from the ceiling was a skeletal doll with two faces positioned next to each other. The arm supporting it rotated so that both sets of eyes could stare at Misaki.

She asked the doll, “Are you the Spinner?”

A spinner of yarns—it had to be a pseudonym, but the doll before her seemed, oddly enough, to live up to it.

“I’d heard there was a pair of you.”

“That information is accurate,” the doll answered opening its two mouths in turn. “We twins share our prosthesis and, when we dive, use the same agent.”

“I see...” Misaki gave a vague nod. Identical twins dualing in one prosthetic body—she really had no idea what that might feel like. “I’m here to learn from you.”

“You want to know about Motoko Kusanagi’s body, don’t you?” the twins preempted her.

“What do you know about her?”

“Everything,” the twins said smoothly. “There was a time when we were in charge of tuning and maintaining her prosthesis. Her current body may differ, but it is not hard to guess the specs she selected.”

“Does that mean you can provide the same prosthesis?” Misaki’s voice was trembling with anticipation.

“It is possible,” the twins replied right away. “It is also meaningless.”

“Why?” Misaki’s tone was now vexed.

“Kusanagi is one of the world’s handful of top prosthesis users. No one other than her can draw out the full potential of her body,” the twins declared without hesitation. “Otherwise, the military and Public Security would gladly mass-produce ‘Motoko Kusanagi.’”

“So if I can master that prosthesis, I’ll be like her.” Misaki smiled, satisfied. “Me alone, in the whole world.”

“Delivering the body comes with a price tag,” the twins stated coolly.

“I haven’t touched the life insurance money that my parents left me. I don’t mind selling my house, either.”

“You understand nothing,” they went on patiently. “You could trade in your whole life, and Motoko Kusanagi’s body would still be out of your reach. It’s a different story, though, if you’re willing to make a deal with the devil.”

“In other words, there is an option for obtaining the prosthetics.” Misaki’s right eye was trained on the Spinner.

After a long silence, they said, “The compensation we seek is probably greater than you imagine. From the moment of the transaction, you will be considered an accomplice to serious organized crime. All that you have gained in your life so far—your career as a police officer, comrades, your dignity and freedom, you will *betray*.”

“I’m aware of that.” Misaki’s expression was as calm as a placid lake. “I’m aware of my heart’s desire.”

“It is by no means a wise decision, but your obsession is fascinating,” the twins remarked like some doctor faced with an unusual patient. “We cannot rule out the possibility that your single-mindedness will work in favor of adapting to the body.”

“Give me the details of the transaction,” Misaki said.

“An old acquaintance of ours is looking for an able prosthesis wielder. The goal is the immediate elimination of a member of hostile forces, to wit, an assassination.”

“An assassination...”

“If you fulfill the role that the organization demands, the body will be yours. If not, it will be retrieved and passed on to another individual.”

The twins’ explanation was clear-cut and fair. Misaki sensed that it was an honest transaction with no hidden clauses.

“You can still back out, but we would have to delete a portion of your memories. So, what will you do? Forget it?”

“Forget it? Why would I?” Misaki looked at the Spinner incredulously. A smile danced on her lips despite herself. “You’re providing me with not

just the body but an opportunity to put it to full use, aren't you?"

◇ AD 2034 · iv ◇

From the roof of a high-rise office building, she gazed down at the inorganic, crystal cluster of a nighttime cityscape—Niihama's, submerged in darkness. The thermoptic-camo assault suit that she wore under her overcoat emphasized the contours of her prosthetic body, while her hair quietly fluttered in the moist, salty night breeze.

The building beneath her housed the Japanese branch of a foreign corporation. Her task tonight was to assassinate the branch manager, who remained in his office.

The fact that he was suspected of clandestine weapon sales and manipulating illicit accounts, even the rumors that he was on a rival organization's hit list, mattered not one bit to her.

A kill target with a guard detail—that was all she needed.

She casually cast off her coat and activated the thermoptic camo. Surveying the world below from the roof's edge, she leapt into empty space. Glass windows reflected her freefalling form like a dark sea. Melting into the gloom, and tugged by gravity, she descended.

When her destination, the thirty-sixth floor, grew near, she shot out a liquid wire. Simultaneously, she drew a Seburo handgun from her harness holster.

Bullets fired in quick succession put a crack in the fortified glass. Scattering countless shards, she broke into the building.

She had studied its layout beforehand. According to her intel, wary of being assaulted on his way home, the assassination target slept at his office. But when she charged into the branch manager's room, he was nowhere to be seen.

She deactivated her thermoptic camo, which could interfere with target acquisition. Aiming her gun cautiously, she scanned her surroundings.

As she did so, she sensed someone laughing close by. She lifted her face

abruptly when she noticed. Her eyes, their colors mismatched, reflected the light and gleamed.

“Ah ha...Bi Eye, with one blue.”

She detected a gun being readied as the voice resonated, tinged with mirth.

A split second later, a male cyborg with false eyes appeared in front of her. He'd been concealing himself with thermoptic camouflage as well.

“Damn, you really look like the Major,” the man with false eyes threw out flippantly, turning his gun's muzzle on her.

She, too, pointed her Seburo at him but couldn't pull the trigger. Another hostile had emerged behind her and was aiming at the back of her head.

“Public Security Section Nine. Don't move, Bi Eye—no, Yuki Misaki!” This second man wore a regular suit.

As expressionless as a doll, she, *Misaki*, took in his words.

Yuki Misaki.

Arriving at that name had been a real chore. The reason was that Misaki was an active-duty cop with no motive whatsoever to conduct assassinations. Moreover, she hadn't received any monetary payments for them.

Public Security Section Nine was alerted to her almost by coincidence through her prosthetics purchase record.

Megatech Body Corp's “Omnilux”—made to order with the exact specs that Motoko Kusanagi used during her time at Sec 9.

Once they realized that the fees for the hits were the prostheses themselves, it went quickly. Identifying the sponsor from the source of the exchange parts, they predicted Misaki's next target. Thanks to a threat made in advance, it wasn't hard to pin down the X-day. Which actually made sense. Her goal wasn't the assassination itself but seeing Motoko Kusanagi again at the crime scene. From the outset, Misaki had no

intention of hiding her crimes.

“Drop your gun, and raise your hands above your head!” Togusa let out a sharp yell, his gun still pressed against the back of her head.

Misaki did just as he said. She calmly let drop to the floor the Sebuoro she'd been pointing at Batou before raising both of her arms languorously.

Her lips formed a faint smile, and a murmur escaped them. “Public Security Section Nine...”

Then immediately—she swayed back her upper body like a rhythmic gymnast. Fluid motions were a female-model specialty. For a moment, Togusa lost sight of her. A slender foot leapt up in an arc and kicked Batou's gun out of his hand with precision.

“Shoot, Togusa!”

By the time Batou's voice reached his ears, Togusa had already pulled the trigger. Yet the fired bullet didn't strike Misaki. While going prosthetic had improved his marksmanship, it fell short of her agility.

“Oof!”

This time, Batou's chest had caught Misaki's tricky roundhouse kick. His hulking figure stood close to six-foot-two but was propelled backwards with amazing force.

“Big man!”

“Crap! No one moves like that after just four years of being a cyborg!”

Batou shoved away the remains of a demolished desk and tried to stand up. Misaki's ankle came at him, and his right arm creaked when he blocked it just in time.

Righting his posture in an instant, he punched Misaki in the face the moment she landed. Taking the blow, however, she leveraged his own momentum to slam him against the wall.

“You're using the same combat prosthesis-control programming as the Major! Where did you get ahold of it?!” Alarmed by Misaki's familiar

movements, Togusa prepared to fire again.

“You idiot! She’s out of your league!” *Run*, Batou shouted at Togusa.

But it was Misaki who reacted first. Jumping high enough to brush the ceiling, she came down on Togusa’s right hand as though to step on it.

Picking up the gun that had fallen to the floor, Misaki pointed it at his pain-racked face.

Batou, who’d finally gotten up, halted. Misaki held a hostage against him, so to speak.

Her expressionless eyes, one of them blue, looked into Togusa’s.

In a repressed growl Togusa asked, “Why? Why are you so obsessed with the Major—with Motoko Kusanagi?” He wasn’t expecting a reply.

Yet, unexpectedly, Misaki answered his question. “Because I’m already part of the concept that is Motoko Kusanagi.” Her voice, cool and nihilistic, sounded a lot like the Major’s. “The day she saved my life, my value as a human being was overwritten and subsumed by the one comprising the tough, beautiful entity called Motoko Kusanagi.”

“We looked into what happened four years ago,” Togusa said. “The Major saved you, yes?”

“She saved my life, and at the same time trampled on it. Simply by being, a superlative concept cannot but affect other beings. My persona was smashed beyond repair by her.”

Misaki shook her head gently as though to pity herself.

Motoko Kusanagi’s competence had engraved in Misaki’s mind her own powerlessness and imperfection as well. Awe and envy, idolatry and jealousy—opposing, chaotic emotions had corroded and twisted Misaki’s soul.

“That’s why you copied her appearance?”

“Yes. An imitation,” Misaki admitted. “And also a succession of the ideational factor called Motoko Kusanagi.”

“You aren’t the Major.”

“How can you say so for sure? What makes you say so, your memories of her?” Misaki’s tone seemed both to deride and commiserate with Togusa. “Memories are just the trace of a concept that Motoko Kusanagi left behind in you. It’s just another replica of her.”

“As long as the real Major still exists, you’ll never be her,” Togusa asserted, shaking free of his inner turmoil.

“Then what is the real Motoko Kusanagi? How do you determine the real one?” asked Misaki, sounding a little irritated. “Given that a concept ceaselessly continues to be affected by external inputs, the original her isn’t unchanging, either. What’s the difference between Motoko Kusanagi and me when I have the same body, the same strength, and the will to be her?”

“What happens to—your ghost as Yuki Misaki?” Togusa asked back in a low voice.

With a chilling smile, Misaki began to squeeze the trigger. “I’ve no need for it now.”

I don’t recognize its value, she added, and the moment she did, she thought she heard someone whisper. It was the whisper of someone who couldn’t be there.

—*Oh, really?*

It created a momentary blank in Misaki’s movements. What filled it was a gunshot.

Togusa’s left hand held a firearm. It wasn’t the Sebuero that Misaki had taken from him. An attachment to his past that he couldn’t ditch—it was the Mateba automatic revolver that he’d kept in his back holster. Unleashed at point-blank range, the .357 Magnum ammo penetrated the outer shell of Misaki’s prosthesis and dispensed lethal damage to her artificial organs.

“Togusa! Are you okay?!”

Still clutching his crippled right arm, Batou came rushing to Togusa's side.

"Y-Yeah," Togusa nodded, staring at the gun in his hand. For the life of him, he couldn't remember when he'd pulled the Mateba. He felt as though someone had guided him. "I'm the one who shot her...right?"

"Huh?" Seeing his partner in a daze, Batou sighed, *Oh boy*.

Punched through right at a vital spot, Misaki's prosthesis lay supine, having ceased to function. Sparks spewed from its neck, and a scorched smell wafted into the air. She must have been set up so that her cyberbrain would get fried as soon as her body stopped working.

"There was a think bomb buried in her prosthesis. Destroying evidence, eh?"

With a sour face Batou clicked his tongue. Misaki would be keeping mum for all eternity about the identity of the organization that had prepared the body.

Misaki had been used by them and been tossed away like a broken doll.

Yet her expression was terribly peaceful.

"Are you smiling?" muttered Togusa, crouching by her.

Just before her prosthesis ceased to function, he'd seen Misaki's lips tremble.

I've met you, at last—she'd said so without a doubt.

Gingerly, Togusa shuttered Misaki's unmoving eyelids.

Her biological left eye, where Motoko Kusanagi's figure was imprinted, quietly spilled glassy tears.



SOFT AND WHITE

BY

KAFKA ASAGIRI

Looking down from a multi-rotor helicopter, Hide only saw a lone heliport on the tiny uninhabited island.

He furrowed his brow despite himself.

A private island floating in the Pacific—Leigo. A small solitary isle whose circumference an athlete fitted out with prosthetics might run in two minutes or less. It was Hide's destination.

When the helicopter landed, expressionless cyborg technicians greeted him and connected a cord into the QRS plug on the nape of his neck to conduct a final check on his prosthetics and cyberbrain. He had to sign an agreement, electronically, for the umpteenth time.

Hide sighed. Good grief. How many hoops did he have to jump through to visit one little island?

There had been no end to the procedures even prior to his arrival: two inspections lying on a machine table at the hands of technicians, and signatures for eight agreements on e-devices and two via paper media; on top of that, installing a designated prosthetics-control program and *submitting a ghost-infiltration key*.

The only other sites in the world that imposed as many hurdles to entry were American Empire nuclear submarines and Self-Defense Forces program design facilities.

They had their excuses for these stringent inspections, of course. This remote island was one of the prime resort islands on Earth, a high-grade cyberbrain entertainment zone you couldn't hope to enter unless you were in the top 0.01 percent.

A world above the clouds.

It was for a reason that rabble like Hide had been invited to sojourn in celebrity high heaven.

Info had been obtained—that the legendary terrorist “Jupiter” was expected to pop up here.

Hide was an expert on Jupiter.

Still...

He looked around.

There really was nothing on this island. While its location, smack dab in the middle of the Pacific, meant not having to sense the hiccup errors (HEROs) caused by electromagnetic noise...

Would Jupiter really show up on this little island?

Hide entered the island's only structure, the elevator shaft. The interior of the streamlined elevator room was a pearly white thanks to the titanium oxide surface coating.

As the chamber descended, he started to feel more and more despondent. He couldn't tell if it was from being cast into celebrity pandemonium or if he was unplugged-anxious because he couldn't connect to the net. Or was it hope, that he might capture her, the terrorist Jupiter, and anxiety that he might swing and miss?

The elevator came to a gentle halt. When the door opened, the pressure difference made itself heard as a gush of wind. Beyond the door stretched a man-made corridor that led to an underground geofront.

Or so he'd thought.

"Wha..." Hide couldn't help mumbling like an idiot.

What spread beyond the elevator was a Baroque palatial interior.

It had a foyer. The meticulous rocaille ornamentation on the granite arches exuded a phantasmal sort of beauty. The walls to both sides were lined with High Renaissance paintings of the Nativity. The soft velvet curtains draping the windows fluttered in the breeze. Palace-guard plate armor, decorations, stood watch along the walls like unspeaking sentries. The crimson Persian carpet covering the marble floor could have muffled the footfalls of a raging military cyborg.

But it wasn't just the exotic trappings that almost made Hide feel faint.

He could see the sky.

Above the arch of the foyer, a clear blue morning sky extended

limitlessly. A pair of thrushes flitted across it as if to celebrate the spring of their lives.

Looking down from the helicopter, Hide hadn't glimpsed such an edifice anywhere. To begin with, he was underground, having descended three hundred or so feet in an elevator!

Hide got off it somehow on shaky legs.

When he did so, the decoration full-plate armor right next to him moved.

He instantly reacted.

Swaying back and evading the sideward swipe of the double-edged sword, he kicked the floor with just his leg strength, spun, and pushed against the floor again, this time with his hands, to execute a back flip and gain some distance.

The plate armor pressed with an overhead strike. Hide jerked his head out of the way, grabbed a nearby scimitar, and with it met the sword's return arc. The blades clashed with a spark. The impact shot up to his shoulder.

The sense of weight and pushback—he wasn't being robbed of his vision. This was an attack from the material world.

Backhanding the scimitar, Hide aimed for the plate armor's neck—or rather, pretended to, instead twirling and ducking in close to launch a high kick. His toes landed a clean hit on the plate armor's chin, and he heard the metal snapping. When the plate armor lurched backwards, he used the same leg to hook its neck, and grabbing its wrist, leapt on his opponent to shove it down to the floor. Then with a reverse-cross move he locked its arm joint.

“A cyborg with a brain or a remote-controlled decot?” Hide asked twisting up the arm. “If it's the former, I can wait for the pain signal block. If it's the latter, this arm is coming off right now.”

“I-I surrender!” the plate armor yelled. “I'm sorry. You're an even better prosthetics-wielder than I heard.”

The plate armor flung its visor up with its free hand. From inside peeked the eyes of the friendliest black man.

“Forgive me...My name is Coma. I’m the security chief here,” the black man said with the friendliest smile, “and your client.”

—

“Hide”—full name, Hideo Hisaragi.

A crackerjack prosthetics-wielder, he had served in a prosthetized military unit on invitation after a research stint at a university cyberneurology program. He’d left the government’s employ for a certain reason and now worked as a freelance prosthetics consultant who was also active in tracking down terrorists, as an info broker.

A certain reason—the terrorist Jupiter. A life-altering person for Hide.

He’d been invited to the island in light of intelligence that Jupiter would appear here. The remuneration was off the charts. Even if there weren’t any at all, he had no reason to refuse, of course. None other than Jupiter might appear here.

Led by Coma, he walked through the geofront lobby.

Decorations reminiscent of eighteenth-century French palaces filled the area from one end to the other, and the staff and guests that he passed by now and then were also decked in rococo attire. Hide shook his head at the unreal sight.

“Leigo used to be a prison island,” Coma, walking ahead in his armor, explained to Hide. “A certain wealthy person purchased and remodeled it into a resort geofront. People who know of this place have come to call it SOFT.”

“Soft?” Hide furrowed his brow. “As in software?”

Coma laughed and shook his head. “Nope, simply as in ‘gentle.’”

Why such a name, asked Hide, to which Coma just smiled and said, *You’ll see.*

Guided by Coma, the two of them entered the staff room. Hide was

astounded once again. Beyond the French doors adorned with inlaid work was a near-futuristic interior with an aerodynamic floating table and white-leather chairs. There was no visible lighting, but the entire ceiling seemed to be glowing and illuminating the room.

“Well, sit down,” Coma offered to Hide and took a seat himself. “Anything to drink? Coffee, tea...We even have *sencha* tea.”

“Enlighten me first,” Hide said as soon as he sat down. “What’s the deal here? On the net it’s just described as a top-of-the-line resort island... Don’t tell me it’s a cosplay island. Or has someone added a branch to my visual component?”

“That last bit isn’t far off the mark,” Coma replied with a meaningful smile. “But forget hacking, your cyberbrain is completely bare now with no defensive wall. Even a rat with a cyberbrain could sneak in just to take a walk.”

Hearing that gave Hide the chills all over again. Leaving your brain unprotected in a high-cyber society was like strolling around a battlefield in your underwear. If an ill-meaning hacker spotted you, you could even have your ghost taken over and end up a puppet.

“Now, drink some of this and relax.” Coma placed a coffee cup on the table. Faint steam rose from the dark-brown liquid. “We’re on a standalone island that’s sequestered from the outside world, physically and electronically. We conduct thorough inspections of personal belongings including prosthetics, so there’s no need to worry. If there’s even the slightest chance of a ghost hack, why would all those rich people be flocking here in the first place?”

That was true. According to Hide’s prior research, that elevator was the only point of entry on this island. The underground shell was sealed and shut out even satellite signals. Moreover, there wasn’t even an undersea cable for wired comms with the outside world, and the only info transfer took place through the scheduled freight deliveries. In other words, it was an isolated intranet—in this heyday of cyberbrain crimes, the perfect and almost only countermeasure against hacking.

Still, Hide was seized by a vague anxiety. He sipped at the hot coffee and wondered. Was the security here really flawless? Could its system respond to a guest who bore malice? What if the system itself went haywire? To begin with—

Having thought that far, Hide realized something. Aghast, he asked, “Hey...*How did you pull out this coffee?*”

With a grin Coma said, “That’s this island’s magic.”

He snapped his fingers.

Instantly, the coffee cup that Hide held disappeared.

It wasn’t just the cup. The room’s furnishings, the table accessories, and Coma’s plate armor vanished into thin air. What remained were bland white walls, Coma in a regular security uniform, and Hide, along with their cushioned chairs. Even the bittersweet flavor of coffee in his mouth was gone.

“Not just...the visual component?” observed Hide, still confused. “My senses of touch and smell and taste were interrupted simultaneously?”

“Exactly.” Coma was smiling in his security outfit. “And not just you. Everyone on the island is having the same illusion in complete synch... You know about cybertech that allows for electronic interventions into visual components, don’t you?”

Hide nodded. A cyberized mind could replay video and audio within itself via a MicroMachine that dispensed electric stimuli to the brain cells. It was possible to flood a target’s visual field with false data and foist an illusion—to “steal your eyes,” in other words. Bravura cyberthieves were said to resort to such foul play on occasion.

“This island’s mother system is capable of granting totally synchronized fake sensations to everyone present.” Coma snapped his fingers again. The room reverted to its near-futuristic streamlined décor. The coffee cup in Hide’s hand was also resurrected. “That’s it, in a nutshell: simultaneously duping all neural components in the system package. The interminable procedures, a dedicated program, and this huge cavern were

prepared for just that purpose.”

With that, Coma tilted the cup in his hand and splashed Hide with its liquid content.

“Ack!” Hide leapt out of his chair. The dark-blown fluid, still steaming, covered his clothes from his chest to his waist. The painful heat felt like an open-handed slap, and he couldn’t but curse, “Damn you! I’ll bet there’s no tactile-membrane pack maintenance on this—”

Before he could finish, Coma snapped his fingers again. The room furnishings vanished along with the coffee, and so did the pain from the burn Hide had felt just a moment ago.

“Nothing on this island can hurt you, Hide,” Coma said, smiling. “Nothing that can actually hurt you. There isn’t a single knife or even a small pin on this island. The chair you were sitting on is the most lethal weapon here.”

Coma pointed at the white cushioned chair by Hide’s legs. It was soft and seemed to be made of pressure-sensitive hardened polymer, yielding gently to a poke of the finger.

“On this island, only the chairs and beds are real. Because you can’t rest your weight on something that doesn’t exist. All the rest is an illusion cast by sensory components...a synthetic reality. That’s why it’s called the SOFT system. It’s the gentlest place on Earth.”

Belatedly, Hide suffered an intense bout of vertigo—as if the floor and ceiling had heaved and switched places.

Apart from the chairs and beds—it was all an illusion?

The coffee and the palace, the sword and the plate armor, none of it really existed but were electric stimuli to his visual and tactile perceptions—merely the shadows of his sensory nerves firing up?

“Unbelievable,” Hide finally managed to squeeze out. “How? How do you maintain your sanity in such a crazy place?”

“Human beings aren’t wise enough to keep living on the level of

philosophers,” Coma said slowly. His smile almost hinted at satori. “In short, you get ‘used to it.’ You’ll see in time. But...I think you get it now. The menace of a terrorist bent on destruction slipping in here.”

Hide gasped. *Right, that’s why I’m here. The terrorist Jupiter. Her, I have to personally—*

“We have intel that the terrorist brought *a real gun* onto this island,” Coma said, looking concerned for once. “You understand, don’t you? We security can snatch out of thin air a sword, a rifle, or if we want, a 20-mm antitank cannon, weapons that would send you flying. But...they’re no match against a real gun.”

With another snap of his fingers, Coma conjured numerous firearms on the floor: a shotgun, a submachine gun, an anti-materiel rifle...

From among them, he picked up an ordinary revolver and gazed at it. Then he said, “We need you and your expertise regarding this terrorist, Hide. Find the one handgun smuggled onto this gentle island.”

—

Hide was shown through the facilities, introduced to colleagues, and brought more or less up to speed, and by the time he retired to the room he’d been assigned, it was nearly past three in the morning.

“Give me a break...”

His room had simple furnishings in the style of resort hotels. This, too, had to be a synthetic reality. He could see and touch the curtains, the glass of water on a table, the book by the pillow; he could bite them or destroy them. But they didn’t actually exist.

Tumbling onto the steel-frame bed, Hide let out a massive sigh.

Today the island assumed a European rococo style, but apparently that was just the area concept of the week. Depending on the day, guests were treated to Cretaceous period or Chinese three-kingdom era or underwater metropolis designs.

It was enough to drive you nuts.

This wasn't a virtual cyberspace. It was physical reality. And yet...

Hide glanced at the bedside night table. On it was a desk clock, a glass of water, and a leather-bound book leaning on a bookshelf.

He reached for the book. A random title from the library would be displayed every time he opened it, he'd been told. Flipping through the pages, he read a passage that caught his eye.

“What we call outward objects are nothing else but mere representations of our sensibility, whose form is space, but whose real correlate, the thing in itself, is not known by means of these representations, nor ever can be, but respecting which, in experience, no inquiry is ever made.”

It was the eighteenth-century German philosopher Kant's work *The Critique of Pure Reason*.

Hide flipped the pages again.

“We believe that we cognize objects as things in themselves, although in the whole range of the sensuous world, investigate the nature of its objects as profoundly as we may, we have to do with nothing but phenomena.”*

Hide thought about those words.

What Kant called outward objects, namely things that human beings could see and touch, were not the true form of the things as they existed a priori—were not “things in themselves.” They were merely experienced. In his book, Kant declared so in no uncertain terms. Everything that we can recognize is only subjective, arising in the mind only upon being reflected in our eyes, and are never perceived in their own being.

We were all prisoners bound in chains in a cave who were only allowed to witness figures reflected on a wall. We only recognized space and God and free will as vague hints and not as true Ideas—

Confirming the book's physical texture, Hide thought, *What would Kant say if he visited this island?*

The book wasn't actually there. Gauging the tactile membrane's contact pressure and movement speed, the core that received the prosthetic signals almost simultaneously returned transmissions of texture to the touch sense device. The brain misunderstood this as "handling a book." If you tried to poke your fingers through it, the prosthesis would make a stop-contact judgment so you wouldn't squash it. The book was a shadow created by cyber signals.

As Kant would have it, reality, too, was a shadow manifested via the same methodology.

If so, wasn't the book on par with an actual one in its signifiatory intensity? To begin with, for humans with cyberbrains, wasn't distinguishing between a real world and a synthetic reality fundamentally pointless? Illusions were also real, the digital was mind, and through cyber technology, were we unknowingly selling the uniqueness of reality to the devil, bit by bit?

This island realized at a nightmarish scale a prediction that Kant had made over two hundred years ago.

Hide shook his head to yank his consciousness back to reality.

It wasn't true. We were okay. No place like this island existed anywhere else. This was a technological point of singularity, an exception. He shouldn't overthink it.

Plus, he'd been told the SOFT system's weak point.

Hide placed the book standing on the floor. Stepping on with his right foot, he applied his weight.

For an instant, his sole met strong resistance, but when he bore down on the book with his whole body, it slipped out from under him with a beep. Turning translucent and spitting out a few error messages, the book shone red and disappeared.

The chairs and beds were real for precisely the same reason. With nothing to support you, SOFT might dupe all five of your senses but couldn't make you float in midair. When you applied your weight, it

slipped through.

“So even a peerless processing system can’t defy God...” mumbled Hide.

He felt a momentary urge to go around stepping on everything the island contained. Then he wouldn’t have to worry over some binary opposition between reality and its synthetic counterpart that was frying his head, and he’d have no trouble finding the gun Jupiter supposedly smuggled into this soft and white underground world.

The international terrorist Jupiter.

Hide didn’t need to access any external memory apparatus when it came to Jupiter because he had all the info memorized. That said, surprisingly little had come to light. What they did know was that Jupiter was a master cyber criminal who intervened in wars and skirmishes the world over and operated with a full-body prosthesis that almost always assumed a female form.

An idea, a bewildering one, came to Hide. He hesitated for five full minutes before summoning a console out of nothing. He gestured with his fingers to send a directive to the core.

As security personnel he’d been granted N-B Class rights to access SOFT. That included synthesizing weapons, dissolving the synthetic reality of persons judged to be a menace, and—

“What’s the idea, calling me like this?” a voice suddenly asked from the doorway.

Hide shifted his gaze to where a woman stood in a negligee. Her long hair a lapis lazuli blue, she wore gold earrings. She sported long eyelashes and intimidatingly lustrous, rose-pink lips.

“You’re...” After muttering that much, Hide noticed that his throat was parched dry.

“You must have wonderful taste if this is how you synthesize a woman you’re fond of. I feel like I’m dealing with a teenager who can’t stop fantasizing. How embarrassing of you.”

Hide was stunned. This—this easily?

“Why don’t you say something?”

The woman’s words brought him back to himself. “You aren’t actually here,” he noted. “My senses are perceiving you, but what’s there is just thin air. That form is only an imagined you out of my cyberbrain. Jupiter must look nothing like it now.”

“Right. Pretty foolish, isn’t it?” The woman, Jupiter, came to sit by Hide. The bed creaked. “It’s been thirteen years since we last saw each other. What’s more, I’m a wanted person, an actual terrorist these days. I would never present myself to you in this sort of getup.”

Jupiter’s shoulder brushed against him—a slight warmth, mass. Hide’s thought processes went wobbly.

“Was it—really you?” he asked out loud despite himself. “Toppling the Republic of Kuzan’s government, assassinating the programmer in exile. The numerous other massacres and instigations and electronic attacks—the public enemy, the monster that cyber technology begat, Jupiter. Is that really you?”

“It is,” she replied, looking straight at him. “Breaking this world is my *raison d’être*. Hearing the orphan’s scream, the refugee’s lament, and everyone with cyberbrains wailing and begging for their lives is the only amusement allowed to me. My next target is this island.”

Jupiter gazed into Hide’s pupils. Hers had no maker engraving or serial number, were dim enough to suck him in. Her eyelashes were so long he could almost hear her blink. The scent of her warm breath.

Unconsciously, he’d gone and reached out his hand to touch her cheek. The soft, yielding sensation at his fingertips shook and jolted his soul to the very bottom.

“...If I said so, would you be satisfied?”

Jupiter made to stand up and pushed Hide aside.

“You’re just a shadow,” he said to her back. “Where is the real you?”

Have you already infiltrated this island? Where is the gun? What do you intend to do here?”

“I can’t answer your questions. All I can do is ask them. Tell me, when you meet the real me, what do you intend to do?”

Hide couldn’t reply. He was too afraid to. His true thoughts were sealed deep down, below even the sixth degree that is the ghost line.

“What can we do with you?” Jupiter shook her head and stood. “Well, I’ll give you just one hint. This island isn’t as singular a place as you think. Human beings only ever see a distorted world and merely manage to picture *something like* a world by collating that distorted information. Wherever you are in that world. So it wouldn’t be strange at all if I *actually* stood here now. You’ll understand when you see this.”

Hide’s own face appeared before his eyes.

The suddenness of it threw him off—but he did understand soon enough. Jupiter had taken out a hand mirror and thrust it at Hide. It was old, and the frame featured amateurish wavy embellishments.

Hide received the hand mirror and gazed at it. His face and Jupiter’s were reflected side by side. He looked perplexed, while she wore a mysterious smile.

“Funny mirror.”

“Don’t say that,” Hide objected. “It still took me forever to make. If we ever saw each other again, I’d have a gift—”

He gulped and broke off mid-sentence.

The hand mirror was one of the few personal belongings that he’d brought onto this island.

In other words, it was an actual object.

Why was a synthetically realized Jupiter able to hand him the mirror?

He turned his head. Jupiter was already gone. The mirror slipped out of his hand and bounced against the floor.

“Look at the mirror carefully, Hide,” a disembodied voice echoed in the lonesome room. “It’s the only path beyond the wall of cyberbrains, to the true reality that’s not composed of electric signals.”

For a while Hide stood there alone in the center of the room.

He couldn’t utter a word.

His gift lay on the floor, and in the mirror, which now had a few cracks in it, multiple Hides quietly displayed their wavering reflections.

—

The main cafeteria, located in underground central. Hide, Coma, and two other security personnel were taking their meal at a table.

“Like I said, at the time of the Japan Micro Industry terrorist-blackmail incident, I happened to be on vacation and wasn’t there,” Coma said with his mouth full. “Same for the Sagawa Electronics Headquarters case. I was bowled over. The desks were lined in a circle, and some program’s aerial...”

Outside the cafeteria spread a tropical beach. The hall itself was worthy of a first-rate hotel, and the terrace on the opposite side offered a grand ocean view. A fountain spraying realistically transparent water sat at the center of the cafeteria.

Gazing at the endlessly blue sky and water horizon, Hide was lost in thought.

The faint scent of the sea, the scintillating horizon, and all the rest of it was a synthetic reality created through innumerable processing operations. So was the woman who’d appeared last night.

But if that was the case, from where in such a world had the words “Look at the mirror carefully” sprung?

“And the rumor was that the next blackmailing would target a cyborg food corporation. The very one that supplied the meal we’re having. I mean, Laughing Man or not, robbing people of their chow is no joke—hey, Hide? Why aren’t you digging in?”

Coma addressing him brought Hide's thoughts back to the table. "... Yeah, pardon me?"

"Jeez...I know it's only your second day here, but are you fasting or what? You do get hungry even in a place like this, okay? 'The painful canine yelps make themselves heard to the traveler's stomach devoid of a grain of millet.' You can't slap around a terrorist on an empty stomach, am I right?"

"Takuboku Ishikawa?" Hide raised an eyebrow. "Quoting him without using an external memory apparatus makes you one weird American Empire national, you know that?"

"I'm pretty erudite when it comes to chow," Coma replied and stuffed his face. "Under different circumstances, staying here a night and having this food would wipe out our annual salaries. Gotta appreciate our daily blessing. Or pray, sir, are you not fond of American cuisine?"

"Come on..."

Hide's eyes fell to the dish in front of him, a steaming, golden-hued paella.

The shrimp still had their shells and heads on and lent themselves to a vivid feast of colors along with the mussels, paprika, and green asparagus. All of the ingredients shone as if they'd just been harvested. Yet in reality what graced the plate were 90-percent gluten and a sprinkling of amino acid-based MMs, which is to say, cyborg fare, tasteless in both senses of the word.

Hide could hardly get into the mood, but it was true that he needed to eat. Poking at the paella, he ferried a spoonful to his mouth.

His thoughts died for an instant. It was delicious...

Countless tastes fizzed on his tongue. All of the savor, the aroma and the mouth-feel, seemed to blend into his body via his oral cavity. Another taste, he needed another taste of this!

Hide was beginning to see why the richest people in the world desired one and all to sojourn on this island.

Watching Hide gobble down his paella, Coma broke into a wry laugh. “*This* is where folks start getting used to it.”

The security chief resumed chatting with his staff once he saw that Hide was feeling full and human again.

Hide, for his part, continued eating and merely listened to the table talk.

Serial anti-corporate blackmail by a hacker who never seemed to rest—he’d heard about it in the news. “The Laughing Man Incident.”

The kidnapping of Ernest Serano, CEO of Serano Genomics, on February 3, 2024 kicked off a case where a total of seven MicroMachine manufacturers received letters threatening to compromise their assembly lines with viruses.

If he recalled correctly, even as witnesses watched during the abduction of CEO Serano, the culprit rewrote his own mug as a pop design face mark. In real time, too...If it was indeed a lone-wolf crime, then he had the wizard-class skills to pull off multiple simultaneous ghost hacks.

A flawless, synchronic visual rewrite—putting aside the criminal aspect, it was pretty much what this island’s system did.

“I wonder where that perp is now,” Coma said, tilting his head. “If he snuck onto this island, he’s mine.”

“As much as I enjoy the banter, let’s talk about work,” Hide spoke up. “Any clues about the gun’s whereabouts?”

“That’s the thing.” Coma’s expression turned serious. “From our investigation, we know that it was disassembled down to its base components and brought in among a load of repair parts. The supply administration department’s scan found one latch, one primer, and two firing pins.”

“A revolver, then,” remarked Hide. “Bugs me that it’s just the smaller bits.”

“The bigger ones like the cylinder and grip would stand out. There has to be a separate smuggling route, but it’s eluding us for the moment.”

Hide gave this some thought. If there was a route that security wasn't aware of, the latch and primer that had been spotted and confiscated could be smuggled in anew using that other method. It was entirely possible, then, that a gun had already been reassembled somewhere on the island.

“What did the dispatcher of that load have to say?” asked Hide.

“The vendor has no idea. These are small parts, so maybe the culprit simply snuck into the warehouse and shoved them into the load. We've requested Niihama's cyber police to pursue that line, but there hasn't been any development to speak of.”

“I suppose they wouldn't mount a decent investigation over stray parts, in the absence of victims or suspicions of terrorism...”

An idea suddenly came to Hide.

“How about checking the memories of all guests and staff using the ghost-infiltration keys that they provided?” he suggested. “The SOFT system is sticking its virtual fingers into everyone's cyberbrains all the time. It should be possible, technologically speaking.”

“That would certainly make our lives easier.” Coma sighed. “The island doesn't permit that move. We staff seeing fit to dive down to the ghost line isn't a measure stipulated anywhere in our agreements, and infringes on cyberbrain ethics laws as well. Only SOFT's mother system, which has no mind or will of its own, can touch our guests' brains, you see? In the first place, we staff haven't been told Mother's admin code or main-unit location, so it's impossible.”

“You don't know her location?” asked Hide, sounding a little surprised.

“To guard against eavesdropping and theft, I'm sure,” Coma said. “Thanks to that, we're clueless about Mother's shape and form and physical durability...Well, our dear God dwells somewhere on this island. That's enough for security purposes.”

Hide could only sigh when Coma flashed a playful smile.

If only Mother would cooperate, no case would be simpler...But it was

true that the SOFT system's power was too great for any individual to wield.

Hide found himself glancing at the fountain at the center of the cafeteria.

The transparent water that tumbled down prettily reflecting the surrounding light—the permeation processing and the physical computations of the aerial transformation must have been fairly burdensome, but SOFT executed such tasks handily as well.

“If this island's system fell into some country's hands whole-sale,” Hide muttered out loud without meaning to, “and if they coerced every citizen's cyberbrain to install it...”

“What was that?” asked Coma, his voice low.

“Nothing...” dismissed Hide.

If they could do such a thing, it would be a rulers' paradise. Policy and welfare would become unnecessary. There would be no rebellions or revolutions. Inhabiting an ideal world, the citizens would keep voting in favor of the administration like zombies.

Prior to his arrival, Hide had presumed that Jupiter's objective was to kill one of the celebrities who visited this island. But perhaps Jupiter's aim—

A wireless warning interrupted his thoughts.

“A guest has struck a guard in Area West-E and bolted! All personnel, apprehend the offender immediately!”

Hide exchanged glances with Coma and the others and started to run.

—

As he ran, the case sit rep streamed into Hide's cyberbrain.

The perp was a VIP guest, a Middle Easterner. The events that culminated in his escapade were, in a word, peculiar.

A guard had spotted a guest removing his own arm in Area West-E and

called out, concerned that the prosthetic was malfunctioning. The guest *struck the guard with that arm* and bolted.

In other words, the prosthesis had served as a club. Swinging a fortified-carbon-frame arm made for a potent weapon here. The man, however, was royalty from an oil-producing nation and incredibly rich. Why would he?

Dashing to where the man had escaped, Hide caught sight of him in a lobby area.

A dust box was set into the wall, and the culprit was in the middle of disposing of his arm.

“Security!” Hide yelled as he ran. “Hands up please!”

Alerted to Hide’s presence, the perp got into a crouch and attacked.

He leapt and went for Hide’s right ankle, and when Hide saw through it and dodged, he struck the floor with just one arm to twist in the air and launch a roundhouse kick.

Hide blocked it with his right arm. Sparks flew from their prostheses.

“Hide, use the lance!” hollered Coma from far behind, still in pursuit.

When Hide issued a command in his cyberbrain, a white stick the size of a pen materialized out of nowhere. It was a special-command weapon available only to security personnel.

He shook the lance. It instantly extended almost ten feet.

The perp swayed to evade the huge stick as it swung. But it elongated some more, and rearing its head like a snake, wrapped around his leg. Anchors that resembled white fangs grew out of the stick and bit into the perp’s leg.

“Gah...” he moaned in pain.

Hide switched the lance’s mode without missing a beat.

In a split second the white stick turned blue, and just as soon, a powerful membrane current coated its surface. The perp writhed, his

body twitching.

After twenty seconds, Hide cut the switch to end the electrocution.

“Uh oh. One prosthetic steak, done,” quipped Coma, who’d caught up, looking at the man on the floor.

“He actually hasn’t suffered a scratch, so it’s fine?” shrugged Hide, erasing the lance with a command. “I’m wondering why this guy tried to throw away his arm. Please check that dust box.”

“At any rate, I’m amazed, Hide.”

“About what?”

“Extension is supposed to be the lance’s only command,” Coma marveled. “Yet you made it go all curvy, grow fangs, and stun with an electric current. What a waste of cyberbrain affinity on someone who’s just keeping tabs on terrorists.”

“I might not look it, but I used to be military,” Hide told him. “And it’s not like I’m a cyberbrain specialist. My imagination is a bit more fertile compared to other people, that’s all.”

“Imagination. The most powerful force on this island,” Coma said, laughing.

“I found the arm!”

Hide and Coma turned toward their colleague.

The arm discarded in the dust box was just a generic prosthetic for male use. The connector bolt was removed, the synthetic skin torn. Hide’s breath caught when he inspected it.

“Coma...Check this out,” he said, pointing to where the arm had been attached.

Visible there, silver white, was prosthetic bone, and its cross-section showed a dent as if some part had been pulled out. If the part had fit there snugly, then it was cylindrical with holes, like a sliced lotus root.

“You gotta be kidding me,” Coma groaned. “This dent...It’s the

revolver's cylinder..."

"We've tracked down the smuggling route," Hide said. "The gun parts were brought here concealed in prostheses. It was made of the same material so the scanning didn't register them."

"So this guest is the culprit?"

"Not necessarily. Maybe he's an upstanding citizen who got ghost-hacked and turned into a mule off-island. It's plausible."

"Yet invading his ghost to find out would violate our service provisions. How do we go about this?"

"We're going to have to be anachronistic," Hide said, smiling. "Question him."

"Yikes," Coma sighed with an exaggerated grimace.

—

They waited for the smuggling suspect to come to before interrogating him, but he didn't surrender any useful info. He was royalty from the Middle East, he said, on here on vacation; a guest, who had every right to discard in a dust box what was concealed in his own prosthesis. Now, he didn't know what had been concealed, nor why he'd done such a thing, but he certainly had the right. To restrain and interrogate him thus was rude behavior that he absolutely condemned.

Watching the video of the questioning, Coma and Hide could only frown.

"What do you think?" asked the security chief.

"It's the typical reaction of someone who's been ghost-hacked," Hide said, folding his arms. "I did expect as much..."

Coma chuckled helplessly. "'My laments, my sorrows, unbow your heads. And depart not, memories...'"

"Are you quoting Chuya Nakahara this time?" Hide glanced at Coma. "We can ruminate later about the sorrows of having your memories scrambled. Because we've figured out the enemy's m.o. Let's check the

surveillance camera feed for the last few days and search for whoever's retrieving stuff from dust boxes and staying on the move.”

—

Hide was walking down a hotel area hallway alone.

Overall, the island felt a little on the cramped side because the space was underground. The room doors were lined at relatively close intervals.

Examining the surveillance camera feeds, they'd come across several scenes of tourists picking things out of dust boxes and moving along. They were retrieving gun parts. These collectors, of diverse nationalities and creeds, were no doubt victims of ghost-hacks, too. Analyzing their routes, Hide concluded that all of them had passed through this hallway. The true culprit had to be in one of the nearby guest rooms and taking advantage of the cameras' blind spot to receive the gun parts from the collectors.

Hide stopped in front of one of the rooms.

Using his cyberbrain, he called up the visitor list. The name of the guest in Room E4403...

Seymour Glass.

Something about it bothered him, but he didn't know what.

He called up the roster details. Seymour Glass, a business owner from the former state of Connecticut, American Empire. He was here alone, on his third visit to SOFT. Guest Class N-A—he enjoyed super VIP treatment and could synthesize almost anything on this island, with access rights surpassing security's N-B.

Hide felt oddly agitated.

That name Seymour Glass...Something about it bugged him.

He tried knocking, but the room seemed to be empty and there was no reply. Hide used his security emergency rights to create a cyberbrain-print key to open the lock and stepped into the doorway.

It was a simple one-room unit. It had a synthetic-reality potted plant

and clock and built-in bookshelf. If a person was hiding there, Hide couldn't sense him. Slipping into the room, he shut the door and looked around.

Nothing in particular was off. Still, he felt an odd presence. He checked his cyberbrain sensor-input signal but to no avail. There shouldn't be anyone there—

Hide was slowly beginning to change his mind. Invading the ghosts of multiple billionaires to make them smuggle gun parts. *It wasn't Jupiter's m.o.* She'd opt for a more radical method, like having a guest ingest a liquid explosive and blow up near the target. The inefficacy of orchestrating a large-scale ghost-hack to sneak in a measly handgun was unlike her.

Was Jupiter...not involved in this case?

Had his hasty assumption conjured her as a mirage?

—*Look at the mirror carefully.*

The way she'd delivered that line came back to him.

An idea flashed like lightning in his brain.

“I see...So that's it.”

He remembered now. Seymour Glass was a character from an old story from the old America. Its author was J. D. Salinger. A genius of a young man ends up *committing suicide with a handgun in a hotel room.*

In the story is a scene where Seymour talks to a little child who mishears the young man's name and asks:

—*See more glass?*

Hide gasped and pulled out the hand mirror he'd been carrying on himself.

Having slipped out of his hand during his conversation with Jupiter last night, it had several cracks. His face was reflected on its uneven surface.

The super VIP Seymour Glass enjoyed N-A Class rights and could

synthesize realities that security personnel weren't permitted to. But stepping on it wasn't the only way to see through it.

Hide held out the mirror and gave it a few quick shakes. A flipped image of the room wavered on its uneven surface.

This mirror wasn't synthesized. It was an actual physical object. Whatever appeared on it needed to be computed and synthesized by SOFT, but shaking a cracked mirror that already needed to show a distorted image increased the processing burden. Thus a momentary time lag occurred before the scene became visible in the mirror. In other words, only for that instant, the world presented itself in its true form.

A human figure appeared in the mirror for a split second.

Hide turned around without thinking. Naturally, he saw no one there. But the truth lay in the mirror.

Shaking it again, he looked at the reflected image, carefully. The person in it—was familiar to him.

A round black hat with a brim. A blue overcoat with a hood that hid the face. A calm air. In the right hand—a gun.

As soon as it all became clear to him, an electric current assailed his cyberbrain QRS plug.

A cyberbrain lock—all of his strength left Hide, and his body started to topple, aslant.

In his fading consciousness, Hide recalled where he'd seen the figure: off-island, on a documentary news program.

Coma had brought it up in the cafeteria. A spree of anti-corporate terrorism that began with the abduction of the Serano Genomics CEO—that culprit's moniker was also from a work by Salinger, the creator of Seymour Glass.

A pop face mark appeared over the face of the gun's wielder.

"Allie doesn't belong to anyone," the guy said. "It isn't to be used by *those phonies* that Allie exists. I have to protect Allie. That's why I came."

“*The Laughing Man...*” groaned Hide at last, deep in his throat, and with those words his mind plunged into darkness.

—

Pain formed a circle around Hide.

They were memories from his boyhood that remained in his cyberbrain.

Darkness and solitude bound him. Not only could he not swing his arm to brush them away, he couldn't even scream.

Where is my body? Where is my body?

Squeezing out silent howls, the young Hide cursed the fact that he'd been born. It was the only resistance the boy could mount—resistance to life.

Not a single part of his body would move. Except his left hand. The rest, strangers had taken away somewhere.

Hide was confused. Was this a remembered past? Or was it just a nightmare? Or was this reality, and what he'd taken for reality merely a synthesized version? Just the dream of a fluttering butterfly?

It was as Kant said. Structural approximates of human beings, which was what we'd ended up becoming with our prosthetic bodies and electronic brains, no longer had the ability to distinguish reality. Fake cognition, fake reality. A pitiful mimesis of the Idea that forever failed to arrive at the *Ding an Sich*.

A ray of light shone through the darkness. It was a girl. The girl's smile had beamed and illuminated him in his darkness. That's why he stopped cursing life itself. But she, too, was now gone.

Just once more.

If she could, just once more—

—

“Ah, you've woken up.”

Hide opened his eyes on a bed in the security staff waiting room.

“Cyberbrain activity, green. So you were just forced to nap for a while. Scared the shit out of me.”

Hide’s eyes moved and caught Coma’s figure by his bedside.

“How long was I...asleep?”

“About half a day. Don’t sound so worried. We won’t dock your pay or anything.”

Hide raised his upper body. The mechanical pressure was still a little high. He felt faint.

“Hide, we found you collapsed in Room E4403. What happened? Did you come into contact with the perp?”

“Ah...Before I tell you about that, could you search the name ‘Allie’ on the island’s database?”

“Sure...but you’ll have to give me a minute,” Coma said. “That the perp’s name?”

“I don’t know yet.”

While Coma searched the data, Hide decided to scan the security log that had accumulated while he’d slept. An orange message panel appeared out of nowhere. He followed with his eyes the info that it displayed.

There was no trace of any commotion. Except for the alarm signal for Hide passing out from a cyberbrain lock, nothing particularly eye-catching had occurred. In other words, after knocking him out, the Laughing Man just quietly walked away, and behaved.

—I have to protect Allie.

What was his objective?

Perusing the log, Hide noticed an oddity.

“Is the freight liner behind schedule?” he asked.

It was forty-one minutes past the arrival time for the ship that ferried food and spare parts to the island.

“Hm? Oh, I guess she isn’t here yet today. Still, this much of a delay isn’t unprecedented. Her departure must have been held back because they went nuts over checking the freight thanks to this brouhaha.”

“Hmph...”

If she’d simply left port behind schedule, then that was that.

Any sort of trouble put Hide on edge given the timing. It couldn’t help but seem like something more. He ran his fingers over his nape where he’d been cyberbrain-locked earlier.

That was when Coma piped, “Holy...Is this ‘Allie’?”

“What’s wrong?”

Coma pointed at the bluish white search panel that floated in midair. “The system admin log retains that name. Allie is SOFT’s Admin001.”

“Let me see.”

Hide turned his attention to the airborne panel—another synthesized image created by the SOFT system.

“What’s going on here?” he groaned. “Allie has been accessing the system continuously since it began operating. He still has a connection from somewhere on this island.”

“Impossible,” moaned Coma. “This place isn’t big. I’ve at least got a handle on every employee’s face and background. But not one person has *never left the island* since we started up.”

A current shot through Hide’s head. “There is,” he blurted out without thinking. “There is one, isn’t there? Someone who’s never left the island since it started up—who can’t.”

Hide looked at Coma before continuing.

“The god of this place. *Mother. Of the SOFT system.*”

Suddenly a number of red alert messages popped up in the air.

“What is it?” asked Hide.

“It’s from the aboveground monitoring team.” Coma ran his eyes over

the messages, and as he did so, his expression grew stiff. “Damn... seriously?”

When Hide read the message as well, he couldn't help but voice his reaction. “The freight liner...*got sunk?*”

The messages noted that the ship, which had been behind schedule, was sunk in nearby seas and that multiple heat sources indicative of combat were detected in the vicinity. Due to having to clear several checks, the report hadn't been immediate, but it was that much more reliable.

“Hello, Topside Security Team, what's the deal?” Coma called out on his cybernetic line. “Hello? Come in, Topside Security Team!” After trying a few more times, he turned a stunned face to Hide. “No signal from our aboveground personnel.”

“What?”

Hide confirmed it. Indeed, the vitals were flat for the four members of the topside team. When he consulted the log, all four had been severed from the system simultaneously.

Something had happened.

“Coma. It mentions heat sources indicative of combat at sea...Did the freight liner that got sunk have any maritime warfare capabilities?”

“Yeah. Against pirates and cyberthief divers. TASS sonar and guided grenades, and two anti-air turrets.”

Run-of-the-mill pirates would disengage at the mere sight of such weaponry. If a ship with those armaments had gone down...

“It could be the doing of a fairly large criminal syndicate,” Hide said. “At any rate, we need some personnel topside as reinforcements.”

“A large criminal syndicate...like who?” Coma asked worriedly. “Mafia, cyberthieves, or terrorists?”

“We don't know yet,” Hide replied, walking already. “Whatever the case, let's hurry up there.”

He had a bad feeling.

Pushing aside the guests, Hide made for the only elevator to the surface.

As he waded through the baffled clientele, he espied beyond the wall of people a familiar silhouette.

A black rimmed round hat and a blue overcoat with a hood.

It was the Laughing Man. There was no mistaking him.

“Hey, kid! Wait!”

As soon as Hide yelled out, the Laughing Man spun and vanished into the wave of bodies.

“Shit, halt!”

“Jeez, Hide!”

Coma tried to stop him, but Hide dashed forth. Whatever the Laughing Man’s objective, he was linked to this situation, no doubt, and couldn’t be allowed to escape.

Chasing after his figure, Hide ran through the narrow hallway and into the supply warehouse. The area stocked food and accessory parts, and no synthetic reality seemed to be projected here. Storage shelves that rose to the dim ceiling stood in endless rows like taciturn soldiers.

“Laughing Man, where are you? This warehouse has no other exit. You’re trapped!”

Hide prowled forward cautiously. Coma looked uncertain but followed beside him.

“Hide, he’s here?”

“Yeah. Watch out. He has a gun.” Hide spotted something peculiar deeper into the warehouse as he spoke. “Wait...I see something. There.” He pointed at a brown object sitting on the floor.

“Is that...a catcher’s mitt?” asked Coma, perplexed.

Hide picked it up and gazed at it. Apart from being left-handed, it looked like an ordinary catcher’s mitt. Not an accessory part that the

island would include in its inventory, it had to be a synthetic projection. Was this the Laughing Man's doing?

Just as Hide tried to inspect the mitt—

“To all security personnel! Topside lost! Repeat! Some party above—”

Almost at the same time, the island shook.

The ceiling and walls creaked, and fragments flaked off—as if a sizable explosion had rocked the island's surface.

“What the hell was that?” asked Hide.

“I don't believe it,” Coma muttered, aghast. “The signals for our topside reinforcements...have all died out.”

“Died out?!”

Hide glanced at the catcher's mitt in his hand. On the inside, in blue printing ink and in type, were the words:

—*RUN AWAY.*

“Hide, watch out!”

All of a sudden, Coma shoved Hide, hard.

He sailed through the air. Before he could register his predicament, he slammed against one of the warehouse's metal shelves.

A moment later, countless bullets rushed to where he'd stood.

Innumerable muzzle flashes sparkled at the entrance. Bullets bore into the warehouse's back wall, leaving their mark.

“Wha...” Hide got up and yelled, “Coma!”

Bullets had riddled the fallen security chief as well. Almost no part of him was untouched. Another hail poured toward Hide before he rushed to Coma's side.

“Go...I'm...fine,” Coma said haltingly. “Hurry to...the SOFT core...the water...”

“Don't talk, Coma!”

Taking cover behind a metal shelf, Hide reached out his hand as best he could. He had to shield Coma from the volley, his head at least. Even a cyborg with a full-body prosthesis would die for certain if the brain shell were destroyed.

Hide's fingers caught Coma by the collar. Pulling him behind the shelf would have to do.

The security chief brushed away Hide's fingers. "You idiot! Go!"

A second later, a bullet sliced through the air from the entryway and blew away Coma's brow.

Specks of blood and cranial fluid splattered Hide's arm.

"Wh..."

Another hail of bullets. Hide could only roll away to get some distance.

Dead. Coma was dead.

Assaulted by some unknown enemy—what, what was going on? Why was this happening?

He looked at the entryway. Three figures in tight black bodysuits. Their hands held submachine guns. Steyr TMPs.

"Goddammit," Hide groaned through clenched teeth. "The enemy isn't a criminal syndicate...*We're facing military spec ops!*"

They controlled the warehouse's only exit. And clearly, they had orders to take out guards with extreme prejudice. He had no place to run, nor any weapon with which to strike back.

The soldiers stepped into the warehouse. They didn't seem inclined to let him be.

Was this the end?

Someone tugged his arm out of the blue.

"This way!"

Coaxed by the mysterious voice, Hide turned around to find an air duct popping up on the warehouse's empty wall. The speaker who'd addressed

him, however, was nowhere to be seen.

“Inside, get in here!”

From behind approached the soldiers’ footsteps. There was no time to think.

Folding his body, Hide hopped into the duct. He slid down its slanted interior, or more like fell.

“Koff…”

Past the dusty duct was the AC Control Room.

A youth came sliding after Hide, stood up, and spoke.

“It’s a matter of time before the enemy finds us here. We need to go to Allie.”

The youth must have lost his hat in the duct. For the first time, the face of the “man” was exposed to Hide.

Dark, unkempt hair. Calm pupils that seemed to suck in all surrounding sounds even at a time like this. He was much younger than expected—perhaps a minor? At the very least, he didn’t look like an anti-corporate terrorist who’d made the world quake in fear.

“You—are the Laughing Man?”

“I never introduced myself as such, not once.” The youth smiled. “They called me ‘Aoi’ back at the institution. I’m the one who summoned you to this island. Please help me protect Allie from that bunch.”

“W-Wait!” interrupted Hide. “What do you mean you summoned me? Who’s Allie? Who are those soldiers?”

“We don’t have the time for detailed explanations.” The youth who’d given his name as Aoi looked around. “First, please witness the state of the facilities.”

When Aoi shook his finger, numerous clips appeared in the air. They were real-time feeds from the place’s surveillance cameras.

It was an un-simulated hell.

In front of the elevator, the point of entry, six troops clad in slick, dark assault suits and two in heavy-duty armored suits fired at the guards. Under the arch of the Baroque-style palace, the intruders looked like true devils.

Two security personnel lay lifeless. By their hands were lances extended to their maximum length. SOFT's peerless suppression organs had proven powerless against actual lethal weaponry.

"They're an assault force attached to the Gavel Republic, with backing from the Eastern bloc. Unit code RASP. Their objective is to collect the system here, in order to regulate internal antiestablishment elements in the name of welfare."

"A government using the SOFT system on the people, huh? True, a regime that employed this place's capabilities would be synonymous with God..."

Still, inserting an assault force onto this island where the very rich from nations all over the world stayed was sheer madness.

"If that's the case, we're all the more stuck," Hide noted. "We don't have the firepower to counter a military strike."

Aoi, his expression unchanging, said, "There is a way. Cybernetic warfare. That, however, requires wired access to Allie and usurping SOFT's admin rights."

"I take it Allie is the system mainframe here?"

"Yes."

A groan escaped Hide. "But establishing a wired connection won't be easy. No one on this island has been told where the mainframe is."

Aoi nodded. "We'll just have to search for it. The attackers have yet to locate it, too. Any hunches? Thick cords, servers, and a cooling mechanism would be indispensable for running Allie's reality synthesis program around the clock. They have to be somewhere on this island..."

Hide considered the possibilities. A cooling mechanism...Seawater?

With Mother on the ocean floor...No, to avoid any subsurface electronic interference, the mainframe had to be inside the island's protective underground shell.

When he thought that far, a bolt of light streaked through the back of his mind. Coolant. Water.

"I know," he said, "where the core is. Come with me."

—

The place where Hide and Aoi rushed to was the island's public space. The cafeteria where Hide had eaten just half a day ago.

"The fountain?"

"Right," Hide nodded in reply to Aoi. "It's been bothering me. Computing complex reflections for images like a fountain entails a high processing burden. Synthesizing a three-dimensional image that requires computing the reflections and transparency of countless drops of water in a cafeteria with so many people is inefficient. If the fountain is here—that's because it's not a synthetic reality but an existing physical reality."

Hide crouched by the fountain's foundation. Feeling with his fingers, he searched for the interface bay.

"Here it is."

Peeling away the camouflaging tile, he exposed the bay. The wire plug, however, featured a cover to guard against connections. A physical key in the administrator's exclusive possession would be needed to open it.

"Damn. We don't have the time to be looking for a physical key," Hide griped.

"It's actually going as I planned. I went to all the trouble to smuggle in a lock-pick just for this reason."

"A lock-pick?"

Aoi pressed the muzzle of a revolver against the cover's sealing mechanism and fired without batting an eye.

The sound of metal breaking echoed, and the lock was destroyed. The cover came off.

“So that’s what the gun was for,” Hide muttered.

From his neck Aoi extended a QRS code and connected it to the plug. “Now I’m diving into Allie.”

“Wait.” Hide grabbed Aoi’s shoulder. “Tell me. Who are you? Why are you trying to protect Allie...the system?”

“*At the institution where we grew up, Allie was my little brother,*” Aoi said. “He was a crybaby who didn’t like being alone...He always wanted to be connected to someone and repeatedly performed these ghost-hacks that bordered on merging. In time, he came up with a plan. A plan to be connected to everyone all the time...When he parallelized brains and became the island’s system itself, he was happy. Even if the repeated ghost replication and parallelization meant he no longer knew who he was.”

Hide was at a loss for words. Ghost replication and parallelization. In other words, Allie used to be a human being...and the island’s system was his brain itself in parallel form?

Hide muttered, “These parallelized, replicated cyberbrains...”

“The data says there are 118 of them,” Aoi stated unceremoniously. “I’ll be diving, then...It might take me a while to break through the central cyberbrain defense barrier. It’s 118 against one, after all, and at the institution, that guy was the only one who was better at hacking than me.”

All of a sudden Hide recalled where he’d heard the name Allie.

Alley Caufield. A boy from Salinger’s novel *The Catcher in the Rye*. The protagonist Holden Caufield’s little brother and a child genius who’s already dead when the story begins.

“A big brother ought to help his kid brother.” Aoi smiled just a little. It was so sad a smile you almost felt bad for him.

Entrusting the revolver to Hide, Aoi closed his eyes and said, “Take care

of my body while I'm diving.”

—

Aoi was in a cyberspace that blinked a bluish white.

He drifted as an electronic signal in the endless expanse. Eventually, the exterior of a cyberbrain array that was intertwined like a molecular lattice came into view.

Aoi lacked his customary support AI array and decoy barrier. He had to break through Allie's ghost line despite being as good as naked, electronically speaking.

“Time for the ‘Laughing Man’ to shine,” Aoi said self-mockingly. “Shooting back my opponent's arrows is the only option. Decoy 8, stand by. Copying barrier array with URF code to anchor opponent.”

Aoi dove into the glowing blue sea of innumerable electronic connections and directories. He had no problem clearing the second and third levels. Assembling countless viruses and Trojan horses simultaneously on the spot, he sent them into Allie's barrier gate.

Aoi was diving into a cyberbrain as casually as he might brush away a curtain, but the amazing speed of his hack trampled on common sense and would have stunned a connoisseur.

The ghost line of the linked cyberbrains was now visible. In electronic space, it looked like a sea whose surface was a blinking net.

“Chief.”

It was the voice of a young boy.

The data of Aoi in the cyberbrain came to a halt.

“Allie...”

“Chief, I knew you'd come. Let's play. How about diving into someone today?”

“Allie. I'm not here to play. Bad guys have invaded the island. To counter them, could you hand over the SOFT access code?”

“How about a race through a barrier maze? I know, let’s go ‘skin diving’! We’ll see who can penetrate and dive through more cyberbrains without using a barrier—”

“This isn’t a game, Allie. And you’re not a human being anymore, but the remains of 118 ghosts that deteriorated from being copied over and over. You’re the end result of a genius hacker who hated being standalone and merged with others like mad.”

“Why...” Allie’s voice echoed through the cyberspace. “Why shouldn’t I fear solitude? You were so scared of it too, Chief!”

Two offensive barrier arrays stabbed Aoi’s cyberbrain. His consciousness data blinked red. The attack tore through the second stratum, and he finally neutralized it at the third.

“Allie. We don’t have the time to talk...The world of us peeping Toms has come pretty far since you shut yourself inside this island. I’m sorry, but I’m going to have to pry my way in by force.”

The cyberspace blinked red. Multiple interceptors shone like the eyes of a predator that wantonly gobbled its prey.

“Let’s see you try!”

Soundless sparks blasted in the space.

—

Carrying the motionless youth’s body, Hide grew impatient.

Not yet? Hadn’t the core been suppressed yet?

One warning transmission after another about facilities getting subdued came in via e-comms. It was a matter of time before the enemy came flooding in.

An armed trooper dashed in from one of the entryways. He seemed to be a scout detached from the main force. He and Hide noticed each other nearly at once.

Hide danced and leapt without even thinking. He launched a level, sweeping kick against the intruder as he tried to aim his submachine gun.

The SMG left the soldier's hands and clattered across the floor.

The soldier thrust out his fist, but Hide tilted his head out of the way and countered with a palm strike to the abdomen. An armored jacket absorbed the impact, however, and Hide's hand did little damage.

Such hardness—meant a full-body prosthesis. Blows wouldn't suffice. Hide had to target a weak point, the joint mechanisms.

The soldier backed up and assumed a fighting pose. Hide charged him anyway.

His opponent greeted him with hooks meant to rattle Hide's brain. Two, then three, to the chin. But instead of collapsing, Hide grabbed his opponent's ankle, tackled him, and brought him down to the floor.

“Nkk...!”

Hide wrapped both of his legs around his opponent's right arm and put all of his back into the elbow cross hold. The soldier's joint exceeded its sundering threshold and the conducting actuator shattered. Prosthetic bone stuck out.

Pulling a combat knife out of its chest holder, the soldier swung it down at the clinging Hide.

Before the tip could sink in, Hide fired all the remaining ammo from the revolver he was keeping for Aoi.

—

Shards of light drifted in cyberspace.

The wreckage of anti-immunity factors undulated like so much debris near the ghost line.

“Ch...ief...”

A parallelized ghost, whose sixth level had been breached and deprived of its barrier, was issuing commands to reboot its array, but it merely crumbled into white light each time.

“Allie. I would have loved to chat with you.”

“No...No way, Chief. Hey, don't erase me. Chief. Don't erase me. Chief. Don't erase me. Chief. Don't erase me. Chief. Don't erase me. Please, Chief.”

Aoi fell silent in electronic space.

This wasn't Allie. Born of *something like* Allie who had parallelized and lost himself, it was the shadow of a ghost. Just a processor.

“The world is overflowing with phony stuff. I actually wanted to talk to you again,” Aoi said. “On a bus stop bench, at a hotel bar, in a museum lobby. Just like that, we'd talk about a world that isn't phony...”

Instead of answering, Allie kept spitting out error codes.

“I'm taking the SOFT admin rights and control access pass, Allie,” Aoi stated calmly.

The space went dark.

—

When Aoi opened his eyes, the gunfight had already begun.

Hide was trying his best with a submachine gun he'd gotten off the enemy but failing to undo the sheer numerical disparity. Hemmed in by his opponents, who approached on three sides, his disadvantage was only growing starker.

“You're up!” he saw Aoi stirring and shouted, sounding fairly desperate. “I can't hold out any longer! Is SOFT in your hands now?”

“I need to borrow the body of the soldier lying there,” Aoi said, pale but calm. “I'll mount the SOFT program on a virus array and stream it through their comm lines.”

After Hide somehow managed to drag the body closer, Aoi established a wired connection to the soldier's QRS plug.

“But the enemy's cyberbrains are guarded like you wouldn't believe with military-grade offensive barriers!” cautioned Hide. “I doubt you've been able to bring barrier-penetrating viruses onto this island! What are you going to do?”

“I’ll assemble them now.”

“Now?!”

Military-grade barriers were inordinately more complex than civilian ones. Any half-assed infiltration could end in your cyberbrain getting fried by a four-tiered offensive barrier and instant death. An attempt with no more than handmade viruses was like charging at a fully defended fortress with a climbing knife.

“Barrier 014, 017 cleared...Comm gate under control...Branch positioning complete. Program ‘SOFT’ infection via enemy admin...Minus six seconds, five...Link complete.”

Had he—already broken through?

Aoi calmly told the astonished Hide, “Now, that bunch are members of this island too.” A bead of sweat rolled down the hacker’s cheek. “Actually...There’s a reason I chose you to be this place’s savior. Your cyberbrain depth...the width of your gate lets you connect to multiple cyberbrains and manipulate them simultaneously. It’s what people in the old days used to call ‘grit’ or ‘willpower’...With your cyberbrain complexity and strength, you...can become SOFT’s hero...”

Aoi trailed off, and his body lurched. Hide hastily propped him up.

“Please...Allie’s...playground...this tiny paradise...”

With that, the youth passed out.

He’d been at his limit. Even for someone who stole passersby’s eyes in real time, infiltrating Allie with its transcendent processing capacity, then penetrating military barriers in quick succession, must have taken all of his mental energy.

“Leave it to me.”

Hide started walking.

The troops fired their submachine guns at once. Hide simply raised his arm without ducking or taking cover.

The soldiers’ eyes went blank in their assault suits.

The bullets—hung midway.

When Hide waved his hand, the bullets turned upright in the air before striking and burrowing into the ceiling. Hide nonchalantly resumed his march.

“Soldier time is over,” he said. “From here on, it’s *wizard time*.”

When Hide swung his arm, a massive antitank gun appeared out of nowhere. It immediately let loose in the soldiers’ direction.

An explosive round hit the wall and spewed orange flames.

Hide leapt toward the troops as they tried to withdraw. Flying almost fifteen feet with a single jump, he landed along their escape route.

His fist shot forth and struck a chin. A soldier spun in the air from the impact, smashed into the wall, and slumped unconscious.

The other troops let out a scream and tried to run away.

Yet, their legs wouldn’t move. When they looked at the floor, the material was churning and had formed an army of hands to grab their ankles. Try as the soldiers might to kick them away, the stone hands didn’t even budge.

“You know what happens to scoundrels who point their guns at a kid?”

Hide poked one of the trapped soldiers in the head with a forefinger, which instantly transformed into a submachine gun. The 9mm HV ammo it regurgitated destroyed the suit’s head. Amidst the scattering fragments, the soldier fainted.

From the opposite hallway rushed in two armored suits and eight soldiers—reinforcements, apparently.

“So many,” Hide said. “Gotta fight numbers with numbers.”

Hide walked behind a pillar, and every time he passed, separate Hides emerged. One became two, two grew to four, and four turned into eight.

The eight Hides deployed lances in their palms.

From there, it was one-sided.

The armored suits' machine guns groaned and spat out bullets, but he flung them all away. Single-handedly. The tips of the lances danced like snakes.

The coiled soldiers, zapped by electrical currents, passed out. An armored suit approached from the flank and brought down an arm like a tree trunk. Hide met the appendage straight on with a fist and a bang and pulverized the whole suit.

The troops' howls and angry shouts, and storms of bullets—Hide appeared everywhere and crushed the enemy inside the island.

“Gkk...” The commander lay on the floor in his thermo-engineered camouflage suit. “You exploiting devil...Slave manufacturer!”

“Is that all you've got to say?” Hide was stepping on the commander's chest and glaring down at him. “You guys massacred innocent people on this island. Including my colleague...You'll have to pay for your crime.”

“Crime?” Even as the commander's face twisted in pain, his lips curled into a sneer. “Compared to the sins and evil spread by the developed world, this is nothing...”

“That's what I call the audacity of a thief.” Hide furrowed his brow unpleasantly. “A dictatorship that military rule gave rise to seeks the SOFT system to attract votes to an instable regime and to dominate the citizenry's ghosts, their very souls. What's that if not evil?”

“You brainwash with vulgar media and cyber entertainment, while we rely on guns and divine dispensations...Where is the difference? At least we are trying to bring happiness to the people!”

“You're wrong,” Hide declared. “Being responsible for your actions and recovering from mistakes is what makes us human. Like Aoi and I have... What you're attempting isn't even manufacturing happiness, but the production of zombies.”

“Kkk...keheh,” the commander chortled deep in his throat as though he were enjoying this. “What ignorance, what a blinkered view! The world... human beings, aren't so classy. Creating nothing, understanding nothing,

they flock to convenient information and willingly assimilate it and get played in droves. Feeling no responsibility whatsoever no matter how irresponsible the outcome, they eat up infrastructures that they take for granted with their aimless behavior. That's the people for you. Humans are born zombies.”

“Shut up.”

Hide pointed the barrel of a gun at the commander.

“Watch what you say. This one is a physical reality that Aoi smuggled in. If I punch through your brain shell with this, your gray matter will splatter across a physical-reality floor unlike with a synthetic-reality gun. You'll ghost out once and for all.”

The revolver's muzzle pressed against the commander's forehead.

“A naïve brat like you?” the man mocked. “You wouldn't dare. You need my cyberbrain as evidence for the international law court.”

All expression dropped from Hide's face. “You killed Coma.”

His eyes saw nothing. Neither drawing breath, blinking, nor feeling, his face was an object that merely existed.

The commander's own stiffened. “Wai—”

Hide pulled the trigger.

A high-velocity bullet capable of penetrating a titanium brain shell stabbed the man's forehead, exited from the other side, and dug into the floor. Blood sprayed from his head like the petals of a grand flower.

For a while Hide gazed down blankly at the commander's destroyed head.

Eventually, the revolver that he gripped vibrated all of a sudden—and vanished like smoke. So did the bloodstains on the floor.

“Take care,” spat Hide. “Your motherland's assassination squads aren't so generous.”

The surf lapped Leigo's shoreline.

Seated in a white chair, Hide was looking out at the waves on the horizon.

In his hand was a cracked hand mirror. The one with an amateurish frame, intended for her.

Jupiter wasn't here. It'd been a piece of disinformation from the outset meant to invite him to this island.

"Honestly, I wasn't expecting to meet you in person," a voice said from behind. When Hide glanced around, it was the young Aoi. "After all, I'm known as an anti-corporate terrorist."

"How's your body holding up?" asked Hide. The youth who stood before his eyes was supposed to be a terrorist that the police searched for high and low, but any compunction on Hide's part to do something about it was long gone.

"I'll be making myself scarce too," Aoi said, nodding. "I actually came here because I had a request for Allie. At the center, he and I were like brothers growing up. But Allie, too, didn't seem to be here anymore."

"A request?" asked Hide, turning toward Aoi.

The young man didn't reply and just silently looked out at the horizon.

"Hey, Laughing Man."

"It's Aoi."

"Aoi," Hide said. "You mentioned Allie not being here anymore. But that's not true. Your kid brother is right beside you."

Aoi laughed weakly. "He lives on in my heart—that stuff?"

"Nah." Hide shook his head and showed his palm to the youth. "Allie was right next to me from the beginning. Look at my hand."

After studying it for some time, Aoi answered, "There's nothing there."

"Yup. Nothing. *That's what's weird.* It should be coated with blood. Coma's blood, from when he was shot in the head. But there's not even a

trace of it. What do you think that means?”

Following a pause, Aoi's expression changed. “Don't tell me...”

“Mm-hm.” Hide nodded. “Apart from the 118 cyberbrains, Allie had an externalized memory apparatus.”

Jupiter's line about looking at the mirror carefully had helped solved the case at hand. Plus, she'd handed him the mirror. It couldn't happen, Hide thought, unless the system side tampered with his entire perception.

There was only one rational possibility.

“Right, Coma? Or rather...‘the one hundred nineteenth Allie’?”

No sooner than Hide spoke, empty space fluctuated and gave rise to a human form.

“Impressive, Hide.” Standing there wearing the selfsame fun-loving smile was Coma.

“Security Chief Coma doesn't exist in this world,” Hide said. “A SOFT creation, it's synthetic life that can laugh and cry...an AI.”

“That's about it. As for the memories and abilities, it's a synthesis of several different guards. Overlaid by a good portion of Allie's...‘my’ recollections.”

“Allie,” Aoi called gently, looking at Coma. “You're Allie?”

“I have a message from ‘my’ memory field.” Coma chuckled. “*Chief, sorry for the hassle.*”

Aoi looked at the ground and didn't reply right away.

When he finally raised his head, he said gently, “Allie. I had two reasons for coming here. To protect you from the soldiers...and to ask a favor.”

“I know, Chief.” Coma nodded. “You aren't the Laughing Man. Except for the first kidnapping case, they were copycat crimes by an impostor. Yeah?”

Aoi returned a slow nod and proceeded to explain.

“I came across a bad guy one day. A scoundrel who made a killing

selling drugs that didn't even work. I felt like I needed to do him in. If I did, the world might become just a little more decent...But reality was different. I was simply crushed by a bigger, more ridiculous scoundrel, an uglier phoniness in the world." Aoi was probably talking about the Laughing Man Incident that shook society. Then he wasn't the mastermind behind the case?

"I...Allie, I actually *came to have my memory erased* by you," Aoi said, his expression no less calm. "My memory of that nauseating Laughing Man Incident. I thought I'd then shut my eyes and ears and close my mouth and escape into solitude. Few hackers have the skills to delete specific memories from a ghost, and you can't erase your own memories."

"Chief."

"I envy you, Allie." Aoi grimaced. "On this island, everyone is together. No lies, no boredom, and none of that nauseating snobbism. If, like you, I could—"

"Chief, we all wanted to be like you." Noise ran through Coma as he said this, and his appearance switched out.

He looked about twelve. Soft chestnut hair, a faded baseball uniform. Big round eyes looked up at Aoi.

It had to be Allie's true form...when he was still alive.

With a youthful smile he said, "Chief, you're one of the good guys fighting against phonies. If you won't, who will? And we can always be together. You just need to come here. To this soft island that shuns no mind."

Aoi didn't reply. He just faced up biting his lip like he was bearing it.

Hide thought looking at Aoi's profile: Ordinary people spend their whole lives as if what surrounds them—their family, their organization, and at most the media and news—is the whole world. For those like Aoi and Allie who have an exceptional affinity for the net, though, society means innumerable cyberbrains connecting to the network and a deluge of information. Many hundreds of times more malice and wicked

thoughts prick them compared to the normal adolescent. Beaten down by the odiousness, they burrow into standalone shells or, conversely, try to merge with others right up to the ghost line.

Only they understood their loneliness.

“The system is entering into sleep mode. I’ve gotta go.” Allie’s form started to blink. “The next time we meet, let’s talk more. On a bus stop bench, at a hotel bar, in a museum lobby. About a world that isn’t phony but fun...”

With those words Allie vanished.

Young Aoi simply stood there unspeaking.

Was uttering some encouragement the thing to do? But Hide’s voice failed him, and he, too, remained silent by Aoi’s side.

Soon, the multi-rotor helicopter for guests arrived and landed on the heliport.

“Time for me to go,” Hide said. “Are you all right?”

Aoi didn’t open his mouth and just gave a straight nod.

“I’m considering going back to the military,” Hide shared. “The enemy commander told me that I’m a ‘naïve brat.’ Maybe he’s right. Maybe that’s why I can’t find Jupiter—and so I’ve decided to see humans in a wider world. To see the world from the same dimension that Jupiter does. For the time being, I could hitch myself to the U.N.-led peacekeeping forces and hop over to the peninsula.”

Aoi nodded and spoke. “About me—”

“I don’t intend to tell anyone,” Hide interrupted with a hint of a smile. “If you were the mastermind, you wouldn’t look so damn hurt. In the first place, you’d just erase my memory if I tried to spill the beans.”

Aoi smiled a bit too. “I’d recommend purchasing a quality cyberbrain barrier.”

“There’s not much I can say, but...Aoi. Keep at it.”

Aoi looked at Hide and responded with a small nod.

“Well, so long.”

“Yes, so long, Mr. Hide...um...Mr. Hideo Hisaragi.”

“Hisaragi is my birth parents’ surname,” Hide corrected. “I lost them both in an airplane accident when I was six. I was badly injured too...At that point, as an experimental subject for a full-body prosthesis for children, which was still a rare thing back then, my doctor adopted me. Now I use my foster father’s family name.”

“Which would be?”

Starting off toward the heliport, Hide laughed a little and said, “Kuze, written with the characters for ‘nine’ and ‘world.’ My real name is Hideo as in ‘hero’ Kuze.”

—

Seated in the helicopter, which had taken off, Hide gazed at the dwindling island.

Jupiter wasn’t there either. Where was she?

—Can you fold cranes with your prosthesis?

The question he asked her that day, that he shouldn’t have, remained lodged in his heart to this day.

The girl who was in the next bed, after that airplane accident...the other survivor, who left without even saying goodbye: the reason he wanted to go on living even though his whole body was prosthetic.

Was she able to fold cranes now? No doubt, Hide thought—baseless though it was. She did hate losing. Surely she had turned into an even more formidable prosthetic-user than him.

The terrorist Jupiter. He didn’t know why they called her that abroad. But there was a chance she was involved in unofficial operations as a mercenary who handled governments’ dirty work. If she belonged to “that side”—the world of conflicts, of politics, of the commander from earlier—then Hide needed the resolve to cross over to it as well. Developing

nations, refugees, lands ravaged by war—he had to see people in such places with his own eyes to fathom what she was fighting for.

There was no need to panic. It was quite possible that she belonged, in fact, to a government organization—like *Public Security*—in order to fight.

He thought about the events on the island that was shrinking beyond the window.

Everything there was a false image created by electric signals. And the island taught the truth about existence: *Your outside world is no different from this island.*

Human beings absolutely cannot recognize the world in its true form according to Kant. He was probably right. Touching your beloved is but a tactile signal. Hearing your beloved is hearing the waveform signals of your auditory device. We're prisoners imprisoned in brain shells who forever misinterpret the shadows of Ideas. We live out our lives misconstruing those misinterpretations in their totality as “mind” and “consciousness.”

Even this longing that pierced the heart like a thorn.

Still, with cyber technology, we're able to touch what comes closest to the Idea. The *Geist*. The root of humanity in the depths of a cyberbrain... The island exposed it and made direct contact with others possible. Moreover, just as we don't know why human beings have ghosts, it wouldn't be all that strange if linking to a network of ghosts is the only way to access Kant's truth—the “higher structure” whereof language cannot speak.

Then, for the first time, we'll be able to hear the immediate voice of our beloved, and softly caress our beloved.

If their paths ever crossed again, he would revisit the island.

It, and cyber technology, as Aoi and Allie showed, was by no means the dwelling place of devils that people were banished to for pursuing convenience.

The island was a soft island.

There, where barriers and even ghost lines melted and mixed—to touch the same thing, to feel the same thing, in that world.

Surely you'd want for nothing then.

Hide prayed for that day to arrive.

* Translation by J. M. D. Meiklejohn



SOLILOQUY

BY

YOSHINOBU AKITA

The setting sun shone in over the slanted penumbra at an equal angle as though bearing down on it.

There was nothing special about the park. It was a normative affair, dutifully positioned according to the city's legally mandated ratio, and in that same petty bourgeois way, unassuming and indifferent. At the entrance an iron railing to keep bicycles out stood like bad teeth; the clay field where no weeds grew was cleanly set apart from the managed flowerbed where wilting was forbidden; the diagonal rays of the setting sun separated light from shadow. In an orderly manner, everything was partitioned, from something else. The only ambiguous thing here was time.

How many seconds until dusk turned into night? A computation based on data would yield a precise answer, and it would be almost unconscious. But she couldn't carry it out...There was no reply when she consulted her prosthesis. Even the most insignificant part should have had the time at least.

Motoko felt less fretful than uncertain at the disconnect. All she perceived was the park. It wasn't that she was there. It wasn't that she was seeing it. Just purely, simply, oddly...it was just the park.

Something wasn't right, but she couldn't figure out what right away.

What she realized first was that she wasn't blinking. When a prosthetic reacted to an unforeseen event on its own, the brain couldn't keep up and registered it after the fact. From a little while ago, Motoko's had ceased to bother with any "play." Her mechanized prosthesis was calibrated to perform human gestures automatically in normal mode, but in emergencies it omitted such waste.

In other words, she was in combat now—or so she thought before judging that she was jumping to conclusions. It wasn't only her blinking. She couldn't move her limbs. Not because she was restrained, but because she couldn't even try to move them.

She couldn't even take a breath and study the situation. There was nothing. Her prosthesis, to begin with, wasn't in observation range.

Naturally, the same went for the brain shell that it held.

That meant she wasn't there.

And the "there" itself was bizarre.

That is, the scenery that she was seeing. Not a single person graced it, true, but it was also devoid of all motion. No wind blew. The clouds in the sky didn't change shape one bit. It was as though time itself had stopped.

She suddenly wondered how long she'd been this way. She had no idea. Perhaps it was just for a moment, perhaps it was for a billion years. No, that couldn't be, if only because brain shells had expiration dates...Yet she couldn't even tell if she still was in hers.

An out-of-the-body experience?

The term had an awkward standing on this planet, as electronically enmeshed as it was at varying thicknesses. The cyberbrain could leave the body and do anything, or so it seemed. Gathering info, shopping, crime, even leading a second life just in case.

But could humans live away from their brain shells? That was the question that anyone who experienced a cyberbrain bumped into. Did the sense of omnipotence mean you could cast off your body? Might you chip away at it and confirm where you began and ended? Humans were at a stage where they could live as a brain. The experiment was quite feasible, in fact. The concept had changed the meaning of life a long time ago. Or rather, returned it to its most elementary place.

The ghost, in a word—and it whispered:

Is the soul immortal? Did someone not promise that it is? Or...are promises made to be broken?

"Let there be light."

When words made their entry, Motoko froze.

Not that she had any body to brace, but she searched for the voice's source. It didn't exist, and that irked her. There had been no sound, at least not in the physical sense. Why would there be a voice in a park

where no wind blew, where even the dust was static?

Mere words. Pure data, if you would. But it wasn't exactly emotionless and inorganic, betraying her expectations again. The voice—which wasn't even a voice—sounded familiar.

It was a woman's. The voice that always issued from the speaker buried in her epiglottis. The one voice that felt both intimate and disorienting for her.

Motoko's own.

“Where there is light, there is shadow. But it's funny, because no one sees light itself, just the shape of shadows. So then, what is light?”

Asked this in her own voice, Motoko pondered almost reflexively: What is light?

Both a wave and a particle, united as the photon through some curious magic. It moved in a straight line, and reflected, and refracted. It was a picture, and a word, and therefore a narrative.

Ah, she realized.

This place she was had no light. What she was seeing was an image. She was in a perfectly still image. It was as though she'd been locked up in a photograph or painting.

Grasping that it wasn't scenery but an image, she modified her views. She wasn't in a space. The 3-D computations that her prosthesis should be replaying in her brain shell had halted, and a lone piece of image data was all that she perceived. It wasn't that Motoko wasn't there. She simply wasn't registering any particulars. Normally, the brain processed info acquired by a pair of eyeballs into a three-dimensional image, and that was how people knew their location and status. She wasn't managing to do that. Unable to obtain data from her prosthesis, Motoko's brain shell was assembling a fantasy deprived of context and based on error.

To wit...she was dreaming.

That awareness put an end to her uncertainty and discomfort. She

might even be able to stand in this place that had no space. A dream...just a dream...wish it...and it'd be granted.

Motoko alighted upon the park.

She felt that way because she understood herself to have been floating. That was strange, too, since she hadn't existed in this place before. Her brain had come up with the illusion to paper over things. It was to maintain people's sanity that many an illusion arose, to keep them from noticing things whose mere sight would obliterate reason.

The park remained somewhat unnatural but had transformed enough to lend itself to a videogame level of reality. She could at least stand and walk on the ground and gauge, at a glance, her distance to the monkey bars. But there was no guarantee that heading straight to a destination would actually get her there. She was in a dream, after all.

Something else had also appeared; more than one pair of feet had touched down. Another person. Motoko didn't fret and turned around.

It was a woman.

Motoko immediately felt offended. The woman was her spitting image.

She looked similar but was different. Motoko swallowed her distaste. Meeting someone who looked just like you could happen in reality, too, and would hardly have bothered her there. It was even to be expected if you used an identical model of prosthesis by the same designer.

She looked similar, but was different. In fact, she was so different that Motoko finding her similar for a moment was what was odd. The woman before her had better curves and wore a cheerful expression. Her voice also...seemed different. Raising her hand against the setting sun, the woman spoke, her tone rather pointed and mocking.

“Even if the crust has become a teeny bit electronic and bombs have ravaged it all over, I guess this is still the same light as when mammoths lived.”

Motoko calmly objected, “The atmosphere's state is different. Plus, this scene is digitally processed, and the capacity of prosthetic receptors is

fundamentally different from an organism's. Human memories aren't as precise."

"B-o-r-r-ring! Nincompoop." The woman gave an exaggerated shrug. "Why not just say, 'You're right, but your eyes are what's eternal.' You're so uncool."

"I'd say invading someone's dream is a lot less cool."

Motoko's hand roamed to her waist out of habit. But there was no gun. Not that it would have meant anything.

Even so, she made a display of her alert stance and challenged, "Who are you? Is this a ghost-hack?"

"If it is, why let you catch on to it?"

"It would depend on your goal."

"Sure. Then could it be well-intentioned?"

"Anything but that."

"Why not?"

"There are realms you just don't invade."

"You're denying the very basis of the Shell Force."

"...Sec 9 is a necessary evil. But I never thought of it as well-intentioned."

"You say that like you do it just for your paycheck."

As the woman continued to mouth blithe responses, Motoko pulled out a gun.

She stared straight at the woman past the sights.

This was a dream. Whatever you wished for came true. Yet, the woman alone seemed to be distinct from her surroundings.

Setting the exchange back on track, Motoko interrogated, "Are you a thrill seeker?"

"This isn't much fun, though. So far." The woman waved her hand in

front of the muzzle. “I wouldn’t. An imaginary gun is useless. There’s nothing you can do. I came to tell you that.”

“What do you mean?” demanded Motoko without lowering the gun, though she knew it wasn’t suppressing her—disgustingly correct—opponent.

The woman laughed. It was an odd thing to feel about someone with the same face, but she had a charming smile.

The words that the woman uttered, however, were ungenerous. “Normally, people don’t want to do anything.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Just what I said. How can you not get it?”

“Who are you?”

“It’s impossible to forget me. So why don’t you ask yourself?”

“Your point eludes me.”

“What’s eluding you isn’t my point, but what you ought to be asking.”

“It’s the same thing.”

Even as they traded questions, the woman’s posture shifted. Without any preliminary motions, she easily leapt and flitted from the horizontal bar to the monkey bars to the top of the slide.

Motoko bothered to continue to aim at her until the woman casually straddled the tip of the gun, at which point Motoko, fed up, drew back her arm. The woman didn’t even fall to the ground and instead jumped to her original position.

And she said, “I don’t think so. Even though you know whom to ask and, ultimately, already know the right answer, you understand nothing because you don’t have the appropriate question ready...That sounds funny, but living is a string of such encounters.”

“Can’t I talk to you without being lectured at every turn?”

While aware that she was being knocked off-tune by the woman’s

jesting, Motoko was having trouble recovering.

The woman knew it, too.

“Right. That’s my role.”

“Your role?” asked Motoko.

“The thing you lack right now, being out of order.”

“I suffer no defects.”

“You think so, that’s all.”

The woman put a hand to her ear as though to listen to the wind.

The gesture was as meaningless as a handgun. All you needed to do was to raise your sound collection device’s sensitivity. Not that Motoko could access her own at the moment.

Her lookalike who was also decisively different sighed...let out the SE of a sigh, and muttered, “Can’t you hear it? The ghost whispers.”

Pfft, the woman blurted like it was a joke only she understood.

Motoko didn’t see what was so funny, but hesitated to ask even that much. She didn’t want to give the impression that she’d accepted the woman. What tickled her so was probably spouting the trademark line to Motoko herself.

The woman righted her posture and started in on the situation. “It’s true that you’re out of order. Fatally so. The danger level is, let’s see, nine on a scale of ten.”

In Motoko’s view, a nine meant being shot at and the bullet, sure to hit, simply not having struck yet. Even as she thought this, she felt irritated that she was accepting, so meekly, the possibility that her standard of judgment and the woman’s might coincide.

The woman went on with an innocuous look. “The Locked-in State... might be similar. Relax. It’s not a stroke. But your cognitive functions aren’t working, so you could say it’s more critical.”

Once the woman got to it, her explanation was straightforward.

Motoko was familiar with the syndrome, and the woman rephrased it in a nutshell.

“‘Body Lost.’ Your brain can’t recognize your prosthesis as your body.”

“So I’m cut off from the net, too...”

“Of course you are. Unless you’re able to connect telepathically—wanna give it a try?”

To be precise, the network link was operative. It was the connection between the prosthesis and the brain that had been lost. Her self-awareness was failing to restore it. That meant either the brain functions being in a panic state or a simple mechanical failure.

The issue was...

Motoko glanced around. This park, this dream, perhaps this alone was maintaining her sense of self.

“With my five senses cut off, my brain can’t stay sane.”

“It won’t last long. But you’re still okay. Or maybe you’ve already gone nuts?” the woman said like it wasn’t any of her concern.

But perhaps it wasn’t. The woman didn’t really exist to begin with. Motoko tasted the irony on her tongue. She felt as though it was the first flavor in a while that hadn’t come through a sensor. Even if it was just a fantasy.

“Where am I.”

Not a question, she ended up voicing a thought she’d meant to keep to herself. It was difficult to keep your mouth shut in this place, she realized at that point. She felt like she was talking far too much but couldn’t protect herself with silence here.

She needed to go on the offensive, then. Probably.

It was the woman who asked back first, “You don’t remember?”

“It must be in my memory. Otherwise, it wouldn’t appear in my fantasy.”

“Come on, why can’t you just say, ‘I forgot, tee-hee?’” Indicating her surroundings, the woman continued, “It’s your initial Body Lost site.”

Now that she’d been told, Motoko remembered.

It was a long time ago that she’d come to this park. Just once. There was no reason to visit again, and she didn’t, but even if she wanted to, she wouldn’t have been able to. A few years later, the whole residential block had been bought up for government construction and been rebuilt.

Motoko hadn’t even checked how it might have changed. All she needed to do was connect to the net, but something that was second nature suddenly becoming inaccessible gave her the chills like the touch of the dead.

If “Body Lost” was what this was, then she was nearing death, both figuratively and literally. How much leeway did she have left, a few more minutes, hours, or days? She couldn’t even register the passage of time. Several years might have elapsed as she had this dream.

Yet it wasn’t the imminent crisis but the faraway recollection that tugged at Motoko’s consciousness. The events of a distant past—so ancient she wouldn’t find it strange if there were mammoths. She was, indeed, seeing the setting sun from back then now.

She heard footsteps. She walked lurching clumsily on her unfamiliar prosthetic legs. Someone’s gait was making a grating noise. It was the sound she’d heard that day: her own footsteps.

Motoko looked around but couldn’t find her old self trudging and dragging that noise. No wonder. She hadn’t seen herself at the time but merely heard her own footsteps. What she’d focused on was the scenery, and...

“My shadow.”

She glanced down at her feet. Motoko wasn’t moving, but a shadow shifted on its own. It was of a small, young figure. At a steady rhythm, like some rudimentary machine tool lacking the tech or capacity to modify its stride, it performed its awkward ambulation.

As she stared, the woman's commentary entered her ears.

“Equipped with your prosthesis, undergoing your rehabilitation, you were finally able to walk. So you wanted to. You snuck out of the center and walked around outside...How far did you go? You got scared all of a sudden. The reason?”

“I don't know.”

“You don't remember. Then I'll tell you, once again. Noticing that your body wasn't getting tired no matter how much you walked, you felt terrified. Immediately, you rejected your prosthesis. That was here.”

Soon the shadow reverted in form. To Motoko's shadow.

No, perhaps it wasn't hers but the shadow of the woman she was talking to. There was no way to tell from the shadow.

Motoko lifted her face, glared at the woman, and asked, “Was I saved?”

“What a stupid question.” It may very well have been one, but the woman's tone wasn't all that mocking.

“Why do I not remember...”

The woman's reply to Motoko's mutter was downright kindly. “After you regained consciousness, it took half a month for you to reclaim your sanity. Your rehabilitation continued, and that wasn't even the worst thing that happened.”

“Why is it ‘Lost’ this time?”

“Due to circumstances that aren't nearly as sentimental. Mechanical damage. An HV round punched through a bad spot. Not that there are any good spots.”

Clearly teasing now, the woman made a pistol shape with her fingers and aimed it at her interlocutor.

Folding her arms, Motoko let out a groan. “So even if I'm maintaining my sanity, I'm knocked out and under the sway of hostiles.”

“You must look pretty dead, so if you're lucky, they'll leave you alone.”

“If that’s true, then I got gunned down by some hopeless doofus.”

“How negative can you get? Do you just endlessly count the bad?”

As the appalled woman cradled her head, Motoko answered without a hint of a smile, “Numbers are endless. Basic math.”

She’d come by a general grasp of the situation. It meant that she had no measure against the greatest threat, though. At any rate, discerning an opportunity, Motoko stepped forward to interrogate:

“I understand you’re a product of my fantasy, but who are you? You’re like me, but not me.”

That was what she found odd.

This wasn’t some nightmarishly distorted version of her. It was one that she wasn’t acquainted with and couldn’t imagine on her own, she felt. Yet this was her dream.

The woman smirked like she’d been waiting for the question. “If you’re going to talk math, approach the issue from both directions.”

“I am like you, but not you?”

“Or I am not you, but like you.”

“What would you be as a result?”

It was sophistry.

The other party alone seemed quite satisfied. The woman pointed at her own head and then at Motoko’s before responding.

“Are you hung up on appearances? But I’m inside your brain. It’s your brain that’s picturing me. Even if I looked like a female gorilla or a Martian, the answer would be the same.”

“Meaning you’re me, after all? But you’re different from me.”

“Was the you who got scared of the prosthesis and withdrew not you?”

“So there’s more than one ‘me’?”

“A whole lot of Motoko Kusanagis. The more the merrier. Just like a

puppet show. Too bad we couldn't make this a reunion. We could've used another, short-haired me."

While the woman spoke sunnily, Motoko didn't relish the thought. In reply, she just managed to croak, "It's like SF, no...a soap opera."

"Or maybe an ordinary human being," appended the woman, who started at it again. "It's true of everyone. Isn't it? There is no firm, absolute self. People tailor their words to suit others, and the stage influences the role. The same light will cast different shadows."

"Then where is the light?"

"But that's been obvious from the outset."

"You're the one who's been trying to confuse me."

"Liar. I told the truth, first thing. Light isn't something that you see." After a pause, the woman added as if she'd had the brightest idea, "Wanna try?"

The woman's body lurched.

She hadn't fallen. She was still standing. But the ground vanished, along with all sense of balance.

The entire park was gone. Was "darkness" the word? Since the woman's form was still visible, this wasn't what Buddhism called the natural absence of light. To indicate that all was lost, had it been painted over with nothingness, as an effect?

There was nothing. Only nothingness. It was a supernatural vista where only nothingness was.

Change, time, and space didn't exist inside of the loop. The woman lurched...turned, now sideways, but there was no telling when relativity was moot.

Yet the dialogue didn't end. Gracefully spreading her arms, the woman intoned as if to divulge a magic trick, "The more clutter that's made to vanish like this, the less well you see. That's why it's necessary. This universe, this world, this...stage."

“Bring it back. You’ll destabilize my personality.”

When Motoko told her this, the woman didn’t object and clapped her hands. In an instant they found themselves in the park again.

The world had disappeared and reappeared, but their conversation continued.

“Be that as it may, if the tale is eternal, the actors’ turns go on,” the woman said.

“I’m not being performed by an actor. I’m alive,” Motoko shot back.

“People used to believe that this world is a shadow thrown by God’s light, didn’t they? Even when they awakened from that dream, physicists insisted that the universe might be a phantasmal projection, after all.”

“That’s not a funny joke when your brain is trapped in a fantasy.”

“If they were joking, it might have been funny.”

“How does deriding a mix of fiction and fact even pass the laugh test?”

“But so many people spilled tears over it. In reality.”

“The reign of capital has people weeping as much as religious strife ever did.”

“How is that a refutation?”

“I’m saying that one way or another, you’ll have people crying.”

“Where’s the anger? No righteous fury at the exploitation of the weak and consumerist society?”

“I fight crime.”

Mouthing those words now, they felt no different from the woman grandstanding about this overblown “tale” of hers. But there was no other way to put it.

The woman abruptly wore an earnest look and asked, “Addressing wrongdoing, have you been able to make the world a better place?”

“It’s not as simple as debugging.”

“...Right. Not freezing due to an error even when it’s faulty might be the misfortune of this world.”

With programs, that wouldn’t be the case. A bug was identified as one.

Had this world been crafted, then, to be okay with people committing crimes? It all came together better when you thought so. That endless chaos was everything.

The reason it wasn’t so clear-cut was that warmth undeniably exists. In other words, why is it that—

“The ghost whispers?”

It wasn’t Motoko but the woman who traced the thought and muttered the words. The woman shrugged her shoulders at her dumbfounded counterpart in the way of an apology.

“We think alike, after all.”

Or maybe it was that in a brain lacking a barrier, Motoko’s memories and thinking had been taken over.

But if she were to be vigilant, the dream itself could be a genuine fiction planted from outside. The character called Motoko and her recollections might be fabrications as well. Five minutes ago, perhaps the universe didn’t exist, and it had been created, deftly, to seem primordial.

When doubts spiraled out of control, they easily undermined your sanity. Thus you had to rely on a steadfast reality most of the time. It was just like evidence when you came under suspicion. Your selfhood required something outside you that you couldn’t revise even if you wanted to, a stern other.

Cyberbrain diving, as a skill, put that in grievous peril. Offensive barriers weren’t the only danger.

The woman, of course, paid no heed to Motoko’s growing alarm and continued.

“Humanity felt wounded at every turn. Like it was allergic to the truth, as the secrets of the world were exposed one after another. For instance,

when it became clear that in the end, the religious experiences of great sages could be reproduced with electrodes or this or that chemical substance.”

“Or when they learned that a mighty empire could fall to a single Parabellum round?”

“‘If you want peace...’ Oh. For the first time, you weren’t attempting a rebuttal,” the woman swallowed the aphorism midway, her eyes opening wide in surprise.

“I was being sarcastic.”

“Don’t be on edge. We’re in your territory, okay?”

As the woman indicated it with her arm, Motoko looked around the park.

It was still just the same. Even the setting sun refused to budge from its starting spot.

“Territory” was quite apt. The place was as close to Motoko as it could be...At the very least, it was inside the fundamental apparatus that was Motoko, and a false image born of it.

She muttered at the transient space, “Being here is the ultimate wasted effort.”

“Though cyberbrains are supposed to have opened a direct channel between here and the world.”

“You said there’s nothing to be done. Until my life maintenance system fails, am I going to have to trade questions with you like this?”

“Does a busted prosthesis heal naturally? That’s as improbable as telepathy. If no one rescues you, right, it’s over.”

“I can’t recall the final circumstances...” Motoko pressed her head lightly and focused her consciousness but couldn’t arrive at the data she sought.

In a quiet voice the woman said, “You must have been scared.”

“Scared? Me?” moaned Motoko, taken completely unawares.

The woman was directing a soft gaze at her. “This is death, after all.”

Maternally. Also like the Grim Reaper. The woman held forth.

“Emotions don’t go away just because you don’t show them. If it were me, I’d be howling and crying. Sure, you’re preoccupied while you’re risking your life, but dying...you know?”

“If I can’t remember, then I can’t cry.”

“Better not remember. This’ll turn into a nightmare.”

“Still, I need to grasp the situation.”

“Only to find out that it sucks?”

“Because it sucks.”

“Just calm down. Think of it as a vacation.”

“You don’t die on an off-day,” Motoko growled, stepping toward the woman for being frivolous even at this stage.

“But that’s so uncool. You don’t play at anything that could kill you?”

Motoko halted when she noticed that approaching the woman wasn’t shrinking their distance.

The park didn’t look any larger, and the woman didn’t move. Meanwhile, Motoko was moving. The virtual space was warped. Was its reality crumbling?

Was she dying at last?

The penumbra neared in as though to transition from dusk to night. Yet what appeared there was not night, but nothingness. Her vision wasn’t keeping pace with the mounting contradictions, and the virtual space was becoming untenable.

Glancing down at her body, she realized that she couldn’t even do that. She wasn’t there. She seemed to be back where she’d started.

Amidst it all, the woman alone stood untouched. Not letting up, the

woman pointed at her own prosthetic chest.

“Me, I chose this job seeking thrills. How about you?”

I haven't got the time for life stories, Motoko was about to yell at her.

Sinking deep below a watery surface, she noticed a buoyant force gripping her body. Not yet. She wasn't ready to disappear yet. Even if she couldn't find herself, there, where the woman stared...in the place reflected in her eyes, Motoko was.

She'd get ahold of it. To that end, she offered a reply.

“Who knows? I can't say that I'm bored.”

“I'll bet that I...that we'll arrive at the same place despite everything.”

“The same?”

It did feel strange. She might be losing her selfhood, but was relaxed and engaging in this banter.

Sure enough, continuing the conversation had stabilized her. The park was gone now. All that remained was nothingness, and a woman who looked a lot like her. But at the other end of the woman's dialogue was Motoko, too.

Discussing where to go, when there was nothing, and vanishing even from there—that was strange as well.

“The same place,” the woman answered. “Narrowly speaking, Sec 9. Broadly speaking, this universe.”

“Can you ever not arrive at the universe?”

“You saw it just now, the nothingness.”

“So if you get locked in, you can.”

“Can or cannot. Chance or necessity. Free will or fate,” the woman set down like a cramped street vendor. “It's easy to divide this world in half. Telling them apart afterward is what's difficult. The mirror and yourself. They ought to be different, but you can no longer tell how.”

“The left and right are different.”

“How do you tell left from right?”

“You just look at the point of symmetry.”

“Where is that point? Are you taking your knapsack and finding it on a journey? Even your own self seemed like an absolute at first but can't be told apart. There are two of us right now, aren't there? And there could be more. You don't know about the Puppeteer, do you?”

“What's that?”

Motoko couldn't let it pass.

It dissolved, as though corroded by acid, into chaos.

Whether the word she'd clung to was a lifeline or the noose immediately grew unclear.

“It's contradictory for you to know something that I don't. Is this a ghost-hack, after all?”

“You want to think I'm your enemy. You have to settle things one way or another even when you're down.”

Nothing.

Other than this exchange, there was nothing. The nothingness was crushing her.

“It beats staying powerless.”

Nothing.

“You can't fight if there's no one to fight?”

Nothing.

“I'm talking about an actual crisis.”

Nothing.

Nothing, nothing.

She was able to make sense of just this exchange. But the self that was making sense of it was disappearing.

Even then.

“You...I have to bring down. I can't let you escape!”

Contacting Motoko and making her think it was a dream after nimbly encroaching on her ghost—this was one formidable hacker. Moreover, of a clearly criminal bent: a deep-rooted, latent sociopath whose word and deed succored revolutionary disorder. Left to her own devices, what might she not—

Was “at that instant” the right expression?

It was certainly then, though time may not have been in business.

“Yes. That's the way we are.”

The woman clasped the hand that Motoko reached out.

Her self was present. The woman was there, too. The rest was still nothing.

Stable again, Motoko locked eyes with the woman. What was reflected in them became evident as Motoko brought in her face. The woman was looking at her, but that wasn't all. They were facing mirrors, showing countless Motokos to each other.

“You didn't hesitate for a moment,” the woman said. “About fighting. Doesn't the opposite ever occur to you?”

“Flight? No.”

“Because...it would make Batou sad?”

“Why mention him?”

“It's not as if I ran away, either. But this world...is too vast if you're searching for something important.”

No rhyme or reason. True, it was like that from the beginning.

Still, Motoko felt that she understood, for the first time. “You speak of things that aren't. So is this really just a dream?”

Not a hack.

This was no man-made trap.

It was mere, uncontrived fantasy, or—

Can it be...?

Before the words could take shape and etch themselves in her brain, the woman's voice muffled them.

“Yes. It's all a dream and nonsense. But no one knows why we dream, nor remembers...”

Their clasped hands melted into each other, and their locked eyes ceded to a muddled view, and Motoko could no longer tell if the voice was her own or the woman's.

“Human ingenuity might conquer the universe and obtain omniscient answers, but in the end this is where it arrives. To the greatest mystery that was supposed to be the simplest: ‘Now, what was the question again?’ ”

“To keep searching for it...over and over...forever and ever...”

Gone.

No, that wasn't it.

She saw light.

She awakened.

Her vision connected.

What entered her view first was the white ceiling.

It looked preternaturally white not just because the ceiling was white; she'd been staring at the lights. She must have slept with her eyes open. On the heels of her vision, the pressure sensitivity circuits on her skin transmitted the feel of the soft sheets and pillow.

It was a hospital room—and a fairly decent private room. There were no windows, but the interior included a flower vase and treated the occupant like a human being at least to that extent. Motoko lay on the only bed. As her prosthetic body began connecting, certifications and a busy hum of reboots crowded her brain shell.

She had recovered. The status of the prosthesis was all clear. Though unharmed, it wasn't the one she was accustomed to, but rather a general-use, economy-grade item. She must have been moved to a tentative body for the time being.

“Such a leisurely awakening, our dear princess.”

Right around when her hearing connected as well, a colleague's familiar invocation entered her ears.

It was Batou. It seemed like he'd been here for a while. Large frame, large head, large hands—just by standing up he added color to the bland white room. The colors weren't vivid, but they had warm hues.

“What an awful face. Well, I mean your prosthetic mug.”

Motoko touched her face when he said this. Not only did it have plain features, its all-purpose setting only accommodated standard emotional expressions. “Rental spec?”

“Well, we needed to hitch up the brain shell asap. It had to connect just like that.”

“I'd say it was appropriate.”

Batou did things right—actually, not entirely, but right enough that one could leave it at that.

She asked Batou, who sat down in a chair he brought to her bedside, “Why am I in a hospital?”

“We had a surprise gunfight. You got shot and were damaged. How much of it do you recall?”

Getting the story just to be sure backed up what she more or less knew. Still, Motoko quietly listened to Batou.

“Switching out your prosthesis didn't restore your consciousness. We came to a hospital because the condition could be medical. Plus—”

Motoko preempted what he was about to say. “In a hospital, as long as you're alive, you won't be scrapped even if you never wake up from a coma?”

“Pretty much.”

Batou cheerfully wrinkled his face.

Motoko’s expression didn’t change, and she found his use of a preset fake smile quite unnecessary.

“So, I took a very long nap.”

“Yeah, four full days. It’s a miraculous recovery. The doctors had given up on you.”

Batou made a praying gesture with his hands as though moved.

Glancing at him, Motoko muttered, “It wasn’t luck. I had a contingency plan.”

“Yeah?”

“Maintaining my sanity by having a lucid dream.”

“You had one prepped?”

“It’s not an electronic measure, but a form of hypnotic therapy.”

She’d let the cat out of the bag, but Batou slapped his forehead, all the more impressed. “Even reduced to your brain shell, you weren’t helpless? You’re something else.”

“When I was still unused to my prosthesis, I suffered the same syndrome. My physician at the time administered it to guard against a relapse. It couldn’t hurt. I didn’t think it’d work, and I’d forgotten.”

“That’s like leaving one last bullet in the chamber. There’s no guarantee, but survivors have that foresight.”

“I’d say only the result matters. What happened to the guy who shot me?”

It all came back to her. It was a chance encounter as Batou said, an unscheduled run-in with hostile forces in an alley the first thing after setting out. The other party hadn’t expected it, either, and maneuvered to avoid a collision, but one of their bewildered greenhorns took a wrong turn in retreating and came out right in front of Motoko. A submachine

gun loaded with cyborg-penetrating ammo hanging from his neck.

“He was lying in the same spot. Mutual destruction. Well...he died instantly, so I guess you won.”

“Victory, huh...”

If she had gotten killed, it would have been a fool’s death.

The tenderfoot had met one there.

Motoko fell silent, thinking, or not knowing what to. It defied thought, indeed. After she meditated on it for a dozen seconds or so, the deceased youngster was fast fading from her mind. She’d been trained to shrug off killing. Her mood aside, her body obeyed her training.

Giving thought to the mind-body relationship was certainly ironic given this body of hers.

Motoko opened her mouth. “Perhaps, this is all some fiction and—”

“Oh, give me a break,” Batou cut in, appalled. “Someone who had a near-death experience delivering a sermon is already a terrible joke. So goddamn clichéd.”

Still, Motoko didn’t stop. She’d have smiled in her usual prosthetic body. “Maybe we’re always dying.”

“What the hell? I’m not having a cyborg sob story, not from you. You’re gonna jinx us.”

What’s he talking about, Motoko thought, but Batou seemed frightened for real, so she rephrased herself. “Not what I meant. Even in a human body, every time you sleep, you die.”

She lifted her hand and placed it on her chest. She had no heart.

Even if she did, a pump for cycling blood was all that it’d be. A heart offered as little proof of life per se than a prosthetic mechanism.

Yet she wanted to feel it, along with her words.

“And every morning, we come back to life. Rebooting over and over. For the sake of the mission.”

“What mission?”

“Who knows...I did, when I was dead.”

“Best we never learn, in that case.”

“Right.”

Waiting for the ghost's call in order to live our reality.

Waking up time and time again. Always...always seeking that light.

Like sunshine filtering through far too large a tree.



SPRINGER

BY

TOW UBUKATA

Sometimes I don't know if we're really benefiting from this thing called technology. When you're doing police work, for example. I have some serious doubts. I mean, everything we use, the most injurious guys can, too. In fact, I often wonder if they don't put it to better use. The case from the other day really drives it home. But I guess there's no going back. That's the thing with technology. Once it's developed, you can't backtrack.

Okay, this last case. I don't know how to put it, but it was exhausting. It made me question to what extent the police ought to bother with what these types get up to. Well, I understand that a detective shouldn't say that. Huh? The entirety of this exchange is on the record? Come on, I know that.

What, you don't like my attitude? Hey, I'd usually care about Internal Affairs people and act like a true cop, but I just can't get into the mood. Yeah, my buddy must feel the same way. He's been quiet this whole time and won't even meet your eyes. Stop kidding? Do I look like I'm kidding?

Oh, I'm coming across as insubordinate? Impossible. I wasn't betraying any such tendency. Why would I? I'm too old to rebel just because. Well, it might be that I'm not on any sort of promotion track. Frankly, it's high time I quit. I would've a long time ago if it weren't for my buddy.

Ah, the case. You've read the investigation progress report, haven't you? No, I had a robot input them. Even we police have lots of those things these days. Huh? The usual term is "bodies"? Uh, I don't know if I could get used to that. It just sounds so raw. Not that "people" would do. Something like "pups" would be even worse, like we're making fun of them. They actually do scare me, you know. Like they're multiplying on their own. Yeah, the robots. I can't help but picture the precinct overflowing with ones that you can't tell apart from us. Maybe humans will be in the minority soon.

Yup, I gave a dictation to one of those things, or bodies. The robot's serial number is right there in the report, so go ahead and search its cyberbrain. Huh? It's not called a "cyberbrain" if they're robots? What should I call it, then? Oh, a neurochip processor. An NP, eh? Non-Player.

That's kinda old-fashioned. Nah, don't mind me. Back when I was a kid, programmed characters used to be called that. In games. Gone out of fashion, though.

Uh huh. I'll discuss the investigation. The précis of this case is, first, a murder attended with robbery. At least that's how the investigation began. Second, the theft of a special-use prosthetic body. Third, irregular corporate accounting.

We weren't sure whether or not to add serial murder. We said forget about it because that's what the CIS chief told us, too. I mean, right? A murder is a murder, but the issue is the murderer.

The first victim was Kozo Iriyama. Seventy-nine years old. User of a full-body prosthesis for the elderly, had the outer appearance of someone in his thirties. The third CEO of the sporting goods manufacturer Signet, he was found dead at the company's factory. Shot with a high-caliber bullet from behind, his brain shell was smashed, and he was identified as Mr. Iriyama via blood obtained from the artificial spine. It was obviously murder.

Four prosthetic bodies intended for sporting use had vanished from the factory before being shipped out, all of them female models. They were for Olympic athletes—two for figure skating, two for track and field. Incredibly expensive and ferociously high-performance.

The order was from the Prosthetic Meet Club, and an insurance investigation organization affiliated with the Olympics is managing the funds. The selected women athletes that the products were meant for lodged a complaint that they couldn't compete without the right prosthesis.

As usual, we and the media shared info, scratching each other's backs. It seems to have been all over the news. No, I didn't watch any of it. My doing so would have changed nothing. Too bad for the athletes who'd been training for the Olympics, but I assumed the prostheses had already been disassembled and sold off in the black market.

My buddy and I pursued sales routes for the stolen prostheses. Special

ones that merit insurance claims have multiple tracking functions in case they're stolen. Electronic tracking devices get disarmed if the thief has the know-how, but there are other ways.

Yup, colors, sounds, odors. They trigger when the product is taken out of the factory before the safety is unlocked. For instance, giving off sounds and smells that humans can't detect. Sometimes it's a transparent marking liquid leaking out. It becomes visible when it's illuminated with filtered light, and once it gets on you, you can't get it off without a dedicated specialist.

My buddy and I focused on the odors. We dropped by the homes of the black-market guys and all.

As you can see, both my buddy and I are cyborgs, too. Don't tell me you didn't check out the files on us, too. Ah, why is the make five years old? I tried out some of the police-use prosthetics. I even ran a simulation using the newest model. I didn't think it'd be any good even against a pickpocketing brat, so I told maintenance that I'd make do with my current body. My buddy didn't seem to be taking to the new one, either.

Right. Our eyes, ears, and nose are special-duty. I use my eyes, this guy his ears and nose, for tracking. That's how Hound Team operates. We parcel out the five senses.

That's because the enemy lays traps. Purposely scattering inks and scent trails that resemble tracking material just to mess up the investigation. We don't want to get suckered by their lame tactics, so we maintain separate perspectives in pursuing the enemy. If my buddy and I feel inclined to go off in different directions, then there's a possibility that they're messing with us.

But this time we were misled in a new way. The details are in the report, but we couldn't even find a trace of the stolen prostheses after hitting all the black-market dealers.

I wondered if they were sealed up and transported whole to somewhere overseas. Yeah, it's rare. Of course it's safer to fence it domestically. Who'd want to go through customs carrying not just one but four

prosthetic bodies?

But these products were special ones for the Olympics, so I did suspect that a foreign broker might be involved. Turned out the involved party wasn't any broker, but mercs. A quartet of men had been hired to rub out Mr. Iriyama. These professional thugs want to make a living killing people even though the war's over, and one of them was found dead harbor-side.

How was the scene? Well, "fucked up" doesn't begin to describe it. It was a boathouse by the containers sector, but you couldn't tell which bits were boathouse and which were corpse. The murder victim had worn a buffed-up full-body prosthesis. Still, the forensics people were at a total loss despite their small mountain of analytic robots. It was that fucked up. The scene was god-awful.

No, it wasn't explosives, though we thought so at first, too. A boat engine did explode, but that was just like the topping. The forensic investigation revealed that the ugliness was thanks to cyborg-on-cyborg combat.

And the same investigation also turned up a scent trail. The kind emitted by a stolen prosthesis. A scent, and also one of those special marking fluids.

That's why my buddy and I were called to check out the harbor, and boy, was I surprised. One of the stolen prostheses showed up on the harbor area's surveillance footage. Not because the dead merc was transporting it. The thing was dressed and walking on its own. They'd put some clothes on it prior to shipment, and it was still wearing them.

You know, this was one beautiful prosthetic body. The ones made for pro sports do look pretty, if you don't mind my saying. They catch your eyes and are certainly easy on them. But this was something else. It was frighteningly beautiful. What was in it must be the reason why I felt that way. Anyway, it was otherworldly.

Uh huh. Speaking of which, the very fact that it was moving was otherworldly, too. I mean, a supposedly empty prosthesis was walking

around on its own. That's not all. The forensics people's investigation concluded that the merc had been killed by that prosthesis.

Isn't it confusing? We thought we were investigating a murder attended with robbery. My buddy and I were chasing after the stolen goods. But the stolen goods had killed the killers. As though to avenge the CEO—which was actually the truth of it.

The question was whose brain the prosthesis contained. This was an Olympic model, okay? Average people can't handle one. With prostheses, high performance isn't always good. My brainpower, for example, wouldn't be up to it.

But whoever it was had exercised its full potential and tore apart, with bare hands, a feller in a tuned-up prosthesis who killed people for a living.

You bet I was wary. Imagining who might be in it sent chills up my spine. 'Cause my buddy and I, we had to go after this individual.

Well, we actually found the first one without having to risk our skins. It was abandoned in a garbage dump in the old city not far from the crime scene. A neighbor reported it. Right, there was no brain. Empty.

Then the next killing happened. This time, two of that quartet got offed. The crime scene was even more gruesome than the first, like they went on a rampage or just nuts. The apartment building is in a seedy part of the old city and was being rented from some gangster. It was as if someone had thrown the whole room into a jet turbine. The forensics analysis revealed that it was another prosthetics fight. They also found a second scent trail. From a stolen prosthesis—the previous one had been for figure skating, while this baby was for track meets.

Thanks to one of the hard drives in the room, we learned that the mercs had been hired to kill the CEO. We didn't know who had hired them, but they'd gotten their hands on the factory layout map to plan out the murder. I mean of the factory where Mr. Iriyama's corpse was found.

The prosthesis was found on the same day. It was the second stolen product, and empty again. The smart money would've been on someone

switching out prostheses to go around avenging the murdered CEO, but no amount of reasoning could explain the oddness of it. I had a sick feeling that something weird was going on.

Anyone could tell that this wasn't just a murder attended by robbery. My buddy and I kept chasing after the prostheses, but by that point the very nature of the investigation was totally different.

We needed to dig deeper for info on Mr. Iriyama, the CEO, to identify who had hired the mercs and who had killed them. All the other detectives with us joined the investigation. The CIS chief even got in touch with the Ministry of Defense because it might be classified as anti-corporate terrorism. Plus, it could have an adverse effect on the Olympics, so even though the only victims were the CEO and the hit men, the case got bigger and bigger.

But you know, my buddy and I, we had a hunch what this might be. That's why we broke off from following the stolen prosthesis' scent trail and started looking into the company.

These firms that develop and manufacture prostheses tend to be up to other stuff, you see. Once we looked into it, what would you know—well, no direct dealings in illegal items. They were subtler than that. They did business that was on the borderline of the law.

The question was the purpose of the money they earned that way. Tons of foreign corporations still try to profit from war, right? No compunctions at all about infringing on international law. That's where the money was being channeled. They were handing not just cash but prosthetic tech they'd developed to folks our country tells us not to do any business with, so it was clearly criminal. It violates national protection statutes and you could even be accused of treason. Who's that desperate to become a billionaire? I guess you get a little greedy and then find that you can't back out and end up going all the way. A chump like me can only imagine.

Actually, it wasn't that the CEO was steeped in crime. Not that he was squeaky clean. The bad apple, though, was the company's financial

manager. The CEO caught on to it and chose an effective means of ridding his firm of dangerous elements—a merger with a foreign firm. There'd be a third-party audit, and the financial manager must have panicked. So he contracted mercenaries to kill the CEO, hoping the merger would get scrapped.

Why would he bother to hire mercs? Well, because the CEO was the same breed. Diversifying as he did during the war and growing the company to that size, he'd had a few scrapes and spent a fortune on personal security. No street thug was gonna bring him down. That's why the financial manager tried to kill him by contracting top-drawer assassins.

The business the CEO did during the war? There were a few, but developing animal cyberbrains and prosthetics, for instance. It became an issue after the war, didn't it? Nowadays, some families turn even their pet dogs into cyborgs, but those were legitimate weapons during the war. Besides, if you don't do a massive number of tests on animals before you try it on people, I suppose you're never going to churn out a lineup of these high-performance prostheses. Hey, if you want to know more, email an animal rights website and ask for their brochure or something.

You're asking me if they developed anything worse? This was wartime. Heaps of stupid shit—in terms of what the CEO trafficked in, you have converting animal brain afflictions into a cyberbrain program and installing it on humans. Some dogs have this innate cerebral defect where they can't manage their anger, for example.

It's called the Springer Rage Syndrome. They named it that because the condition was first observed in that particular breed of dogs. It's not like all springers fly off the handle. A few of them suffer from the illness, that's all.

It's a form of epilepsy, and they suddenly exhibit aggressive behavior after something sets them off. Dogs actually don't attack that easily. They do try to warn and intimidate. The ones who've got this sickness, though, aren't even aware that they're attacking. It's a brain affliction, you see. After going insane and attacking indiscriminately, they go into a daze and

don't remember what they've done.

You turn this sickness into a cybernetic program and use it on people. It's a kind of cyberbrain virus. I heard it saw some action during the war. Say you stream it into your target's family member, or their cyborg dog, as a matter of fact. Goodbye, peaceful dinner table, hello, site of a gruesome massacre. What's more, the poor sod you fed the virus to can't explain his behavior. You weren't manipulating his ghost. His cyberbrain got sick, so it's literally a virus.

How did I find out? Well, I asked one of their animal prosthetics engineers. He said he was the oldest face at the company. Elderly type, pretty rare these days. Right, it wasn't his biological body. He preferred to come across as an old man. Me too, I thought it was just his taste in prosthetics.

It was that man who told me. He told me all sorts of stuff. Like about the CEO's pet dog. And right beside him was this ridiculously large canine cyborg. One of the company's old research models, apparently. It was bigger than my buddy.

He also went on about some weird shit. I'm just gonna repeat what he said: The ghost of the murdered CEO is drifting on the net, even now, and taking revenge by possessing prostheses that his company developed. Yeah, go ahead and laugh. When I heard it, I almost burst out laughing, too. It's nothing but a joke.

You've heard of the third world, haven't you? I mean in the sense of a world of data existing apart from both humans and things. I suppose you could call it occult talk. Our society used to be just the world of humans and the world of things. Man versus nature—by creating civilization, humans established a world of their own and treated nature like things, I think that's how it goes. The idea is that in the same way, these things called data might grow and in time become independent of humans in turn to craft their own world.

It's idle gossip, but some folks believe it. I guess it's like religion. There are people who copy their ghosts onto the net before they die. Sure, the

net is teeming with programs we have no idea who made for what reason, and sometimes they affect each other and morph into some other bizarreness. As it gets more complex, who's to say something distinct from humans won't be born?

Now. Damned if I know what to think about that.

At any rate, we had a pretty good handle on the side that wanted to kill the CEO. We needed to find the remaining pair of stolen prostheses before the last merc was slaughtered so we could shine the light on the perp who was executing the revenge. By then, various sections were on the move, and honestly I couldn't tell which organizations were partaking in the investigation, there was so much crisscrossing info, but my buddy and I's task, in any case, was to get on the scent trail of the stolen prostheses.

It's a shame because we were on the right track. We even figured out where the last merc was holed up. Also where the financial manager had fled. It took all eight members of Hound Team, but we were too late in the merc's case. The scene was even more atrocious than the first two. The merc had called on a couple of pals for some protection, and the three of them died like chums. Yeah. Very chummy. You couldn't tell which bit belonged to whom. I'd rather not say more. Consult the 3D data that the forensics robots compiled, will ya?

Half a day later, at night, we found the third stolen prosthesis. It'd been dumped in a canal. My buddy and I were the ones who found it. A beautiful female prosthetic body that might have won a gold medal was sticking its head in a drain like a mannequin, and the sight was so strangely unreal. The tracking ink that it emitted had leaked out, and the canal shined green when I turned my light on it. I was reminded of that occult talk about the third world. Like if the canal, shining a funny color, was connected to the net, and whoever in the prosthesis passed from the canal to the net.

Personnel from our team got to the financial manager and took him into custody, but sometimes I think we ought to have left him out there instead of protecting him. No, it's not just me. Because that thing

appeared where we secured him, and there were casualties on our side.

When I saw it, I realized what I'd imagined was true. A frighteningly beautiful prosthetic body, dark hair neatly trimmed at the shoulders. It was wearing its close-fitting shipping clothes, a sort of skin suit. It came walking straight at us, barefoot, its movements odd but somehow stately. Like it clearly wasn't human despite its human form. A carnivore's gait is the best way I can put it. The whole time it was running amok, it was growling. Yup. A beastly growl. Werewolf! Something like that.

Of course I fired. I felt like I'd be a goner if I didn't shoot it dead. But soon I found myself too stymied. To fire, I mean. Couldn't even get my sights on it. If I just sprayed bullets, I might hit my teammates. I'd never once found the targeting program of police-use prostheses to be useless until then. That thing was just so fast, and it was like shooting at a shadow. If not for my buddy here, who knows how I'd have come out of it. Yeah. It was reacting to my buddy—to the hounds' voices, rather than to us. That's when I became convinced. It was a total joke, but there was no other possibility.

As you know, the financial manager made it. It was his good fortune that the prosthesis could only rage for so long. I don't know if it's the program's setup or something about the brain that was in there. Springer Rage Syndrome—what was in there was a cyberbrain loaded with the virus. I'm glad I never ran into that stuff during the war. I'm glad there weren't any on my side, not just the enemy's. Friend or foe, hang out with such a thing, and it'll turn on you soon enough. It was the essence of indiscriminate aggression. Maybe it was programmed to scam once the drive abated. It ran away, never slowing down. That nightmare's gonna come back to me every time I see an Olympic prosthesis, I'm afraid.

Oh, right. The ghost lock didn't work at all. The ones we have were no good against it. What's in there isn't a human being, you see. You need a designated one.

The fourth prosthesis hasn't been found. It was a foregone conclusion that we'd be receiving another visit. So our buddy and I went to catch not it but the guy who'd tuned it. Whoever kept transposing a brain mounted

with a rage program into four prosthetic bodies.

Yup. That engineer, the old face who knew the murdered CEO well—as the report says, he turned out to be the CEO. In other words, the murdered CEO was a remote-controlled prosthesis. The engineer was just one of the prosthetic bodies, I might add. They're using far-out tech in the private sector more and more these days, I thought. I find it more scary than impressive.

What tipped me off? Must have been the longwinded occult talk he inflicted on me and my buddy. I guess he meant to say that he was still alive. Or he didn't mean to say anything but simply couldn't keep his mouth shut. The moment I really caught on, though, was when I saw that prosthesis.

The CEO hadn't been installing himself in the stolen goods. Mr. Iriyama's cyberbrain was in the canine prosthesis that the engineer had with him. There's no way a human brain could make that thing move, so it'd been on semi-robotic mode. How the hell would I know how it felt? Ensconced in a dog's body the whole time, he was being the CEO, an elderly engineer, and whatever, in turn. He couldn't control that many bodies at once, so he switched it out by the day. I know he always needed to be on guard, but you have to give it to the guy for going that far.

Then who was in the stolen prostheses? Like I said in the report, it was the brain of the CEO's pet dog. Figuring that he'd get murdered, he brought sporting-use prostheses to his hidden private lab to set them up as instant guards. I'm sure he'd have loved to sign up outside people, but funny expenditures are taboo when a merger is underway. Instead he deposited his pet's brain in his own company's product and injected a cybervirus, as a retaliatory mechanism. The prostheses had vanished prior to the CEO's murder, you see. It's been confirmed that he tampered with a few forms without alerting anybody.

I know it's hard to believe—a canine brain being able to walk itself in a humanoid prosthesis. But it's true.

And this case isn't over yet. That escaped prosthesis is still on the prowl.

According to the engineer, meaning the CEO, it eventually stopped listening to him. His intention wasn't to wipe out those mercs but to safeguard his own person, he says, but whenever he let his pooch out of sight, it went out and killed someone, forcing him to swap out the body every time. You find that weird? Same here. He should have gone ahead and revealed that he was alive. He'd made too many enemies, I suppose. Not knowing who might be after him, he became too scared to leave that canine prosthesis.

A cyberized animal brain managing a humanoid prosthetic body has no precedent? Yeah, I know. Yet it's possible, as it turns out. I don't know what program the CEO developed. We're still looking into it, but the man insists that it emerged on the net, which is why he's come to believe in the third world.

Uh huh. A program that no one is known to have developed suddenly popped up and made the impossible possible. That's the gist of it. I'm just telling you what I've heard. I don't know what the truth is. Not because the last stolen prosthesis hasn't been recovered yet. I suspect that even after it is, we won't know.

So, you think you people can find it all right?

Hey, drop the act. The Internal Affairs guys, their probing is way more sinister. You people haven't tried to cast my very disposition as a detective into doubt. Who are you really?

If I have any questions, I should ask Public Security Section Nine? Uh huh, I get it. I was thinking how big this is getting to be, but it's shot all the way up to the national security level, huh? Looks like my buddy and I will be humbly handing things over to you.

No, I don't mind. You know, I'm not in the mood to be pissed off because someone snatched a case from right under our noses. Not when we're dealing with a monster. If anything, you have my sympathy.

My buddy? Ah, he's not a springer. A Labrador. Must be hard to tell since he went the prosthetic route after he got old. No springer serves as a K-9. Regulations, always been that way. I haven't heard of any even for

part-time commissions.

What? Do I believe in the third world? Like I said, I don't know. If the net, the world of data, really gave birth to something, and it began to exert something like a will, I bet it'd stay away from humans. At least, from humans who'd escape into a canine prosthesis and put a dog's brain into a human prosthesis to take revenge. Maybe that's true of you and me, too. It wouldn't find us any safer.

My buddy and I have been together for the longest time. In the beginning, I felt like I had to teach him. The rules. Not just for living in society, but for contributing to it. But I think I've come to owe him more than he owes me. You could say he's been yanked out of nature by human hands, but he's been good enough to live in fealty to our society. Meanwhile, we treat nature like shit. Calling it the world of things, for starters. I don't know if technology will give rise to a world of data, but if it does and starts to treat the human world like shit, do we have any right to complain? No, I haven't thought through it, and I hope I never have to. It just puts me in that kinda mood, okay?

I do have a gut feeling about where we're headed. What we think is convenient is going to be using us for *its* convenience. Bought and paid for, with our own money. I don't mean to lambaste technology. It's just that we'll learn a lesson that in the end it's about the worth of the person using it.

The mass media are up in arms about how we ever let it happen. I don't think that's what this is about. Law enforcement being useless, corporations being unaccountable, rampant war profiteering for big bucks, that whole critique also applied in the past, and I'm not raising my eyebrows about it at this late stage.

I've stayed in this line of work because I feel like I owe my buddy, and I know I'll only end up deeper in his debt but can't figure out any other way to feel like I'm doing the right thing, that's the honest truth of it. The right thing, it's important. Without it, I'd be like a mad dog that can't even explain to myself what is it that I've done.

Uh huh, I pray you'll find it all right. Whatever's in that prosthesis, do it a favor and stop it. I don't think it can on its own anymore. A lot of criminals are that way, but I don't think it wanted to become what it is. Well, probably no one ever does, but at least with humans, we need to pretend like our actions reflect our desires.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Toh EnJoe spent a few years as a postdoc prior to his writing career. He won the Akutagawa Prize in 2012, and the English translation of his debut effort, *Self-Reference ENGINE*, earned a Philip K. Dick Award Special Citation in 2014.

Gakuto Mikumo worked at a motorcycle importer before winning the Japan SF Rookie of the Year Award in 1999. He is also a member of the Mystery Writers of Japan and the creator of various beloved “light novel” series including *Strike the Blood*.

Kafka Asagiri resigned from his post at an auto company in 2012 to pursue his lifelong dream of becoming a scenarist. His series *Bungo Stray Dogs* features literary masters such as Osamu Dazai, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and H. P. Lovecraft as characters.

Yoshinobu Akita, a former phototypesetter operator, is the author of *Sorcerous Stabber Orphen*, a fantasy adventurer series boasting over ten million copies sold in total. He has also novelized *Redeemable Dream*, another Shirow Masamune property.

Tow Ubukata grew up in Singapore and Nepal before entering a Japanese high school. He has worked in a variety of genres and media, from the videogame *Shenmue* to the novel *Mardock Scramble* to the TV anime *Ghost in the Shell: Arise*.

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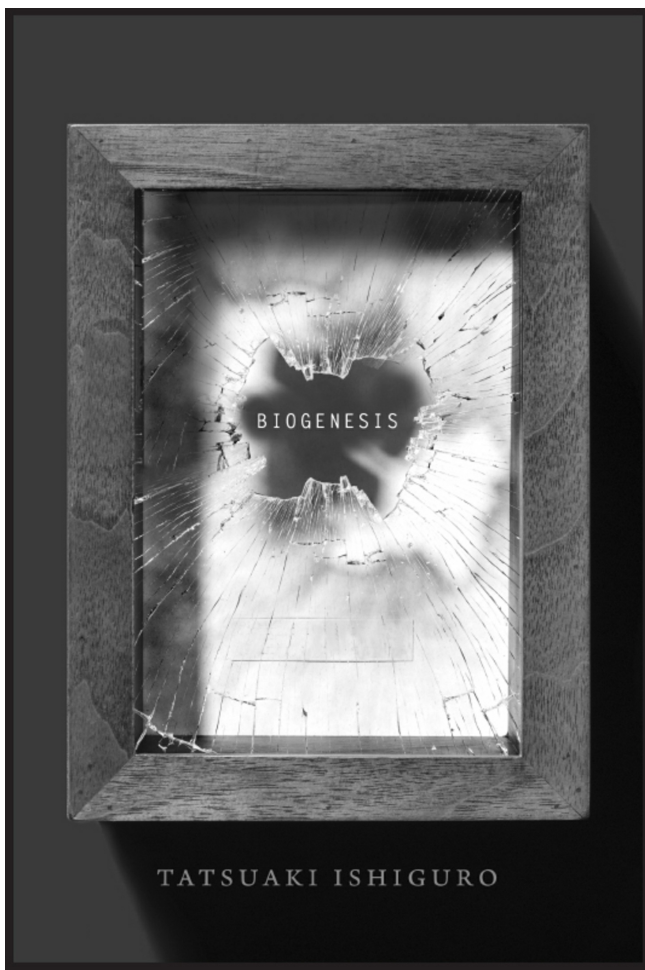
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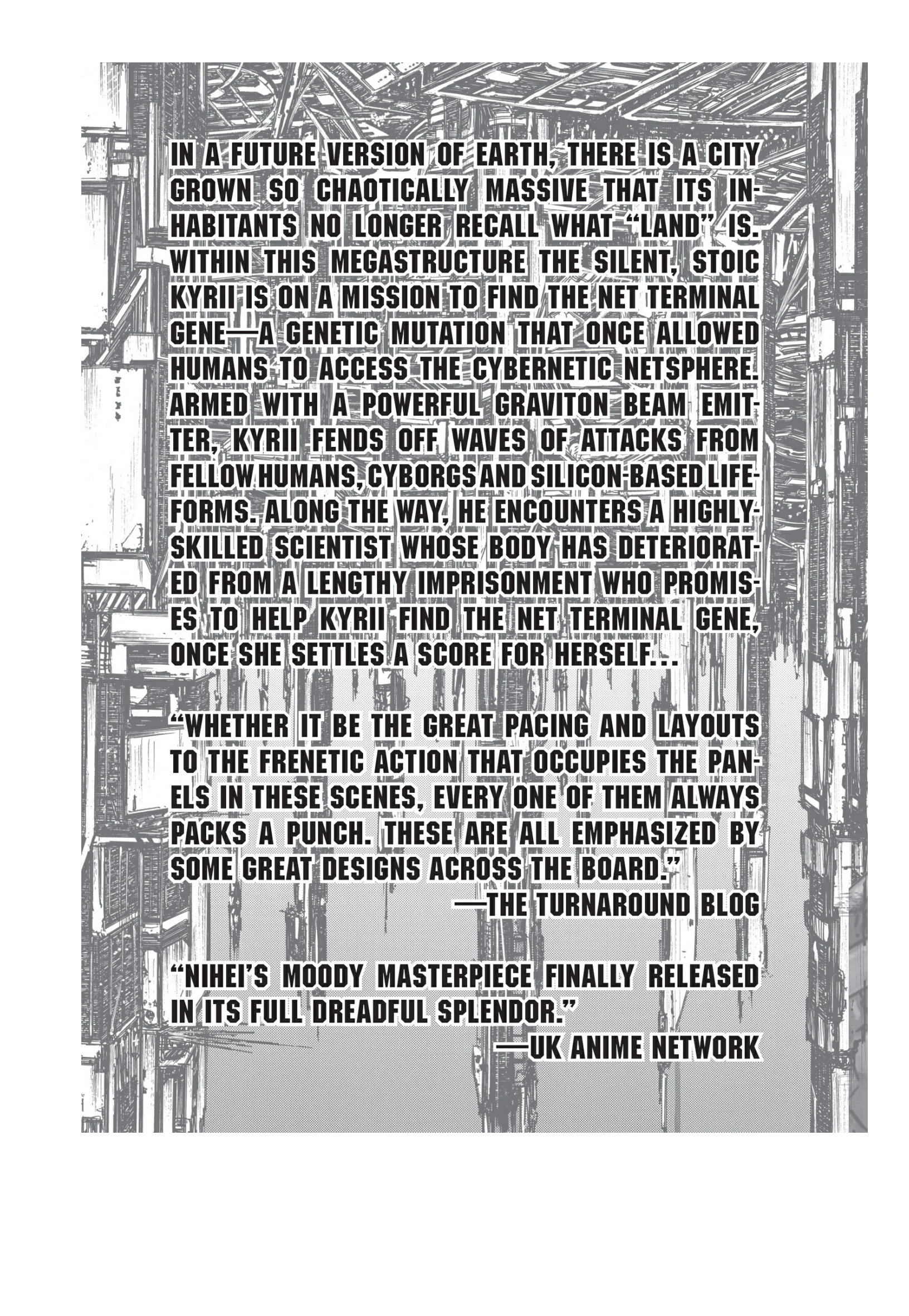
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