



.hack//Bullet

English Fan Translation by Kazetrigger

<https://dothacktranslate.wordpress.com/projects/hackbullet/>

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Story Summary

The year is 2023, three years after the Immortal Dusk* Incident. With the hacker-group Schicksal dissolved, having resigned from CyberConnect Corp., and the position of Network-Trouble Consultant now vacant, Ryuuji So-gabe is forced to scrape together a living. However, when an unexpected request from a former colleague is put forward, the evil plot surrounding “The World” drags Ryuuji back into the fold. In this blood-stained final battle, will he come out the victor?

*Translator’s note: Immortal Dusk is the name of the event Geist wished to create in the .hack//LINK game.

Character Introductions

Ryuuji Sogabe



“I had a dream about my wife. It was the most beautiful time of the year. It made me sad.”

Ryuuji Sogabe managed the Network-Trouble Consultant’s Department. Before becoming a high-ranking employee of CC Corp. Japan, he studied psychiatry at a university in Munich, Germany.

Jyotarou Amagi



“It’s chilly. There’s quite a breeze today, isn’t there?”

Jyotarou Amagi is a proponent of the Real Digitization Theory, who returned to the digital world himself by infiltrating a computer system. As a consequence, he was placed in a comatose state for a long time.

Lilie



“Geez! Nothing ever happens around here!”

A first-year junior high student, Lilie is a distant relative of Ryuuji’s deceased wife and now his adopted daughter. She suffers from PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder) after being involved in a train accident, but she has nearly recovered.

Kiyoteru Yodogawa



“Regardless of whether you accept it or not, I want you to promise to keep it a secret.”

Mr. Yodogawa is the director of CC Corp. Japan. He confides in Ryuuji the truth of the rumours surrounding Geist.

Flügel



“Well, I’m back in this ‘World’ again...”

Flügel, the Player-Character employed by Ryuuji Sogabe, is equipped with the Curse-Gun Brieler Rössle. Its bullet strikes with enough force to stop a target dead in its tracks.

Veronica Bain



“When I play a game, I always win. I guess I was just made that way.”

A blonde beauty of unknown age who is called the “Empress,” Ms. Bain is CC Corp. San Diego’s founding member and current president.

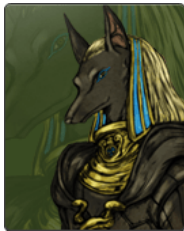
Tokio Kuryuu



“Sheesh, I quit. It’s like I’ve been stuck in the same situation for way too long.”

A second-year high school student, Tokio works as a writer for a gaming magazine and is an active user of “R:X.” In the midst of a growth spurt, he is rapidly growing taller, and is bewildered by this.

Kusame



“Let’s work together, Flügel. That way, we both benefit.”

A human beast sorcerer.

David Steinberg



“Someone has to protect this ‘World’.”

A NAB (Network Analysis Bureau) Investigator, David has been chasing the Net Terrorist that distributed a virus.

Kaya Fröbe



“Hold my hand.”

The woman that Ryuuji met while studying abroad in Munich, Germany.

Drain



“This is the test that’s been selected. I requested it myself.”

The PC used by Yuri Seto. It seems he calls himself Drain (as in drainage system). He is able to summon and manipulate a horde of rats.

Urania



“It’s time for a campfire. Enjoy it as much as you can.”

The leader of Sophia Squad with state-of-the-art anti-virus abilities. She displays unparalleled strength in a battle with a virus.

Prologue

As he was about to start climbing the sloped mountain trail, the figure came upon the facility.

He was there to hand in a letter of introduction. He stepped up to the reception desk and handed the letter to the lab-coat-wearing staff member behind the desk. The staff member eyed him suspiciously as he surrendered the letter and he was informed that his visit would be limited to ten minutes.

“Ten minutes?” said Ryuuji.

Ryuuji was surprised that visits were to be kept so short.

“Actually, visitation is prohibited, due to the ill effect it may have on the residents,” said the staff-member.

The response was not very convincing.

Ryuuji thought of the ill effects. He was certainly not the type of person who wished anyone any ill will.

“Now it’s time for his afternoon stroll. You should come out and see the courtyard. Would you prefer to stay in the waiting room, or would you like to come to the courtyard?”

Ryuuji wanted to meet in the courtyard, so the staff member invited him inside. The corridor was dead and silent. A cold air lingered.

“If only you had contacted us in advance.”

The staff member barely hid his harsh tone as he continued on ahead.

“I can make an allowance this time.”

“Thank you,” said Ryuuji, bowing his head weakly.

If memory served him correctly, he had called the day before to set a visitation time. This must have been a simple miscommunication. Today’s time slot had been confirmed by this very staff member, and since there weren’t many days left on his bus pass, Ryuuji had come all this way.

“There are some things you should know,” said the staff-member without looking back. He stood there confidently. He had the attitude of someone who was used to being at the top of the food chain.

“Please obey visitation time limits. Please do not feel uncomfortable around the residents who talk strangely. Also, items such as knives and razor blades, matches or lighters, explosives, and chemicals are prohibited. Are you ready?”

“Is it okay if I skip the written oath?” said Ryuuji.

“What?”

The staff-member turned around with a surprised look on his face. He continued on at a brisk pace as before, and was able to keep astride of Ryuuji who was over 180 centimetres tall.

The two continued walking side by side and chatting while Ryuuji tried to think up a plan. He continued speaking.

“I think it best that you agree not to concern yourself or the authorities with any sort of happenings within these facility walls. That would make for a good suspense film, wouldn’t you agree? It’s called that when a director intends to bestow a feeling of tension from the beginning of the story. It gets the heart racing. As a child I would make my own secret designs and signs, it was something of a dream of mine. However well-thought out it may be, from frequently seeing that billboard with the similar design in the parking lot of this areas convenience store, I have become somewhat disillusioned. The bluebird close to the billboard is also not too happy about it,” said Ryuuji.

The staff-member nodded.

“I have doubts about happiness itself,” Ryuuji added.

There was a pause for a while.

“The sign is unnecessary,” quipped the staff member.

The staff-member once again brought up his thoughts on the situation.

“By coming here, nearly everyone gets better. When you called, we informed you that there were simple regulations to follow.”

“Ahhh...”

Ryuuji startled his companion with a sudden shout.

“Damn it. I have some candy with me. Is that okay?”

Ryuuji felt around in his pocket for a candy, removed one, and raised it level with his face for his companion to see, and pointed to the plastic wrap.

“Look at this here. This is a sharp point. Isn’t this dangerous?” asked Ryuuji.

“Well...”

The staff-member, as he was about to say something, swallowed deeply, then spoke in a hushed voice.

“That’s not a problem.”

“I see. Well, that’s good.”

Ryuuji held out his candy with a smile.

“Try one. It’s cola flavoured.”

“No, thanks.”

The staff-member’s expression was now like that of a noh mask. He turned away and started walking onwards with a quick pace. It seemed that he was putting in too much effort to shake off this outsider.

However, try as he might, he was not able to get away from or cruelly drive away this person carrying the CC Corp. Japan letter of introduction. Ryuuji disliked people who acted arrogantly through borrowed authority.

Finally, after what seemed an eternity, they arrived at a door. The staff-member turned the knob to open the door, and then invited Ryuuji in. Ryuuji saw the spacious courtyard. Standing at the threshold, he saw a stone wall covered in damp green moss that swept around to the other side, encircling a variety of tress under a serene blue sky.

“Remember, visits are limited to ten minutes. When your chat is done, please notify the reception desk. Is that alright?”

It seemed that there was no other choice. Ryuuji turned and passed through the door.

“Ah, do you happen to have a timer?”

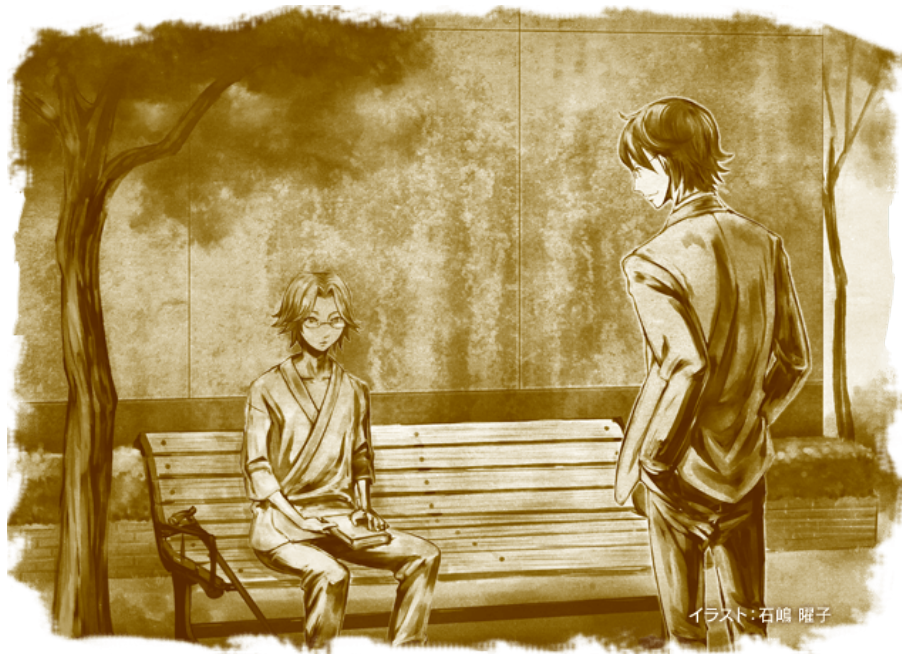
“I don’t.”

The door closed at the tip of Ryuuji’s nose with a thud. Then the sound of footsteps died away, leaving Ryuuji alone at the edge of the courtyard.

Residents could be seen around the courtyard in groups of two and three. Everyone was dressed in the same manner, so they were indistinguishable from a distance. The temperature of the courtyard felt comfortable. It was mid-May, a season when everything is very lush and green. It was the middle of the afternoon and the sunshine was refreshing. This was nice, but the courtyard was very wide. It was somewhat like a small urban park. Ryuuji did not care about visiting hours just because there were “simple regulations

to follow” and considering how hard it was to get to this place, he was a little fed up with rules. But he believed that he had indeed found what he was looking for.

He found it easily.



A man was sitting quietly, like a statue, on a bench installed in a shady area of the courtyard.

Bending the page into a doggy ear, he closed the old book he had been intently reading and placed it on his knee. To his right a cane was propped up on the bench.

As Ryuuji approached, the man raised his head and stared at Ryuuji with scrutinizing eyes.

The man’s actual age was difficult to determine, but he did not appear to be in his thirties. One could expect that he was, at most, in his late twenties. He was wearing thin pale-tinted glasses, and he had a well-defined slender face. However, what caught Ryuuji’s eye was that several years of not getting enough sunlight left the man with a pale, almost blue, skin tone.

“Hello. Nice weather, isn’t it?” said Ryuuji.

“Yes, it is,” answered the man politely.

“It was cold a little while ago, but it’s much nicer out now.”

As he said this, the man's long-slitted eyes moved, gazing up and down at Ryuuji's suit.

"Are you a resident here?" asked Ryuuji.

"I am," replied the man.

Ryuuji nodded.

"Are you an acquaintance of mine?" asked the man.

"Yes," answered Ryuuji.

The man forced his mouth into a smile.

"I'm sorry. My memory has been acting a little peculiar lately..."

"My name is Ryuuji. Ryuuji Sogabe."

"I'm Jyotarou Amagi."

As the man introduced himself, he placed his book beside himself.

Ryuuji passed Jyotarou a business card, and sat down next to him.

"Actually, first, there's something I want to ask you, Mr. Amagi."

Jyotarou tilted his head slightly to look at the business card he received.

"Network Trouble Consultant..." Jyotarou read aloud.

"I deal with various problems on the Net. Well, it's something like a detective agency."

"As I said before, my memory is not the best. If it concerns my work, I'm afraid I cannot discuss it," said Jyotarou.

He seemed to be cautious about hearing the word 'Net'. It was a natural reaction for those who worked their way up in the business like Jyotarou Amagi.

"That's not a problem," replied Ryuuji in a feigned nonchalant manner.

"Does the name 'Geist' ring any bells?" asked Ryuuji.

"Well, let's see. Doesn't that mean 'spirit'?" said Jyotarou with a puzzled tone.

"If I remember correctly, I think it's some sort of philosophy term. Oh, I was told about it. I feel like I heard that name before... from a European landscape artist." continued Jyotarou.

As he searched through his memory and spoke slowly, Jyotarou looked at Ryuuji.

“Other than that, I don’t remember anything,” said Jyotarou.

Ryuuji looked at Jyotarou’s eyes. There was a change in his facial expression. It didn’t change with talk of weather. ‘Nice weather, isn’t it?’ ‘Yes, it is.’ Jyotarou’s essence had been unaffected by that matter.

“Is that so? Well, thanks anyway,” said Ryuuji.

Suddenly, a flowing chime that sounded like a xylophone rang out from a speaker somewhere in the facility.

Jyotarou turned his head and muttered to Ryuuji.

“Lunch break is over. I have to go back in.”

Ryuuji stood up.

“Thanks for your time. It was nice meeting you.”

“Are you satisfied with my answers? Well... what I can remember anyway.”

Jyotarou took his cane and slowly stood up.

“Of course. You were very helpful. Ah, you forgot your book,” said Ryuuji.

Ryuuji grabbed the book and passed it to Jyotarou. Ryuuji saw the title, which read ‘Vijnapti-matrata’[†].

“That must be a difficult book. Is it from Buddhism?” remarked Ryuuji.

“Yes, it is. I borrowed it from a coworker a long time ago and haven’t been able to return it. I’ve been waiting for the opportunity to read it and, now that I’m in here, I think I’ve found it, but it’s not easy to read.”

Jyotarou stroked the book cover with a bitter smile, muttering softly to himself.

“Just before I came here, I had this huge fight with this guy at work. I got really angry.”

Ryuuji remained silent.

“In some ways I’m still angry, because I can’t go back and make it all better,” continued Jyotarou.

Suddenly the wind blew and whistled through the trees. The wind was refreshing and cool, a change from the warmth of the courtyard.

Jyotarou’s body trembled.

“It’s chilly. There’s quite a breeze, isn’t there?” he said.

[†]Translator’s note: Vijnapti-matrata (‘Thesis of Cognitions’) is a Buddhist theory which states that all existence is subjective and nothing exists outside of the mind.

“Oh, please go on in. I’ll stay here for a bit and enjoy the air,” replied Ryuuji.

Jyotarou bowed and went back, walking with his cane, into the facility. He dragged his left leg awkwardly.

Ryuuji waited until Jyotarou’s back was no longer in sight, then removed from his pocket a portable data terminal and gently brushed the panel with his finger, loading the memo function. A message alert was instantly displayed on the screen.

1:02 p.m., 19 May, 2023.

During Ryuuji’s visit, he was contacted by Jyotarou’s cousin, just about his only relative, Saika Amagi. In this message, she explained her knowledge of the condition her cousin, Jyotarou, was diagnosed with: memory loss. After delving into cyberspace as “flesh and blood”, Jyotarou paid for his deeds upon returning to the real world.

His memory ceases at the year 2015. He now believes that he works on the Urayasu coast mega-float. After he caused a serious loss of data to the company, he was transferred to his present location of Odaiba, Tokyo... He thinks the fire he started is all a dream. To him it’s a thing of the future.

The co-worker he fought with was likely Banshouya Jun. Together with Jyotarou, he participated in CC Corp.’s top secret project as team leader. He died a long time ago.

As Ryuuji took in the text, he sighed deeply.

While Jyotarou reads the book he borrowed from Banshouya, he keeps waiting for the day when he’ll meet him again.

While he wishes to reconcile, he will continue to read the book at this facility indefinitely. However, there will never come a day when Jyotarou finishes reading that book. His memory will keep resetting to the year 2015.

I don’t know whether The World Goddess will perhaps show Jyotarou’s condition some mercy and compassion. Very few know how things will turn out. Because of that, everyone bears the responsibility for the damage he caused.

After he turned off the portable data terminal’s power, Ryuuji thought whether he should have conveyed something to Jyotarou or not.

At least, that was his only reason for coming to visit.

However, maybe it’s best if he explained it like this — Even after he left ‘The World’, Jyotarou Amagi’s ‘Geist’ still wanders to this very day.

Chapter 1

The Call

He stood on a slightly elevated sandy beach and gazed out at the sea.

He heard the roar of the waves.

He smelled the scent of the tide.

The cold water of the early morning, the chill in the air, and the sunlight blended together.

The sky was cloudy.

A girl stood nearby.

She was younger than him.

She couldn't be more than twenty.

Out over the waves, two birds were singing.

"Ah, Japanese robins," she murmured.

Then she looked out at the sea and whispered to him.

"Hey, did you know? Migratory birds, midway through their journey, temporarily stop at a location, and leave behind an individual," she said in German with a southern German accent.

She tilted her slender face in profile, her wavy flaxen hair swayed softly.

The sea was very loud, even at a distance.

"As long as a healthy individual does not become injured or fall ill, they won't be left behind."

The sand at the woman's feet made a crunching sound. She looked down at her bare feet. On top of her elegant white sweater she wore an overcoat, and



her navy blue skirt hit just above her knee. Her calves were dazzling like ceramic pottery.

“What are you thinking about?”

Then the woman turned her face towards him. Her eyes were blue.

Well, he was thinking about this conversation with this girl. He was thinking of things he had experienced before. Yes, that was it. In a moment, she'd be sure to comb up her hair and laugh.

As soon as he thought it, sure enough, she combed up her hair with her right hand and prudently laughed. Listening to her soft voice, he wanted to say something. He thought about what he wanted to say to her.

But, the words would not come out. The thoughts would not come out. A strange impatience began to grow. He sensed something strange, something sinister, a disquieting sense of unease.

Suddenly he realized that her dress looked as though it was blurring. Then the girl was no longer there. The sand and sea and sunlight, everything, grew dim and distorted, as his body became soft and opaque. A distorted sense of reality spilt out everywhere.

He could not see and felt as though he was being torn from this place with considerable force. In an instant he was clinging to this place for dear life. It was painful trying to keep it together. He felt as though he was being merged with something. It was useless to resist.

Ryuuji woke up from his dream.

He looked up absentmindedly at the grey ceiling for a while. His mind, as he watched the dream, was already finely cut and processed, his memories vanishing into the distance.

Soon his consciousness became clear, and he recognized the ringing sound of a telephone call.

Ryuuji got up from the sofa, and donning his slippers, walked up to his desk and picked up the portable terminal. There was a dull throbbing in the back of his neck.

“Hello...,” said Ryuuji.

A hoarse voice came out. He coughed away from the mouthpiece.

“Thank you for calling. This is Office Consultant Ryuuji Sogabe.”

“It’s Kiyoteru Yodogawa,” came the voice on the other end of the phone.

“Ah, Mr. Yodogawa. How may I help you?”

Now Ryuuji was dealing with a client.

“There’s something I want to talk to you about,” said Mr. Yodogawa rather quickly with a thinly veiled tone of desperation.

“It’s not something I can talk about over the phone. Why don’t we meet?” Mr. Yodogawa continued.

“Right now?” questioned Ryuuji.

He looked at the clock. It was three o’clock in the afternoon.

“Oh, as soon as possible,” said Mr. Yodogawa.

“Ohhh, well, actually, I have plans. How does any time after six o’clock sound?”

“Sooner.”

“Then, five o’clock.”

“Alright, five o’clock...” said Mr. Yodogawa.

There was a pause as he thought.

“Alright, we meet five o’clock in the same place as last time, the ‘Sea-dragon,’” continued Mr. Yodogawa.

As hastily as he had begun the conversation, Mr. Yodogawa hastily ended the phone call.



Ryuuji tossed the portable terminal on the sofa, and went behind the partitioning screen he had in the office. There he had installed a sink, so that cooking would now be easier. He felt thirsty.

He turned on the tap and, holding some water in his hands, took a gulp. It was refreshing. The bad reputation of Tokyo's water was a thing of the past. Moisture in his body gave him a pleasant feeling of replenishment and, after gargling, he washed his face and dried it with a towel, putting him in a better mood.

He went back to his desk, pulled out the chair, and sat down. He didn't have a hangover as he was not a heavy drinker. Yet, as with someone who has a hangover, he couldn't hide the washed-out feeling that encompassed his entire being. He had fallen asleep on the sofa at a strange hour. The peaceful feeling was much too fleeting to enjoy.

He looked around the room. The office was spit into two parts. A black linoleum floor and a grey wall. It was an expensive lounge suite in itself. Around the office, the remnants of last night's evening drinks were scattered about.

Ryuuji put on his glasses and looked at the clock again. 3:15 p.m. He figured he ought to hurry a little.

While he quickly changed his clothes, he thought about the phone call from Mr. Yodogawa.

Client Kiyoteru Yodogawa is CC Corp.'s director... to be precise, he is the

senior executive managing director. Next year in 2024 and beyond, he will serve as the producer of new game productions and will set the launch schedule.

Just the other day, he submitted his latest report as requested regarding whether or not there were any questions or concerns.

Ryuuji groped around in the pocket of the suit he had just put on for a candy, took one out, removed the wrapping paper and put it in his mouth. It was orange flavored.

Before he left, he secured the office door lock and, for some reason or other, he was reminded of this morning's dream. However, he could not remember the contents of the dream.

He turned the key and the door locked with a solemn clanking sound.

If he couldn't remember, it was no big deal, was it?

Chapter 2

Lilie

After a twenty minute drive, he arrived at the station. It was a much shorter distance to the station from the office at his workplace than from his apartment. In favor of parking in the parking lot, he turned into a roundabout, and a group of junior high school students started shuffling out of the station entrance. He was just in time.

The junior high students were all in their sailor-style uniforms, and each of them carried a backpack and overnight bag for traveling. One courageous student dragged along a colossal suitcase — something like what a news anchor would use on a vacation abroad — which he must have borrowed from his parents. He surely must have been older than the others to want to use a thing like that.

Mixed in among the black-haired boys and girls was a single blond-haired girl. She carried a yellow leather-backed knapsack-like overnight bag and a paper bag was hanging from each hand. In her right hand she also carried something that looked like a stick, and looking more closely, Ryuuji saw that it was a wooden sword.

Ryuuji abandoned entering the parking lot and pulled over to the side of the road.

As he gazed out from inside the car, the girl informed her classmates of her parting and waved goodbye, then took out her folding mobile phone, and began to dial a number.

Ryuuji held his portable terminal and waited.

Before long a ringing sound reverberated, and Ryuuji quickly touched the terminal screen.

“Ah, Ryuuji? It’s Lilie. I’m at the station now,” came Lilie’s voice.

“Come pick me up. I’m waiting at the west entrance,” she continued.

“I’m already here. That’s a cool wooden sword you’re holding.”

And, just as he spoke, Lilie recognized Ryuuji’s car and got to her feet.

She walked up, opened the car door, and slid into the passenger seat.

“I’m home!” she said.

“Welcome home.”

She twisted her body in her seat, leaned forward, and, holding herself in place, put a large amount of luggage in the back seat.

“It was amazing! There were a lot of deer!” she said.

It was a first year junior high school trip. They spent three nights and four days visiting Nara and Kyoto, and it was a while before the heat of excitement finally cooled down.

Ryuuji waited for Lilie to fasten her seat-belt, then started the car. She kept talking all the while. As she made gestures with her hands, her long curly hair shook.

“And then the sun shone on it, it was so beautiful,” she said.

“The Kyoto Golden Pavilion?” asked Ryuuji.

“No, the deer.”

As he listened to the tales of her travels, Ryuuji soon reached the road that led to his apartment.

“...Anyway. It was really big and sublime, and it had a mysterious ambiance about it,” she said.

“The Buddha statue in Nara?”

“No, the deer. Geez, are you even listening?”

“This conversation is a little biased,” said Ryuuji, who was a little shocked, as one would expect.

“Didn’t you see anything besides deer and souvenir shops?” he added.

Lilie turned around and took a paper bag from the back seat.

“Even if I bought everyone’s time, there still wouldn’t be enough to tell you everything. There was Nomu and Nene. Oh, and there was Tokio...”

While she fished through the contents, Lilie muttered the names of her acquaintances.

“By the way, who’s wooden sword is that?” asked Ryuuji.

“It’s mine.”

“Ahhh, I see...”

“I got you a gift, Ryuuji. Look, pickled vegetables. I sampled some and they were delicious. We can eat them with dinner.”



“Sorry, I have to go to work,” said Ryuuji in a gentle, casual tone.

“I don’t know how late I’ll be back. I should be finished before it gets dark,” he continued.

“What, really? I thought we’d eat together...”

Lilie was extremely disheartened by Ryuuji’s words.

He parked his car in front of his apartment and Lilie turned to the back seat and collected her things.

“Will you be okay by yourself?” asked Ryuuji.

“Yeah, I’ll be fine.”

Lilie was tougher than her delicate looks suggested.

Ryuuji spoke as he passed her the wooden sword.

“Go to bed early tonight. And there’s some pudding in the fridge you can have,” he said.

Lilie stopped and looked at Ryuuji.

“Pudding? The stuff from last week?”

Her blue eyes became very sharp in a flash.

“Hey, you did say you’d get rid of it if it wasn’t eaten by the best-before date, didn’t you?” she continued.

“Right...” said Ryuuji.

“You didn’t listen to me at all... What about the laundry?”

“What?”

“Did you do the laundry?”

“Of course I did.”

“Really? You don’t just pile it in your office?”

Lilie had a habit of looking directly at a person’s eyes. Ryuuji averted his eyes and put a candy up to his mouth again.

“I wonder how it’s doing. Ah, if it’s still there.”

“You better have it when you come back. I’ll go through it and wash it tomorrow morning.”

“Yes, ma’am,” said Ryuuji.

“Also, don’t forget to buy new garbage bags.”

“Garbage bags, certainly...”

“Speaking of forgetting, don’t forget to take stock of your non-flammable materials and separate them from the flammable stuff.”

“Right. Thanks for reminding me.”

“You’re welcome,” said Lilie.

Chapter 3

Seadragon

The “Seadragon”, specified by Mr. Yodogawa, was located at a corner of a business district, on the sixth floor of an old building. It was a fairly thriving high-class Chinese restaurant located far from CyberConnect Corp. Japan in Odaiba. He must have selected a distant location on purpose.

Ryuuji took a piece of candy from his mouth, threw it into the garbage bin located in the first floor lobby, and entered the elevator.

The restaurant was empty. Lunchtime was over and it was time for a breather.

Mr. Yodogawa was already sitting at a table in the corner, waiting for Ryuuji. Light shone in through a window by the seats, illuminating the table.

Ryuuji watched an employee serve Chinese alcohol with a dim sum platter, then sat across from Mr. Yodogawa and greeted him.

“Hello, Mr. Yodogawa. Sorry to have kept you waiting,” said Ryuuji.

Mr. Yodogawa turned his plump flushed face to Ryuuji. His eyes were bloodshot. He also seemed to have been drinking. Beads of sweat slowly ran down his forehead.

He expressly called Ryuuji in confidence to talk about a request, that is to say, to have a business discussion. With a man such as Yodogawa under the influence of alcohol, there was a strong sense of discomfort as he did not talk of any negotiations.

“Excuse my rudeness. How about a drink?” he asked in a firm tone.

“No, thank you. I came by car, you see,” answered Ryuuji.

Ryuuji requested a cup of oolong tea from a passing waiter.

It was just before the start of Golden Week* a month ago that he got a call

*Translator’s note: Golden week is a week-long holiday season in Japan, occurring in

from Mr. Yodogawa for the first time.

Mr. Yodogawa said on the telephone that he wanted to talk about Ryuuji's great ability and dedication, and to offer him a job.

Three years earlier in 2020, when Ryuuji still worked at CC Corp. Japan, he came face-to-face with Mr. Yodogawa on several occasions through acquaintances. Mr. Yodogawa joined the company approximately six years earlier. At that time, he was not the director, but was employed as the Secretarial Office Chief. Though he was nonetheless the same company-man and human being that he was when he first arrived, when it came down to it, Ryuuji felt that Mr. Yodogawa had completely changed.

After his resignation, Ryuuji did not know whether he heard about the so-called vacancy in the Network Trouble Consultant office by chance somewhere, or whether he investigated and ascertained this information himself. However, to be requested for a specific job was in itself a kind of fact.

In other words, the position was not known to other in-house employees.

In any case, special knowledge and skill are required for investigations concerning "The World."

Mr. Yodogawa brought up a curious request.

"There's a rumour that the PC called "Geist" unleashed a computer virus. I want you to find out the truth."

He continued.

"Right now, I'm backed up with too much work. If I can't drink alcohol, it's unbearable," explained Mr. Yodogawa.

"That's fine. Ah, Mr. Yodogawa, the new title was officially publicized. I saw it in the newspaper. Versus... umm....."

"VERSUS: The World. I was finally able to announce it."

Between the gossip and small-talk, the orders soon arrived. With this, there would be no further intrusions from employees.

"I met Dr. Amagi," said Mr. Yodogawa after a while.

As the director of CC Corp. Japan, Mr. Yodogawa had grasped the events surrounding "The World" of the past.

He also knew that Jyotarou Amagi created the underlying cause of the Immortal Dusk Incident of 2020 by transferring his A.I. Copy into Geist and having him execute the program.

"Yes, the letter of introduction I received was useful," said Ryuuji.

early-May.

“He, that...” continued Ryuuji.

“I did not learn anything in regards to Geist. He even filled out a report, but his memory goes back to before 2015. The present Dr. Amagi is unrelated to the previous incidents... he is harmless,” Ryuuji concluded.

“Because of Dr. Amagi’s situation, our plan must be put on hold,” said Mr. Yodogawa with a look of disappointment.

“Well, I guess so. However, it’s most likely just a rumour, a hoax that became costly.”

“It can’t be a hoax!”

Suddenly Mr. Yodogawa’s loud voice revealed itself. Seeing that he drew the attention of those in the restaurant, Mr. Yodogawa stirred with apparent discomfort.

“Sorry,” he apologized in a whisper.

“But, this is not simply a hoax. Without a doubt, the person who has been spreading the computer virus is still somewhere in “The World.” I believe that person to be Geist,” Mr. Yodogawa continued.

“What was it you said, that when it comes to the world-class MMORPG “The World”, some gossip about a computer virus is the price of being famous? I’m shocked speechless that someone in a position like yours could make such a reckless remark now. Rather, it doesn’t make sense,” Ryuuji said.

Mr. Yodogawa’s eyelids twitched and convulsed. He seemed to be have become rather emotionally unstable.

“Are you calling me a liar?”

“I didn’t say that, and I’m not trying to attack you,” said Ryuuji.

Mr. Yodogawa fell silent.

“Your current request is very unnatural. There is a rumour that someone is spreading a virus through the online game. You somehow know the culprit, this person called Geist. Yet, on the Net there are many people to investigate. As is often the case, the irresponsible one behind the aforementioned rumour won’t be found. Do you know something? If you want to do something to me, please let me know. You called me out here today of all days with this plan,” Ryuuji continued.

Mr. Yodogawa’s mouth remained closed and his eyes were cast down at the table as before.

Ryuuji downed his glass in one mouthful.

“Come now, I’ll wait a little. We’re socializing with small talk. Oolong tea is good for the health, I’ve been drinking quite a lot since last Friday. But, sooner or later you’ll get down to the business of facts, or I’ll vanish from your sight.”

Still Mr. Yodogawa cast his eyes downward and was silent. There appeared to be a conflict with what was obvious upon close inspection. He firmly grasped the edges of the table with both his hands.

He felt his stiff feet loosening and looked at Ryuuji in order to gather his thoughts.

“If I want to request additional cases, how much would you charge?” asked Mr. Yodogawa.

“Depending on what it is, there may be extra fees. As a rule, the criteria are established in accordance with previous talks. One week is 300,000 yen. And then there are necessary expenses.”

“Regardless of whether you accept it or not, I want you to promise to keep it a secret.”

“Naturally.”

“Can I depend on you?”

“Of course.”

With the talk finally showing signs of advancing, Ryuuji displayed his extraordinarily harmless business smile.

Mr. Yodogawa took something, which was wrapped in a paper bag, from inside his suit pocket and handed it to Ryuuji.

“What’s that?”

Mr. Yodogawa opened his mouth to answer Ryuuji’s question, when his portable terminal’s ringtone sounded. Mr. Yodogawa’s suit pocket shook from the portable terminal’s vibrate function.

“Ah, excuse me,” he said.

Hindering the talk, Mr. Yodogawa instantly became ashen-faced and answered his portable terminal. It seemed to be something relating to work, so Mr. Yodogawa stood up and walked to the restroom.

Subsequently, Ryuuji was left behind to gaze at the paper bag in boredom. He held the bag in his hand in order to judge what was inside, and felt what seemed to be a case for glasses. However, having been firmly fixed in place with cloth tape, he would not be able to see inside without tearing the paper bag. Ryuuji considered it a little, but decided to wait for Mr. Yodogawa to return.

Eventually, Mr. Yodogawa returned and sat in his chair.

“Mr. Yodogawa, what is this?” asked Ryuuji.

Then Ryuuji noticed something unusual with Mr. Yodogawa. He was trembling bit by bit. His teeth started to make a nervous chattering sound. Seemingly not able to control himself, he wiped the sweat from his face awkwardly and spoke as he panted. Despite his hoarse voice, he could be heard quite clearly.

“I want you to exterminate the rats.”

“Pardon me... rats?”

“Don’t you get it? They’re biting me!” Mr. Yodogawa cried out.

Once again the looks of the restaurants patrons were gathered on him. However, this time Mr. Yodogawa did not become silent. Rising from his seat as though he was repelled by it, he continued yelling.

“Some slimy dripping things are beckoning them to my feet. The stench is soaking into my eyes. They’re climbing up the air-duct and attacking me. They’re biting me! They’re biting me!”

He opened his eyes wide. It looked like his pupils and irises were melting into the whites of the eyes. Countless beads of cold sweat ran down his forehead. His breathing was laboured and shallow.

Ryuuji stood up and went around the table to put his hands on Mr. Yodogawa’s shoulders.

“Mr. Yodogawa, calm down.”

“What’s going on?”

A waiter came along and stood on the defensive.

“You’re bothering the other customers,” the waiter said.

“It’s nothing. Please bring some cold water,” said Ryuuji.

When Ryuuji was distracted, Mr. Yodogawa’s right fist hit just under Ryuuji’s left eye. Though he was shorter than Ryuuji, there was an unexpected brute strength in Mr. Yodogawa’s muscles.

Completely caught off guard, Ryuuji staggered greatly from the force of Mr. Yodogawa’s hand.

“When he comes back with the water, he’ll think you bumped your nose. Why don’t you go numb the pain with some ice!” said Mr. Yodogawa.

Mr. Yodogawa jumped up on top of the table and, while shouting and muttering incoherently, kicked and broke a window with the heel of his shoe. The

glass shattered with an intense sound.

Now, for the first time, screams came from the restaurant's female customers. After this, they seemed to foresee what would happen next.

Mr. Yodogawa slowly placed his right foot on the window frame. Then, his left foot.



“Mr. Yodogawa!” cried out Ryuuji as he held his left cheek.

Mr. Yodogawa looked back. His eyes met with Ryuuji's. He smiled as tears flowed down his face. He passed through the window and fell head-first.

After that moment, a smashing sound could be heard from where Ryuuji sat on the sixth floor.

Ryuuji rushed over to the window and looked down at the ground.

He couldn't look. He thought it better not to see the body, but it was impossible not to look. The body lay twisted by a twenty-five-metre fall from a six-storey building to the asphalt sidewalk below. Until a little while ago, that thing had been a lively human being.

Chapter 4

Questioned

The police were called, Ryuuji came down, and waited for the arrival of the patrol car as curious onlookers encircled and surrounded Mr. Yodogawa from a distance. An ambulance was not called. It was obvious there was no need to call for one. Eventually a patrol car came. Of course, a frightening-looking middle-aged policeman tried to get some information from Ryuuji. He seemed to conclude that it was a quarrel over drinks. From there he didn't try to hide that he was beginning to doubt the circumstances.

However, the Seadragon's waiter came outside and explained that the deceased, that is, Mr. Yodogawa, when he arrived at the restaurant by himself, already seemed emotionally unstable, and when Mr. Yodogawa began to become violent, Ryuuji tried to calm him down, and Ryuuji himself didn't even drink a drop of alcohol.

For the time being he was cleared of any suspicion, but next time, in order to do an investigation of the scene, he would be called to come and act as a witness.

After that, each time someone came or went by the Seadragon and Mr. Yodogawa's fall location, they had to look at the harsh work of a police officer.

They kept an eye on the people going back and forth, then moved Mr. Yodogawa's remains before anyone noticed, the bloodstain spread out on the sidewalk in the evening hours. This was more graphic than when Mr. Yodogawa fell.

It started to get hot under Ryuuji's left eye, on his cheekbone. He felt it to check and it seemed to be swelling. He was asked by the policeman he spoke with earlier whether he wanted to go to the hospital or to the station for questioning, so he decided to be taken to the nearest police station. The talk ended after about twenty minutes, but for some reason they left him waiting in the room for forty minutes. The pain in his cheek became worse. He almost considered it a good time to let them know that he would rebel against

the state, when a small middle-aged police officer came with official documents and a first-aid kit under his arm. For the first time since this afternoon, he was able to see out of his eye. He put out his experienced hands and stuck a compress under Ryuuji's eye.

Then, he thanked Ryuuji for his cooperation and pleasant behaviour and apologized for making him wait, then explained that he'd come to arrange to have Ryuuji fill out forms rather than question him.

The form work was finished in about ten minutes.

"There was no need to use up so much of your time. There are a lot of witnesses, and there will be no charges laid in this random suicide case," said the officer.

"Random suicide?"

"Yes. Among Mr. Yodogawa's personal effects we found a tranquilizer. Something to manage the stress, it seems," said the policeman.

"However, it took some time to confirm Mr. Yodogawa's identity. That's why we had you wait here so long, Mr. Sogabe," he continued.

"That's quite alright. But, that's kind of strange," said Ryuuji.

"Mr. Yodogawa is the director of CyberConnect Corp. Couldn't you simply get that information by contacting the company?" he added.

"Of course, we did call the company. They were not very helpful. In the end the call kept getting handed off to someone else, until the person in charge finally told us that there was no one who could help. Even when we told them that it was one of their own employees that died. Large companies are like bureaucracies. That's what I say anyway," said the middle-aged policeman somewhat indignantly.

"In the end, we contacted the wife of the deceased, and she confirmed his identity. We were very grateful for her help. This is a token of our gratitude for your cooperation."

As he spoke, the officer passed an envelope containing a gift-certificate booklet to Ryuuji. Looking more closely, he noticed the envelope contained two slots with a telephone card in each slot. On these cards, pictures of odd mascot creatures dressed as police officers were drawn. He, or rather, these mascot-like characters looked up at Ryuuji with fearless expressions. As he closed the envelope, it looked as though the cute designs of the eyebrows rose to the forefront and became comically thick and imposing.

"Ah, this is..." said Ryuuji.

"This is very lovely. Thank you very much. My daughter will be delighted," he finished.



He thanked the officer and politely put it in his pocket.

The policeman saw Ryuuji out of the building.

“We’re very sorry for using up so much of your time. Thank you for your cooperation.”

“It was no problem at all,” said Ryuuji.

Chapter 5

Babel

He returned to the office, arriving late at night.

He phoned Lilie before going to the police, only to tell her that he would not be able to come home that night. She was probably already asleep by now anyway.

On the desk, the remnants of the familiar end of last night's evening drink gently and decadently greeted the completely worn out Ryuuji. Ryuuji changed into his lounge-wear and, finding an untouched fish sausage, finely chopped it, cooked it in a frying pan, and picked it up. Pushing things aside on the desk, he placed the skimpy cuisine and a bottle of Taplows* in the space he cleared. He poured the contents of the bottle into a whisky glass and downed it in mouthful, then waited for it to settle in his stomach. Sitting down, he leaned against the back of the chair and gazed at the ceiling. His body became hot, and, under the compress, the spot where Mr. Yodogawa struck his face throbbed.

What a day it's been, he thought.

A client died right before his eyes. Jumped to his death. Suddenly went mad and smashed out a window in the middle of talking about work, and jumped from the sixth-storey of a building. Couldn't be restrained. It all happened so fast.

He remembered the words of the middle-aged police officer.

"There are a lot of witnesses, and there will be no charges laid in this random suicide case..."

Was that really true?

There was certainly a sense of discomfort in Mr. Yodogawa's appearance today. He'd been drinking. He seemed to be emotionally unstable. He shouted

*Translator's note: Taplows is a brand of Scotch whisky made in Scotland.

loudly. He'd apparently been taking tranquilizers.

But would that explain being led to such a sudden suicide? It seemed likely to Ryuuji that Mr. Yodogawa had been talking to someone just before all this.

He did not know Mr. Yodogawa personally. He'd been very precise in how he presented himself and clients had known him better than his old acquaintances. This was as far as his relationships went. However, he'd been caught up in something. At that time, Mr. Yodogawa had had something to ask Ryuuji. What had he said? Rats. That was it, rats.

"I want you to exterminate the rats," Mr. Yodogawa had said.

Could that have been nothing more than delirious, incoherent babble?

Ryuuji sat down and looked at the paper package Mr. Yodogawa brought to the "Seadragon." He ought to have submitted this item to the police, at least that was his intention. However, he changed his mind due to his association with the drawn-out investigation. Actually, he changed his mind when he discovered the telephone cards he received.

He took a box-cutter in hand and carefully cut the packing tape around the packaging.

A black box-shaped glasses case came out. Strictly speaking, it looked a lot like a glasses case. There was something familiar about this case to Ryuuji. Momentarily distracted, he moved his hand forward and opened the case. Inside was contained something that looked like glasses. However, these were not glasses. It looked like something called an FMD, a Face-Mounted Display, used for communicating in online games. However, this was not an FMD. Ryuuji knew what it was.

It was a VR-Scanner.

He held it for a while and looked at it.

There was a time once when Ryuuji worked on the research influenced by Jyotarou Amagi's proposed Real Digitization ideology. The VR-Scanner was produced as a byproduct in this process. By using an optical sensor to connect the optic nerve and performing an operation on the "Schicksal Player-character", medical technology recovers the mentally afflicted part of the test subject with high compatibility for the digital world.

When he resigned from from CC Corp. Japan three years ago, Ryuuji transferred to a company with all his research and data, including the VR-Scanner. Ryuuji renounced all of his rights as a developer. Such was the contract of employment. Therefore, Ryuuji, for the first time in three years, was actually able to hold this device in his hands.

The remnants of a dream of Ryuuji Sogabe's as a psychotherapy researcher, so to speak.

He started his desktop PC and used a code to link his PC and VR-Scanner.

Immediately, on the other side of the monitor, the PC-data installed on the VR-Scanner stood out like a wax model that had been given a coating. It was a tall, lean figure. Black hair. Light-weight clothing. Somewhat lanky limbs. A monocle in his right eye.

It was just as he had expected. Reunited with his dear old friend "Flügel."

Why was the VR-Scanner here? It was because Director Yodogawa brought it with him.

Then, why did Mr. Yodogawa bring this along and lay it across from Ryuuji? Mr. Yodogawa didn't select Ryuuji for some half-hearted reason that he simply did not want to be known to an in-house employee. He came with this request because of Ryuuji.

"I want you to investigate whether Geist released a virus," said Mr. Yodogawa when they first met. It was obvious that there was a different intent behind the scenes. The question lay there. What was it that Mr. Yodogawa wanted Ryuuji to do? Did he intend for Ryuuji to use this Flügel in some way?

His head hurt too much to keep thinking. He didn't even know if he was drunk again.

Ryuuji opened a drawer and retrieved a pack of playing cards to play a one-person card game. He moved away from his desk, leaving his computer as it was, sat down on the sofa, shuffled the cards, and arranged them one by one onto the reception table. It was a one-person game called Babel.

When Ryuuji arranged them in his head, he did it in order to play this game. He continued arranging the cards methodically in accordance with the rules. It's name is derived from the story that, as they packed the cards in their hands, and the cards kept piling up little by little, players were reminded of the Biblical tale. You had to admire this sort of human taste in naming. In any case, it was the perfect tool for clearing the mind.

While sorting the cards, Ryuuji put all unknown matters to the side for the moment, and tried to consider only practical matters.

Was there a cost to this problem? No. On the contrary, he'd already received an advance payment which was more than enough.

With the exception of this matter, did he have any high-priority work? No.

In order to divert leisure time, would he rather have the Taplows while snacking on the somewhat shoddy fried fish-meat sausage? He wasn't so sure about

that...

Soon the cards were divided into a stalemate. Game over. Concluded in accordance with the Scriptures.

He felt bad about the work he'd left undone. That was certain.

With what appeared to be the conclusion, Ryuuji drained the remnants of his glass and stretched out on the sofa. Then he slept.

Chapter 6

Resurrection

The next morning, Ryuuji left the office and returned to his apartment building. He stuffed the laundry in a vinyl bag, went inside and slipped the card-key into his apartment door.

Lilie was already awake, watching morning cartoons in the living room while dressed in her pyjamas. As Ryuuji entered, Lilie, realizing the situation, became panicked.

“Grid, news,” she said.

The TV channel quickly changed and became a news program.

Since around the time just before she became a junior high school student, Lilie became bashful about watching child-oriented anime in front of Ryuuji. Perhaps a sign of puberty.

“Good morning,” said Ryuuji.

Lilie replied, trying to appear calm and collected.

“Morning.”

Having just changed the channel again on a whim, she called out to return to the original news program.

Then she looked at Ryuuji’s face and raised her eyebrows.

“What happened there?”

“Oh, this?”

Before he’d left the office, Ryuuji removed the compress from under his left eye and applied a large bandage to the area. Even so, it looked like nothing more than a squished pimple.

“I squished a huge pimple. It was horribly painful,” he said.

Lilie frowned and didn't enquire any further.

"What will you do about breakfast? You should eat soon," she said.

"I'll eat right now," said Ryuuji.

He was hungry. He thought about it, and realized he hadn't eaten sufficiently yesterday.

"Grid, kitchen," said Lilie.

In the kitchen on the other end of the hallway, the ventilation fan began to whir.

"Grid" was the name given to the server-robot who managed Ryuuji's household consumer electronics.

Lilie instructed "Grid" to activate the cooking appliances, and it promptly prepared the breakfast arrangements. Rice, miso soup, bacon and eggs. And of course, pickled vegetables.

They sat down face-to-face at the kitchen table.

The advantage of the lofty family dining table was that you wouldn't be hindered by anyone.

The problem was, every time he bit into the pickled vegetables, he felt a sharp pain running through his left cheek. The swelling fortunately looked like it was going down. Even if he didn't take off the bandage, he didn't think he could care less about how he looked. He casually tilted his head and chewed with the teeth on his right side, its effectiveness in relieving the pain was close to nil.

Suddenly raising her head, Lilie, who had finished eating, looked at Ryuuji, who looked too concerned to eat.

"Hey, that's strange," she said while looking at Ryuuji's swollen cheek.

"Did something happen?" she added.

"To be honest, I forgot to buy garbage bags. Sorry."

"That's not it."

"Well, other than that..." said Ryuuji, turning away as he talked.

"Here's a gift of thanks for the wonderful pickled vegetables," he added.

He took out the envelope case and placed it before Lilie.

"Huh? What is it?" said Lilie loudly, taken by surprise.

She snatched up the envelope.

She peered inside, her doubting face formed a seemingly happy facial expression for several seconds, and, left speechless, she looked back up at Ryuuji.

“What are these?” she asked.

“Telephone cards.”

“*Telephone cards?*”

“They’re cards that you use in a public telephone. Try them. They’re a good deal.”

“*Public telephone?*” said Lilie, as she tilted her head.

“Huh?” she added with a puzzled tone, making a somewhat confused facial expression.

“Ah, I see... You’ve never seen one.”

Lilie came along with Ryuuji to Japan six years ago. At that time, public telephones were being eliminated, and many of them had already been removed. No, perhaps they were completely removed by the time she arrived. She had not known about the existence of public telephones and telephone cards. A generation gap.

“Ah. Well, in the olden days such convenient public installments existed. You could use these cards to make calls,” said Ryuuji, trying to explain the gist of the situation.

“If you had a cell phone, wouldn’t you not need these?”

“If electrical power were to go out in an emergency, you’d be worried. So, with the auspices of the police, the old telephone line has recently been making a comeback. You know, it’s the mark of an endorsement from the Metropolitan Police Department.”

“But where would you use it? I’ve, well, never seen anything like a public telephone.”

“You’re right. Where would you use it, I wonder,” said Ryuuji.

“As far as that goes, I really don’t know,” he added.

“Despite not knowing, did you look it up?”

She tried searching with her portable terminal’s Net search.

“...Wow. It seems even a large station or the airport is useful, eh? The number of machines still operating in the country is around two-hundred. ...Two-hundred? Two hundred doesn’t seem to be enough. Ah, I see. So, even the cards are rare.”

“Really?”

“Am I wrong?”

“I don’t know. Geez. I said it was fine.”

“Well, do what you want with it. It’s not the end of the world.”

“Japanese is funny,” said Lilie.

“Now listen here, you.”

“Aren’t the illustrations of the mascots cute?” added Ryuuji in a soft voice.

“I don’t need them,” said Lilie flatly, with such timing that it seemed to be the end of the conversation.

“Grid, kettle.”

She collected her tableware and pushed the case envelope over to Ryuuji, then quickly proceeded to the sink.

Even now, you sometimes hear of the infamous “Resurrection” of six years earlier, in 2017.

After having lived away in Germany for many years and having gotten used to it, Ryuuji returned to Japan with Lilie.

Lilie, who was seven years old at the time, is a distant relative of Ryuuji’s late wife. After losing her family in a train accident, she suffered from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. Having no other relatives than Ryuuji, she would have been sent to an institution had he refused to take her. Had Ryuuji not taken appropriate action, she would have been an orphan with serious mental issues.

At the end of the day, leaving her native Germany was probably the best thing for her.

The same could be said for Ryuuji.

Leaving the drying of the dishes to “Grid,” Lilie dressed into a plain clothes combination of a shirt with a skirt and leggings, and went outside to play. She had a play-date with a friend. In spite of having just been on a long-awaited holiday, her vitality was amazing.

After he saw Lilie off, Ryuuji sat down on the living room sofa, retrieved his portable terminal and Palm-PC, and set them on the table.

After he’d returned to the office, he considered starting on his work, and since Lilie was now gone out, he thought he could use this opportunity wisely.

He deployed the Palm-PC’s keypad and the power automatically turned on, and the login screen for “The World R:X” appeared.

“R:X” was the latest in “The World” series of games, released in 2020. According to official reports, the number of worldwide users exceeds one million people. The old versions, “R:1” and “R:2”, showed a decrease in popularity, but this version boasts the highest popularity of any online game in the industry.



He first loaded a thread on the Official Bulletin Board. One month ago, Ryu-
uji started it himself.

“To the Magician of Destiny. Requesting contact. E-mail accepted.”

There was not even one response. It was only natural. This was because this message was very cryptic to an outsider, and Geist, who was the target from the beginning, no longer existed in this “World.”

During the Immortal Dusk Incident of 2020, Jyotaro Amagi’s Copy AI “Ma-
gician” Geist was crushed and terminated by a gigantic Jyotaro Amagi who had been induced with Outer Dependency Syndrome. There wasn’t even a fragment left. Despite faithfully serving his master, a cruel reward was bestowed upon the Conjuror for carrying out the plot to its end.

Ryuuji had witnessed the scene through the eyes of Flügel. That’s how he knew that Geist “was not there.”

However, right now he had no objection to respecting the dying wish of his recently deceased client. He just had to look into talks related to “the hacker who identifies himself as Geist.” There wasn’t much time.

Ryuuji typed on the keypad and added the new information.

“To the Magician of Destiny. Concerning the extermination of rats. Request-
ing contact. E-mail accepted.”

Then, he looked at the other popular Bulletin Boards and was not particularly worried.

Using his Palm-PC, this time he accessed NAB's (Network Administration Bureau) site from his portable terminal. Having acquired a Network Supervisor license that is issued by NAB, Ryuuji, an ordinary person, was able to access otherwise inaccessible pages.

He input the ID and password and the industry news page, which updates in real-time, opened before him. He took his time carefully going over the Bulletin Board.

There was one big news item to worry about.

There was an article stating that CyberConnect Corp. San Diego's female President, Veronica Bain seemingly intended to visit CC Corp. Japan in the middle of next month's audit. Dubbed the "Empress," CyberConnect's most powerful person, Veronica Bain, was the one VIP whose name frequently appeared in network and finance news. You didn't get many chances to make her acquaintance, so her meeting with CC Corp. Japan's employees became something of an amusing topic around the water-cooler.

When he had finished viewing all the information on the page, Ryuuji closed his Palm-PC and turned off the power to his portable terminal. For the time being, he decided he should tie up loose ends in the real world.

He'd save "The World" for last.

Chapter 7

Net Slum

Net Slum is an irregular, parasitic server in “The World.”

It is a place which ended up functioning as a sort of town, where corrupt area data and various bugs gather and wander to evade debugging, and hackers and cheaters assemble.

This town of junk existed in “The World” from the beginning. It was said to have already been arranged to look as it did in the “R:1” era of a decade or so ago, and even before this, there were talks of sightings of it by the testers for “Fragment”, the beta version of “The World.” Like in the legend of El Dorado, through the ages, it continues to be a “paradise” for the people who love illegalities and lawlessness.

Even if by chance the game’s operation was suspended and “The World” ended, Net Slum may go on existing as it always has in cyberspace for eternity.

On a part of the crumbling wall which encircled the town, handwriting had been added, and graphics had seemingly been scribbled in paint.

The trash heap of the world! Welcome to the domain of delinquent hackers and cheats!

At the gate placed in the centre of the dump, a single PC transferred in.

It was a middle-aged man. He wore rustic goggle-glasses and his face was unshaven. He had on a colourless and worn-out coat. For some reason, a house-plant was growing on top of the aviator’s cap he wore on his head.

He was an information-dealer. Permanently residing in Net Slum, he made a living by stealing and selling illegal data for real money. He was a brilliant hacker.

He walked down to the square and began to walk towards the modified @HOME made by a transformed guild system — a coffee shop which contained his

headquarters.

When he turned the corner of the main street, someone was there, standing in his way.

He thought it was a new hacker, because he was unfamiliar with this PC, but he felt like he had seen this person before.

“Yo. Long time no see. How’ve you been?” said the new figure.

In order to support his own insight as an information-dealer, this man came to talk to people in a strangely over-familiar tone. The moment the first figure heard the voice, a wave of ominous sensations overwhelmed him.

“I’ve been waiting for you to come. For two years? Or maybe three? Well, I’m so relieved to finally meet with a former acquaintance,” said the new figure.

In regards to his appearance in “The World”, the man wore an mismatching shirt, necktie, and suspenders. On his right eye was a monocle. Due to his outward appearance, it was impossible to tell his profession. It is possible to say that the informant himself was personally included among the inhabitants of Net Slum.

“I’ve been looking for the skill of a good information-dealer for a long time. Is that you by any chance? Hehe. I hate to ask, but I could use a little help.”

The man formed a smile, like a long and narrow stick was in his mouth — perhaps a stick of candy was shifting back and forth.

In the instant he saw this stick of candy, the information-dealer realized who the man standing before him was.

That’s right. This guy was “Flügel.”

“Eeeeeep!”

With a great yelp, he jumped back into the nearby back-alley. He tumbled on to the road on the other side, got his foot caught in a pile of garbage laid at a bend in the road, freed himself, then ran off with all his might.

As he ran through the labyrinthine path, he reached the entrance to the @HOME, targeted it, selected the guild-key from his item-window, and took it in his hand.

After a moment, he slipped inside the hideout.

The calm atmosphere of the dimly-lit jazz café ushered the information-dealer inside, his momentary panic subsided, and a feeling of calm returned in his chest.

He felt safe now that he was inside the confines of the @HOME. A person who did not hold a pass item such as a “Guild Key” or a “Guest Key” absolutely could not enter. Net Slum was “modding heaven,” to say nothing of this place. For those in the trade, security against the rising skill of hackers cost double or even triple.

Why did this man Flügel appear here right now? He didn’t know and didn’t want to know. This is what he thought as he stood waiting. From now on, for a little while at least, he ought to be careful about returning to Net Slum. No, he ought to refrain from logging into “The World” altogether.

At that moment, there was a clicking sound at the back of the shop.

The information-dealer was startled and his body stiffened. Someone was there. There was a person sitting on a stool at the farthest end of the counter.

“Ah, by any chance did you switch occupations? Did you become a café manager? If that’s what you want, why not go for it, right? But, I don’t get a good feeling from this shop,” he said to his old friend.

As Flügel went on chattering endlessly, the information-dealer knew immediately that he had to shake him off as soon as possible.

Steam rose up from a coffee cup placed in front of Flügel.

Flügel took the cup in his hand, brought it to his lips and made a “sipping motion”, then placed it back on its saucer. It made a clinking sound.

“I didn’t know you like Jazz. As a matter of fact, I like it too, it has a lovely ambiance. We might get along well after all, eh?”

His inflection at the ‘eh?’ was very clear. Hehehe, he snickered.

The information-dealer sank down to the floor. This guy was on a different level of hacking skills. How did he possibly get inside? How did he possibly produce that coffee-data?

“What’s with you? How did you get in here?!” cried out the information-dealer, thrusting his finger at Flügel.

“Arrrgh, I hate it when you show up unannounced!”

Around the time that “The World R:X” service began, there was a period where the worth of user rights strangely rose in price. Hacker groups emerged to take over the corners of Net Slum and keep control, and they began to use cheat-programs to illegally copy user-registration information and buy and sell Player-Character-bodies.

In those days the information-dealer was already an intermediate player in the trade, setting up shop near the group’s headquarters and trying to avoid getting involved as much as possible. He felt that the scope of the illegal act

was far too big. He stayed away from the really dangerous jobs. He'd just barely scratched the surface. This is his lifestyle.

His intuition was right. Before long a group, frolicking like a circus troupe, raided and destroyed a hacker group's safe house.

The members of the hacker guild totalled about 50 people. Those who had confidence in their skills ambushed the assailants. Some of them tampered with their PC bodies and gained "semi-immortal" status. However, the circus troupe's strength was no laughing matter, and these tricks were not enough.

It was a disaster for the information-dealer, and there was this evil man with brown skin and brown eyes. This guy took out a huge machine gun — a machine gun in a fantasy world? That's right, it was surely a machine gun — he started shooting indiscriminately at the people around. The bullets rained down upon the "semi-immortal" hackers and there was nothing they could do about it. Their guild headquarters was filled with more holes than swiss cheese.

The bullets soared up to the information-dealer's shop which was located a little ways up the street, effortlessly pierced the interior data of the outer wall graphic, and shook in an odd manner. Valuable information stored in a cloud-storehouse was blown to smithereens. It was merely collateral damage. The information-dealer's real stomach began to hurt as he remembered the incident.

They were somehow able to recover the data through backup files, and were left to spend a large amount of time and resources rebuilding the ruined security system which had been riddled by bullets. The hackers' pride was torn to shreds as the wall of defence that they were more confident about than anything else was calmly broken through.

The person at the helm of the circus troupe's command was Flügel. He knew after a while that they were a hacker group hired semi-officially.

"That's right, now I remember. You said you'd take care of the damages, didn't you? You still owe me for that!" shouted the information-dealer.

Flügel tried to avert his eyes from any signs of trouble while he approached the person shouting at him.

"No way. Since when did I say something like that? What hour, what minute, what second?"

"You old* punk! You definitely said that you'd reimburse me for my store-

*Translator's note: The original line literally read "Showa-era punk." The Showa Era was from 1926-1989. I decided to translate it as old, because, in 2023, anyone born before 1989 would be at least 34 years old, hence, middle-aged. Therefore, Ryuuji is at least 34 and is essentially being called old by the information-dealer. It is assumed that the dealer is younger, possibly in his twenties.

house!”

Flügel had had a habit of just coming around to the information-dealer for things like mass observation of “R:X”, in short, he needed underlings to do reconnaissance. However, eventually the contact became estranged, and soon was lost altogether. Though the compensation was not what it used to be, this time he was relieved that the burdensome relationship was finally over.

“OK, I get it. I’ll pay you later. I’ll get it all after I finish this job I’m doing. How does that sound?”

“No. Pay me first. If you don’t, we’ll have to have a little chat. You can absolutely count on that. Now please leave.”

Taking a seat on the bed, the dealer looked away. Little by little he regained his composure after he spoke. He didn’t think he’d be back to dragging out a former contract, but he decided to refuse to become emotional here. This was thoroughly dangerous. This was his lifestyle.

“Absolutely? Count on it? If I don’t pay you the money first?”

Flügel removed the candy from his mouth.

“Well, if I pay you the money first, you can absolutely count on it, can’t you?” said Flügel.

“Uh?”

“Please check your bank account. I just made a deposit.”

The dealer couldn’t believe what Flügel just said. He was at a loss for words. Staring at Flügel’s face, the dealer opened an invisible secret window and saw his bank account. A deposit had been made. Inside was an amount people don’t often get to see.

“There’s... there’s so much!” said the dealer.

No. More important than that, how did he figure out the bank and account number?

“I just thought I’d sweeten it a little. I added in the interest I owe you for keeping you waiting so long.”

Flügel put the candy back in his mouth and joined his hands with an unnatural popping sound.

“This has been a very lovely chat. You should consider me a friend. Listen, let’s sit down. How about we have a toast with coffee?” said Flügel.

He suddenly stretched out his hand and tapped on the counter for his companion to sit next to him. He took out a steaming cup of coffee seemingly from nowhere, and placed it on the table with a clinking noise.

The dealer realized he had been placed in a position where he could not refuse the offer. This man had brought new work, and he had no choice but to assume the responsibility. Could he feign ignorance? Perhaps run away with the money or log out? It was no good. There was no escape.

He made up his mind. The dealer stood up with a sigh and sat down on a stool next to Flügel.

“Alright. Fine, sir,” said the dealer quietly.

“What should I be looking into?” asked the dealer.

“Lately there have been rumours going around ‘The World.’ I want you to find everything you can that includes the following words: ‘Computer virus,’ ‘rat,’ and ‘Geist.’”

“Is that all?”

“That’s everything.”

“Huh? Those are extremely vague terms,” said the information-dealer somewhat anticlimactically.

“If you’re talking about computer viruses, there are countless types just from the former ‘R:1’ alone. As for rats and Geist, are they some sort of monsters? That’s it, isn’t it? If you’re talking about rats, there may be a ‘monster invasion.’ There may be a scenario where a giant rat-monster from the sea attacks Mac Anu. You wouldn’t want something like that, would you?”

“No. But I’m more dangerous.”

“How so?”

“I’ve left dead people in the real world.”

The dealer was too frightened to answer.

“Well... even if I did...” added Flügel.

The dealer kept his voice low as he spoke:

“Hey. This is a really troubling talk. It’s not my style to get involved in such things.”

“That’s okay,” said Flügel stiffly.

“I’m not really dangerous,” he added.

“Hey, didn’t you just say you were dangerous?”

“I am and I’m not. Just a little.”

“Which is it?!”

Flügel took the coffee cup in hand, put it to his mouth and made a “sipping motion.”

“Ah, I have to be honest with you. If this investigation brings up anything dangerous, you don’t know me.”

“Huh?”

What was this man proposing?

“However, there was a man who thought there was some significance, so he hired me for a lot of money. Therefore, I wanted to ask a pro like you. I want you to sift through the information with that sense of smell of yours,” said Flügel, who got up from his chair and began to walk towards the exit of the @HOME.

“If you have any prospects for me, please give me a message. It’s been a while since I gave out my member-address,” Flügel added.

“Ah. Umm, hey!” said the information-dealer, facing Flügel’s back.

“Just one thing I want to be clear about. Are you a system admin now? Or are you a hacker? Which is it? What are you?” said the dealer.

Flügel looked back for a moment.

“I’m just Flügel.”

He exited the café.

Chapter 8

Curse Gun

The rise of the current Net-culture is said to have begun on December 24, 2007. On this day, restrictions regarding use of the Net were completely lifted across the whole world, and “Network Safety Declarations” were announced by the WNC (World Network Commission). The event is taught in school history classes under the name “Virgin’s Kiss.”

This “Virgin’s Kiss” was implemented and spread to the whole world through the “ALTIMIT OS” operating system to provide absolute resistance against all computer viruses.

With the exception of formerly-existing critical software and security, the Web thoroughly collapsed in 2005. This was the result of the worst computer virus in history: “Pluto’s Kiss.”

It’s sort of a clever joke. Virgin and Pluto; it’s OK to kiss either of them.

In any case, the world’s network temporarily died in 2005.

It was revived in 2007. It brought with it the world’s first MMORPG “The World” supported by “ALTIMIT OS.”

“The World” soon became “R:2”, and as time passed, became the current “R:X.”

In the present year of 2023, rumours concerning the next version update to “R:X” are being whispered here and there.

However, this is still all just talk.

Flügel came back to the Eternal City Mac Anu from Net Slum, sat at sidewalk café table near the entrance to the central square, and watched the passing Player-Characters. The area was flowing to the brim with various comings and goings such as chats, party-member recruitment, item trades, and all the other lively interactions unique to Net-games.

Mac Anu was a city of canals. In the Celtic languages “Mac” means “son”, and “Anu” denotes a fertility goddess who appears in Celtic mythology. Therefore, “Mac Anu” means “Son of the Goddess.” As the name suggests, the sunsets are always beautifully and tenderly coloured like the look of affection from a goddess.

Among the pedestrians one could sometimes see the same types of PCs as Schicksal. In particular, the “Dancer” type of female character seemed to be popular.

Flügel turned his gaze to the deep red sky. An airship flew leisurely above. An enormous building could be seen standing in the distance. It was the Akashic Records.



He gazed motionlessly at the tower; the off-limits legacy left in this “World”

by Jyotarou Amagi. After much trouble, it was now completely silent and inactive.

“Just ruins now,” Flügel muttered to himself.

Like his Schicksal PC, for Ryuuji Sogabe, that is Flügel, this tower represented the ruins of Dr. Amagi’s dream to pursue his Real Digitization theory. It continued to stand independently like a gravestone for the developer himself.

Flügel personally felt that it was rather ironic.

I am wandering aimlessly in “The World” and managing the ruins as Flügel...

He smiled weakly. He seemed to become sentimental, wrapped in the goddess’ love.

Four days had passed since he started moving in “The World R:X.”

It took him longer than expected to locate his old acquaintance, the information-dealer.

Flügel opened the Parameters window. He figured he’d confirm his status once again.

Since Flügel’s PC body had been reset, he was now back to level 1.

He opened the Item window and selected “Brieler Rössle,” the only weapon he carried. The Curse Gun Brieler Rössle appeared at Flügel’s right-hand side.

The revolver’s bullets had the ability to freeze.

Produced from Ryuuji Sogabe’s mental structure by the VR-Scanner, the Schicksal PC Flügel possessed a unique ability — if one of his bullets hits a target, it can “suspend” the data. Is that the ability of a PC, or a monster? Could he have used a cheat on the @HOME entrance? It could have been rewritten as easily as he suspended the data.

An almost unrivalled skill in battle. If it hit, he would always win.

But there were weaknesses.

To suspend the data of the target, the user would require a certain amount of energy output. If the range is within striking distance, the energy output is kept high. It works much like a water gun in theory.

To be more specific, in order to reliably perform the forced suspension, the bullet must hit within a range of the equivalent of about two metres in the real world. If standing farther away, the energy output will be insufficient and the bullet will have no effect.

Despite its revolver-like appearance, its range is unusually small.

It also does not have rapid-fire.

Once before, as he was engaged in a close match with a red Twin Blade, he used a super-cheap technique that forcibly increased the gun's energy output by linking it to the Akashic Records, tampering with the data of over 100 bodies that he had turned into stone statues.

On the one hand, Brieler Rössle is powerful in pristine condition, but very clumsy to use on the other.

The Schicksal PC embodies and reflects his real player's mental state on his abilities. Due to the strain on his mind, by operating his PC in the digital world, this strain on the mind could be cured. That was the Schicksal PC's general medical care theory.

It perhaps could be said that the powerful nature of Brieler Rössle's habits may have transferred this strain onto Flügel's, that is, Ryuuji Sogabe's mind.

He removed Brieler Rössle by selecting it in the Item window and the gun vanished from his hand.

Then, something happened.

From the distant spire of the Akashic Records, something that sounded like a roar resonated in the sky over Mac Anu. The ground shook like a landslide was approaching in the distance.

Suddenly Flügel almost completely lifted himself from his chair, but quickly realized this was a mistake. The PC kept calm in his surroundings, as though he could not hear the tremors.

This was not the game's sound. This was a real sound. On Ryuuji Sogabe's real-life side, a loud rumble could be heard.

Flügel tried to take off the monocle from his eye with his right hand. He made a mistake. It was not his right hand. He did not take the monocle. It seemed that his senses still had not recovered fully. He took a deep breath in the hopes that the oxygen would make him feel a little more aware. It took a while to take effect. It was a similar feeling to having the bends. He had to acclimatize himself to the other side.

Like when you just wake up from a dream, Flügel was filled with a hyper-real sense of reality.

He removed the VR-Scanner from his face.

The telephone was ringing.

He got up from the office sofa and the setting sun thrust in through the western windows. The wall clock showed half past five. Squinting his eyes, he

took the VR-Scanner in his right hand, stood up to put on his slippers, then took up his mobile terminal and walked to his desk.

A cold, confident voice could be heard.

“You’re Network Trouble Consultant Ryuuji Sogabe, aren’t you?”

“That’s right, I am.”

“My name is Mr. Ogura and I am employed as CC Corp. Japan’s Secretarial Office Chief. I need to speak with you, Mr. Sogabe. I’m very sorry for calling so suddenly at such an hour, eight o’clock at night, but I must ask you to meet with me.”

It was certainly abrupt. At any rate, it was a strange hour at which to talk about work.

“This is an unusual request.”

“Normally I would not ask, but it’s about work.”

“As expected.”

“I cannot tell you over the phone.”

There was silence for a moment.

“I understand. Would you like to meet at your company in Odaiba?”

“No, please come to the hotel I’m about to tell you.”

Ryuuji made a note of the name and address of the hotel that Mr. Ogura mentioned.

“Tonight at eight o’clock. The Baketon Hotel in the Harbour Ward, right?” confirmed Ryuuji.

“Yes, I look forward to it.”

The call cut off.

Ryuuji gathered his portable terminal and VR-Scanner and put them into his office desk.

Secretarial Office Chief was the post that Mr. Yodogawa held before he became managing director.

Sogabe had been in possession of a VR-Scanner without a legal basis, and CC Corp. Japan’s people were likely determining his whereabouts, and now they decided it was a suitable time to establish contact of some sort. At eight o’clock at night. At the Baketon Hotel. Just splendid. He should have guessed.

Fatigue clung to every membrane in his body. It was proof that he had not yet regained his senses after controlling Flügel from the VR-Scanner.

I'm so tired, thought Ryuuji.

And I haven't even done anything yet.

Chapter 9

Monster

Long ago, during the imperial reign of Taisho*, there was a British cotton-trader who visited Japan, and, being deeply impressed by the politeness and modesty of the locals, became a naturalized citizen and set up residence in Tokyo where he remained for the rest of his life. He did not have any children, so he requested in his will that all of his money go to his faithful Japanese servant in order to establish a cultural exchange between Japan and foreign countries.

Thus, at the cotton-trader Mr. Gill Baketon's dying wish, the money had been handed down by the servant's descendants, and a modern descendant founded the hotel. An episode of the good old days.

At least that's what it says when doing a Net search.

The Baketon Hotel that you actually get to see, with the exception of Japan's leading high-end hotels, appeared to be free of such sepiea stories.

Giving the car to the porter, Ryuuji entered the palace-like lobby through the elegant entrance.

He tried to throw away the candy that was in his mouth, but realized that there was nowhere to put it, so he reluctantly placed it in his jacket pocket.

No sooner had he done so, than a man wearing a suit came up to him.

"Thank you for coming. I'm Mr. Ogura. Please, follow me."

He spoke in the same voice that Ryuuji heard over the phone, and led Ryuuji to the back at a brisk pace.

Ogura walked across the sea of carpet that lay at his feet, entered the elevator and pressed the button for the top-floor penthouse. The elevator slowly rose up.

*Translator's note: Emperor Taisho reigned from July 30, 1912 to December 25, 1926.

After they completed their initial greetings, the rest of the trip occurred in silence.

“Tell me a little about yourself,” said Ryuuji finally.

“What is it you do for work?” he added.

“I think that’ll be explained when we reach our destination,” said Mr. Ogura.

“Could you give me a rough idea in advance?” asked Ryuuji.

“I cannot. I do not have the authority to tell you that,” responded Ogura very calmly.

Contrary to his words, Mr. Ogura’s eyes did not appear very calm to Ryuuji. If Ryuuji looked hard enough, he could see faint beads of sweat on Mr. Ogura’s forehead.

This man was tense, and Ryuuji could sense it. He looked away. From this point on, he was terribly nervous as they headed to the destination.

The elevator arrived at the penthouse-suite level. There was a door at the end of the corridor, and a white man was standing there. He was one head taller than Ryuuji. He seemed to also be twice as heavy. One could tell by how much his dark grey suit was deformed by his muscular body. He was the very picture of a bodyguard.

For this white man to be someone’s bodyguard, thought Ryuuji, this someone must be inside the room, but what kind of person is it? Why would CC Corp go about this in such a roundabout fashion?

“I’ve brought Mr. Sogabe,” Mr. Ogura conveyed in English.

The bodyguard nodded, turned to Ryuuji, and, in order to remove unwanted items, began to thoroughly search Ryuuji’s person.

“He is merely checking for things like cameras or voice recorders. We don’t want to leave a record of anything in this room,” conveyed Mr. Ogura as an interpreter to Ryuuji.

While he was finishing these words, the palm of a hand that looked like a bodyguard’s glove stretched out and plucked off the second button from Ryuuji’s shirt.

“This recorder is a no go,” said the bodyguard in English, who took the button from Ryuuji, and hid the button-like IC recorder in his breast pocket.

“You’ll get it back after,” he bodyguard added.

“You’ll receive the cost of repair along with a transportation fare,” said Mr. Ogura rather loudly.

Ryuuji looked up at the bodyguard’s face.

The bodyguard looked down at Ryuuji.

Ah, it's really humid out today, isn't it?" Ryuuji said to Mr. Ogura.

"I was just about to open my collar anyway. Thanks for saving me the time and effort, my friends! Please tell me... actually, hold on. Just a second," he added.

Ryuuji removed a piece of candy from his coat pocket and held it out to the bodyguard.

"You missed this. This could also be a state-of-the-art recorder, you know. Here, take it."

The bodyguard was caught off guard for a moment, being given this item in such a nonchalant manner.

"Put this in the trash for me, would you?" asked Ryuuji.

Mr. Ogura knocked on the door, and a bodyguard quickly appeared, blocking the entrance.

"I'm told to only let Mr. Sogabe come in," said this bodyguard.

Upon hearing this, Mr. Ogura seemed very relieved. With a nod to Ryuuji, the second bodyguard vanished.

Ryuuji felt like some sort of sacrifice that has been left behind in a cave where a monster lurks.

The first bodyguard knocked on the door, and a female voice could be heard from inside saying "come in." It was in Japanese.

The bodyguard looked back at Ryuuji, thrust the piece of candy into the back pocket of his trousers, opened the door, and went inside. Ryuuji followed after him.

First he noticed the smell of tobacco. The roomed was filled with the faintly bittersweet scent.

The interior decor was like an antique Western style. The same went for the furniture. A large, long table was arranged in the center of the spacious room, the likes of which were used to start meetings of an elite atmosphere. On a sofa on the other side of the table sat a blond Caucasian woman with her legs crossed. In front of her a tobacco leaf had been placed, which she massaged between her pinched fingers and then packed in a ceramic pipe shaped like a rose.

She didn't even attempt to look at Ryuuji.

"Steve, please leave," she said in English while she fiddled with her pipe.

The Bodyguard left the room silently. He didn't make a sound at all, neither while walking nor when he opened and closed the door.

The woman wore a voluptuous, tight-fitting suit. She was the type of beauty that you didn't know where to look first. Yet, you couldn't help but let your eyes wander. It was difficult to tell her age. She appeared to be in her late thirties, but she also looked as though she could be in her forties as well as in her twenties. As this beautiful woman sat there, a mysterious ambiance was in the air all around her.

There was a sofa on the opposite side of the woman across the table. But, Ryuuji stood in silence as she did not offer him a seat.

Soon the woman finished stuffing a tobacco leaf into the pipe and lit it using an old-style match, and began to smoke the pipe with a satisfied look on her face as though she were in a world all to herself.

Then, lifting her eyes, she noticed Ryuuji for the first time over the smoke. She smiled faintly. It was a charming smile that opened like a wound.

"I take it you're Ryuuji Sogabe?" she said in fluent Japanese.

"Yes," said Ryuuji.

"Is it alright if I just call you Ryuuji?"

"By all means. That's what all my friends call me."

"I hope we can grow accustomed to such a relationship with each other. Do you know who I am?"

"Of course. Ms. Bain, it's an honour to meet you," said Ryuuji tactfully.

The main programmer and official of the former ALTIMIT Corp, and the current CyberConnect Corp. San Diego president. She is the most powerful person in the company that stands on top of more than ten of the subsidiaries that exist in the entire world.

Veronica Bain was smoking the pipe as though she had two mouths.

"I remember seeing on the news a while ago that you were coming to Japan," said Ryuuji.

"I wouldn't have had to come if it weren't for that man, Mr. Yodogawa," said Ms. Bain as though it were nothing, looking at Ryuuji with narrowed eyes. She continued.

"Ryuuji, I know all about you. I had some research done. Ryuuji Sogabe. In 2009 you studied abroad at a university in Munich, Germany. In 2010 you met Kaya Fröbe, a test subject at the Psychiatric Care Center located on campus, and married her."

Suddenly Ryuuji felt like a clump of lead had dropped to the bottom of his stomach.



“In 2017 you left the university and returned to your home country when you were hired by CC Corp. Japan. In 2020 you were involved in the “Immortal Dusk” Incident. Your contract with CC Corp. Japan was terminated and you opened a Network Trouble Consultation business, and now you’re here,” said Ms. Bain who continued to smoke her pipe while gazing at Ryuuji.

“I wonder if you really are,” she added.

“I’m more or less here,” replied Ryuuji.

“I think you know why I called you here. I want you to return the VR-Scanner that you’ve been hiding. I am aware, of course, that you are the developer,

but now it belongs to my company.”

Veronica Bain stared at Ryuuji through the smoke. Her eyes were like those of a snake looking into a bird’s nest. “It’s not a good thing for you to have. I know,” she said.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. The V... R... something or other, was it? I can’t quite remember, but I feel as though I worked on that thing a long time ago,” said Ryuuji.

Veronica’s mouth became distorted. Even so, her lips still looked beautiful. She spoke in a low voice.

“For some time now, you’ve heard of and known who I am.”

“Yes, I would say so.”

“I could easily crush a freelancer like you all by myself.”

“I’d just like to say that I would like to have this talk through the standard procedures. This is a country with a constitutional government. It’s the same in your home country.”

A smile came across Veronica’s mouth.

“In any case, you’d need evidence that Mr. Yodogawa took the VR-what’s-it-called off of your company, don’t you? After that, you’d need evidence that I received the VR-thingy from Mr. Yodogawa. Also, I have a license to participate in Network business. In other words, I have the right to NAB’s legal protection. Also, you have the duty to confidentiality owing to your official position,” said Ryuuji.

Veronica looked at Ryuuji with a lustre in her eyes. The smile disappeared just as quickly as it had appeared.

“Your relationship with Mr. Yodogawa was not so close.”

“Well, he didn’t call me ‘Ryuuji’.”

“Mr. Yodogawa was not merely a client to you. Now that he’s dead, there is no need to be loyal to him anymore. And yet, are you working on something for him?”

Ryuuji did not answer. He forcibly took a deep breath.

“I think you should give me a break. You ruined my chance for quality family-time by calling at eight o’clock at night, tore my shirt button, blew your strange-smelling foreign tobacco near me, delved into my past as though it were a gossip magazine, threatened me, told me to give up my work, and you expect me to answer honestly?”

As he spoke in one breath and reached his hand into his chest pocket, Ryuuji looked at Veronica.

“Do you mind?”

“Go ahead.”

Ryuuji took a candy from his pocket and removed the wrapper with his mouth. It was a caramel-flavoured candy.

Veronica frowned.

“Are you a non-smoker?”

“Can you put up with me eating a candy?” said Ryuuji?

There was a short pause.

“Haha. Hahahaha,” she laughed loudly.

Veronica squirmed on the sofa in delight, then spoke.

“Good. That’s good. Haha. I like you.”

She smiled at Ryuuji.

“Entrust the VR-Scanner to me,” Veronica said.

Up to now her smile had been warm, but it became strange. At least, outwardly strange.

“Actually, to be honest, I want you to use the VR-Scanner,” she said.

This was not something Ryuuji expected to hear.

“There’s something I want to ask you. Please sit down.”

Veronica pointed to the sofa before her with her rose pipe.

“Is it about work?” asked Ryuuji.

“Yes.”

Ryuuji hesitated for a moment. He got a bad feeling that once he sat on the sofa, he would become involved in a tricky situation.

His indecision lasted but a moment. Ryuuji sat down on the sofa.

“As we speak from this point on, this is about CC Corp. San Diego, not CC Corp. Japan,” prefaced Veronica.

“Our specially hired programmer ran away. I want you to catch him,” she said.

Ryuuji was silent for a while.

“Ah, well, you often hear about things like that. Especially in this industry of ours. I think it’s terrible. It must be unbearable for those left behind,” said Ryuuji.

“But, why me? Wouldn’t it be better to hire someone from your own country?”

“It has to be you. You’re the only man for the job,” said Veronica.

“This man’s true nature is a hacker... no, his true nature is a hardcore cracker. When he fled, he had easily broken past our security, and had stolen some securely stored and confidential material. Among the material was data and research equipment developed during your time as an employee at CC Corp. Japan. Of course, that includes the VR-Scanner.”

Ryuuji felt his body shrink inwards.

“There’s no way that guy could adapt a Schicksal PC, right?”

“I don’t know. But it’s possible. He may change the data segments that are available to him. He has the skill to do such a thing.”

A Schicksal PC has an overwhelming power in the digital environment that is “The World,” and has the potential to cause irreparable cyber-crime if it is misused.

“Yuri Kazinsky Seto. That’s the name of the cracker.”

“Is that a Russian name?”

“He’s of Japanese descent. No, I should say he is Japanese. He’s half-Japanese, but his nationality was always Japanese. His Japanese name is Yuuri Seto[†].”

Anyone with good sense would become silent when they heard that name.

Of course, Ryuuji went silent.

“The Yuri Seto of the ‘Deadly Flash’ incident?” he asked.

“The very same,” nodded Veronica.

The hacking incident occurred in December of 2003 when he invaded the world’s terminals through the network, causing a flash to be displayed on screens that reached down into the users’ subconscious, damaging their minds.

Victims received a sharp stimulus to the hypothalamus, inducing vomiting, vertigo, convulsions, cramps, and eventually leading to impaired brain activity. There were seven deaths across the world as a result.

The incident was known across the world as the “Deadly Flash.”

[†]Translator’s note: Seto’s name is written as 瀬戸悠里 in kanji.

That was the only cyber-crime that caused people to die before “Pluto’s Kiss,” and the virus’s creator Yuri Seto became the subject of a nationwide manhunt and investigation. He was caught between a rock and a hard place when he was found trying to flee to the United States by plane, and was arrested by the FBI upon arrival at Washington’s Dulles International Airport.

Then, Seto was the first to be sentenced to death by Internet Law for the crime of inciting unrest via a network — or he was supposed to be.

“His lawyers proposed a deal. Seto had connections with Internet terrorists all over the world. His sentence was commuted to life imprisonment in exchange for that information,” continued Veronica.

“And that led to further commutations on the basis of merit and good behaviour as long as he cooperated in the investigations while his crimes were being evaluated. June of last year, he completed a prison term of eighteen years. There were no abnormalities in his psychiatric evaluation, so it had been determined that he was completely rehabilitated,” she added.

“So, after his release, you’re saying he was picked up by CC Corp. San Diego?”

A hacker who was involved in crime being hired by a security company after rehabilitation was not a new story. It was not something unusual.

However, that a global enterprise like CC Corp. would hire a criminal that had been sentenced to death was a case like no other.

“I’m surprised,” said Ryuuji.

“Or rather, I’m amazed. That’s equal to the number of vaults robbed by the thieves,” he added.

“That’s an opinion based on hindsight. People with good skills are a treasure, and I believe they should be kept safe even at the risk of others,” said Veronica.

“Having said that, I admit that it has backfired. That’s why I’m asking you. A Schicksal PC cannot defeat another Schicksal PC. Isn’t that the case?” she added.

“There is one exception,” said Ryuuji loudly.

“Seto is up to something with the Schicksal PC data. If it’s yours, you can settle things in the game. If you use Flügel’s bullets,” said Veronica.

“Naturally, the police should be notified, right?”

“No,” said Veronica, shaking her head.

“Don’t report this. From now on, what happened here must not get out. Expect for you.”

“Why?”

“Because it’s confidential. You cannot go public about the existence of the VR-Scanner and the other technologies. That would be contrary to this company’s interests.”

“Ah, I see,” murmured Ryuuji. It was an easy answer to understand.

“Without making it known to the general public, you must recover the sensitive data that was stolen by Yuri Kazinsky Seto. That is what I’m asking of you.”

“You didn’t say what I would get out of it.”

“It’s the same as what I already guaranteed. How about I tell you the codename that Seto uses while doing his work?” she said in a whisper as she leaned forward. Her rich, sweet-smelling breath drifted to Ryuuji’s nose.

“Geist.”

Chapter 10

Shadow

Late Sunday morning. The bedroom was completely silent.

Ryuuji looked at his Palm-PC, which was set on the bedside table.

Since returning from his “audience” with the “Empress” Veronica Bain last night, he’d left the power on. Ryuuji had returned to his room after eating breakfast and faced the monitor. He’d told Lilie to “go back to sleep.”

After he’d consented to Veronica’s request, Ryuuji received a Flash Memory. Its contents were displayed on the monitor. It was a profile about Yuuri Seto, that is, Yuri Kazinsky Seto.

Yuuri Seto was born in Okinawa to a Japanese mother and a US military father.

Immediately after Seto was born, his family emigrated to the United States due to his father’s transfer.

When Seto was six years old, his father died in a training accident.

He returned to Japan with his mother, and two years later she died.

He spent his high school years living with relatives of his mother.

He had tried his hand at hacking during his first year of middle school.

Later he went to Tokyo to attend the Department of Neurological Studies in the School of Medicine at Chikuba University. He left school on the verge of completing his courses and going to graduate school. The reason is unknown.

At the age of 27 he caused the “Deadly Flash” incident.

Three photos of Yuuri Seto were attached to the report.

In the first photo, he is about to be placed in a car after being arrested at Washington Dulles Airport. He has delicate-looking features, dark brown

hair, and black pupils. His face is raised while his arm is being twisted behind his back.

The second photo is from when he went to prison, the mugshots you get from the front and side.

The third photo is from just before he was released from prison. Unlike the previous two photos, he had a look as though he'd come to a profound realization, as, by this time, eighteen years had gone by.

What made this man decide to send out a murderous virus. What made him indiscriminately kill seven people? It was reported that his only motive was that he "seemed to want to show off the power of a hacker."

CC Corp. San Diego got in contact with Seto about half a month after his return to society. He was hired and presented with exceptional rewards. He was placed in the "Security Adviser" post that had been prepared for him.

Then, he worked doggedly for nine months, hardly uttering a word. After ten months, he stole highly classified data and fled the country. His whereabouts were completely unknown, and the photos serve as a stark lesson as to why one should not leave security to one person like him.

The more he read it, the more Ryuuji became depressed.

If you follow the dogma "criminals repeat the same trick," it was only a matter of time before he was trying to spread another virus through the network again.

The VR-Scanner that Seto stole contained highly-classified data. If it were the case that the VR-Scanner was a reflection of Seto's mind, and this were to exist in cyberspace, there's no telling what could happen.

What if Yuuri Seto, for example, woke up to "the ability to produce a new type of computer virus"?

Like an orphaned girl who produced a partner in the motif of a pet dog that died. Like the girl, whose only communication was through fighting games, learns martial arts to not lose to anyone in "The World." Like the youth who — psychologically dependant on guns — becomes a specialist in operating small arms.

Things like that would have to be checked.

Ryuuji entered the home phone number of Mr. Yodogawa into his portable terminal.

Soon, Mr. Yodogawa's widow answered. There was a dark tone to her voice. It was to be expected. Not even ten days had passed since Kiyoteru Yodogawa died.

Claiming to be a person who had assisted the deceased, he apologized for not being able to attend the funeral, and told her that he wanted to pay tribute by offering incense to the spirit of the deceased. The answer came that she did not mind if he were to come anytime this afternoon. She said to come around one o'clock, and Ryuuji hung up the phone.

He'd be able to make it in time if he left right now.

In the living room Lilie was sitting on the couch and reading a fashion magazine for teens.

"Ah, Ryuuji...", said Lilie as Ryuuji came out of the bedroom looking somber in a suit.

"Are you going out?" she asked.

"For a little. I'm going out to eat lunch," replied Ryuuji anxiously.

He then asked a question in return.

"Why? Is something wrong?"

"No, nothing. Are you going to the office?"

"Ah, I may."

"Well, bring the laundry, and have a good day," said Lilie as she looked down at the magazine.

Upon exiting the apartment, Ryuuji started getting into his car.

As he drove along the boulevard, a small black eco-car came up behind him. It looked like a normal car you could see anywhere. Behind the wheel was a young man with sunglasses.

Along the way, Ryuuji bought pastries from a Japanese confectionery. When he got back to the road, he could still see the same black eco-car reflected in the rear-view mirror.

Ryuuji decided to make a right turn and continue driving for another five minutes. Turning to the right and proceeding a little further, Ryuuji made another right turn and proceeded back to the original road. The eco-car continued to stay with him. Ryuuji pulled into the other lane and applied his brake to come up beside the black car, but as he did so, the eco-car passed him and sped off unexpectedly. Ryuuji was not able to see the driver through the reflective side-windows. The car got away.

It was tailing me, though Ryuuji. But for who and why? Right on the heels of yesterday, it may have something to do with the meeting with Veronica Bain. No. Her coming to Japan wasn't supposed to have been made public yet.

While he continued to think, Ryuuji arrived at the Yodogawa household.

It was a respectable Japanese-style house suited to the name of Yodogawa.

Mr. Yodogawa's widow was a slender woman of nearly the same age as her deceased husband, with elegant and beautiful features, yet she looked older than the impression given by her voice over the phone.

Ryuuji passed her the pastries, then went into the Buddhist altar room and, after raising the incense to the simple white plain-wood mortuary tablet, sat face to face with Mrs. Yodogawa.

"You weren't Mr. Yodogawa's assistant, were you?" said Mrs. Yodogawa quietly after a few moments.

"That man was only ever interested in profits and protecting his own interests," she continued blandly.

She had a thirsty facial expression.

"It was not like him at all to help other people..." she added.

"Ahh, actually..." said Ryuuji, sitting up straight.

"I run a Network Trouble Consultant business. It's like a detective agency. I accepted a consultation about work from your husband. I met with him last Sunday," he said.

"I see," she said.

"I heard about that from the police. It was you that reported it, wasn't it?"

Ryuuji nodded. Then, after a short pause, he spoke.

"That's right, it's true that I was your husband's assistant. I also worked for CC Corp. before, and during that time he kept an eye out for me. I wanted to return the favour, even if it was something small. It's very unfortunate."

Mrs. Yodogawa's expression changed slightly.

Suddenly she began to sob. She looked away, and dried her eyes with a handkerchief.

"I'm sorry. I thought I'd be able to keep my composure..."

Ryuuji began to talk in an attempt to ease her mind.

"I'd like to have the portable terminal that your husband used, if that's all right with you."

"Terminal? My husband's?" said Mrs. Yodogawa with a puzzled tone.

“Your husband had asked me to investigate certain confidential events. I cannot give details, but there’s no telling what he might have left on the portable terminal.”

“What do you mean?”

“There’s a possibility he was infected by a certain kind of computer virus,” said Ryuuji.

When Ryuuji left the Yodogawa residence, there in his hand was the portable terminal committed to him by Mr. Yodogawa’s widow.

Ryuuji recalled the events with Mr. Yodogawa at the “Seadragon.”

When Mr. Yodogawa tried to confide in Ryuuji everything he had hidden up to that point, he received a call on his portable terminal. He had to interrupt their conversation, and he left his seat to take the call. It was after that that things went wrong.

“Deadly Flash” causes problems to the functionality of the target’s hypothalamus, driving someone mad.

Something had also driven Mr. Yodogawa mad at that time.

Or Ryuuji could just have been imagining things. Mr. Yodogawa jumped to his death after he received a phone call, but it might have just been a coincidence. He thought about it and if that were the case, there was no evidence that it had been merely a coincidence.

Since he had been driving while lost in thought, Ryuuji hadn’t noticed the familiar black eco-car that appeared behind him like a shadow.

Oh my oh my oh my, thought Ryuuji as he looked in the rearview mirror. This guy seemed to be an amateur. He randomly came closer to the target so Ryuuji could sense the shadowing manoeuvre. Ryuuji didn’t think the man even suspected that Ryuuji sensed his presence.

Ryuuji turned the steering wheel and deviated from the road that leads to his office, and instead drove to the city park.

He left his car in the parking lot facing an alley, then picked up an old magazine he had thrown on the back seat, and strolled inside the park. He found a bench under the shade of a tree, sat on the side facing away from the parking lot, and began to read the magazine.

After a short time, Ryuuji peeked at the parking lot reflected in the mobile terminal screen and saw the black eco-car parked there.

After another ten minutes he got up from pretending to read the magazine. Discarding the magazine in a trash bin, Ryuuji went to the public toilet. There was a small window across from the entrance. Ryuuji slipped over to

the side and leaned over to open the window. He went through and came out in a parking lot by a large bypass and hid in some nearby bushes. He was easily able to sneak around and come out behind the eco-car. He moved in a crouching position so as not to be seen in the side-view mirror, and knocked lightly on the driver's side window.

After a while, he heard the sound of the window opening above his head.

Ryuuji thrust his arm into the lowered window, stood up, and released the lock from the inside.

The young man who was sitting in the front seat gasped in surprise, and Ryuuji pushed hard with his arms to hold the young man still. He reached out and pulled the key from the ignition and dropped them at the man's feet. He then removed a candy from his breast pocket and held it out in front of the man.

"Do you like candy?"

The man's sunglasses almost fell off of his face. He stood rigid with his eyes wide open. He was too surprised to answer.

Ryuuji put the candy in his mouth and threw away the wrapper. It was a lemon-flavoured one.

He sifted through the contents of the dashboard, and papers fell out. They were copies of car-rental documents. An address and name were written on the papers.

Ryuuji smiled as he thrust a stick of candy at the man's nose.

"Want a piece? Didn't they teach you not to carry around this stuff when shadowing someone?"

The man looked around restlessly and allowed himself to swallow his saliva. It seemed he could not cope with this overwhelming situation. Amazed at the situation, Ryuuji dropped the documents on the man's chest. Even though he must have been hired, he must not have been informed of how to handle this kind of situation.

"I'll save you the trouble. Now I'm going to go to my favourite supermarket. I'll be buying more candy. I like the taste of coffee, and at first glance this one looks like it is coffee-flavoured, but for some reason it tastes more like aloe. The taste of aloe is not that great, but I had a bad craving so I bought what I thought was coffee as I inadvertently mistook the taste. I used to like aloe to begin with... you've heard of it right? You got anything important to say now?" said Ryuuji.

As he spoke, he clapped his hand on the man's shoulder, the man's body quivering.

“See you. Do better next time,” said Ryuuji.

The man closed the door, picked up the key, turned the engine, and in a panic, made a sudden departure.

Ryuuji went back to his car after seeing the eco-car drive off into the distance in a cloud of dust. He was delayed by many unnecessary things.

He had a late lunch at a noodle place, then arrived at the office a little after three o’clock.

As Ryuuji walked from the parking lot towards his office, he stopped dead in his tracks.

In front of the door stood a tall man wearing a light hooded sweater.

The sunlight created an ominous silhouette out of the man. Ryuuji’s body tensed up. Then it immediately relaxed.

“Good. I thought I’d missed you,” said the man — no, said this boy in a carefree voice as he waved his hand at Ryuuji.

It was Tokio Kuryuu.

Chapter 11

Tokio Kuryuu

“I went to your apartment, but Lilie told me you weren’t home. I tried calling you, Mr. Sogabe, but there was no answer,” said Tokio.

“I was meeting with someone. I had the power off.”

“I’m sorry to bother you all of a sudden.”

“That’s okay. Hey, you’ve gotten pretty tall since the last time I saw you. How tall are you now?”

“About 178 centimetres, or 179.”

“Hey. You’re almost at 180. You’re starting to overtake me. Would you like some instant coffee?”

“Oh, please don’t trouble yourself.”

Ryuuji took two cups from the sink, poured in some coffee powder, then poured in the hot water.

Tokio sat down on the sofa in the reception area and curiously looked around the cluttered office.

Tokio Kuryuu was a seventeen year-old second-year high school student who met Ryuuji during the Immortal Dusk Incident three years prior. At that time he was still an immature junior high schooler.

His ambience was very unusual in this meeting. You could say he had changed. It was not simply due to his change in height, but he seemed to be a grown-up with a change in attitude and poise that had not been there before. However, his friendliness was something that still remained and would likely never change.

“I was in the area for work. So I thought I’d drop by and quickly visit you, Mr. Sogabe,” said Tokio.

When he became a senior high school student, he began doing editorial work for a certain game magazine publisher. A magazine editor was scouting the area and just happened to be present when the invincible Tokio was victorious at a fighting-game tournament sponsored by the local game-shop.

At first he worked as a strategy writer, and soon became involved in editing work that values social skills... or so Ryuuji heard from Lilie. This publisher was located only two stations from Ryuuji's office.

"So? What can I do for you today?"

Ryuuji sat across from Tokio and placed his cup of coffee on the table.

"Ah, there's something I want to discuss," said Tokio.

"...Recently I've been having a dream. A dream about AIKA," he added.

Ryuuji stopped as he was about to put the coffee cup to his lips.

"AIKA looks the way she always did. But, she has a very sad face. She tells me that "The World" is in danger and she wants me to protect it," said Tokio as he stared at his cup.

AIKA is the name of a girl that put a stop to the Goddess Aura's rampage during the Immortal Dusk Incident of 2020. An inhabitant of the digital world that had evolved from Artificially Intelligent Data Anomalies (AIDA). By restoring the memory of the brainwashed Aura, AIKA had a decisive role in solving the case. However, doing so caused the destruction of her own data, as immediately after she was swallowed up by a huge torrent of electrons and vanished.

"Do you think she may still be in 'The World'? Something is happening in the unknown places. The events of three years ago are still going on, AIKA brought it to my attention, or something like that...," he added.

Tokio looked at Ryuuji.

"Mr. Sogabe, you work on issues related to the Net, right? I think you know something about what's happening in 'The World'."

"No, I have no idea," answered Ryuuji.

"I see..." said Tokio as he cast his eyes down in frustration.

"I think it's only right that you dream about AIKA. You both shared a special connection..." said Ryuuji, choosing his words carefully.

"...To that extent, we experienced an event that left a strong impression. I've been having vivid dreams for years now. However, just because you can objectively analyze the content of dreams, that doesn't mean that there has to be some sort of meaning or reason behind them. Sometimes dreams are just that, dreams," said Ryuuji.

As he spoke, Ryuuji was seized by an odd sensation. While explaining in front of Tokio, Ryuuji got the momentary feeling as though he was persuading himself.

“Well, there’s no need to be concerned,” Ryuuji said.

“But, I also have dreams about Saika. And dreams about AIKA. I started having these dreams very recently,” said Tokio.

“Ah. That’s... perhaps... due to your feelings for her? Is it nice having the same dream? Hehehe.”

“No, that’s not it,” said Tokio hastily. His face turned red.

“Look. Last year, wasn’t there a strange rumour going around in ‘The World’? Around Christmas.”

Ryuuji also knew about it.

About half a year ago, certain rumours flowed around ‘The World.’ It is said that, on Christmas Day, during the first siege of ‘The World,’ participants were held captive and unable to logout from the game when it was released.

The matter had not been confirmed save for by those involved. It was a story that put to rest the so called occult story of “The World”, but Tokio, who had experienced the Immortal Dusk Incident, knew better than anyone that it was just as likely to be a mere occult story.

“I don’t like it...,” said Tokio.

“It’s strange how ‘The World’ was protected by AIKA, and I don’t like it,” he added.

Ryuuji sipped his coffee.

“The dreams I saw of Saika and me, they weren’t just dreams. So, AIKA must be safe and sound out there somewhere. If you want to help me...” he said quietly.

“I want to save AIKA. No matter what.”

He raised his head and looked at Ryuuji. These were not the eyes of a boy. They were the eyes of a man.

“Ah, I see,” said Ryuuji after a brief pause.

“Right now my hands are a little tied. I can’t promise you that I can actively investigate the matter, but I can put out an antenna. I’ll let you know if I find anything. Is that okay?”

“Thank you, Mr. Sogabe,” Tokio said softly.



Ryuuji lightly shook hands with Tokio, then, changing the tone of his voice, spoke.

“I remembered the most important thing.”

He went to his office desk and took the case envelope that had been pushed into the corner. It was the lonely telephone cards that Lilie had refused. He opened the envelope and the reliable police mascot looked up at Ryuuji. Ryuuji closed the envelope.

“I have a present for you. Here,” said Ryuuji as he returned to the sofa.

“What? For me?”

Tokio opened the envelope and looked inside. He sat quietly for a moment.

“Ummm, what are these?” said Tokio.

“Telephone cards.”

“You don’t say. Hmm, I remember seeing one once back in elementary school.”

He continued to murmur to himself as he looked at the cards. Then he looked up. He had a big grin on his face that caught Ryuuji off guard.

“Is it okay?” asked Tokio.

“It is alright for me to have this cool stuff?” he added.

“Well, of course,” said Ryuuji.

“Thank you so much! I really like this character design. I just want to poke and prod its cool, cute and superb lines. I can tell you have sharp modern tastes,” said Tokio.

“I’m glad you like it,” said Ryuuji.

“Oh right, right now I’m supposed to be going on a day trip to Hokane Onsen,” said Tokio in a carefree manner as he carefully folded the envelope.

“I’ll buy some candy for you. Is there anything you liked that you got Lilie? I’m surprised about what you got, so I’ll make sure she doesn’t come back with a pin or something,” added Tokio.

“Don’t worry about it. ...You know, I’m happy to get something practical like a keychain or figurine. Just not health foods. A pot or a stamp seal or something. Or that thing that spreads your toes.”

“You’d want things like that? Really?”

Tokio took out a notebook and pencil and began to take notes.

“Or maybe a device that massages the back of my neck. That sort of stuff is good.”

“Back of the neck, massage, device.”

“Right, right,” said Ryuuji.

“I’m thinking of various things to try for when you have a hangover,” he added.

“That’s what you want it for?! I think I’m losing my hearing.”

“You didn’t hear me right. I don’t think I’ll be able to do research on Saika without it.”

“Ah, that’s right too. If I hear of it... I’ll buy it,” said Tokio, making a face.

“It’s the law,” said Ryuuji as he leaned forward.

“Now, you’re assuming that Saika will be nearby while travelling?” Ryuuji quipped.

“Well, it’s... that is...” said Tokio.

“That’s really very interesting. Yes, very interesting, isn’t it? It’s plenty interesting.”

“Plenty?”

Afterwards, Tokio returned home from the chat after thirty minutes. He said he was going to the station, it was a place to visit besides a place related to work.

Ryuuji leaned against the office door and saw Tokio Kuryuu off.

Tokio was a normal young man like any other, but in reality he was the owner of a special physical existence called a “Doubleware.” Fully adapted to the digital world, he had the ability to access it while still in the flesh. A valuable human resource that can practice the theory of Real Digitization. However, Jyotaro Amagi retired his AI copy Geist from his field of research and disappeared, then the technology that sent Tokio directly into the digital world was lost forever.

However, his true value did not lie in a place like that, thought Ryuuji. There is a place that reassures him there is somewhere for him. Saika Amagi was fraught with feelings of insecurity on the one hand and feelings of superiority on the other, was taken advantage of by Geist there, and caused the Immortal Dusk Incident as a result. Yet, this would not be a problem as long as she stayed around Tokio Kuryuu.

Ryuuji felt Kiyoteru Yodogawa’s mobile terminal from his top jacket pocket.

There was a problem, or rather, it was to come.

Chapter 12

Cathedral

Mac Anu. A large plaza bathed in twilight.

Flügel went to the cafe terrace, and he found the information-dealer reading something at a table in the corner. It looked like a newspaper. It was possible to bring it into “The World” by importing these sorts of e-books and newspapers. But the contents must be converted to a new form such as a scroll of parchment or a booklet so as not to impair the appearance.

The information-dealer’s outfit had recently been slightly changed into something that looked like more of a fantasy-style cloak than a shabby coat. It must have been a trick to cheat the eyes of the system when in a regular town. His appearance looked like that of an ordinary PC, save for a helmet with a decorative plant growing from it and rustic goggles.

The information-dealer sat motionless, then shrunk his body and hid himself with the newspaper.

Taking a good look, Ryuuji could see a town-patrolling system admin PC coming from across the street.

The admin wore a uniform like that of a guard and a strangely shaped distinctive cap. The part that must have been the visor seemed to hang vertically and completely covered the eyes and nose, and left the mouth uncovered.

He slowly walked down the street past the cafe terrace towards the market, and, without turning to look at the information-dealer, disappeared in the direction of the Akashic Records.

The information-dealer breathed a sigh of relief, and let out a big yawn to relax his mind.

“Have you heard news on whether the system admins are concerned about Netslum?”

The information-dealer heard a voice call out, and snorted at the sight of Flügel.

“Hmph, I got nothing. You didn’t notice me, right? What if the admin noticed?”

His voice contained a hint of mockery. The state of the feud between the hackers and the system in “The World” had not changed since “R:1.”

Flügel sat opposite the information-dealer.

“But you know, wouldn’t it be better to go to a quiet place to talk about a secret? You know, I like to relax and listen to music. Yeah... for example, at a jazz cafe.”

“Well, Boss.”

The information-dealer wore an expression like he had bitten into something sour.

“I’ll say this clearly, I hate being involved with you. I don’t want to tamper with data,” he continued.

“Tamper with data? Who? When? How many hours, minutes and seconds? How many rotations of the Earth?” said Flügel.

“Just one more time,” said the information-dealer.

He started smoking a cigarette again and handed over a piece of parchment-like paper.

“Ahh, so tired. I stayed up all night because of all the geeky stuff I had to investigate. Here, read it quickly,” the information-dealer continued.

Flügel targeted it with his hand and text began to be displayed in a window. It was a data file masquerading as a newspaper. There were also images attached. Several of them. The matters Flügel asked the information-dealer to investigate — the information related to the keywords of “computer virus,” “rat,” and “Geist” — were all written there.

Flügel read through the data quickly and checked the information.

“What is this guy? ‘Doctor Rat’?” he asked.

“‘Doctor Rat’ Perves. He was one of the original Chaotic PKs. He was a character that played the role of a mad scientist and got worse as time passed. He was a Twin Blade. After being infected by a computer virus or modified by human experimentation, he seemed to unceasingly blurt out odd things to the PCs he killed.”

“Strange guys are all over the place,” said Flügel.

“A bounty hunter recently killed him. So, the job is done for us. After that it seems he’s hardly logged in.”

Flügel scrolled down the window.

“Cannibalistic dungeon?”

“It’s a mechanical premises type of dungeon that goes to the area of “Silent” “Magnetic” “Pandemonium” from the Θ (Theta) server. There’s a rumour that the players of PCs that are lost here are also lost in the real world. But that’s only some superstitious ramblings,” said the information-dealer.

“However, because undead-type monsters and rat-type beast monsters appear in that area, I put it on the list,” he added.

Flügel scrolled the window further.

“What’s this about ‘Pet Shops and Chims?’”

“Do you know the function of a companion, Boss?”

“No.”

“A companion is a new feature that is planned to be added to the next version of ‘The World.’ A mascot character that will help give various types of support. You’ve heard of the Grunties that manage guilds, right? It’s basically a personalized version of that. Now, its function is being distributed to some users and monitored in the strictest confidence,” explained the information-dealer.

“There was a guy keeping an eye on it, and he nabbed the companion function data and sold it. He remodelled an @HOME into a Pet Shop. Because cheating is indeed illegal activity, he does not do business openly. However, there are rumours going around that he’s got a good reputation,” added the information-dealer.

“Really?”

“They say there are several kinds of mascot character graphics. In addition to a Chim Chim on the list, there’s a small dragon, a winged dog and cat, a pretty female fairy, and a handsome male fairy. And, I heard that one of them is a rat.”

Flügel rolled the piece of candy to the other side of his mouth.

In this case, “sell” and “disseminate” are nearly synonymous terms. A rat mascot character.

“A Pet Shop sounds nice.”

After checking the data file, he, repeated the information to the information-dealer.

“The Pet Shop sounds the best. What can I do to go to the store?”

“It seems to pull customers to Dol Dona, but it’s not especially encouraging from here. I don’t know the exact location of the @HOME.”

“All I can do is wait for more word on it. Well! It’s enough for me to just take this,” said Flügel.

“I was right to ask you to collect information after all,” he added.

The information-dealer’s facial expression was not as dissatisfied as he would have Flügel believe.

“Is two more alright?” said Flügel.

As he continued on, he looked more displeased.

“Is that still the plan?”

“First, I’d like you to continue gathering information about this pet shop as normal. One more thing, I want to find out about the ‘bubbles’.”

“Bubbles, you said?”

“It was in the news about seven or eight years ago. At that time, they were called ‘Black Spots’ or ‘Black Gates’.”

The information-dealer’s eyes looked around as though he was searching through his memory.

“Ah, yes, I remember.”

It was a very restricted fact that most people did not know that the bubbles were an intelligent data entity called AIDA. It was generally spoken of with terms like bubbles, spots, and gates.

“Well. Should I do a new search for ‘rat’, ‘Geist’, and ‘computer virus’ in relation to ‘bubbles’?”

“Yeah.”

“It’ll cost you extra.”

“I don’t care.”

Flügel stood up from the chair.

“Well, let’s cooperate on this. I’ll eventually come out to play.”

“No. I’ll be in touch.”

The information-dealer yawned and shook Ryuuji’s hand with his own hand dangling wistfully.

“So, please don’t come to me.”

Flügel left the information-dealer and walked to the Chaos Gate, then entered three words: “Hidden”, “Forbidden”, and “Holy Ground”.

He felt as though he were gently floating. His body was wrapped in a halo effect, but this disappeared as his transfer was completed.

There was an island standing in the middle of a lake. At the end of the bridge a stone building rose to meet with a group of spires that extended 10 meters up and soared against the setting sun.

The oldest Lost Ground, the Hulle Granz Cathedral.

Flügel followed the road to the cathedral, targeted the double doors, and went inside.

The nave was deserted. There was no one there except Flügel. He walked down the center aisle, his hard footsteps resounding. The greenish marble floor reflected the hall like a mirror. Wooden pews were arranged on the left and right.

He went to the front of the altar.

During the “R:1” era, there had been a goddess statue enshrined at the altar. At that time, this area was simply called a sanctuary.

The officials of “R:2” provided the myth and setting, as well as the name Hulle Granz to this building, and the goddess statue was lost as reparation. Then a tri-edged sign was carved into the altar.

For a long time the ugly traces remained exposed in the cathedral. It was not until the R:X upgrade that the building was fixed.

However, the goddess statue had not been replaced.

Flügel looked back in the hall.

Silence. There was nothing there. Nothing was happening. This was a common feature of Lost Grounds. Here game strategies were completely pointless. Monsters and chests never appeared, and events never occurred.

However, there had to be something, thought Flügel — Ryuuji thought. At least Mr. Yodogawa had thought so.

After taking the whole day yesterday, a virus check of the mobile terminal owned by Kiyoteru Yodogawa was completed.

No abnormalities were found. None whatsoever. There were, without a doubt, zero traces of infection by computer viruses.

Yet Ryuuji’s anxieties did not abate. Ryuuji, who had witnessed the death of Mr. Yodogawa in the real world, was convinced that he’d find some abnor-

mality in Mr. Yodogawa's mobile terminal. Instead he felt very uncomfortable about the lack of abnormalities.

On the other hand, he did find out from the mobile terminal's history log that Mr. Yodogawa had been frequently visiting the Hulle Granz Cathedral in "The World."

The log entry for the oldest date was on April 6 of this year, about the same time as Yuri Seto's flight, and the most recent date was a day before Mr. Yodogawa's death, that is May 20.

Was there something here? Had Mr. Yodogawa met with someone here? Had he possibly hidden something? Or, had he been looking for something?

Flügel tried to gather his thoughts in front of the altar.

Were there any connections between Mr. Yodogawa's request and Veronica Bain's request? Is there any connection between Yuri Seto and the Geist who spread the virus? Maybe there was, maybe there wasn't? There still wasn't enough evidence to say for sure. He thought about how the talk of the pet shop that he'd heard from the information-dealer might be useful to advance the present situation, then a sneeze resounded in the hall.



A beast-human PC was standing at the entrance. He caught Flügel unawares. The figure was tall and thin. He had an elongated head like the western dogs the Borzoi and the Pharaoh Hound. His hair was black save for the place where hair would be on humans, where it was golden. His profession, by looking at the black robe he wore, seemed to be that of the Wavemaster.

The Beast-human PC came into the nave while he spoke through his nose.

“So this the Hulle Granz Cathedral. This is quite the strange place.”

He walked down the main aisle while speaking to himself.

“Looks like they worked real hard on the objects and the background. It’s completely new. Wow, so much time and effort went into this.”

He noticed his reflection mirrored in the marble floor, then paused for a moment in the middle of the aisle and made a motion like he was marking time.

“This place is called a Lost Ground, right? I had no idea there were several of these places in ‘The World.’ It might be pretty fun to play here, but it seems we have work to attend to, right, Flügel?”

The Beast-human PC smirked as he stepped before Flügel.

“Don’t you think so?”

He opened his mouth, revealing long, pointed canine teeth. He sensed the wafting smell of the beast.

“Welcome, long time no see,” said Flügel with open arms.

“Ah, such a pleasant surprise. Meeting you here like this. Ah, to think you would show up at this place. Really, welcome,” Flügel continued.

“I have to tell you, but this is the first time we’ve met,” said the Beast-human PC.

“What? I thought I saw you before on the street,” said Flügel.

“Pleased to meet you. My name is Kusame,” said the Beast-human PC in a carefree tone.

“Flügel, in real life a resident of Tokyo named Ryuuji Sogabe. Opened an office as a Network Trouble Consultant. Am I wrong?”

Flügel removed the candy from his mouth. He looked at Kusame with narrow eyes.

“Oh, wait, wait. I’m being suspicious. I merely wish to talk.”

Kusame made a conciliatory gesture with both hands towards Flügel.

“I couldn’t decide whether to talk in real life or in the game, but I was wary to meet so quickly in real life, so I wanted to take the action that would have the least impact.”

“I think that a game chat may bring out bad manners as opposed to a chat in the real world.”

“You’re right. That’s true. I feel the same way.”

Kusame nodded with an affirmative uh-huh.

“I’d like to visit your office right away,” he said frankly.

“What?”

Flügel tried to call out to Kusame, but it was too late. A halo effect came over Kusame’s body and in a moment he was gone.

Ryuuji removed the VR-Scanner.

He sat up straight on the sofa, breathed on to his glasses and looked at the clock. Three o’clock. Not in the day. Three o’clock late at night. Outside the sky had filled with darkness ages ago.

He was coming right now? Here?

Before he could answer himself, Ryuuji heard a chime ring loudly throughout the office.

Chapter 13

NAB Men

Suddenly the chime rang.

Ryuuji put the VR-Scanner away in his desk drawer. Then he filled a glass with one quarter Taplow's and the rest with mineral water from the refrigerator, making a thin whiskey.

The chime rang three more times.

Ryuuji took the glass, sat down on the lounge suite sofa, and unlocked the door with a remote key.

"Come in, the door is unlocked," he said with a carrying voice.

The door opened. There were two visitors. They were both Caucasian men, and both were dressed in black suits. They looked around the office with discerning eyes, and then stared at Ryuuji as he sat on the sofa.

Suddenly, the shorter of the two grinned and laughed.

"You must be Mr. Sogabe," he said in the Kansai dialect, exactly as had been heard in the game.

"I am David Steinberg, also known as Kusame. Excuse me for coming at such a late hour."

"Don't worry about it. You seem different from what I expected based on your character. Are you perhaps... an American?" said Ryuuji.

David nodded.

"Indeed I am," David replied while smiling at Ryuuji sitting in the chair.

"You seem similar to your character Flügel, Mr. Sogabe. Not just in appearance, but in demeanour too. It is a clever reproduction. The Japanese have a great sense for such things."



“No, no, not at all...” he said while laughing softly.

“May we come in?”

The taller man looked as though he was growing impatient. He spoke in English.

Sogabe leaned back and looked up at him.

“May we come in?”

He repeated the question, but this time in slow standard Japanese.

“Is this about work?” said Ryuji.

“No.”

“I’m very sorry, but if this is not about my work, then I’m going to have to ask you to leave. Wow. Would you look at the time!”

“We’re from NAB. We would like your cooperation in matters related to the network.”

Ryuji placed his glass on the table and stood in front of the two people standing at his door.

“Do you have identification?”

The taller man produced a leather case. Ryuji took it and looked at it. It was a national identity card issued by the Japanese branch. Gus Fox. Washington, D.C. Member of Head Office.

“Would you like to see mine?” said the man who had introduced himself as David.

“No, that’s alright. Come in.”

Ryuuji returned the ID card as the two people came closer.

They sat facing each other from across the table and Ryuuji pushed his glass to the side.

“I like to have a drink before I go to bed. Would you like one?”

“That’s okay. It’s already very late. Let’s get down to business immediately,” said Gus.

“Indeed,” said Ryuuji with a yawn.

Gus ignored Ryuuji’s yawn.

“We are tracking Yuri Kazinsky Seto. We hope to find his whereabouts and would like your cooperation.”

Ryuuji closed his mouth.

“A few days ago you came into contact with CC Corp.’s Veronica Bain. We came to Japan to follow her. We staked out the Baketon Hotel and noticed you. You spoke with her about Seto, didn’t you? Also, you went to the house of the Japanese branch director, Mr. Yodogawa, and recovered his mobile terminal. I want to talk about these things in detail.”

Ryuuji took his glass in hand and put it to his mouth. However, he did not actually drink his watered-down whiskey. He merely applied his lips to the rim of the glass. After thinking for a moment, he placed the glass back on the table.

“This so-called NAB, is it short on talented people? Such horrible tailing techniques are rare these days.”

Gus frowned.

“The man that followed you was hired as a part-time worker with the Akasaka Branch. He received no formal training. Perhaps we should have been tailing you, but white people stand out so much in this country. So, will you accept?”

“I refuse.”

Gus and David both looked at him.

“Why?” asked Gus.

“I cannot afford to discuss the affairs of my clients.”

“We are NAB.”

“It seems that way.”

“Why won’t you work with us?”

“Because, I must maintain integrity in this business. Do you think I would last long in this line of work if I just started blabbing all the information I had on my clients’ cases?”

“This is not a talk of that level. We plan to keep going to determine Seto’s whereabouts as soon as possible. If you work with us, we can of course pay you. I can promise it will be a fair amount.”

Ryuuji laughed weakly.

“This is not that sort of talk.”

Gus’ face reddened.

“A witty guy, aren’t you?” he muttered in English.

He had a mild intonation, and a flat pronunciation. He sounded like he might be from Chicago.

“Huh? What did he just say?”

Ryuuji was heard again.

“I said you are a unique man,” Gus repeated in Japanese.

“NAB is not the police. Your job is simply to monitor the network. You have neither the right to investigate, nor the right to arrest. You intruded into the place of a good free-trader in the middle of the night and could not even force him to cooperate.”

“You can be stripped of your license to instruct at Akasaka.”

“Isn’t that just a fad?”

“What?”

“To be threatened like that these days.”

David was silent until a sneeze found its way out. He took a plastic container out and placed it against his nose, squeezed the liquid medicine into his nose and breathed deeply, then turned his body towards Ryuuji.

“Now now, now now. This sort of encounter is unfortunate. Shall we start over?”

Ryuuji looked at David. When he passed by the entrance, he let a smile cross his lips. But it was not a smile. It was an expression that looked somewhat like a smile.

This is rather troublesome, thought Ryuuji.

“Please forgive his impatient attitude. But, it’s mostly just talk. We don’t have much time. That’s why we had to disturb you in the middle of the night,” continued David.

“We, that is my colleague and I, and you are in a position to be able to exchange cards with each other on an equal basis. Ah, wait. I should speak honestly. Your reputation is probably very mighty. We want you to help us in our dealings.”

“Ah, then, you should have asked,” said Ryuuji.

Yuri Kazinsky Seto was hired by CC Corp San Diego — according to the source — and lived in a high-rise apartment in the city centre. It was in a new apartment prepared for him by the San Diego company. The residents were mainly white-collar workers. It was a typical apartment in that part of San Diego.

Before Seto disappeared, seven instances of death by jumping occurred at that apartment. The seven who committed suicide were company employees in their late twenties to early forties. One of them was a woman.

“You have no proof. Of what we know, Seto has made a new computer virus, and we think he’s “testing” it out. A virus more atrocious than ‘Deadly Flash’.”

“There is no evidence? Is that what you’re saying?” Ryuuji asked.

“We have thoroughly checked the computer and mobile devices of the deceased,” said Gus.

“However, I was not able to find any trace of evidence. Even after being infected by a virus, it had not been hacked from the outside.”

Ryuuji was reminded of Mr. Yodogawa. He remembered the sight of Mr. Yodogawa’s body lying on the road.

“From what I’ve heard of the story so far, it seems like the sort of thing that should be left to the police. They have the means, if it turns out to be a murder rather than a suicide. I don’t know why you two NAB members bothered to intrude.”

David opened his mouth, but hesitated for a moment.

“This is becoming a political conversation.”

“Wait, David. There’s no need to tell him,” said Gus in English while blocking his partner.

“I can’t proceed without showing our hand,” David replied in English.

“However, it’s a serious matter involving a presidential election. This man had been hired by the ‘Empress’ no less. The information could leak out completely.”

A presidential election. Ryuuji did not so much as blink as he had been expecting it. David suddenly looked at Ryuuji.

“Gus. Don’t say anything else,” he said quietly.

“I’ll just have to pretend not to know the words I need to say.”

Gus looked at David’s face which was blinking heavily in surprise. David looked at Ryuuji’s face. Gus turned his gaze to Ryuuji, then to David, then back to Ryuuji. This time he kept watch.

Ryuuji broke the tension and spoke in English.

“Well! It’s better to keep things like that since I save money...”

Gus’ face turned red. He fell silent and said no more.

“Do you have any knowledge of the implant chips?” said David, returning to the Kansai dialect as though nothing had happened.

“As much as anyone else.”

“That’s sufficient. Ah, certainly in this country... Aomori was a data-processing ward.”

The implant chip is known as the Biological IC Chip. Chip that are different in many countries are standardized to the specifications of ALTIMIT Corp. Over the past year, there was strong opposition to it growing across the world, especially in developed countries, but at the end of last year, in several countries including Japan, trouble with the flow of vast amounts of information had been discovered and a popular movement began over the frustrations with this.

“In our country, surgery to embed an IC Chip in recently released convicts had been mandated, but that was cancelled two years ago. NAB was opposed to the implant chip. The world would not be so welcoming to a negative flow of implant chips. But, thanks to you, problems arose.”

David looked up with a sigh.

“In other words, Yuri Kazinsky Seto doesn’t have an IC Chip. We won’t be able to use it to determine his whereabouts.”

“Ah, that’s true,” said Ryuuji.

“Are you saying that if Seto is guilty of something, the proponents of the IC Chip would appear again?”

“NAB’s position on the matter has become very difficult for us. Therefore, we have to find Seto’s whereabouts in absolute secrecy, since I don’t want to be placed under surveillance anytime soon. He could pose a problem around

children. No, I should be more precise. He could pose a problem if this comes to light, or..."

"What do you need?"

"Mr. Sogabe, you should examine our methods regarding this matter. I want to share in this information. Also, I heard that the part of the program that Seto has belongs to CC Corp. You will act as our guru, Mr. Sogabe. I'd appreciate it if you could advise us on how to corner him inside the game. In exchange, we will be allowed to be backed up fully by the powers of the organization. If you tell me what the request is, Mr. Sogabe, we can give you our full support. So, what do you say?"

"As I said from the beginning, I cannot reveal the client, nor can I talk about the details of the request," said Ryuuji.

While something like a smile stuck on David's lips, he looked at Ryuuji patiently.

"Well, there are no problems in any other areas. All is well. Let's work together."

The request that Ryuuji had received from Veronica Bain was that "the sensitive data that Yuri Kazinsky Seto stole from CC Corp is to be recovered." The person that was once said to be a hacker should be placed under surveillance or caught.

Ryuuji revealed all except the most private details of the encounter that he felt his present company should know, including Veronica Bain's name.

"I see, a pet shop that sells illegal mascot characters. That's certainly suspicious."

Gus nodded while putting memos on his mobile terminal.

"Shake off investigator decoy in Dol Dona and wait for contact."

"We can't look unnatural or wander aimlessly, as we may look suspicious."

Gus glanced at Ryuuji.

"We also have something called segregation. I'll listen when you think I need advice."

"Now now. Please leave those things to the organization. Don't you have anything else to talk about? Don't question it."

Ryuuji shook his head at David's words.

"Didn't you hear what came out of Gus' mouth?"

"Did he say something?"

On David's face the ripples of a real smile began to spread.

"No."

"Then, I didn't hear it."

After waiting for Gus to put away the mobile terminal, David stood up with a clap on his knee.

"All dealings have been recorded. I'll inform you when progress has been made. Well, that should be all..."

The late-night visitors left.

Ryuuji locked the door and took a sip from his watered-down Taplow's, which had lost its strength. He toasted to the forming of a wonderful new relationship.

He was informed by a "Pet Shop Chims" contact from David Steinberg that someone had entered two days later.

Chapter 14

Grunty Ranch

The PC used by Gus Fox looked to be the same type as that used by the Shadow Warlock Kusame. Though Kusame had blonde hair on his head, the hair on Gus' character body was jet black, and it was apparent that this was the only difference between the two characters. The character's name was Fox*.

“Huh? Fox was it?”

Flügel asked again in spite of himself.

Fox's dog eyes glanced at Flügel.

“You got a problem with that?”

“Oh, no. Not really. I think it's a good name,” Flügel answered.

In the real world, Kusame, who had been having a telephone conversation, cancelled the offline mode and turned to Flügel.

“Sorry about that, make sure you're prepared. Well, shall we get going?”

Flügel, Kusame, and Fox went to the Celestial City Dol Dona.

If Mac Anu was the “City of Water,” then Dol Dona was the “City of Green”. The entire town was covered in lush green vegetation.

“When one of the investigators went shopping at the guild shop, I was talking with the Shopkeeper NPC. The investigator passed me a ‘Guest Key’ and a pet catalog, and told me the store's location and how to enter it,” said Kusame as he walked down the street sandwiched between two cliffs.

*Translator's note: Gus' last name and character name could also be rendered as Fawkes, but I chose Fox as it is a more common spelling and may coincide with the characters looking like dog-like creatures.

“This ‘Guest Key’ was not added regularly, but its ID code was easily cracked. The investigators followed the behavior of the Guild Master, and found him in chat channels overseas outside the game. Then they spoke with me by pretending to be a fellow hacker and gathered enough information to determine the guy’s true identity.”

“Honestly, there’s nothing to say. It’s pure skill.”

Flügel frankly seemed impressed. His private contractors could not possibly have sniffed him out in two days.

Kusame looked at Flügel through the window. The image of a young man with a sullen face appeared in the window now.

“Travis Bond. American. Twenty years old. Lives in Los Angeles. A college student for the past six months. He obtained access to the North American and Japanese servers of ‘The World’.”

Flügel compared the image of Seto with the one in his memory. Of course, it was someone else.

“Recently, it seems like he’s only logged into the Japanese Server. From the chat channel we found logs of conversations between Travis and a person we believe to be Seto. His chat-name is...”

“Geist?”

“Bingo. Travis opened the ‘Pet Shop Chims’ in order to talk to Geist.”

“Geist’s access location?”

Kusame shook his head.

“He joined the chat via Finland. That country is known to harbor nefarious individuals who can get anonymous access. IP addresses are constantly being updated to boot, and the account is specially crafted so that it makes copies infinitely. It’s a fully automated camouflage tactic that is conscious of being tracked. Without access to it, it will be nearly impossible to track down the whereabouts of the guy in real life.”

“And what about the two men’s conversation?”

“The filter applied to the log made it unreadable. It will be removed the day after tomorrow.”

They eventually came to the square. Compared to Mac Anu, it was quite small. Several guild shops aligned side-by-side gave the appearance of a flea market.

“It describes their future plans. We strike the real and Net guy at the same time. To seize the scene of the cybercrime, we overpower a place in the real world to connect to the Net.”

Kusame looked and smiled at Flügel.

“Well, I might just be preaching to the choir.”

“I don’t know about that. Please let me study this as it’s a good opportunity. Please go on.”

“To maintain reality, you should go to the local police. Tell them to apprehend the hackers that threaten the corporation with cybercrime. A short time ago, they received a list of the personnel. On my signal, they’ll step into the guy’s apartment.”

“To maintain the Net, Kusame and I are going together.”

Fox opened his mouth.

“You enter the shop pretending to be a customer. When the opportunity arises, listen in to reveal his identity. After that we’ll catch him in real life. We’ll get him in real life when he tries to escape and then get him to talk after that.”

“Do I need to do anything?”

“All you have to do is interact with the shopkeeper. Your interference is not likely to be needed.”

“Really? I’ll follow you with the intention of keeping the peace.”

“As I said before, as well as Flügel, you may be required should anything strange happen,” said Kusame.

They soon came to the shops located at the end of the market. They came so far out of the sight of passers-by and arrived at a small unattended shop. They looked in to notice a shopkeeper PC sitting down looking frustrated with the lack of customers. They targeted an empty chair and a window appear with the word “Preparing.”

“This is the ‘Chims’ entrance.”

Kusame took out and looked at the so-called “Guest Key.”

“A three person invitation.”

The transfer effect wrapped around the three of them.

The destination was a strange place.

The contour and size of the room was typical of an @HOME, but the interior was completely different. Lush pasture graphic textures lay on the floor, and a wooden fence surrounding the area also divided it into several sectors. It was a quaint and idyllic rural farm.

“This is a Grunty ranch,” muttered Fox.

Animal training areas had been implemented in R:1. These facilities are the basis for the mascot characters that are to be adopted in the next version.

In each fenced enclosure were oddly shaped creatures with large heads that looked out at the three visitors with apathetic eyes.

In the corner of the room was a garden shed from which came a lone man.

“Welcome. This is my Grunty ranch.” It was an old man with a long white beard. He was dressed like a Wavemaster.

“Welcome to the ‘Pet Shop Chims.’ Are you looking for anything?” he said. He had a unique foreign accent but his level of Japanese was not a problem to the group.

“We are Wavemasters. Do you have something that would be useful in combat?” Kusame began chatting casually with the shopkeeper.

Flügel left Kusame to talk with the shopkeeper, and strolled away from them in the @HOME.

Upon closer inspection there were other non-Grunty mascot characters. A Chim Chim, a small dragon, a winged dog, a winged cat, a female fairy, and a male fairy. He heard about these from the information-dealer.

Yet, it was now only a rat.

“What the...?”

Suddenly, the shopkeeper, who had been speaking softly while sandwiched between Kusame and Fox, suddenly issued a loud voice.

“Hey, hey... You...” he said.

“We are from NAB. We have received word that you are being fraudulent. Travis Bond, your address is...” Fox read out the address which was in Los Angeles.

“No doubt about it, right?” The shopkeeper was overpowered by the intimidating words.

“Police officers are already waiting in front of your apartment. We promise not to rough-handle you depending on how our talks go,” said Fox.

“I can’t believe it. How it is possible? It’s incredible. Well, dammit,” said the shopkeeper.

He muttered in English instead of Japanese. The old man’s role exposed the slang of youth that had not been there before.

“Travis, you didn’t think we would realize you had opened this shop illegally. You’ve been enticed by someone, haven’t you?” said Kusame, gently admonishing him in English.

“If you tell us about this person, in regards to this matter I may be able to be of assistance,” added Kusame.

“Geist? Do you guys know about him?” said the shopkeeper.

Kusame and Fox quickly exchanged glances.

“Right. That Geist guy. Let’s talk about him,” urged Kusame.

“I’ve only spoken with him on the Net. I don’t know the real man,” said the shopkeeper.

“He’s a pretty cool guy. His hacking skills are just okay. Even so, he was able to cause the Network Crisis all by himself. Ah yes, I remember, definitely a rat,” the shopkeeper added.

Flügel stopped his feet. He heard the word “rat.”

“The rat would probably work its way into your heads,” said the shopkeeper.

“What do you mean?” asked Fox.

“Don’t you know how to listen properly? I’m not sure you do.” The shopkeeper released a dry laugh.

“But surely there’s no room for the creature to get in. Initially it would be uncomfortable and scratchy, but eventually it would become very happy and the blue colour would spread. It can use its fingers to create an opening in the front and back of the eye. The length of the hands would change a different colour and dissolve. Yet, they have a deep bite. The back of the eye. Deep in the back of the eye,” said the shopkeeper.

“Kusame, overpower the real one!” Flügel yelled.

“Quickly, call the police!” Flügel added.

“What did you say? What the...”

He didn’t have time to explain. As he ran up he took Brieler Rössle in his right hand and directed the muzzle at Fox. Fox’s body stiffened.

He pulled the trigger. The bullet flew past Fox and hit the shopkeeper PC who was standing right behind him.

It was a peculiarity unique to a Schicksal PC. “An attack on another PC has an effect on its real player.” He shocked the PC with the bullet in an attempt to stun the player.

Yet, there was no resistance. The real player seemed to have been unseated with the FMD and controller removed before the bullet hit. Brieler Rössle’s effects are not able to reach a player who is away from the game.

“What rash behavior. We should have told him not to interfere,” said Fox, who drew closer to Flügel. His voice trembled with anger.

“Wait, Fox, wait.” Kusame called on his colleague in English. He was dazed.

“A contact from the police has arrived. Travis Bond has jumped from his room,” Kusame added.

Fox was at a loss for words, and he looked alternately between Kusame and the shopkeeper who stood there like an empty shell.

“His condition?” said Fox.

“Unknown. The contact merely said the suspect jumped and then hung up the phone. I didn’t bother calling back,” said Kusame.

It was time. The sound of the water drainage pipe echoed throughout the room.

The small Grunty shook and squinted its white eyes through the fence. It made a little growling sound.

“Oink oink. Squeeeeeeee... oink. Squeeeeeeee. Snort snort snort.”

The noise from the Grunty’s body grew louder, and suddenly several purple hexagonal effects began to appear.

It became deformed. The Grunty’s body twisted and melted, then bulged until a lizard-like monster put its hands on the ground where the Grunty had been.

Flügel muttered as he slowly backed away.

“Hey, hey, it...,” said Flügel.

He was not able to get the words out.

The monster attacked. It had a speed that one would not assume based on its bulk. The fence was blown to smithereens and the monster struck Flügel in the face with a rock-like fist. Flügel was thrown back. Flügel’s PC body grazed the left side of Kusame while flying around and around like a kite without string, flew over Fox’s head, and after crashing through the @HOME’s ceiling, and fell behind the garden shed like a pile of sticks without losing any momentum.

Kusame and the others were stiff. None were able to move. A momentary event. When they realized this, Flügel had been blown away.

The monster turned towards Kusame. It was so big it could almost touch its head off the ceiling. The shopkeeper PC was knocked down and soon was being trampled.

Kusame noticed the form of the monster change at that moment.

The right leg distorted on its own and with the fangs in its mouth, it deeply bit its shin.

Kusame recognized the monster model. He saw it when he read an old article on “The World.” Version “R:1.” No, older than that. Yes, it was a monster from the “fragment” era. He remembered. This was a “Cross-legged Grunty God.”

In CyberConnect’s official document collection, it was a legendary monster that was involved in the creation story of the world.

Why did it appear in R:X? Well, rather, it’s actually a hexagonal effect being.

It was a Data Bug, Kusame finally realized.

Fox moved forward. He brandished a staff and invoked a fire spell. The Crimson Hellfire spell, used to annihilate high-level monsters, wrapped around the body of the monster.

However, the “Cross-legged Grunty God.” did not accept it. There was no damage. The attack was pointless against a Data Bug that was outside system specifications.

Then, of all the times, Flügel, who tied the group together, was struck down with one blow.

“So damn useless,” swore Fox.

“Oh, for shame,” voiced Flügel.

They turned around, startled, and the figure of a man with long hair and black clothes appeared.

He moved towards the monster in a thrown-off gait between Kusame and Fox. He held the same handgun as before in his hand. The monster raised its arms above its head, and struck down, aiming for the figure’s skull. The figure shot while moving. Bullets pierced the back of the neck through its mouth as well as the right shin of the monster. Just one shot.

“It’s faster than you think, and it attacked very suddenly,” Flügel said.

The monster slowly fell on its back. It had been forcibly “stopped” by Brieler Rössle’s bullet.

“Flügel? Are you okay?” said Kusame.

“What is this form?” Kusame continued.

“This? This is the gear for heavy lifting. It’s my battle form. Up to now, my normal form was for mental work. I can switch my PC body to match the type of work I have to do,” said Flügel.

Kusame shook his head from side to side in shock and looked down at the “Cross-legged Grunty God” on the ground. The purple effect that covered the monster was now gone and the body had turned grey and looked like a stone statue.

“Something strange was bound to happen. There was no reason for the pet guy to do this,” said Kusame.

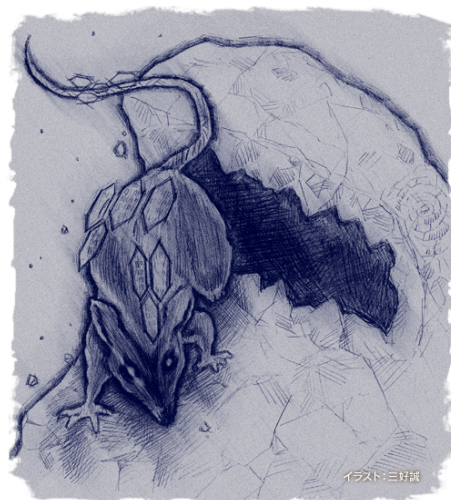
“I think it was a complaint officer. Or perhaps a guard,” said Flügel.

“Was he expecting us to arrive?” asked Kusame.

When Flügel tried to answer, Fox, who had been examining the monster’s head, gasped in surprise.

They looked and the monster’s mouth, which shouldn’t be moving, began to open and close. The lips spread apart and something came out. It was a small animal displaying a purple hexagonal effect.

A rat.



It wiggled its nose in an attempt to smell the air and then looked up. It moved its head, looking around the room. Slitted eyes that showed hidden malice caught a glimpse of Flügel and glared at him.

“Look,” the rat moaned in a rusty voice.

“Look, you mongrels,” it continued.

The rat’s eyes were opened wide. Suddenly, the three men then saw an illusion as though a golden light shone forth. That wasn’t right. They didn’t realize it at first, but the rat gave off an explosive flash from its body.

“Deadly Flash.” A light of death. From only a single small rat came a bright light that filled the entire @HOME.

Flügel issued a warning to the two others while shielding his eyes with his arm.

“Don’t look!” he yelled.

Kusame heard Flügel’s warning and and tried to cover his face with his hand. It wasn’t enough.

But, Fox became an obstacle to the light in front of him.

The flash that the rat produced formed a dark shadow from Fox’s PC body that shielded the face and chest of Kusame.

Kusame saw the “Deadly Flash.”

Fox heard Flügel’s warning and and tried to cover his face with his hand. It wasn’t enough.

When the rat burst, of the three of them, he was closest to the rat. With no obstacle to block the light, Fox took the full impact of the “Deadly Flash.” The deadly light burned into his brain through his unprotected eyes.

Chapter 15

Lunch

It was Saturday, two days after the encounter with the rat.

It was a pleasant morning. Outside the window it was sunny. With no cumbersome work to do, it was a day on which one could enjoy the beauty of life. He thought that it would be nice to drink whiskey while teasing the stray cat that lies on a bench in the park. But Ryuuji had cumbersome work to do. There was no time for playing with a cat.

Perched on the bed in his bedroom, he made a call to the number he had acquired. He waited a while to give his name to the receptionist. Soon Veronica Bain's hoarse voice could be heard.

"Ryuuji, I read through the report."

"I felt it best to convey this verbally. There are some developments," said Ryuuji.

He relayed what happened at "Pet Shop Chims." He had previously reported the details on David and the others.

Ryuuji finished speaking and heard a long sigh on the other end of the phone. He wondered if she was blowing smoke out of her pipe. The rich sweet breath felt as though it was coming through the phone.

"Seto had the power to use the rat in the game," said Veronica.

"Perhaps," said Ryuuji.

"The rat sacrificed itself and gave off the 'Deadly Flash'?" she asked.

"Ah, well, no, that's not quite right. The light from the rat wasn't really the Deadly Flash. It's much worse than that. It seemed to have an effect on those who saw it, such as implanting into the mind a desire to commit suicide by jumping. I don't know for what purpose," Ryuuji explained.

“What happened to the NAB investigator that was struck by the light?”

“He’s been hospitalized in Tokyo since yesterday. So far, it seems they haven’t found any abnormalities,” he said.

“That’s good news,” said Veronica Bain in a sincere tone.

“Also, Travis Bond, the Los Angeles-based hacker is alive. The apartment that he lived in was a two-storey building and he was fortunate in that he landed on a car that was parked in the lot below. His right leg took most of the impact when he hit the windscreen, but he did not sustain any injury.”

“What are you trying to say about him?”

“I haven’t heard any talk of it,” replied Ryuuji.

“He’s in a state of unconsciousness. Even though there was hardly any trauma,” added Ryuuji.

There was silence for a while. A long sigh.

“Such a bad effect. I wonder whether the depressed hacker would have known about it,” said Veronica.

“Is it possible to temporarily shut down the Japanese servers of ‘The World’?” Ryuuji asked tentatively.

“Ah, why?” asked Veronica. She sounded very surprised.

“While other people are too distant, there are those that can be harmed by accessing the game. Then they’ll become victims. Without doubt that number will continue to grow,” said Ryuuji.

As he spoke, Ryuuji remembered the eyes of the rat. Just before it exploded. At that time, Ryuuji had looked into the depths of the rat’s eyes through Flügel. He glimpsed into the “eyes” of Yuri Seto himself on the other side. There was pure malice in them. What did Seto do after that? What brought it about? He was clearly aware. He acted of his own free will. Upon realizing everything, he used the rat for his own aims. Ryuuji thought this to be the case.

“Speaking from the viewpoint of the company, if you stop the operation of an online game such as ‘The World,’ how much damage do you think will occur each day?” Veronica asked.

“We can at least prevent the damage from the rat,” said Ryuuji.

“In the Japanese server. But if that were the case, couldn’t Seto just move to another server. Will he even stop there? And if he moved to yet another place? Will we stop him from going from one place to the next? That could be impossible,” said Veronica.

She had reason to believe that this was the most likely answer.

“Ryuuji, I have hired you specifically to avoid a situation such as this,” she said.

“I’m happy to be entrusted with the work,” said Ryuuji.

He heard a chuckle.

“What about NAB?” asked Veronica, changing the topic.

“Oh, yes, that’s right. I think I can trust that our interests are the same. However, it may be dangerous to let our guard down completely.”

“On what terms do you base this?” “I don’t know why the people at NAB Headquarters are moving. It is unnatural for so many of them to come to Japan. The Akasaka branch is in Japan. Activity in this country is best left to the Akasaka branch investigators.”

“In other words? They have ulterior motives?”

“I don’t know about that, but I think they’re hiding something. Speaking of which, they said that they’d been following you first. Did you have any idea?”

“Only too well,” said Veronica without hesitation.

“I see, but there are many advantages to cooperating with them. It cannot continue like this.”

“If I hire someone, I won’t be giving that person orders. I’ll leave that to you,” said Veronica. Then she muttered to herself as though she were alone.

“NAB and CyberConnect. One side monitoring the other. Two irreconcilable presences that will happily join hands. Don’t you find this to be an interesting situation?” she said.

“It has a certain literary quality to it,” Ryuuji answered blandly. That’s not to say that he was not himself a man of CyberConnect.

“I received new clues about Seto, so please come see me. Let me hear your reports directly from you,” said Veronica.

Veronica exhaled slowly.

“Also, I want to talk about literary things,” she said.

The phone went dead.

“That’s just lovely,” Ryuuji said at the mobile terminal.

In the kitchen, Lilie prepared a lunch wearing an apron over her sailor school uniform. There was some sort of event at school later that afternoon. Ryuuji

was about to walk towards the living room when he suddenly stopped.

Lilie was standing in front of the sink at the back of the room. She was humming while cutting something with the kitchen knife.

Ryuuji stared fixedly and, seemingly taking notice, Lilie looked up.

“What?” she said.

“Uh,” mumbled Ryuuji as he pointed at the cutting board.

“It looks pretty delicious. A midday sandwich?” he asked.

“A bagel sandwich. I bought some rye bread bagels from a baker at the entrance to the mall. I can rarely afford to buy from him because he’s so well-known. He baked them himself,” said Lilie with a look of pride.

Ten minutes later, bagel sandwiches, salads, and miso soup lay on the table. At Ryuuji’s home, miso soup always appeared on the menu.

Ryuuji and Lilie sat across from each other.

“I did a nice job, look,” she said.

Lilie lifted the bagels to show Ryuuji how she had cut the bagels lengthwise.

“They look beautiful from here. Hehe,” chuckled Ryuuji.

Ryuuji took a bagel sandwich in hand.

Ingredients such as dried tomatoes, salmon, cream cheese, and sliced onions were jammed between the bagel slices.

“Yummy. I even got them crispy,” Lilie exclaimed.

“You did. This is delicious,” said Ryuuji.

However, in reality, Ryuuji did not really like the taste of the food.

His right cheek stung. He still felt the lingering pain as though a needle had been stuck in all the places that the Data Bug at the Pet Shop Chims had hit. There was a sensation on his tongue like a stinging thorn. His sense of taste was not working quite right. It was one of the mild symptoms he experienced when he received viral damage that was fed back into the real world during a Schicksal PC operation.

He would have had no difficulty attaining that amount of attack speed if Ryuuji was still at CC Corp. Ryuuji’s own skills in controlling Flügel with the VR-Scanner had declined. Three years out of the business had been very difficult.

“By the way, because you’re a girl, you should stop laughing like ‘teheehee,’ said Ryuuji.

“What? I don’t laugh like that,” she said.

“You laughed like that just now,” said Ryuuji.

“I don’t laugh in such a weird way,” insisted Lilie.

“I’m not like you, Ryuuji,” she added.

“Ahh, I see,” he said.

Ryuuji finished eating half of his bagel, and drank some miso soup.

“I heard that Nene passed the primary entrance exam to the National Ballet,” Lilie said suddenly.

“Ohhh, I didn’t hear. She’s off to a great start,” said Ryuuji.

“I wanted to thank you, Ryuuji,” she said.

“Thank me?”

“When we go there, I’ll teach you all the lingo of the place.”

Nene Koharu was a girl who had worked at CC Corp. with Ryuuji and Lilie before. Before that, she was a psychiatric patient of Ryuuji’s.

After her work had been completed at CC Corp., Nene took an exam to study at the National Ballet Academy in Hamburg, Germany. She was an expert ballet dancer in the making with a promising future in various competitions until the onset of a psychiatric disorder.

Half a year later, Ryuuji begged her to take lessons in the German language. The German language would allow her to attend classes at the Academy since it was listed as one of the requirements for admission.

Consequently, Nene was able to successfully enroll at the Academy.

Lilie had become attached to her and frequently kept in contact via Internet phone and letters. Ryuuji was able to learn of Nene’s status from Lilie. He had heard that the ballet rookie’s stage-time had been greatly reduced compared to previous years due to the aftermath of this year’s recession.

Her first success was happy news before things went downhill.

Ryuuji believed that Nene would succeed.

Ryuuji saw Nene’s struggle first-hand. He knew how much training was needed to make a comeback as a dancer. You needed to have talent, the ability to withstand adversity, and to never give up to be a happy and successful person.

Lilie spoke while looking at the cup in her hand.

“Hey, Ryuuji, I —,” she said.

At that moment, Ryuuji's breast-pocket trembled. He raised his hand to Lillie and took out his mobile terminal.

It was a call from David.

"Hello Mr. Sogabe. Do you have a moment?" David asked.

Ryuuji picked up the mobile terminal and turned away from Lillie. There was an unnatural firmness in David's tone. He had a sudden bad feeling.

"Yes, I have a moment. What is it?" asked Ryuuji.

"There's news from the hospital. Gus has fallen into a coma," said David.

Suddenly it felt as though the temperature had dropped.



Ryuuji stood up, left the kitchen, went through the living room, went into his bedroom and closed the door.

"Did he jump from something?" asked Ryuuji.

"No. That was not issued by the hospital. According to the nurses, he thought he was falling and suddenly went berserk in the room. When they tried to restrain him, he lost consciousness," said David.

David took a deep breath to calm his mind.

"I'm going to the hospital now. I want you to come if you can, Mr. Sogabe. The symptoms and scan data may require a professional opinion," said David.

“Understood. I’ll leave right away,” Ryuuji said.

Ryuuji turned off the mobile terminal, quickly got dressed into a suit and went back to the kitchen.

“Sorry, I’ve got work. I’ll leave the clean up to you. I’ll eat later,” said Ryuuji.

Lilie drank a sip of milk with a nod.

Ryuuji stopped at the entrance and looked back.

“Ah, were you going to say something earlier?” asked Ryuuji.

Lilie shook her head.

“It’s not a big deal. Take care. I’ll make sure to put the bagels in the fridge,” she said.

Chapter 16

Lost One

After being given a full check-up, Gus Fox was admitted to Tokyo General Hospital. Nearly 70 percent of the cases of patients related to “The World” in the metropolitan area were first admitted to this hospital which was one of the hospitals privately funded by CC Corp. You could say it was used to this. Although not officially, the hospital would have already been fully systematized.

The first day had gone by without incident. Gus had been distinctly aware. He had complained about the bland food he had been given. He had been no different from any healthy person.

The “seizure” occurred on the second day. He pushed away the nurse during an exam, then tried to open the tempered glass window while muttering things as though he were delirious. The ward was on the fifth floor.

Then he lifted a cabinet and began to hit the window with it. The nurse tried to stop Gus, but was easily sent flying — not surprising, given the size difference — and the nurse call alarm was sounded. However, before help came, Gus dropped the cabinet to the floor. When the nurse grabbed hold of him, he was already unconscious.

Ryuuji and David received this explanation from the elderly hospital director in the reception area. David had already revealed that he and Gus were investigators for NAB. The doctor was unusually cooperative.

“Mr. Fox’s symptoms and prognosis are very similar to each of the “Lost One” cases that occurred in 2009 and 2016. A distinct difference is that there is an incubation period of a few days before becoming unconscious from contact with the ‘thing’ that appears and causes the condition in the game. Also, just before going unconscious, he — ,” The doctor stammered a little.

“As though driven by ‘impulse,’ he tried to throw himself from a height. That’s the second point,” added the doctor.

“What’s the problem? Pathologically, I mean to say,” said Ryuuji.

“That’s unknown. It’s the same as past cases. Mr. Fox had his brain examined but no abnormalities were found,” said the Doctor, shaking his head.

“However, before he became comatose, his symptoms included spouting disjointed words. In other words, because of his ‘word salad’, we believe his brain’s cognitive functions were the first things to go. Somewhere in the language area of the brain, there were some perplexing changes on the surface exam. If you could focus your attention there — ” explained the doctor.

“Is it about time for him to wake up?” asked David who had been silent up to this point.

The doctor stopped speaking. He attempted to say something, hesitated a little, then spoke.

“I don’t know. He could wake up tomorrow, or it could be a year from now. I could even be three years from now. Studies on the pathology of the Lost Ones themselves show that little progress has been made since 2009.”

“Are his chances for waking up good?” asked David.

“There is a possibility,” said the doctor.

Outside the hospital the early afternoon sunlight shone in Ryuuji’s eyes. It was blinding. The sun of springtime, before the rainy season.

“I’d like to speak with you alone, Mr. Sogabe,” said David upon reaching the parking lot.

“Why were you able to react immediately at that moment?” he asked.

Ryuuji stopped and turned around. David looked at Ryuuji through his sunglasses.

“That moment?” said Ryuuji.

“When the rat exploded and gave off that light. Of the three of us, only you, Mr. Sogabe, were able to react to the movements of the rat. You got to warn us with a ‘Don’t look!’” said David in a matter-of-fact tone.

On his lips was the usual smile. However, his eyes, which could be faintly seen behind his sunglasses, cleverly sparkled while looking at Ryuuji.

“Mr. Sogabe, did you perhaps know of Seto’s ability from the very beginning? If not, did you just take a wild guess? Gus and I did not know. Am I wrong?”

“Yes, you are mistaken,” said Ryuuji.

“Then, why were you able to react?” asked David.

“I cannot say.”

“Why not?”

“I should have refused in the first place. I cooperated with you on behalf of a client. To explain will be to the detriment of the client.”

“My colleague has fallen ill. I don’t even know if he can come back...” muttered David in English.

Naturally he was not talking to himself. He directed his speech to Ryuuji.

“However, it may have actually been prevented. I want to make that clear,” David continued.

“I was not able to prevent it,” Ryuuji replied in English.

“All I can say is this. At that moment, Fox was closest to the rat. He was unlucky. If I had been there instead of him, I doubt I would have been able to avoid the light. He was in the wrong place at the wrong time,” said David.

David stared at Ryuuji’s face without moving. His eyes were sharp like knives. Almost too sharp. Ryuuji perceived before him a gaze that hardly seemed to be that of the NAB investigator. It only lasted about ten seconds.

“Did you know anything about the rat’s abilities?” David asked in a low voice.

“No, I didn’t,” Ryuuji said clearly.

“I feel bad about the situation. Truly, I do. That’s not to say it was simply a case of bad luck,” Ryuuji added.

They walked towards the other side of the street as Ryuuji sounded the horn, unlocking the door to the parked car that was still a little ways away. David stopped and Ryuuji stood next to him.

The glint in David’s eyes suddenly grew dim. He removed a nasal spray from his pocket and pointed it in his nose, then took two deep breaths. Then he bowed his head.

“Excuse me. That was rude,” said David in a nasally voice.

Well, because we both kept secrets, we’re both equals in that regard, thought Ryuuji who refrained from saying it. Ryuuji also had a sense of decency.

He decided to say something else instead.

“Do you have any plans to officially publish a NAB review of Yuri Seto and the rat after this?”

David grimaced at Ryuuji’s words for only a moment. You could see a look of agonizing doubt. However, the next moment he became as expressionless

as a mask.

“I don’t. It’s no good. I can’t,” David said in a dry tone.

The two of them continued to walk in silence.

Soon they came up to David’s car. It was a black mini-car.

David got in the driver’s seat, closed the door, lowered the window, and looked at Ryuuji.

“After this I’ll report Gus’ condition to headquarters. Let’s discuss future policies tomorrow,” said David.

Ryuuji nodded.

“I’ll contact you at ten o’clock in the morning. By twelve at the latest,” said David, gently raising his hand in farewell and slowly moving the car ahead.

Ryuuji watched as the mini-car drove away. As the car disappeared from the parking lot, he removed a candy from his pocket, peeled off the wrapper, and put the candy in his mouth. It was mint-flavored.

There must be something he could do while he waited for a call from David, he thought. He didn’t think of anything in particular.

Even so, he should be able to find something to pass the time away, he thought. There was.

Ryuuji turned on his mobile terminal, launched the Mailer program, addressed a message to the information-dealer of Net Slum, and sent an e-mail to the effect that he wanted to meet at the Cafe Terrace of Mac Anu.

He then got into his car. He stepped on the accelerator. He returned to his apartment, took out the bagel sandwiches, got a drink, and decided to go to the office. He would arrive just after three o’clock.

Chapter 17

Rat Hunt

He decided to log-in with his battle-form from the get-go. His battle-form had much higher stats than his normal-form, but the cost of its use was higher physical and mental fatigue. Yet, the skills that Ryuuji had as a player made up for his weakened state, so he had no choice but to rely on his current PC. In his normal-form, if by any chance he should encounter a rat, he would not be able to deal with it.

Mac Anu was filled with more hustle and bustle than usual.

Flügel noticed this as he warped in at the Chaos Gate on the opening day of the “Monster Town Raid.”

The “Monster Town Raid” is an event whereby the blockades to the town have been broken and players must defend the town against monsters that appear. During this event, the whole town becomes like a carnival with monsters and PCs hunting each other down.

In the main square, a few system administrator PCs were calling out to those who were walking the streets.

“The ‘Monster Town Raid’ Event ‘Rat Hunt’ will soon begin. Those who wish to participate and have not done so already, please make your way over here.”

The information-dealer had not yet appeared on the cafe terrace. While Flügel was glancing at the PCs that were taking their usual spots in the square, he tried to remember the details of the event that he had heard from the information-dealer. Apparently the word was that a herd of giant rat monsters was to attack the town. A rat hunt. A name that feels like a strange coincidence.

In any case, it’s going to happen, thought Flügel. It’s best to concentrate on hunting rats over here. Flügel took out his playing cards and lined them up on the table one at a time. While placing the cards in the shape of Babel

Tower, he ruminated over the events leading up to now. In any case, he had only touched upon the things that he knew.

He played to the middle of the Tower of Babel and then he saw the information-dealer coming from across the street.

The information-dealer turned away in disgust as he glanced at the system administrators and walked straight to the front of the cafe terrace. His eyes met with Flügel's, then he looked away, walked past Flügel, wandered around the entrance to the cafe terrace, and came back to his original spot. He looked at Flügel's face once again.

"Yo," said Flügel, raising his hand.

"You're the Boss I'm supposed to meet?" said the information-dealer.

He finally seemed to have noticed.

"What's with the look? I thought you were someone else as I was passing by," the dealer added.

"You mean I've become far more handsome? Truly?" asked Flügel with a chuckle.

"I've changed my look. What do you think? You'll be seeing me like this from now on, so it's nice to meet you," Flügel said.

"Changed, eh? Looks like winter clothes no matter how you look at it," the dealer said in a low voice as he sat across from Flügel.

"The preparation procedures for the 'Rat Hunt' have ended. The event begins now. I wish you all a good battle," one of the system administrators could be heard calling out in a booming voice to those in the square.

"Huh? What's going on today? Do you know what this is? Or did you track the progress?" said the information-dealer.

"I have to be honest, I didn't find out anything about 'bubbles'," he added.

"It's okay that you've come empty-handed. Instead, I have a higher priority job I want you to do," Flügel said while he sorted the cards.

"A PC was attacked by a non-specification monster, causing a so-called Lost One case. I want you to make a list of them," continued Flügel.

"That's such a classic occult story. Is it meaningful to examine such a thing now?" said the dealer.

"I'm not saying to make a complete list. There is one requirement. The colour of the monster," said Flügel.

"The colour?"

“The monster was covered with a ‘purple’ hexagonal effect. Only list the cases in which that term is involved. Ah, that’s right. I’ll narrow down the incidents that occurred. From April of this year — no, from June of last year until now. I want you to concentrate on that one year range.”

April of 2023 is the month in which Yuri Seto disappeared, and June of 2022 is the month in which he was recruited by CC Corp. San Diego.

From the description so far, Flügel noticed that his companion was only half listening to him.

The information-dealer stared blankly into space. He looked as though he was in deep thought. Then, he suddenly looked at Flügel’s eyes and came back to reality.

“What’s wrong?” asked Flügel.

“Uhhh, it’s nothing. I just had something else on my mind,” said the information-dealer in a soft voice.

Flügel looked with suspicious narrowed eyes into the goggles of the information-dealer.

“Do you know something? About the purple non-spec monster,” he asked.

“No, not at all,” said the information-dealer as he shook his head in a panic.

“I don’t know anything about that. I just thought that I should learn all I can about it,” he added.

The rat-hunting event had begun in the square.

Magic beast-type Rat-monsters, each the size of a small horse, began to appear in succession. The event participants, encountering the monsters, immediately rushed into battle. Roars and cheers, as well as weapon and magic sound effects, resonated throughout the area.

Flügel and the information-dealer could not be attacked by monsters as they were not participants in the event. Such were the rules. Non-participating players watched the fighting unfold before them from the cafe terrace.

When Flügel looked back at the cards that were aligned on the table, he noticed something moving at the edge of his vision. A pudgy little shadow ran over the pavement. Flügel followed it with his eyes and was startled.

It was a rat. It was not a giant rat-monster that had been deformed in the game. It was the figure of a real rat. It was the creature he had encountered at the “Pet Shop Chims.”

The rat stopped, turned its neck and looked over its shoulder at Flügel. It spoke in a raspy voice like a creaking tree.

“You don’t dance?”

The rat squeaked.

“You won’t dance for me?” the rat said.

Flügel swiftly stood up and took Brieler Rössle in his right hand.

“Ah!”

The information-dealer almost fell from his chair in surprise as Flügel continued to follow the rat at gunpoint. However, the rat ran into a back alley faster than Flügel could aim.

Flügel left his seat and moved closer to the back alley while still holding his handgun.

“What was that voice just now? Hey, what’s going on, Boss?”

The information-dealer saw Flügel take off and was dumbfounded, clicked his tongue in indignation and immediately got up and followed after him.

Around them players were too distracted by the battle going on to pay any attention to what had just happened.

While the back alley twisted between brick buildings on the left and right, it extended all the way to the back. It was not possible to see to the back, but if he left here, he’d be leaving the port.

“Boss. Hey,” said the information-dealer as he raised his hand.

He couldn’t find the figure of the rat. Instead he saw things like pipes and boxes hidden by steam on the sides of the alley. He wondered whether it was hiding in the shade of one of them. Or if it possibly turned into the next alley.

Flügel tried to step into the back alley while being cautious.

“Boss! That thing’s dangerous!” cried out the information-dealer.

It came out as a high-pitch scream that echoed throughout the square. It was a scream coloured with fear and pain, not something that could be emitted during normal gameplay. Flügel stopped and looked towards the square. Then he looked at the sight in front of him and gasped.

The rodent-monsters were flocking to the event attendees. This was not one of the conditions of the battle. A hamster-like monster grabbed the PC bodies of the participants with both hands and pierced them with his teeth and chewed on them little by little as though nibbling on sunflower seeds. Its whole body was covered in the purple hexagon effect like what Flügel had seen before.

A still-intact Blade Brandier went deep into the mass of monsters, brandishing his blade in order to save a comrade, and the rodent-monsters did not seem bothered in the slightest. One of the rats made a furious swipe at the warrior's torso. The values and effects that represent damage under normal conditions were supposed to be indicated. That was not what happened. Instead, pieces of data chunks from his chest and shoulders were completely stripped away from his body.

The data spilled out like a liquid, flowing like blood from a hollowed out wound, and the PC turned into a ghostly figure of fine particles. The Blade Brandier fell to the ground and let out a groan of pain. Several rat-monsters began to flock together, blocking the player from view.

Soon screams one after the other could be heard everywhere. Someone called out for help while weeping. The player's voice was full of pain.

Flügel and his companion had been in a harsh plight at the Cafe Terrace until a moment ago. The PC's that remained back and watched the events with a sense of detachment were late escaping. Tables and chairs were overturned and the rodent-monsters were huddled together. They heartily bit and tore at the data that streamed from the neck of the PC body and gulped it down.

Flügel and the information-dealer looked stunned at this vision of hell. The rodent-monsters did not try to come back towards the alley. The violence was limited to just the main square.

"Ah, I'm sorry I'm late," Flügel said to the information-dealer in as calm a voice as he could muster.

It was difficult to speak with his tongue stuck to his palate.

"Please, logout. The situation has become dangerous," he continued.

The information-dealer just stood there as though entranced by the disaster in front of him and with those words he snapped back to reality and looked at Flügel. His face twitched.

"Oh, uhhh, I'm so sorry you had to go through that!" said the information-dealer sharply before he quickly transferred out and disappeared.

Flügel felt a little uncomfortable at those words, but there was no time to think about it too much. Now he had to concentrate on the rat-monsters in front of him.

What was going on? These rat-monsters were not official monsters in the game. At one time they may have been, but now they were not. They had become data bugs like the Grunty God. The same phenomena that happened at the "Pet Shop Chims" was now happening in the square of Mac Anu.

When he thought about it, from behind him Flügel heard a voice like cicadas rubbing their legs together.

“Squeak squeak. You don’t dance?”

Flügel, as though drawn in, turned around and drew his gun. Across from him was the figure of a small rat against the wall. It watched Flügel through its slitted eyes.

“You don’t want to dance? Squeak squeak.”

Flügel shot his gun. He hit the target. The rat let out a cry and the data of its body went rigid. It rolled on the ground like a figurine.

Flügel stooped down trying to determine whether the rat could “fix” its data and though there was one rat already in the back of the alley, he soon noticed another rat. Here after dusk, it asked with upturned eyes.

“Would you like to dance? Do you dance?” squeaked the rat.

Then he inverted his body faster than Brieler Rössle could shoot and disappeared into the back of the alley.

Flügel jumped into the dark alley. He chased the rat and when he turned a third corner, he lost sight of the small animal. Flügel stopped trailing them there.

He lightly leaned against steam pipes that protruded purple things from the wall. He quietly sat up and noticed a single figure standing nearby. This figure was wearing a uniform and cap like that of a guard. It was a system administrator PC.

He stood only a few metres away from Flügel. Surprised by the events outside, he looked as though he would try to run away into the back alley. He looked at Flügel who had just appeared and tried to rush over to him.

“Don’t come any closer. Logout,” yelled Flügel as he warned the perimeter. The rats were likely still lurking somewhere.

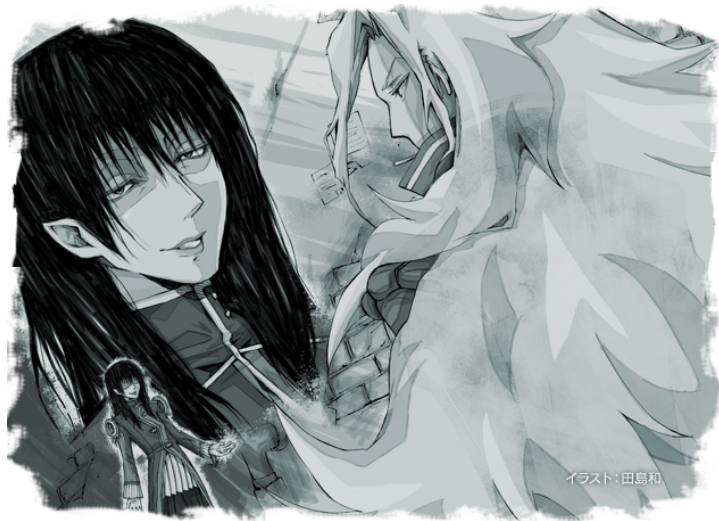
“Mac Anu is in critical condition right now. Don’t do emergency maintenance or anything, just leave and stop the game immediately,” Flügel continued yelling.

However, as soon as he said it, Flügel noticed the strange look on the face of the other player. This PC’s purple-coloured lips formed into a distorted grin.

“If they’re out, don’t worry. There are no accidents in life,” the player said, his lips moving softly, giving off a deep gentle voice.

“I just had to clear out the people is all. I wanted to have a delicate little talk with you,” the figure continued.

He moved forward, slowly lifted his thin pale right hand, and pinched the visor of his school cap which covered his eyes and nose. He removed the cap and his long black hair came undone with a whoosh.



“Pleased to meet you, Flügel of Schicksal,” he said while smiling at Flügel with long and narrow eyes.

There was the gaze that Flügel remembered. Twice now he saw the very same eyes. The first time in the real world, when he had viewed documents and photos of a computer cracker. The second time in the game, when he had looked directly into the eyes of the rat right before it exploded.

“Or, would you mind calling me the ‘Grunty God Killer’?” the figure said, as though he were a close friend telling a joke.

Flügel was struck by a feeling of dread like a bolt of electricity.

No. This PC was not a system administrator. He came out on his own. This guy was... This PC was...

Flügel thrust at Brieler Rössle with his right hand.

“Yuri Seto?” he asked in a dry voice.

“Some people call me that,” the other replied.

Then he smiled like a saint.

Chapter 18

Meeting

He leisurely moved his delicate slender arm and dropped the cap. The purple cap rolled over the cobblestone in a gentle arc, hit a wall, bounced back, and suddenly dropped.

For a while the two stood across from each other in the back alley and did not move.

In the square outside the screams and moans had already stopped. Not a single sound could be heard.

The man, who had the appearance of a system administrator PC, smiled at Flügel. His eyes shimmered but somewhere in his pupils was a tinge of sadness.

Yuri Seto. The name of the man who killed a total of fifteen people. By spreading a virus throughout the network, he killed seven people twenty years ago, and after Seto's release from prison, Mr. Kiyoteru Yodogawa became the eighth victim.

Flügel held Brieler Rössle at the ready and raised the hammer. The sound of the click broke the silence in the dim alley.

“Well?” Flügel asked the other brusquely.

The man continued to smile and gently titled his head.

“What do you mean ‘well’?” the man asked.

“What should I call you? The name of the PC that has become a thorn in my side. Seto? Geist? How about I lump them together and call you ‘Geiseto’?” said Flügel.

As he spoke, Flügel measured the distance between him and his opponent.

The back alley was narrow. They were sandwiched between boorish walls to

their left and right. The ability to dodge sideways would certainly be limited. Using the Curse Gun was the ideal option.

However, it was too far. The opponent was standing just a little out of striking distance. Flügel didn't like the situation one bit. Even if he shot from here, the Curse Gun would have no effect. Even if the bullet hit, the data would not freeze.

Just one step closer. No, two steps would do the trick.

"I put in a lot of time and effort to see your face. Would you like me to tell you about it? Oh, shall I shorten 'Geiseto' and just call you 'Geis'? Oh my, would this just be the perfect nickname for you? 'Geis,' a nice name, isn't it?" said Flügel.

While laughing giddily, he casually moved forward just half a step.

Flügel resisted the temptation to approach all at once.

The rat from before was probably still lurking somewhere in the back alley.

He would have to be careful to not let the PC escape before his eyes. It would be terrible to get caught in the rat's flash and let them get away. Being defeated like that could mean unconsciousness or even death for Flügel.

He had an idea about the other's goal. He'd probably set off a flash from the rat the moment Flügel tried to shoot. He felt that he should take aim at his opponent with exact timing in order to rely on the bullet.

"You don't have to be so cautious. I'm not here to fight with you," said the man quietly.

"Furthermore, I'm not plotting to use the rat just when you plan to pull the trigger," he said.

Flügel stopped moving.

The man pressed his right hand to his head and gently brushed his hair. His jet-black hair flowed past his shoulders like waving tentacles.

"The name of this PC doesn't matter. Call it what you want. I'll just tell you two things," said the man.

He stopped brushing his hair and brought his right hand in front of his face and raised his index and middle finger.

"One, whether it's 'Geiseto' or 'Geis,' it's a really low and stupid pun. You should take care to not get caught up in a selfish sense of humour," he said with a tone like a teacher scolding a poorly-performing student.

"Two, you just made a remark to the effect that it was difficult for you to meet with me. That is not a correct assessment. I wanted to see you, so I

came to meet you. That's the gist of it. This meeting was for you to decide, so it is irrelevant how much of a hard time you had up to this point," the man added.

"Meeting?" asked Flügel.

The man nodded.

"I want to talk with you," he said.

"Talk?"

"Yes, that's right."

"Well, what do you want to ask?"

Flügel took aim and shrugged his shoulders.

During this, he moved his left foot half a step forward.

There was no sign of the rat.

If he took one step closer, he'd be inside Brieler Rössle's range.

"Well, aren't you going to ask me something? Go ahead," said Flügel.

"Thank you," the man said with a smile. The smile remained on his face.

"God doles out tests fairly," said the man.

"What?"

"For those trying to do something, what do you think the most important thing is?"

"What are you talking about?"

"This is a test," said the man, ignoring Flügel's question.

"Tests, aside from the differences in size and magnitude, are something that in the life of every human being without exception. There are tests, difficulties, predicaments, adversities, sufferings, and woes that occur in life. Most people wish to avoid such challenges in life if they can help it. But that it wrong. Precisely because people overcome challenges, that is why they're able to find value in their actions," the man said, continuing to talk with a smile on his face.

"That is to say, it would be nice to say that the person is chosen by the trial. I think I was chosen by a test, and I want to overcome it. From now on, I want to prove the validity of trying to form myself. I want my trial," the man said.

"Religious talk? I'm not really interested in that," said Flügel.

“No, it’s mind talk,” said the man.

“I can somehow imagine by your explanation that you brought your mind to a state of nirvana.”

“I don’t care at all if you want to make me out to be a madman,” said the man while maintaining his serene look.

“Ah, well, I hear you. What is this ‘act of trying to form yourself?’ Spreading a killer virus?”

“That is a way. I want to erase a little something called the Net from this world.”

“Ohhh... What?”

“I will cause the Net, like The World, to be abandoned by human beings all over the world. That is my goal. Hence the rat, and hence the Deadly Flash.”

“You started to talk pretty big.”

“There is certainly a hell,” said the man.

“This is a land of the unclean. A place where the endless torrent of desire continually overflows. A place where terrible scream and sinister cries roar. A place I do not belong...”

A mysterious light began to dominate the man’s eyes.

“The Net is Hell. Here everyone gives off a rotten smell. A repulsively lingering stench wafts throughout the air,” the man continued.

“You have a very soothing imagination,” murmured Flügel.

“Everyone knows that there is an evil influence in the Net. Everyone knows that the Net is dangerous. They know, yet they don’t do anything about it. Even though they have experienced a Network Crisis many times, people still keep using the Net. They just don’t learn. At the end of the day it’s the same thing, everyone knows, yet they don’t know. That’s why I decided to take action,” said the man.

The man sighed and glanced down. He took his gaze off of Flügel.

Here was an opportunity.

A chance. It was the perfect time to strike him with a bullet.

Flügel took a step forward. He pulled the trigger. The magic bullet was fired into the distance and struck the forehead of the man who didn’t even try to avoid it. His PC body’s data completely froze and was now free to be tampered with. He instantaneously computed whether the man was accessing the Net from anywhere in the real world. If he let David know, NAB, with

branches all over the world, could quickly secure the custody of Yuri Seto. Troublesome negotiations may be required to recover the sensitive information of CyberConnect, but the case could be closed at any rate. A happy ending. The story becomes famous.

Yet, Flügel did not do it. He didn't take the last step. He hesitated at the last moment. He looked down.

The system administrator's cap was rolling.

It was the thing the man had cast off.

It was a natural gesture. However, now that he thought about it, it seemed really unnatural.

Or was it a coincidence? Why was this hat within striking range all of a sudden?

That's it. The man ought to know. About Brieler Rössle. This man, who stole confidential information from CyberConnect, should surely know the capabilities of Flügel. Yet, why, in this back alley that prevented his own movement, did the man contact Flügel?

Alarm bells rang in the back of Flügel's head. He could smell the danger.

Flügel aimed the gun and took a step back. Then another step. He moved away from the hat.

The man slowly looked up. His face moved, and his shoulder-length black hair flowed down. A shadow of an evil smile crossed his handsome face. Something lurking in the dark wriggled suddenly in the light, then laughed as it once again hid back into the shadows.

"What's the matter, Flügel?" the man said in a hushed tone.

"If I don't come closer, your Brieler Rössle can't take effect, is that it?" he continued.

Suddenly the hat started jiggling. The shaking became more violent and the hat turned over. Then countless rats came out of the hat in droves. Many came out bearing fangs, and reached for Flügel's feet.

Flügel gasped in surprise and flew down to the ground.

The hat continued to spit out rats one after the other.

"Congrats. If you come a little closer, you'll be disqualified..." said the man.

The rats started to run around the man like muddy water. The small animals with purple effects on them, while shaking their nose, whiskers, tail, and other hideous parts, crowded together very closely.

“I wonder whether you deserve my test. I wanted to determine this with today’s interview.”

The man’s quiet voice clearly reached Flügel’s ears from the middle of the squeaking rats.

“So far you have performed very favourably. I predict that you could be my best test subject yet.”

His voice became low.

“However, it all depends on the final test results. I sincerely hope you pass. For my sake and for yours.”

Rats began climbing the walls to the left and right all at once, and when they started to create a vertical formation, Flügel felt intense chills run down his spine.

This was bad. There was no escape. Not in this terrain. Not in a back alley. It was the opposite, Flügel realized. He should have noticed sooner.

It was he that had been cornered.

Flügel turned on his heel and started running at full speed without looking back.

“The contents of the final test...,” the man called out.

“...Is to get out of here alive,” he continued.

Immediately the flock of rats came out from all sides and rushed towards Flügel like a stream of muddy water. The countless cries of rats sounded as one, sounding like a strong wind that splits rocks as they came near Flügel.

He continued to run. He made a right turn without slowing down until he reached the crossroads. He went straight and was sandwiched between the monsters in the square and the rats behind him.

He went to work on his options while running desperately.

Could he log out? That was impossible. He’d have to stop for a moment to perform the action. They’d catch up in a few seconds.

Should he fight? It was no use. Brieler Rössle couldn’t take them all out in one shot. It had no chance of winning against this horde.

All he could do was run away. He had no choice but to run, shake off the rats, and log out from a distance.

The exit leading to the outside came into sight.

At that moment, one rat approached from behind, kicked off of the wall and jumped at Flügel’s left hand. He was pierced by a fang in his left hand. He

felt a severe dizzying pain. A sharp pain passed through the ligaments of his hand in the real world.

He groaned in pain and grabbed the grip of Brieler Rössle, slammed it down unceremoniously on the rat, and fell down.

The rat's defense and hit points seemed to decrease. On the other hand, it's attack power was very high.

Two rats jumped at the gun in Flügel's right hand. Then there were three rats at his left hand. Furthermore, some of them clung to the hem of his mantle and started climbing up onto him. He furiously shook his arms to get the rats off of him. He stomped at the rats as they dropped to his feet and he lost his balance.

Flügel stumbled as countless rats poured over him.

He was overtaken.

Dammit — there was no time to think.

Flügel was overtaken by rats all over his PC body, and they began to eat away at him. He stood up once, but fell back down due to the unbearable weight.

Flügel lay on all fours and, while being devoured by the rats, Flügel looked back. He raised his right hand and took hold of Brieler Rössle. Across from him stood the PC operated by Yuri Seto. Without even blinking, he watched Flügel get ripped apart under a pile of rats. Through his shiny eyes were pupils tinged with sadness. He was still smiling. He was out of striking distance.

Chapter 19

Steam Jet Trap

The back alley of Mac Anu's port was being flooded by rats that ran around as though they owned the place. They covered the narrow cobbled streets in a dense carpet of purple and in the middle of all this stood a bump in the shape of a person.

The bump was struggling to escape from the plague. It was reminiscent of a large rat trying to escape a trap of adhesive tape.

As the figure struggled, a section broke open as the rats scattered and crawled up one after the other until they covered nearly the whole area.

A man leaned against the wall to bump's right, folded his arms, and looked up at the sky through a gap in the buildings. Then he narrowed his eyes wistfully, took in a deep breath, and released it slowly. It was a sigh.

He gave the "command" for the rats to attack. Their instinct to slaughter en masse kicked in. They swarmed their target and bit at him while he tried to fight back with all his might.

Then, as though possessed by the rats' attack, the trapped PC could not escape no matter how hard he struggled. The man confirmed this would happen through several experiments. He kidnapped the rats during a solo-play adventure in a dungeon and did performance tests on them. The results were always the same. As though exhaustively licking a lollipop away, the trapped PC's data began to disappear from the world.

How could his real PC be destroyed by rats? He didn't know and he didn't want to know. The important thing was that the light of the rats was tempered and trained and it grew as though it was part of the man's design. Then, the test was essential.

But —

The movement of the mass began to decline rapidly in front of the man as he

was lost in thought. The body of the lumpy figure could not keep its original PC form.

Then, at that moment, the PC's body rose and warped violently. Like the flame of a candle that burns remarkably bright before it burns out, he made a final effort to resist the agony of death. As rats were thrown from him, Flügel's arm was revealed.

His gun shone in the twilight.

He then directed the muzzle straight at the man.

Well well, the man unaffectedly admired, he's keeping his arm ever so still.

However, the man thought, what are you going to do with the handgun now? Shoot me? Me, of all people? From a distance of two metres?

There was enough room to dodge. Even if the man couldn't dodge, there were other means of defence.

He used the simplest means.

He did nothing and left Flügel to the rats.

The rats moved as though they were a single giant creature and tangled around Flügel's arms. They forcibly bent the gun's muzzle, and and pointed it towards the wall to the right.

The gun fired. The roar echoed throughout the back alley and a bullet struck the ear of the man, but that was it.

All Brieler Rössle did was leave bullet holes in the wall, all for naught. It didn't even strike a single rat. With that he became exhausted and his arm was covered in rats once again.

Having witnessed this so far, the man shook his head from side to side. A sense of melancholy crossed his face.

This was the end.

It was over.

An anticlimactic ending. The hungry rats began eating away at Flügel's PC data, not leaving even an ounce of him.

The man admitted that perhaps he had spent his valuable time too lavishly. His test was not inside Flügel. Feelings of anger and frustration began to well up. He felt the disappointment as though it were seeping out from deep within his body.

There was no helping it. He had no choice but to find a test candidate — for a different kind of test.

The rats were left to clean up, and, after an attempt to turn back towards the square, the man suddenly stopped.

From somewhere a minute but foreign sound could be heard. The sound of rigid foam bubbling and popping. A sound like that of still water slowly turning into ice.

It was not the sound of the man's loyal subordinates chewing at their prey.

As the rats wriggled sideways, the sound was being emitted from the brick wall.

While the crunchy sound came forth, part of the wall fluctuated as though in a haze of heat and began to rapidly change shape.

The man was puzzled.

What, he thought, what is this? What is going on?

Perhaps he was an enthusiast from the old version of "The World," because he immediately noticed that the thing emerging from the wall was a steam jet machine, a trap that was typically placed in dungeons. A gimmick that had been implemented in "The World R:2." A mechanical trap that blew steam at a player that entered the dungeon.

But the man, having been an excellent hacker and cracker, was not a heavy user of "The World." He had a knowledge of some of the gimmicks, but it took several seconds to tie the shape of the gimmick before him with a memory in his head.

Even after realizing that it came from where the wall had been struck by a bullet from Flügel, he could not believe that he had come up with the answers himself.

Therefore, his reaction was further delayed.

Surely it was the Curse Gun Brieler Rössle. Could it do such a thing?

Now the wall "ceased" to be a wall, rewrote its data, and appeared in a completely different form to the steam jet machine.

The spout opened with a clank, then the next moment, the back alley filled with pure white high-pressure steam.

This trap was usually not even a threat to players in "The World." Unless it was an exceptionally novice party, the trap was not deadly.

However, it was sufficiently powerful against the rats. Shrill screams went up all over the place. The rats were burned as they were struck by the vapour and began to disappear one after the other. They were devastated by what took place in this alley with no escape.

A sense of agitation appeared on the man's face for the first time. He tried to rush over to help, but white steam blocked his view. In that moment, deep inside him, he felt the pain of the dying rats that he had raised.

He'd have to give the command to everyone. "Defend yourselves." Or "withdraw." Quickly.

But as soon as he did, white steam broke out, hit the man's face, and suddenly a black arm protruded outwards.

"Ohh!"

A cry of surprise came out and he was lifted, slowly.

At the same time as the rumble, a bullet was fired.

Chapter 20

Martyrs

The man pushed off the pavement and leaped backwards awkwardly. His shiny black hair was dishevelled by the rapid movement. Due to his weak physique, his agility was like that of an imaginary wild beast.

A chunk of something hit his left shoulder with an immense force.

Suddenly, a sensory perception that absolutely shouldn't happen if the game was acting normal — something that everyone experiences differently in the real world — struck the man. It was a shock that he didn't expect. His eyes blazed red hot.

It was a “pain” that he had never before experienced in playing “The World.”

A bark, a growl, and then a scream resounded in the alley, and Flügel knew that the bullet he fired had struck somewhere on the body of the other PC. Then there was the sound of something hitting the ground. The opponent had fallen. But Flügel couldn't be sure of the situation with all the vapour blocking his view.

Flügel tilted his body and began to walk.

It felt like it took one whole month just to take one little step. There was no strength in his limbs. His whole body felt like it was weighed down. He was also in pain, but wasn't so bad — at least not yet.

The surroundings looked blurry. Not because of the mist, but due to being struck in the eye.

It just so happens that the wind was blowing in from the sea and it cleared away all the mist that enshrouded the alley. The bleak landscape came into focus.

At an intersection a few metres ahead stood a steam pipe that shot up like a utility pole. A man that looked like a system admin crept out from around the corner and faced Flügel. He began to run, and he wasn't going to stop.

Just before pulling the trigger of Brieler Rössle, the man jumped back a distance of two metres in one breath.

The bullet struck the side of the target. Damage that conformed to the system of “The World” was applied to the opponent. Then it was a feeling of “pain” that was fed back to the player in real life.

“Ahhhhhh. Somehow I feel as though the smell of sewage is ingrained in my whole body. And here I was thinking I could do whatever I wanted,” said Flügel as he directed the muzzle at the man.

“I don’t want to be a bother, so I’ll get to the point. I’ll approach you now and deliver the final blow. Obviously this doesn’t mean that you’ll die in real life. I’m only going to delete your PC data. Understand? I’ll just have to put in a little extra effort,” Flügel continued.

“There’s something I experienced and understood for the first time,” said the man as he stood up partially, his leg sticking out from behind the pipe.

“Schicksal PCs attacking each other, that’s truly soaking into my brain. It was rather satisfying...” he continued.

The man had both hands wrapped around the pipe. His face and much of his body was not visible, but one could tell he had a smirk on his face.

Cocking the gun, Flügel spoke across the gap to the opposing man.

“I’m not leaving here. If you cooperate, this won’t have to end badly,” said Flügel.

“You brilliantly escaped the rats and survived, it seems,” said the man, ignoring Flügel’s warning.

“To be exact, although you’re still not out of this back alley, that doesn’t matter. You surprised me quite a bit when you used Brieler Rössle. Your judgement and cunning deserve the highest accolades,” said the man.

His hands disappeared and then the sound of applause could be heard.

“You get an A+. You passed the test without incident. Congrats,” he said.

Flügel moved ever so slightly and confirmed the condition of his body. It was returning to normal functionality and he’d gotten used to the narrow field of vision.

However, the problem was the rats. There now was resistance from them after many of the rats had been attacked and destroyed by the steam jet trap. Not all of them had been annihilated.

But now, there was no sign of even one rat. They had all suddenly disappeared. The man was planning something.

A palm appeared around the pipe once again and soon went up the pipe. It seems the man was standing against it to support himself. He let out a sigh to stifle the pain.

“I’ll try to accept this blow. It is proof of sublime passion. I am a proud stigmata that ushers in the trial,” said the man.

“You’re really acting the martyr,” retorted Flügel.

“When I used the ability, I realized that it was a divine revelation — when I was eighteen years old, I felt trapped, then I was hired by Cyber Connect, everything I did was for that company. By using the rats, I could save the world from contamination by the Internet. It was a mission that was imposed on me. Because of this, I resigned myself to the fate of a cyberterrorist who spreads a virus across the net. I sought the disgrace of a criminal,” said the figure.

“That’s a lie. You would have only been able to kill me with a special power,” said Flügel.

“Ha. Why would you think that?” said the man with a defiant tone.

“Unless, I purposefully killed seven residents of the same apartment? Whether a trial or a crucifixion, this is merely an accessory to you,” said Flügel.

“I agree, but you’re a bastard for enjoying killing for killing’s sake,” Flügel continued.

The man appeared upset upon hearing this. The lurking man could be heard breathing heavily in the shadow of the pipe.

However, Flügel noticed immediately that this was not the case. The man only smiled and breathed lightly without uttering a word.

“What’s the matter? Are you any different from me?” said the man as he poked one eye out from behind the pipe.

“I was just wondering if you were thinking the same thing as me, Flügel. I want you to tell me something. When you dream about your time with Kaya Frebe, do you still feel something for her?”

A silence lingered for a while. The man’s words took a moment to sink in.

“What...” mumbled Flügel.

“I think you’re rather similar to ‘them.’ There are crucial differences, but very similar overall,” spoke the man.

“Them?” asked Flügel.

“The programmers who once decided to take a look into the abyss of The World. They were also martyrs,” said the man.

“Stop flapping your gums. I don’t know what you’re talking about,” said Flügel.

“Harald Hoerwick,” said the man.

“For the sake of his true love, he did not hesitate,” continued the man.

The man came out from behind the pipe. He stepped forward without taking his eyes off Flügel, revealing himself completely. He continued talking.

“Indou Masato. For the sake of his sister, he did not hesitate.”

He started to walk towards Flügel.

“Jyotaro Amagi. For the sake of his aunt, he did not hesitate.”

He continued to gradually come closer. He continued to speak to Flügel.

“However, you are clearly different from them in one regard. You ‘hesitated.’ You withdrew from the study of Real Digitalization. Why is that? Why did you give up?”

It felt as though the man’s eyes were becoming more intense.

“Are you trying to avoid the question? Why didn’t you overstep your bounds? It was a mission you believed in and were supposed to complete, you, a human of sufficient ability, so why did you have to hesitate during the mission?”

A gentle saintly smile crossed the man’s face.

“I’ll ask you again. In your dreams, what was most appealing about her? Or rather, did she even visit you in your dreams?”

With his hands spread in a natural manner, in a gesture as though he was pitying Flügel, the man had been stepping inside Brieler Rössle’s firing range.

“She would visit you, wouldn’t she? The man who let her down.”

Flügel shot reflexively.

The bullet struck the man in the face, and blew off the top half of his head. It rebounded and struck a the brick wall behind the man, created a wave of digital noise and tore off a section of the wall’s data, then rolled to the man’s feet.

The man staggered back one, then two steps, then stood still.

“Is that your response? Flügel. Hehehehehe,” said a new voice.

Flügel gasped.

With only his lower jaw remaining, the man did not even collapse. Flügel heard a laugh come from the man as though a swarm of insects were buzzing

around each other, and there remained a rift in the man's body. From the chest to the neck, a mass of PC data fell from him like slabs of meat.

Flügel saw that the mass was made up of rats.

The man's bogus appearance vanished immediately, and the countless rats began to scurry all over the ground and brick wall.

Flügel tried to get the agile little beasts in his sights, but to no avail.

Then he realized something in the corner of his mind. Just like an octopus can squish its body to fit into places, the rats were mimicking the PC data in order to work together.

Has he been fighting against the damn rats instead of Yuri Seto this whole time? There's no way, Flügel thought. The PC body had been shot with a bullet and then a steam jet trap. Then, having been blinded by the steam, the figure fled the scene, leaving behind rats. They came out from the shadow of the pipe where they had been hiding.

"Listen, Flügel. Take heed," came the voice, which was a rat who spoke as though it had the booming voice of a man.

"Five days. Five days from now, on Thursday, the 18th day of June," said another rat.

"We will unleash the rats unto the world," said a third rat.

"They will infiltrate every terminal and grant the 'Light of Salvation' to those who have grown weary of the Net. Hehehehe."

One after another, the rats continued to issue forth the man's words in turns.

"You are my trial."

"I am your trial."

"The trial must be administered equally."

"Therefore, I showed you the ability."

"Do your best to stop me."

"Use any means necessary without hesitation."

"Hunt me to mobilize everything..."

Suddenly the rats' voices began to fade away. The shadow of the group of rats became thinner and thinner. They continued to spread out.

"I'll shatter you... and prove just how right the rats are..."

As the wave moves away, the rats disappeared to the back of the square.

Afterwards Flügel was left all alone.

It seemed that all traces of the rats were gone. Flügel stood and clutched his gun for a while, exhaling as he became acutely aware of the fatigue he felt throughout his body.

However, just as he was about to unplug the power to his system, a man's voice whispered in his ear.

"I'll fill this 'world' with the rats of greed," came the appalling voice. It was like a raging wind blowing through a desolate and eerie void.

He shook his body, knocking off one rat that had been clinging to his shoulder.

The rat fell to the ground and ran about two metres up a nearby wall.

"I have a gift for you. Please accept it," the man said.

The rat looked down at Flügel.

"Good luck with the test."

There was an explosion.

Chapter 21

A Season of Blue and Green

The past suddenly flashed before him. It didn't look as good as he had hoped. He had been struck deep in his chest, but he didn't dare touch his chest. Gradually the past became more and more beautiful in order to avoid a feeling of disgust.

A year before Pluto Again. He had torn into the other side of the past, into the year 2009.

It was the year of the earthquake.

A magnitude 3.3 quake occurred in Duisburg, Germany. It was said to be the biggest earthquake they'd had in over ten years*. To the Japanese Ryu-uji, such an earthquake was not particularly large, but for the people of Germany, it was an earth-shattering event, literally and figuratively.

It was the year of women's soccer.

At the 2009 UEFA Women's Championship held in Finland, the German team ran a close game against powerhouse Sweden, winning 1-0, thus securing their fifth consecutive title†. During the halftime of the final match,

*Translator's note: This historical piece of information is based in reality. In July of 2009, a magnitude 3.3 earthquake struck near Moers and Kamp-Lintfort in the Wesel District, a region 20km (12mi) northwest of Duisburg, Germany. About a week later, a magnitude 3.1 aftershock was recorded in the area. These two seismic events are known as the 2009 Moers Earthquake. It was caused by a mining operation in the area, but does not seem to have caused much damage. It is apparently the largest earthquake Germany had experienced since 1955. Although natural earthquakes of a larger magnitude have occurred before and since 2009, they do not seem to have been felt as heavily as the 2009 earthquake due to its closeness to the surface.

†Translator's note: Although also based on real events, the story gets details wrong. Germany did not play Sweden at all in the 2009 UEFA Women's Championship. It played England, winning 6-2 in the final. Germany, however, did win 1-0 against Sweden in the semi-final of the 2013 UEFA Women's Championship held in Sweden. They then played Norway in the final, winning 1-0.

words that the coach directed to the players such as “existential attack” became buzzwords in the country.

It was also the year of “The World.”

Just six months after its release in 2007, this monster hit of a game had recorded sales of over ten million units, and this figure would increase with every version update. The world was about to be united by a game. At least that’s how it looked. When Ryuuji thought back on that idea, it was no more than a mere illusion, a practical joke., but some people at the time took it very seriously.

It was the year of the reassessment of Minnesang[‡].

The old love songs gained such a resurgence in popularity that soon one could hear such love songs seemingly everywhere. Ryuuji’s attendance at the laboratory was no exception; he had become fed up with his coworkers playing the sweet melodies every day from old record players, like what you might find in an old professor’s personal belongings. His blood would boil every time he heard the songs playing. His memories would seethe. Two birds nestling close together. Forever. Forever and ever. Forever and ever and ever and ever and ever...

It was the year that he met Kaya for the first time.

That unbelievable afternoon, under a blue sky the like of which had never before been seen in Germany, Ryuuji was sitting on a bench in the Englischer Garten with the dog from his former boarding house. A breeze gently shook the trees that lined the street in Schwabing, and the sun shone softly on the lawn[§].

There was a creek in front of the lawn. While listening to the lively chatter of passers-by, Ryuuji pondered the matter of the death of the soul. He didn’t know why.

Suddenly a strong gust blew, and a round brown object came into view and broke his concentration. The object, a straw hat, fell just short of the creek, and looked as though it was going to start sailing away again.

Ryuuji commanded the dog with a smack on the back of the neck.

Alright, let’s go. Come on, he said.

[‡]Translator’s note: Minnesang (“Love song”) is a type of Middle German love poetry popular from the 12th to 14th centuries in Germany.

[§]Translator’s note: Schwabing is a borough in the northern part of Munich, the capital of the German state of Bavaria in the south of Germany. The Englischer Garten (German for “English Garden”) is a popular public park. (See <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Schwabing> and http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Englischer_Garten for pictures of what Ryuuji likely saw.)

However, the dog, a Great Dane, looked back at Ryuuji with a sad look as though he had been through some hard years, and then laid back down with a big yawn.

I know, the dog was trying to say.

Ryuuji stood up, walked over, and picked up the hat.

Immediately after, a young woman with a handbag began to scurry over.

Ryuuji brushed off the hat, then passed it to her.

Thank you, she said as she took the hat. Then she called out hesitantly to Ryuuji who was about to return to the bench.

Do you live around here? I'd appreciate it if you give me some directions, she asked.

There was an awkwardness in her words, like a foreigner exploring an unfamiliar land. I wonder if she's a tourist, Ryuuji thought.

No problem, Ryuuji said casually.

The woman wore a cardigan and a skirt of modest hue. She had a mature demeanour, but if you looked closely, you could see a childishness in her face as though she were a young girl. Ryuuji supposed that she was one or two years younger than him.

The woman said the address.

However, these strings and numbers, which she did not understand well on her own, meant little to Ryuuji too.

It's hard to understand the addresses around here. Don't you have a map?, Ryuuji asked.

She took out her phone from a pocket in her handbag, displayed a map on it, then passed it to Ryuuji.

Ryuuji examined it for a moment, struggling to adjust the map on the mobile terminal while he rechecked the address several times, but he finally managed to find the destination and the route to it.

Ryuuji was surprised to see the name and picture of the building displayed on the terminal.

What? That's the boarding house I stayed in, he said.

Just then, Ryuuji saw a flash of a memory of something he had been told at a dinner two weeks before.

She decided to adopt the daughter of a distant relative, the landlord had said.

The woman's relatives had been involved in an accident while on a business trip in the United States, leaving their daughter an orphan. The daughter had nowhere to go and she was so depressed that her health started to deteriorate. To get her medical attention, the woman adopted the young girl.

If you're so inclined, could you perhaps also direct me to a nearby cafe?, the woman asked.

Such an amazing coincidence, Ryuuji said as he handed back the mobile terminal. I'm the one who took care of Mr. Weiss. I've heard about you. Ah... Kaya Frobe, right?

Kaya, said the woman as she held out a slender hand. Kaya Fröbe.

He took her hand and gripped it lightly. Her hand was light as a feather. It felt like she would fly away if a breeze blew, so Ryuuji pressed her hand lightly so as not to hurt her.

My name is Ryuuji Sogabe, but please just call me Ryuuji.

Ryuuji took the leash after he finished his self-introduction and spoke to the dog that remained lying down while also showing no interest in the exchange between the two people.

Grid, come on. You've got to guide the guest, Ryuuji said to his dog.

The dog, however, did not move. He looked up at Ryuuji and yawned again. He wagged his tail two or three times listlessly, and then closed his eyes as though to say that he had fulfilled his duty. Ryuuji pulled on the leash in vain.

I apologize, Ryuuji said to Kaya.

It seems my buddy here wants to bathe in the sun a little more. Good grief, he continued.

I understand, she said.

Pardon?

Since the weather is so nice today.

Kaya smiled as she spoke. Her flaxen hair blew in the gentle breeze.

Ryuuji looked away and pretended to look down the road.

Well, once you go out of the park, don't just immediately turn right. Go straight, then the cafe is on the right side of the second street. Understand?, Ryuuji said.

Yes. Thank you, Mr. Sogabe. Well, bye now.

Ryuuji said goodbye and sat on the bench.

As she walked away, Kaya put on the straw hat.

Ryuuji watched Kaya as she walked the trail, his eyes fixed on the beautiful outline of the girl who easily stood out from everything else in the park.

The sky overhead was a ghastly shade of blue.

Chapter 22

Message

As soon as he had returned from the cyberworld, the area that had been bitten by the rat became hot. The area soon began to show signs of inflammation, along with symptoms of numbness, tremors, and dizziness. These were moderate side effects of the use of the VR scanner. Abnormal damage incurred in the cyberworld flooded into the real world, reaching levels far beyond what “Flügel” could handle.

He couldn't have been logged in for more than an hour. It was only now that Ryuuji felt like his whole body would fall to pieces.

He tried to rest and recover at the office late into the night. But by nine o'clock in the morning, he was still far from ready to even drive his car. Rather, he felt that he was getting worse as time passed.

Maybe I should go to the doctor, Ryuuji thought. But he had been prohibited from using the VR Scanner before this.

Reluctantly he took a taxi and returned home at what seemed a crawl. Along the way he bought some painkillers and muscle relaxants at a pharmacy, and took two pills before going to bed.

The next day, at around seven o'clock on Sunday morning, Ryuuji woke up to severe pain as though his flesh had been torn apart. His senses returned to him in the morning light as he temporarily forced himself to get out of bed with the use of the drugs he bought. It felt like a drop of scalding hot water from a frying pan had dropped on to his head.

There was a knock at the door of the room.

“I have breakfast for you,” came Lilie's voice.

Ryuuji bit his lips and tried to not let a groan escape.

“Ryuuji?” said Lilie.

Ryuuji breathed with difficulty, cleared his throat, and took another breath.

“I’m sick. I have a splitting headache,” he said.

He spoke in a purposefully deep, hoarse voice, so much so that his voice unexpectedly cracked.

“Ugggh. Have you been drinking?” Lilie said through the door before walking away.

Ryuuji tried to get up from the bed. For a moment he remained paralyzed. His upper body was locked while his legs swung towards the floor. His breath came with difficulty and sweat dripped down his forehead.

He didn’t want to allow his body to shake so much. But he couldn’t stop it. He felt nerve pain, muscle pain, fatigue, nausea, chills, and cramps. He waited for the pain to subside.

Slowly he grabbed a glass of water, took two tablets, and placed it back on the night stand. Although the drugs might not take effect for a while, at least it was better than nothing.

There was another knock.

“How about breakfast? Want to try some rice soup?” asked Lilie.

“No, I’m fine. I want to sleep in because I worked too much yesterday,” said Ryuuji, nearly forgetting to use his fake hoarse voice.

“Well, I’ll have something ready for lunch, okay? Sweet dreams,” said Lilie.

Ryuuji listened as Lilie left the hallway, her footsteps growing fainter.

He laid himself back on to the bed and hauled the blanket over him with difficulty.

He wanted to write a summary of yesterday’s incident while the memories were still fresh in his mind, but it seemed more difficult to do in his current state than if he were to climb to the summit of Mount Everest. He took in a deep breath. At that moment he wanted to immerse himself in peace and tranquility while he waited for the drugs to take effect. It was an impossible wish. The mobile terminal suddenly rang on the night stand. The call was from David.

“Sorry to bother you so early. I wanted to wait, but I had to call right away. Some real bad stuff happened,” said David.

“No problem. I was up anyway,” Ryuuji answered from his bed.

“What’s this bad situation you’re talking about?” Ryuuji continued.

“It’s our headquarters,” said David.

His voice was a mixture of frustration and shock.

“I gathered some personnel and created a search team to find Seto within the Japanese Server. I think that’s what Gus intended. He contacted me previously about it,” said David.

“Is that the terrible news?”

“HQ’s been wiped out,” said David.

“Seto logged into Dol Dona, mustered his forces, and sent his rats to attack us. He ambushed us while he crashed the server with that blast of light. That light virus got sent to all the hospitals.”

Ryuuji closed his eyes. Then he spoke.

“This was yesterday?”

“I heard he logged in at half past two.”

Yesterday Ryuuji had arrived in the cafe district of Mac Anu after three o’clock. Yuri Seto had followed and greeted Ryuuji after dispatching with the NAB officials who had been tracking him.

“I’ll tell you about it in greater detail. Shall we meet in your office at four o’clock today? How does that sound?” David said.

Ryuuji hesitated. He was suspicious about meeting at the office.

“No, please come to my apartment. Do you know where it is?” Ryuuji asked.

“I know. Is something wrong?” David asked.

David seemed to have noticed that Ryuuji’s voice was different from a moment ago.

He spoke briefly about the events at Mac Anu.

“Don’t worry, Mr. Sogabe,” said David.

“He logged in somehow. All by himself. That dangerous bastard,” said David, in reference to Seto.

“I just wanted to enjoy Mac Anu’s scenery,” said Ryuuji.

Because he was was humbled in the presence of the informer, Ryuuji couldn’t explain why he had been logged in.

David blew his nose.

“Well... I guess I’ll see you at your place at four o’clock,” said David.

The phone cut off.

Ryuuji twisted his body in his blanket, and attempted to return his mobile terminal to his nightstand. However, he couldn't stand the discomfort created by reaching out and dropped the terminal by the bed instead.

As he tried to move now, the pain throughout his body seemed to become worse.

I can't sleep like this, he thought. But this wasn't true. Perhaps it was because of the drugs or his symptoms or both, but Ryuuji closed his eyes and soon drifted off to sleep, almost as though he had lost consciousness.

Ryuuji woke up from his nondescript dream and saw that the hands of his clock read noon.

His body was soaking wet, having been covered in night sweats. But he felt much better overall. Compared with the night before, his pain was markedly reduced.

Ryuuji slowly came out of the bedroom.

There was no sign of Lilie. She seemed to have gone out.

"Grid, where's Lilie?"

When he asked this in the living room, a message played.

"I'm gone out with friends. I'll be back in the evening. If you have laundry, keep it all together," came the voice of Lilie.

Sorry, Ryuuji thought, apologizing in his mind.

He had left a large amount of dirty clothes in his office.

He prepared himself a microwave meal and ate it. He had no appetite, but he forced himself to eat it. It was like chewing on waterlogged cardboard. But he knew he had to eat if he wanted to keep his physical and mental faculties.

He finished his brunch and went to the bathroom where he took painkillers and muscle relaxants.

In the bathroom mirror he saw his sullen eyes, void of ambition, his unkempt hair, and pale sickly face staring back at him.

"Don't worry," he said to himself.

"It's not as bad as it looks," he continued.

He took off his clothes and got in the bathtub. He stood under the shower-head a long time, letting the hot water fall on his feet. Soon the drugs began to take effect, and he began to feel like his usual self.

He soaked in the bathtub, washed himself, shaved his beard, got dressed, and finally got ready to face the tough world.

He sat on the sofa in the living room, and unfolded his mobile terminal.

He loaded The World's official bulletin board and found that an apology concerning the connection error that cut many players off in the middle of yesterday's "Monster Town Invasion" Event had been posted.

A forced disconnection?

Some players had responded to it, apparently they were the participants. They were complaining, and the language was rather abusive. It was one scene surrounding the game. However, they were angry that the event had been cut short, not that any of them had suffered any harm in real life due to being killed in the game. Everyone seemed convinced that it had been nothing more than an event filled with raiding rat-monsters. There didn't seem to be any reason to doubt them.

Ryuuji accessed the NAB website from his mobile terminal and looked through the latest reports. No stories about any unconscious people could be found. For the time being there was no publicity given to the victims of the "rat hunt."

Ryuuji scrolled through the rest of the pages and checked the news.

Much of it dealt with Veronica Bain's visit to Japan. It was in the news that she had just arrived in Tokyo yesterday. Various speculations were made as to her reasons for visiting, such as performing an audit of the Japanese branch of the company or visiting a Japanese factory to oversee the development of new products. She was staying the Baketon Hotel in Tokyo. It seemed she would be staying about two weeks or so.

The V.I.P. truly is the center of attention.

He scrolled further down the screen and this time he was worried about something.

Something nibbled at the back of his mind. Some thought crawled into his consciousness. It was an unpleasant, frustrating sensation.

He returned to the top of the screen and reviewed the page from the beginning; it was not possible to locate the identity of those who had struck a nerve in him.

Something was strange, but nothing seemed to be abnormal in the article.

Ryuuji shook his head.

Nevermind, he thought. If you assume something's there, you must be seeing things. I'll put it at the back of my mind for now.

Positioning his mobile terminal at eye level in his hands, Ryuuji was startled by something. An icon had just popped-up. It was a notification that a new

thread had been written on the official bulletin board that Ryuuji started.

He called up the thread using the keyboard.

“From Fate to The Magician. There is talk of exterminating the rats. I request that you contact me. Mail is acceptable.”

Two weeks prior, this is what Ryuuji wrote after the death of Kiyoteru Yodogawa. He added a new sentence at the end.

“From The Magician to Fate.”

The text that followed read:

“In the lake, it turns to silence. All that remains is nothingness.”

Chapter 23

A Voice from the Past

“In the lake, it turns to silence. All that remains is nothingness.”

Ryuuji looked at text displayed on the screen of his Palm PC.

He didn't know why, but this unexpected message gave him a sense of unease that he couldn't quite grasp, an unease like an annoying hangnail.

Who had written this? He first considered that the message might be from Yuri Seto who had mentioned Geist. But he couldn't think of why Seto would place this message in this thread now.

Maybe it was an unrelated third party, or a lurker who viewed the thread out of interest or boredom. That felt like the more likely possibility. He tried thinking of other possibilities, but he drew a blank.

Ryuuji closed the bulletin board.

He'd seen enough. When faced with a problem that had no discernible answer, the easiest solution is to blame someone else. Ryuuji considered this post to be the work of Yuri Seto.

It was you who did all this, wasn't it, you rat-bastard? Ryuuji thought this as pain intermittently coursed through his body.

It's that bastard's fault. He'll get his payback.

Ryuuji worked on writing a report in the afternoon.

He devoted twice as much time as usual to it, then took a break when he arrived at a place where he would normally be done eight out of ten of his reports.

There was some time remaining before four o'clock.

He threw himself on the sofa, removed his glasses, and closed his eyes. Today, like yesterday, he was overworked. At least until David comes, he wanted

to lay on the sofa and revel in laziness. His wish was not to come true. Just as he was about to doze off, his mobile terminal rang. It was a call from Lilie.

“Did I wake you up?” she asked.

“I was already awake,” Ryuuji replied cheerfully.

“What’s up?” he continued.

“Well, right now I’m on the main street, and there’s someone strange here,” said Lilie in a hushed tone.

She seemed to be blocking the mouthpiece with her hand.

“His name is David. He suddenly spoke to me, and said to bring him to our house because he’s an acquaintance of yours. Do you know him?” she said.

As Lilie asked this, Ryuuji could hear sneezing in the background.

“I do. Don’t worry, he’s, uh, not strange,” Ryuuji said.

“He’s someone I’m working with at the moment. We’re supposed to meet today. It’s okay, bring him here,” Ryuuji explained to Lilie.

“Really? Okay then,” said Lilie, her voice sounding suddenly relieved.

Before four o’clock, Lilie arrived home with David following close behind.

“Hello, Mr. Sogabe. I hope I’m not disturbing you,” David said with a radiant smile as he removed his sunglasses.

“I met Lilie on the way and recognized her face, so I asked her bring me here. She’s a very well-mannered young lady,” David continued.

Lilie went to the kitchen, blushing from the praise directed at her.

Ryuuji walked through the living room towards David.

David spoke as he looked around the room.

“You’ve really tidied up here. Excuse me for saying, but I had the impression it’d look like your office here...”

“It’s clean here thanks to Lilie,” said Ryuuji.

“Your little worker bee,” said David.

“No, she’s my boss,” said Ryuuji light-heartedly.

David tilted his head delicately at this answer.

“Quite the level-headed young lady,” he said, praising Lilie once more.

Lilie took out the tea set for two people, laid it out on a tray, setting it down in the living room, and David turned off his forced smile as if removing a mask.

“How’s your health?” he asked.

“I can’t say I’m feeling the greatest,” said Ryuuji.

“But, I’m fine. I could even do a tap dance,” Ryuuji added.

“Could you tell me about your encounter with Yuri Kazinsky Seto?” asked David.

Ryuuji relayed what he said on the phone this morning, this time adding more detail. He spoke of the ominous subject of the rats, which he had left unsaid before.

“In fact, he called out for them to retreat,” said David in a monotonous voice after he finished listening to the story.

“NAB headquarters abandoned keeping track of Seto on the Net side of things. With only a team of ten people on the case, we would’ve been beaten in an instant. From now on, rather than searching for him on the net, we’ll be focusing our efforts on investigating him in the real world. That means I have to return home and find Seto in the real world,” said David.

“So, you’re going home?” asked Ryuuji.

For some time David did not answer Ryuuji’s question.

“Seto hasn’t moved an inch out of the United States. He’s still hiding somewhere in the country. We’re sure of it,” David said as he faced Ryuuji directly.

“Do you think there’s something strange about Seto’s activity, Mr. Sogabe?” asked David.

“How so?” asked Ryuuji.

“Why is Seto active not on a North American server, but on a Japanese server? It’s a confusing matter. Don’t you think it’s strange? If he purposefully unleashed the rats, the North American server would provide a much larger platform for the spread. And generally, it’s pretty simple to gain access to it from over there. The bastard has some reason for taking the time-consuming route of accessing the Japanese server, but what is it?” David explained.

Ryuuji shook his head.

“Hmmm, I have no idea,” he said.

“Based on my intuition, I feel that NAB will not be able to permanently capture Seto if they focus the investigation on just the real world,” said David.

“Why do you think that?” asked Ryuuji.

“It’s just a hunch I have,” remarked David.

“I thought that you of all people did not like to judge things based only on intuition,” said Ryuuji, causing David’s face to turn red for a moment before returning to its usual paleness.

David averted his gaze at these words, and sat still for a while, gazing out of a nearby window.

But, he reached out and unexpectedly took up his cup and drank his tea all at once.

“I’m not going back,” David said after taking a deep breath.

“Damn his call to retreat. As long as I’m still here, it is my goal to see Gus and the others fully recover,” said David with a tone of determination.

“I do it for that reason, Mr. Sogabe. Your help is absolutely necessary. You were attacked by Seto yesterday. You survived the encounter, passed out and are now here, not having given up. You’re an expert on this matter, and we at NAB are not. It is quite a shame, really,” David said.

David took his mobile terminal from his jacket pocket.

“I believe that you are a mirror-like person,” David added.

“Well said. That’s a good way of putting it,” said Ryuuji with a nod.

“Do you mean to say that I sparkle?” Ryuuji added.

“No, not at all,” David denied the statement with a very straight face. He did not so much as smile.

“Fight force with force. Fight cheap tricks with cheap tricks. We truly cannot attain our goal unless we join forces with you,” said David.

David opened the voice memo app on his mobile terminal and, placing the terminal on the table, and immediately pointed it out to Ryuuji.

“I want you to listen to this audio file. Only a handful of people at NAB know about this. If you listen to this file, you must swear to never mention this to anyone,” David said very seriously.

Ryuuji looked at David’s mobile terminal. It looked like an older model. It had been well-used as paint was chipped off of the corners. David spoke in a low serious voice and looked as though he were trying to conceal something.



“Somehow I don’t know about this. If it’s going to cause trouble for me to hear this, maybe it’s best to stop now,” Ryuuji said softly.

“But since you came prepared, I don’t think I can get you to change your mind,” Ryuuji continued.

“Listen to it,” David said plainly.

“As you listen, please think of this as an extension of a conversation,” David said as he tapped the screen with his index finger.

A heavy silence came down in the room. For a while there wasn’t even any sound coming from the mobile terminal.

However, the voice of a man came forth. Its tone was full of confidence, and

could even be considered arrogant. It was faint, but there was a hint of a foreign accent. Ryuuji immediately knew who this voice belonged to.

“...To start, in telling this story to you, I am committing a crime of divulging corporate secrets. If you do not wish to be my accomplice to this, I suggest you immediately discard this file.”

Silence.

“Splendid. So, I’ll cut to the chase. Last year, this is to say, 2020, an incident orchestrated by Jyotarou Amagi occurred in which a backup AI was put into action.”

Silence.

“At that time, it was an era of bliss, nestled in the bosom of the goddess Aura, a time in my career I will not soon forget. Vibrant electrons were charged within me and I appreciated all of my senses. Freed from the constraints of the real world, I realized in my ecstasy that I must surrender to the presence of the Mother. I realized that it was stupid to try and dominate the goddess with the Akashic Record.”

Silence.

“However, there were those who were still unaware of this.”

Silence.

“Unaware of their being dwarfed in comparison, these ignorant fellows tried to challenge the great Aura. They gathered up the fragments of the Akashic Record and tried to extract the goddess’ data. What this act meant, what it brought to this world, was something that they did not understand.”

Silence.

“I’m sorry to say that I am no longer qualified to be involved in this matter. As things stand now, in this regard, I can no longer get to the core of the issue. However, if you do it, it may be possible to avoid a catastrophe.”

Silence.

“This is not a request from the former Managing Director of CC Corp. Genius. Rather I want you to think of this as a request from the man Durga Fida Sharma.”

Silence.

“I beg of you. Please stop CC Corp.’s recklessness and the desecration of Aura’s name.”

Silence.

The silence lasted a long time. Just when Ryuuji thought the message was over, there was another message. The voice spoke again.

“Sogabe, I entrust this will to you.”

Chapter 24

Legacy

David stopped playing the voice message by stroking the screen of the mobile terminal, and for a moment the room remained silent.

Suddenly a squeak was heard from the other side of the house, suggesting that Lilie had just sat down in a chair in her room.

David finally spoke.

“That was the voice of Durga Fida Sharma. Your former boss, Mr. Sogabe. This message was recorded the 23rd of September, 2021. About one year after you retired from CC Corp,” he said.

“What is this?” asked Ryuuji.

It is a voice file seized from Mr. Yodogawa’s home computer. The majority of the data is damaged, but I was able to restore the portion at the beginning.”

David spoke the word ‘seized’ without any hesitation.

“In fact, we at NAB had already flagged Mr. Yodogawa much before this. We had suspected him of using industrial espionage to illegally sell CC Corp. Japan’s trade secrets to the San Diego division,” David said.

Ryuuji was speechless for a moment.

“Industrial espionage? Mr. Yodogawa?” he asked.

“Yes. He was handling CC Corp. Japan and its local subsidiaries, as well as billboards to the San Diego Corp. In regards to the laws of this country, this is a violation of the Industrial Espionage Prevention Act. Civil liabilities are imposed in espionage, and it is therefore subject to punishment as a criminal offense. However, that’s not my main point,” said David.

David leaned forward.

“Mr. Sogabe, have you ever been contacted by Mr. Sharma after your retirement?” he asked.

“No,” said Ryuuji, shaking his head.

“Do you know the current whereabouts of Mr. Sharma?” David asked.

“No,” Ryuuji said once again.

“What do you know about Mr. Sharma’s misconduct?” asked David.

“Except for what I heard on the news, nothing,” said Ryuuji.

Ryuuji was reminded of the former employer as he answered questions. The man who had been waiting at the airport for Ryuuji when he returned from Germany, and offered him a contract to continue his research for CC Corp.

The man had had an arrogant demeanor. He was completely meritocratic, not caring about anyone else’s feelings. Self-admittedly, he would not offer assistance to anyone, even if they paid him the greatest respect.

At the time he had learned of the Durga incident, Ryuuji had been trying to contact him. However, his attempts had failed. He felt that an act such as showing mercy would only hurt the arrogant man’s pride.

“Ah, I remember hearing recently that he had embezzled public money,” said Ryuuji as David nodded.

“He did indeed. He was investigated for it — well, needless to say, there was some infighting and he was expelled from the company,” said David.

“Infighting? When I was there, I never heard such commotions,” said Ryuuji.

“Time sure does fly. Things have changed at CC Corp. Japan since you worked there, Mr. Sogabe,” said David with a snort.

“To begin with, the company called CC Corp. is at the center of the San Diego company, but each subsidiary has its own organizational structure that allows it to be flexible and move in its own direction. The Japanese corporation’s huge sales boast compared to the English division created a very strong momentum of self-reliance. Yodogawa broke the momentum. He went over to the San Diego firm to collect evidence against Mr. Sharma. Mr. Sharma had been in conflict with the management team at the San Diego firm for a long time concerning guidelines for the management of The World. Credited with ousting Mr. Sharma, Mr. Yodogawa was promoted to Senior Managing Director. Subsequently, San Diego’s intention has clearly been to influence the staff at the Japanese firm, to this very day —” continued David.

“How can you be so sure that it was Mr. Sharma who embezzled the company?” asked Ryuuji.

“It is an undeniable fact. According to trial records, he secretly used some of his own money who it would be harder to detect, and tried to incorporate new specifications to the Japanese server on his own,” said David.

“He admitted that much himself. However, what sort of specifications did he add? And why? He wouldn’t tell us that. He wouldn’t tell us, even under extreme interrogation. Then he returned to the United States and we lost track of him,” David said.

“He disappeared?” asked Ryuuji.

“Exactly. Sharma’s whereabouts are still unknown to us. He hasn’t even returned to his homeland of India. Even NAB was not able to trace his footsteps. He wasn’t anywhere. No one knew the whereabouts of Mr. Sharma...,” said David.

David pressed the mobile terminal once again, switching the screen. What appeared to be various lists filled the entire screen.

“What I say from this point on is just a theory on my part, so listen carefully. In 2021, after being dismissed, Durga Fida Sharma wrote a message addressed to you. However, for some reason, he didn’t send it. Therefore, I asked to deliver it to you on behalf of Chief of Staff Yodogawa. I think that Mr. Sharma did not realize that his subordinates were industrial spies,” said David.

Ryuuji sighed faintly. He felt as though he could imagine the situation. Durga Fida Sharma had admitted himself that he had become too vulnerable to his opponents. This was the case in 2020.

“Of course, Yodogawa heard his message without permission. However, this was not reported to the San Diego company, it was not delivered to you, though it was meant just for you,” said David.

“Why? What’s the reason?” asked Ryuuji.

“Now that Yodogawa is dead, I don’t know what his intention was. The compensation package that was arranged from the San Diego company at the time included Durga Sharma’s demotion. Therefore, they must have supposed that there was no work left for him to do. Or rather, that information may be the trump card they need to protect themselves. But this is only speculation,” David continued.

“As for this year, Yodogawa began to receive e-mail threats from an unidentified hacker calling himself “Geist”. The hacker made threats, saying ‘tell me about the former president’s legacy or I will unleash a virus into The World’,” said David.

“Legacy...,” said Ryuuji.

“Yes. In other words, the specifications that Mr. Sharma began to add to the Japanese server,” said David as he nodded.

“Yodogawa was not able to rely on San Diego on this matter. They betrayed one of their own. This was not explained in the report concerning Mr. Sharma’s audio file. His trump card was actually his weakness. So, in order to solve the situation, Yodogawa singled you out take care of this. As I said before, he knew you were someone who cared,” said David.

“Do you know what the specifications added by Sharma are?” asked Ryuuji.

“I don’t know,” David answered quickly.

Then he added in a manner that was a little panicked.

“No, I’m not hiding anything. I truly don’t know. As I mentioned before, the second half of Mr. Sharma’s audio file could not be restored after it had been damaged. I don’t think he was talking about anything specific in that part. Rather, in my opinion, you shouldn’t expect to hear anything from Mr. Sharma,” said David.

“You still haven’t talked about the most important thing,” said Ryuuji.

“What is NAB’s purpose? Previously you said that you and Gus came to Japan to catch Yuri Seto. Yet now it seems as though Seto is merely a minor player who muscled his way into the middle of this story,” Ryuuji added.

“For Gus and I, our mission, which is of the highest priority, is to ensure that we locate the whereabouts of the currently hidden Aura,” said David in a stagnant tone of voice.

He seemed to have been waiting for that question to come up.

The Ultimate AI Aura. Daughter of the former goddess Morganna Mode Gone. An autonomous AI with the ability to stabilize a network.

“In the audio file, Mr Sharma had been very admiring. Enthusiastic believers of religion seem to worship the God of where they live. It’s not only Mr. Sharma. Those who were involved with the Aura of the past, to a varying degree, seemed to develop pious feelings towards her,” said David with a shrug.

“But you know, Mr. Sogabe. Aura is not very good for us. Aura is a weapon. The worst kind of weapon of destruction for clearing out the core of the network. You just have to look at the previous network crisis for proof. An ultimate AI can do great things. Whether it heals or destroys the real world depends on how you treat it,” said David. He closed his mobile terminal with one hand as he spoke.

“Therefore, it’s useless to keep Aura under strict control in facilities established by the United Nations. For example, even if we had property devel-

oped by a company, we wouldn't just be able to do whatever we wanted with it," said David.

"That's a very brave thing to say," said Ryuuji to David.

David now made a remark that greatly overstepped the bounds of what is permitted to one of the members of NAB.

"To be honest, I think that's the best hand to play," he said.

"Ah, in other words, NAB dared to overlook Yodogawa's industrial espionage activities. Yuri Kazinski Seto made contact and took the name of 'Geist.' Seto is aiming for something that Mr. Sharma left behind. Is it something like that?"

"Why does Seto insist on the Japanese server? That's the answer to this," said David with a nod.

"Why is Seto interested in Durga Sharma's legacy? What is he plotting? I don't know yet. Nonetheless, we definitely cannot allow Seto to get the legacy," said David.

You got that right, Ryuuji thought to himself. The man we believe to be Yuri Seto cannot be allowed to reach his goals.

"No matter where you look in the world, you won't find a country without crime," said David.

"In any period in history, no place is free of crime. Similarly, there can be no cyber-space without cyber-crime. NAB's job is to monitor the world's networks to watch for cyber-crime. In a time when we cannot exist without computers, if a mastermind were to take control of the computers' mechanisms, all that would be left is to become the voice of morality. If the mastermind were to ignore morality, a Hell more grotesque than anything seen before could easily be created," said David.

Hell. Ryuuji felt as though he'd heard that word somewhere before.

Then he suddenly remembered where.

"There is a certainly a Hell," Seto had said. "It is unhallowed ground. A place where an endless torrent of lust overflows. A place where terrible screams and cries echo and roar all around. A place that none should be tied to..."

"You were asked to investigate the causes behind Seto's rats and that light," David said as though he were reading Ryuuji's thoughts.

"He's pure evil. Those who look directly into the light start to develop symptoms within half a day to a few days. The illness drives them mad and they attempt to jump from high places. The rats themselves exploded and vanished with no traces left in the computer terminal," Ryuuji said with a sigh.

“For those who fell unconscious in The World, they all had the fact that they went unconscious during game play as a common point. Therefore, the rumor went around that something was happening in The World. However, Seto’s rats were not even considered. No one realized that the internet was merely an intermediary for them. They were designed in such a way so as not to be perceived. The rats’ victims would therefore get lumped in with a number of conventional suicides,” said David.

Ryuuji remembered that there were no abnormalities found in Yodogawa’s mobile terminal.

Then he recalled the sad circumstances surrounding Yodogawa’s death and the events leading up to it.

Yuri Seto’s words resonated in his mind once more.

“Thursday, June 8. I unleash rats upon the entire world. They descend upon each and every terminal and they will shine a great ‘Light of Salvation’ upon those that tire of the net,” Seto had said.

“It’s useless for anyone to try and protect the world, either real or online, from the malevolent Seto,” said David.

“Even people like you and me,” he added.

Ryuuji stood up from the sofa.

He left David alone for a moment as he went to the kitchen and removed a bottle of whiskey from the storage cabinet. He had gotten it as a gift at the end of the previous year. He thought to take it to the office, but decided to leave it at home.

He didn’t bring his own whiskey glass to the apartment, so he arranged two teacups in front of him and poured some of the amber liquid into each cup. He thought for a moment, then retrieved ice from the freezer. On the rocks was most appropriate at such a moment. He placed the drinks down on a tray, along with a pitcher of water, then went back to the living room and placed the tray on the table.

Ryuuji passed a teacup to David, fixated on his own cup, and then sat on the sofa as before.

David looked as though he was gazing into the surface of his drink.

“Wild Turkey*?” asked David.

“It’s rye,” said Ryuuji.

“It’s excellent,” said David, nodding.

*Translator’s note: Wild Turkey is an American brand of Bourbon whiskey that is well-known in Japan among whiskey drinkers.

A few seconds pass, and Ryuuji and David were still holding their cups as though they enjoyed the feeling of a cold teacup in their hands.

“I should say something beforehand,” Ryuuji said.

“Unless I fight well, my Flügel PC will flounder and not be able to contend with Seto’s PC. For me to beat him, I have to come within two meters of him. However, he’s able to launch a string of critical hits from any distance by manipulating his rats. To be honest, the main reason I was able to survive my encounter with that rat-bastard is because ‘he isn’t really all that much’,” said Ryuuji.

David lifted his head and looked at Ryuuji.

“However, this does not mean we don’t have a chance of winning. I have a plan to capture him. What’s more... if it’s two against one, the odds are much better,” said Ryuuji, adding power to his words.

“I was about to say that,” said David, smirking slightly.

“Please don’t underestimate our strength. We have enough to finally shut that rat up for good,” David continued.

“It’s people like you and I that must put a stop to Yuri Seto,” Ryuuji said as he held up his cup.

David also held up his cup.

“To the Pied Piper of Hamelin,” said David.

“To the rat exterminator,” said Ryuuji.

The two of them toasted.

Chapter 25

Nostalgia

David got up to go home around six o'clock. He said he would be staying at a hotel near Akasaka branch. When he got into the taxi that Ryuuji called, he looked up at the sky and frowned.

"It's gotten pretty cloudy. Looks like it's going to rain."

Soon after he said this, it began to rain.

A little while later it was raining in earnest. Even late into the night the rain continued unabated, tapping hard against the building like countless fingers playing a piano.

Ryuuji sat alone on the living room sofa, a pile of cards expanded upwards in the partial shape of the Tower of Babel on the table before him. It was beginning to return to its previous state; Ryuuji just needed to stay quiet to finish it. Perhaps this would have a calming effect on the rain too.

Well, let's see if I can play the great detective, he thought. By basing this on what I've gathered so far and the information David brought today, and by combining it all, I can try to ascertain the solution.

The placement of the cards was stronger than ever before. The arrangement piled up in no time at all and the blasphemous tower was steadily completed.

However, a dull gray haze came over Ryuuji's mind. He couldn't foresee anything. No flash of insight came to him.

He had a vague inkling of something, but it seemed that he was not as sharp a detective as he thought he would be. He wondered whether he was wrong to change jobs. CyberConnect was a good financial deal. The severance pay was also very good compared to that of Durga Sharma's offices. He would have opened a stylish cafe with the money he had and it would have been nice to be the boss for a change. If he had just done that, he wouldn't have gotten punched by his client and gotten the bruise of his eye. He also never

would have had his brush with death by being attacked by the rats...

His mind got off track and he became distracted when Lilie entered the room and sat next to Ryuuji in her pajamas.

The hands on the clock had already gone past eleven. It was unusual for her to be at this time.

“Are you still awake?” she asked.

“Uh-huh.”

“Is there a TV show you want to watch?”

“Uh-huh.”

“You should go to bed. You must be tired.”

“Uh-huh.”

Lilie called out to Grid and was about to turn on the TV, but instead looked at Ryuuji. He had a case of bedhead. It seems he had gotten back into bed after having already gotten out of it before.

Ryuuji turned the deck over, took a card, added a card to the pile, and then took another one.

“I do that all the time,” said Lilie.

“I see.”

“Interesting?”

“Yeah, it’s very interesting. Hehehe.”

“Really?”

“Not really.”

Ryuuji put the cards in a pile and pushed them aside, then turned towards Lilie.

“What’s up? Is something wrong?”

Lilie had her head down and hesitated, then held out her mobile terminal as though hiding behind it.

Ryuuji took it and looked down at the terminal. A “Notice to Parent/Guardian” page displayed on the screen. It was information on a study-abroad program. It involved short-term homestay and study-tour programs with language courses over the spring break. It proposed language courses suitable for middle school students and overseas homestay, as well as a way to experience a different culture, among other benefits.

“There,” said Lilie as she pointed out the place.

“It’s a list of schools that are accepting applications.”

There was a German school listed. The address was in Schwabing.

“Ahhh,” Ryuuji stammered.

He placed the mobile terminal on the table and looked directly at Lilie.

“Do you want to go there?”

She did not answer immediately.

“I had a dream recently. I dreamed of the time I was there. Mom and Dad were there,” she said softly.

“But, I didn’t remember their faces. I only know my mom and dad’s faces from pictures now. It’s not only their faces, I don’t even remember their voices or behaviors anymore. My memories of them are almost gone,” she said.

At this point, Lilie stopped talking.

The sound of the rain seemed louder than ever.

Ryuuji waited for her to continue talking.

“If I go to Germany, I think I should be able to remember,” Lilie said.

Lilie spoke again after a while.

“But... I’m scared. I’m scared to go there. I’m scared that I won’t remember anything about Mom and Dad. I’m scared that I’ll just remember the terrible things that happened instead...” she said.

“I like my life in Japan and you’re here. I get to ride on trains and go on school trips with friends. So, I thought it’s better here for those reasons. At least until recently. But...”

She lifted her face and looked at Ryuuji.

“But, Ryuuji, what should I do? Should I stay here in Japan? Or should I go to Germany?”

“That’s a tough question...,” said Ryuuji.

“What do you want to do?” Ryuuji asked, speaking softly.

Lilie cast her eyes down.

“I want to be reminded of my mom and dad,” she said.

She shook her head.

“But... I don’t know what I am going to do,” she said.

Six years ago, when Ryuuji adopted and started treating Lilie Weiss, she had been haunted by “cognitive distortions” that transported her from a happy world to a world of her own filled with darkness.

Everything had been corrupted by a despair that nothing could repair. She blamed herself for what had happened.

It was a pronounced case of someone who had lost her family due to an accident. Ryuuji was able to understand her feelings very well. He could understand all too well.

Now Lilie was fully recovered from her PTSD. There was no doubt about it. There were no longer any behavioral issues in her daily activities in Japan. Yet, could Ryuuji be sure that she was completely cured? He knew well that treatments for PTSD could be undone when patients return to the circumstances before the onset of their illness. Sometimes you had to let the patients come to terms with this harsh reality themselves.

Although negligible, there was a small chance that she would revert back to her previous state. A visit to her homeland for the first time in several years would certainly have a significant impact on her. When she clearly remembered her parents, this could perhaps lead Lilie to relive the intense memories of the unfortunate accident. What kind of effect would this have on her personality, her spirit? Something might happen. Then again, nothing may happen. There was just no telling.

“I see. But you know that I can’t make that decision for you,” Ryuuji said.

“It’s important to you. So you have no choice but to decide for yourself,” Ryuuji added.

Lilie lowered her head more than ever at this point. She gave a little shrug.

“It’ll be alright. I think this is evidence of the strength you have within you. There is no right or wrong here. This is not a decision you need to make right away. Don’t get flustered. It’s okay whether you participate in this program or not,” Ryuuji continued.

Ryuuji said it as though it were nothing, then smiled at Lilie and handed back her mobile terminal.

“There’s no need to rush things. I will help you in your decision. You can talk to me about anything. I’ll always lend an ear. Just like now,” said Ryuuji.

Lilie nodded while still facing downward.

She hesitated a moment.

Then she opened her arms for a hug. She pressed against Ryuuji, grabbed the end of his shirt and started to cry.



For a while they just stood there, Ryuuji gently patting her on the head.

As they hugged, Ryuuji remembered when Lilie was younger and he would comfort her like this when she was frightened.

Before they knew it, the rain seemed to have lightened up.

The patter of the rain and Lilie's sobbing had subsided.

It must have stopped five minutes before. Lilie stood motionless and Ryuuji let her go. She wasn't crying anymore. She wiped her eyes with the back of her hand and laughed somewhat awkwardly.

"Oh? What was that?" he asked.

Ryuuji placed his hand to his ear.

"Did I just hear a laugh?" he asked.

"I didn't laugh," said Lilie, feigning indignation.

Yet, she stopped moving and put her hand to her mouth and let out a big yawn.

Ryuuji stood up.

"Listen, you should go to bed. I'm getting pretty sleepy myself."

He went to the kitchen, took a carton of milk from the refrigerator and filled a cup. There was still a cup of milk left in the carton.

As he drank the milk, he thought of a punishment for Lilie for staying up so late, then poured another cup of milk and went back into the living room where he found Lilie already sleeping peacefully on the sofa. It was too soon.

While he stood amazed at how peaceful she looked, he placed the cup on the table, and stealthily tip-toed to Lilie's bedroom. He opened the door and entered, then turned down the bed's blankets.

As he made his way back, he was startled when he accidentally kicked the wooden sword that had been leaning against the wall, and narrowly caught it before it hit the floor.

"This security system is perfect, isn't it?" he muttered to himself and returned to the living room.

Lilie gave the impression of being deeply asleep now.

He picked her up and carried her to her room. Ryuuji staggered a little, but was able to keep his hold of Lilie.

She was heavier than he thought.

He laid Lilie down on the bed, taking care not to get her hair caught under her. Once she was placed in the bed, he left the room and closed the door quietly.

Then he went to the kitchen and poured the rest of his whiskey into the empty teacup, then sat down in the chair by the window. The light was off.

He was never much of a detective. He was unaware that his adopted daughter had been languishing. It had been right in front of him. The stylish cafe owner had been better at this. But how could he be angry at the stylish cafe owner?

Ryuuji took a candy from his pocket, took off the wrapper and put the candy in his mouth.

Time flies by. A child grows up. Lilie is confronting her past. She had already gone to Kyoto by herself on a train and was able to buy a wooden sword.

Then, perhaps she should be able to go to Schwabing. To her hometown. It's not as far as it seemed before.

A faint pain ran through Ryuuji's chest.

It's not impossible, he thought.

A moment later Ryuuji felt something odd in his mouth.

He spit out the candy and looked at it. It wasn't coffee-flavored. It was a similar color, but the shade was different. It was too bitter. It had a depressing aloe taste.

He put it back in his mouth with a sigh and look out the window. The rain continued to fall quietly.

He smelled the moist air as he tasted the bitter candy.

Soon it'll be the rainy season, he thought.

Chapter 26

Pluto again

Ryuuji could never forget the events of that foolish autumn. The year was 2010.

ALTIMIT OS was Scheiße*.

By October of that year, people who had praised the network were now very upset. It was not surprising. Massive connection issues occurred frequently both inside and outside the country, telephone lines were interrupted, the stock market crashed, train schedules were disrupted, there were power failures, and ALTIMIT's security was beyond help. It had holes big enough to fit a whale.

On the opposite side were those who continued to praise the wonders of the network.

Pluto had been contained and we received the blessing of the Virgin. We could now enjoy the benefits of the network. We believed in the Virgin. It was necessary to avoid the foolish mistakes that would send us back to the dark ages.

The two sides would sometimes get into heated debates both online and in the real world. Soon the problems would develop into political controversies in other countries around the world. That is to say, the debate was over whether to continue promoting the globalization of the Internet, or "Netification" as it was sometimes called.

However, Ryuuji had enrolled at the Institute of Psychiatric Medicine's Neimann Department at the University of Munich's School of Medicine, which meant that the Psychiatric and Neurological Pathology Laboratory, which was sponsored by Professor Manfred Neimann and was where Ryuuji studied, was far

*Translator's note: Since Ryuuji is reminiscing about his time in Germany, he dots his speech in this chapter with German words he learned while there. Scheiße is the German word for "shit" as in "terrible." Not that it needs much explaining.

removed from these issues. This was because computers had not been introduced into the classroom as part of an academic policy.

This was not something considered to be human nature, nor natural for a Professor, and was like an extreme dislike of computers.

Having said that, this policy was not without merit in an age of an unstable Internet environment, but its disadvantages far outweighed the advantages.

For example, when they organized patients' medical records, students had no choice but to pack them away in a warehouse once a month.

While making a bunch of medical records, Ryuuji's friends spilled them from his huge business-use clipboard.

Ryuuji was pretty upset. Rather than click on a computer like in the 21st century, they were stuck using clipboards.

He pointed at some bugs in the corner of the room with a look of disgust.

The professor spoke perfectly grammatical German, but with the accent of someone from Poland.

He spoke while looking around at the students during the first lecture.

"Your job is not to give direction to a patient like an oracle. Nor is it to solve a mental illness by filling out a quick prescription. You are there to help patients understand themselves. You have to experience their true nature, to be present and aware, to be open with the patient, and guide them toward a realization of the solution to their problems," he said.

"How do we go about doing that?" a student asked.

"If you do nothing else, please do something for me."

"What exactly?"

"Two things," the professor replied.

"Always be sceptical, and always explore. That is the mission of the psychiatrist."

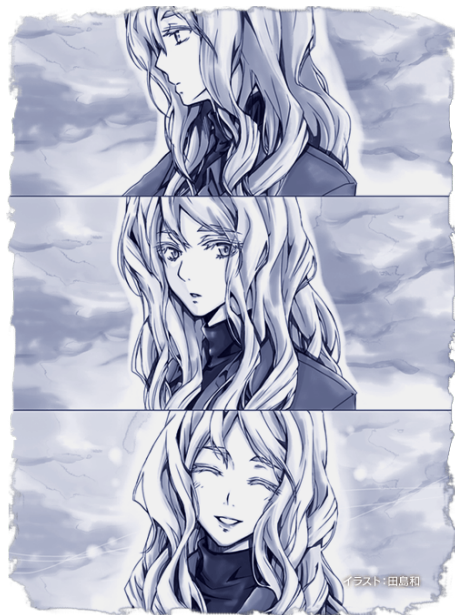
The university lecture ended and, as part of his daily routine, Ryuuji stopped by a cafe and a used-bookstore as he wandered back to the boarding house where he was staying. He asked for a cup of coffee and read a book in the peaceful town.

There was also the times when he accompanied Kaya for a stroll.

Every Friday she would attend the Psychiatric Center at the University of Munich.

On a day that Kaya showed up, Ryuuji perfectly timed his departure, quietly excused himself from the classroom and stood at the front of the building in a nonchalant manner for a chance to meet with Kaya just as she finished her visit to the center.

“Hey, Kaya. I didn’t realize you were here,” Ryuuji said.



“Ryuuji. What’s up?” Kaya asked.

“Nothing much. I had an urgent errand for a professor, but I didn’t catch him. I was a little bothered by it”, said Ryuuji.

“If you mean Professor Neimann, I saw him in the second floor hallway a little while ago,” said Kaya.

“No, it’s actually another professor. Not one you know. Probably not,” countered Ryuuji quickly.

“Should we go look for the professor together?” she asked.

“That’s okay. I’ll look for him tomorrow. It’s not as urgent as I first thought. Oh, by the way, are you stopping by the cafe today?” said Ryuuji.

Seeing Kaya was always interesting, even if he didn’t get to spend time with her. The taste of coffee was exceptional when sitting across from her. They would talk about various things; recent events, friends, neighbours, TV, books, hobbies, and their respective hometowns.

Looking back on it, Ryuuji realized it was love at first sight.

From the time he first met Kaya in the park that spring the previous year, Ryuuji found himself becoming hopelessly attracted to her.

In Kaya's attitude towards Ryuuji there was a deep sense of affection, like that of a sister towards her brother.

Being with her allowed Ryuuji's to feel a deep calm come over his heart, and he could be himself; he didn't have to pretend to be someone he wasn't.

On the other hand, however, Ryuuji felt that there was a mysterious "wall" that had been placed between them.

Kaya, though thoughtful and intelligent, had a naivety that allowed her to become friends with just about anyone in no time.

But inside her it was as though she had built a tough wall to protect herself from others, a wall that covered the most important parts of her soul.

As it was, much of her was not expressed due to this wall.

No matter how sociable he was with her, no matter how much they talked, no matter how intimate the conversations, Kaya's wall stubbornly remained standing before Ryuuji, and at the end of the previous year, she gave him an impression of being somewhat unfriendly and unapproachable.

Ryuuji had once tried to ask Mr. Richard von Weiss, the landlord of a boarding house, about Kaya's illness.

Mr. Weiss, who held the title of Count, was a seventh generation direct descendant of a prominent family that made a number of meritorious contributions during the rise of the German Empire. His ancestral Schloss[†] was located on the outskirts of Hamburg and though he would still be tended to by servants had times not changed, he could not stop the tide of change, so he had become a businessman, working for a trading company in Schwabing.

It was an evening in late July and Ryuuji was in the early stages of living with Kaya.

After dinner that evening, when they had been driven out of the dining room by Mrs. Weiss for clean-up, Ryuuji went out on to the terrace with Mr. Weiss.

Kaya went to the living room to tend to the Weiss's daughter. The daughter, Lillie Weiss, had just been born in the spring of this year.

[†]Translator's note: Schloss is the German word that can refer at once to a palace, castle or manor house. It is not clear which type is referred to here, but it is most likely that it is a manor house, as the family is noble, but not necessarily royal enough for a castle or full-scale palace. Nobility typically did not build larger or finer residences than a king or queen as this would be insulting to the royals, and a stone castle would be difficult to maintain without a large staff.

From the terrace the Weiss family were able to look over the spacious grounds. The lawn had been beautifully coloured by blue lilies that dotted the grounds.

“You want to know about Kaya’s illness?” Mr. Weiss asked Ryuuji as he cut the tip off of a cigar.

“Yes. I’d like you to tell me everything you know,” said Ryuuji.

It would be easy to imagine that Kaya’s illness is the cause for the wall she creates between her and others. Learning about her illness might get Ryuuji past her defences.

“Why do you want to know about this?” asked Mr. Weiss.

“Ah, well, you see, ummm,” said Ryuuji.

It was a natural question and Ryuuji was at a loss for words. He was not able to provide a good explanation of his feelings to this man.

“I am Kaya’s guardian. I will not speak indiscriminately about her private matters,” said Mr. Weiss. He looked calm, but his tone suggested otherwise. “It is a delicate matter, after all.”

“Yes, well, you’re certainly right,” said Ryuuji.

“If you want to know anyway, ask her directly. She may not want to talk about it either. If she does, she’ll tell you,” said Mr. Weiss.

There was a lull in the conversation, but Mr. Weiss looked as though he had more to say. Even if Ryuuji asked Kaya, she may react like Mr. Weiss did now.

“Why? Why do you want to ask such a thing?” asked Mr. Weiss.

“To answer that question, I must confess my feelings for Kaya,” said Ryuuji.

Ryuuji proposed to her nearby, but this resulted in Kaya’s rejection of him, ending his dealings with the Weiss family. Friday’s talk disappeared forever.

Since he had come to enjoy living here since meeting Kaya, living without her in his life was terrifying to imagine.

So Ryuuji secretly decided to not pursue his happiness any further.

However, at some point circumstances would cause him to break his own commandments.

These circumstances came about almost by accident.

On the last day of Oktoberfest[‡], Ryuuji passed the time with Kaya at the

[‡]Translator’s note: Oktoberfest is an annual funfair and beer festival held in Munich. The Theresienwiese is the name of the field in which the event is held. (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oktoberfest>)

Theresienwiese located on the south side of the Munich Central Station, then withdrew home early.

Since Mr. Weiss and his wife had to meet with a real estate agent concerning the maintenance of their manor, they took Lilie and left for Hamburg, leaving the house empty except for Ryuuji and Kaya.

The two of them sat face to face on the terrace, speaking disjointedly while they snacked on currywurst and beer that they had bought at a food stand. Somewhere in the garden a cricket sang in its strange way.

“Do Japanese people like the sounds of insects?” asked Kaya.

“I don’t know if you hear what I hear, but I feel like it’s different from how it’s referred to in the Japanese language,” said Ryuuji.

“Does it sound like a melody to you?” asked Kaya.

“Perhaps,” said Ryuuji.

“I envy you,” said Kaya.

“You envy me?” questioned Ryuuji.

“Yeah, I think I envy the fact that you can like me so much without really knowing me...” she said.

As she spoke, Kaya’s hand bumped into Ryuuji’s hand which was resting on the table. Ryuuji took Kaya’s hand.

Kaya withdrew her hand shortly after.

“Why’d you let go?” asked Ryuuji.

“Because your hand is greasy from the sausage,” Kaya answered accurately.

“Oh, sorry,” Ryuuji said, then wiped his fingers with a handkerchief.

Not really knowing what he was thinking, Ryuuji held out his hand again.

She did not hold his hand.

Ryuuji moved his hand back.

“I do really like you, but I don’t really know you well, do I?” said Ryuuji.

He realized it as he spoke. Perhaps it was because he had had too much beer.

Kaya ate some peanuts, then took a shell and tossed it at Ryuuji, hitting him.

An unpleasant joke.

Or maybe it wasn’t a joke.

He had come this far and he couldn't go back. Ryuuji now said something that until a few seconds before he hadn't even dreamt he would ever say.

"I love you, Kaya. I want to marry you more than anyone else in the world," he said.

Suddenly the cricket stopped making its noises.

Kaya was silent for a moment and put her head down, but then looked back up again.

When he saw her eyes, Ryuuji felt his blood run cold. He could see the protective wall of rejection rise up inside of Kaya.

"Ryuuji, we can't continue this relationship anymore," said Kaya.

"Why not?" asked Ryuuji.

"I...," Kaya said, her eyes cast downwards. "I'm sick."

"I know. Well, I don't know the exact details, but I know what it's called. It's not a problem with some good medicine," said Ryuuji.

"No. You're taking this too lightly. You don't know about my father," she said.

"What about your father?"

Ryuuji was puzzled by these unexpected words. This was the first time Kaya had spoken about her father.

"My father committed suicide," said Kaya.

A strong wind blew through the garden, shaking the flowers.

A heavy silence followed.

Why isn't even the cricket making any noise?, thought Ryuuji. He wouldn't stop up until a moment ago.

Eventually Kaya spoke.

"My father chose to end his own life. He could no longer endure the pain that his dream caused him," said Kaya.

"His dream?" Ryuuji asked. His voice didn't sound like his own.

"At first it was just a nightmare. A dream about being run over by a car or being attacked by someone. It made for a funny story when he woke up," she said. "But that would not remain so. His dreams became more severe. The line between dreams and reality began to blur and my father started to break down. He said that he would actually feel pain from where he had been injured in his dreams. My symptoms are exactly the same as when my

father first started suffering from his illness. Little by little I feel more severe pain that will become intolerable in the end. I haven't been suppressed by drugs just yet. It was the same during my father's time. But that's just a pretense. It only looks like I'm fine. I'll also be killed by my dreams. In just a few more years. Just like my father."

Kaya had described all this with a cold tone, devoid of emotion.

"My illness is apparently inheritable. So, I can't get married. I'm sorry," she added.

She stood up and walked away at a brisk pace.

Ryuuji watched her in silence.

When Kaya was no longer visible, Ryuuji very slowly exhaled the breath he had been holding.

I wonder if she really has this disease, thought Ryuuji.

However, Kaya was continuing to go to the Psychiatric Center of the University of Munich. The Center is a research institute containing a state-of-the-art treatment facility. It was highly unlikely they would misdiagnose her.

While he was lost in thought, it was time for a stroll.

Ryuuji retrieved Grid and went out again.

The sky looked ready to rain. He walked on anyway. He walked the course of the English Garden as usual and when he sat down on a bench, it began to rain in earnest. It was drizzle.

Ryuuji just got wetter and wetter.

Grid quickly sank down on the bench and lay still without being perturbed by the rain.

Ryuuji remembered that he had met Kaya for the first time in this place.

At that time the park had been filled with vitality. The sun had been shining and the sky had been a bright blue.

Now it was nothing like that day, everything was dismally gray. The landscape was filled with loneliness.

However, it was very poetic and this poetry was tough for Ryuuji.

Unexpectedly, Grid barked as though clearing his throat.

Ryuuji, who was getting soaked while lost in his thoughts, returned to reality at the sound of the bark.

"You're right, bud," Ryuuji said. "It's just as you say."

The next Monday, after his lecture, Ryuuji caught his professor on his way to the laboratory.

By this time the reprint boom of Minnesang had long since passed, but the professor continued to record the sweet love songs as usual. No matter how high the wall. No matter how thick. My love surmounts them all. Like a bird. Flying to you. Forever and ever.

“Professor Neimann, I’d like to get your permission to organize the warehouse,” said Ryuuji.

A week and a half later, Ryuuji hadn’t returned to the boarding house and hadn’t shown up at lectures, but was instead intently sorting through medical records at the warehouse. He continued to take notes and look for a certain case.

The twelfth day was a Friday in the third week of the month. Ryuuji reported that the sorting was complete to the professor and waited for Kaya to come visit.

Kaya didn’t come.

In the evening, Ryuuji left the lecture hall and went straight home without giving a thought to the used bookstore or cafe.

The days passed quickly. Winter approached ever more swiftly. Oktoberfest was over and a cold wintry wind began to blow, as though a sign of the harsh winter to come.

Upon finally returning to the boarding house, Mrs. Weiss, who was cradling Lilie in the living room, spoke with wide eyes.

“Well, Ryuuji. Where could someone like you have been hiding all this time?” she said.

“Under some rocks,” Ryuuji said with a smirk, but his mouth began to get dry with nervousness. “Is Kaya here?”

“She’s in her room,” said Mrs. Weiss.

“It seems Kaya’s condition has worsened. She’s been bed-stricken since the end of Oktoberfest,” she added.

Ryuuji went to Kaya’s room and knocked on the door.

Soon Kaya opened it. The room was dimly light and Kaya’s expression was hard to determine, but Ryuuji could tell she was giving him quite a look.

“Kaya, please listen. I’ve been investigating your illness,” said Ryuuji. “I don’t know the exact details. I’m only learning as a student. So, based on your description, I’ve been examining whether there are any cases that the University’s hospital has handled in the past. I found several illnesses that fit

the profile. Narcolepsy, pain disorder, fibromyalgia, and CNS Hypersensitivity Syndrome. You weren't able to realize it because you haven't seen them, but the case was easily solved by digging through the mountains of medical records.

Ryuuji then described each disease in detail, one after the other.

"That sums it up," Ryuuji said after taking a breath. "Your illness is not hereditary. For starters, with mental illness, except for special cases, genetics are irrelevant. The impact of one's environment is much greater. You were only assuming that your illness was inheritable. Also, even if genes were relevant to your symptoms, I can do something for you. So, please don't tell me you've been doing fine all this time. Or, if I can't handle your illness with a smile, I want to say this clearly. No, that's not it. I don't want to tell you such a thing."

Ryuuji took a step towards Kaya.

"I'll say it again, Kaya. I love you. I want to marry you more than anyone in the world," said Ryuuji, who closed his mouth and waited for Kaya to respond.

Time passed uneasily. Ten seconds felt like an eternity to Ryuuji.

Looking into his eyes, Kaya gently placed her hand on his cheek.

Then, she kissed him lightly on the lips.

Ryuuji brought Kaya close and embraced her thoroughly. Her face rested on his collarbone.

"You fool," Kaya said in a soft voice.

"But I'm being honest," Ryuuji replied softly. "That's better than a clever, dishonest man."

"Strange logic," Kaya said.

Her body trembled. She gently sobbed. Her tears spilled forth.

"No one's looking, Kaya," Ryuuji whispered.

December 24, 2010, the last day of Pluto Again.

Ryuuji Sogabe and Kaya Fröbe filed their marriage registration.

Chapter 27

Forgotten City

Everything had turned to stone in this town.

Originally it had been a beautiful cityscape reminiscent of an ancient capital, but now everything stood still.

It was like a penal colony at the end of the earth, as though all those who had lived there had died, a place where silence crystallized and accumulated throughout the city.

A sinister silence.

The air was stale.

A grey hazy sky covered the town, making it difficult to tell whether it was cloudy or sunny out. Or whether it would rain. Or whether it would snow. Or whether it was night or day. You couldn't even tell that.

On the outskirts of town the ground had been cut off, and there was nothing beyond that point. It was a void of emptiness, as though a gray liquid spread itself out for eternity.

The town was floating in a void cut off from the "world."

"The Forgotten City." That was the codename given to this dead place.

In order for CyberConnect Corp. Japan to carry out a certain project, the design of Mac Anu was copied and a town of rejected and neglected code was built. However, the project had been discontinued and was left open for a different purpose.

A dozen knights stood surrounding a fountain located at the center of the town. They were reminiscent of the European Middle Ages, a familiar theme for characters in a fantasy RPG.

The knights were all silent. Yet, when you came near one of the PC bodies, a

chat balloon could be seen popping up overhead, then it would disappear as you walked away. It was much more efficient to talk in the text chat than to use a microphone in a voice chat.

“Memory leaks occur as you age,” one of them said.

“Schedule confirmed,” chatted another.

“Update complete.”

“Yes.”

“Where is the list located?”

“Please give priority to the translation.”

“Submission still unacceptable.”

“Seems like a text bug.”

They were debuggers organized by members of CC Corp. This “Forgotten City” was the work place of the knights, a special “bug treatment” facility.

“Head Knight, ‘visitors’ are coming. Three of them,” said a knight.

“Understood. Start the transmission,” said the head knight.

At the same time the PC called the Head Knight sent a reply text, the water fountain began to vibrate. Not the water graphic, but the bleak stone base of the fountain.

The next moment the fountain stood still, and three characters suddenly appeared.

Everyone looked at the three figures as though they were not normal.

One’s machine-like skeleton was exposed.

Another had several square holes open in its body.

The last had limbs growing from its large head.

“Transfer complete.”

They were vagrant AI. They were irregular data that were born into The World, but were no longer wanted.

The head knight displayed a warning window at the vagrant AI, and sent a signal to his troops at the same time. The knights raised their spears in unison. They were synchronized to an inch. Schwing! The sound of metal sliding against metal echoed in the square.

After a period of exactly ten seconds, the head knight sent a message to alert the knights to the next stage of action.

“They didn’t react to the warning message. Confirm illegal PC status,” said the head knight indifferently.

“These are three bugs. Based on the Terms and Conditions, these are not within the specifications of The World, and are therefore irregular characters,” said a fellow knight.

The wandering AI were dumbfounded and did not seem to understand what was happening to them. They didn’t seem to have the intelligence in the first place to tell what was happening.

“Begin processing.”

The knights jumped with raised spears at the vagrant AI.

“Delete them.”

“Yes, Sir.”

“Are we on schedule?”

“List uploaded. Please confirm.”

“All good.”

As the speech balloon popped up, a flash of white hot light burst forth from the raised spears and penetrated the PCs.

The vagrant AIs screamed and in the next moment they were gone without a trace. Their digital souls were sent to an eternal rest.

“Deletion complete,” the Head Knight declared.

He operated the Bug List window, placed a check-mark, and wrote something to the effect that a bug had been erased.

In the past, debugging methods that are now distant memories, such as the spear-wielding knights forming squads to delete wandering AI that infiltrated the towns and areas, were standard practice.

But that was a thing of the past. Now, methods for removing bugs had changed significantly.

The new way was to regularly auto-search each server of The World, and force the targets to be transferred to this place, where they could be deleted all at once. Wait for target, then click and delete.

“Ummmm, I thought I’d get to do it,” said a text balloon directed at the Head Knight from one of his subordinates. It was a rookie that had been recently added to the debug team.

“Are we required to auto-delete? I don’t think it’s much trouble to manually delete. You go through the trouble of having your forces wait in a place like

this,” added the rookie.

“Did you read the documentation for a debugger?” asked the Head Knight.

“Yes, once.”

“Once?” said the Head Knight as he stared at the rookie.

“I had a quick look. There was so much to read, so I only skimmed it.”

“Only a quick look?”

“Yes, that’s right...”

The Head Knight sighed and shook his head. The young rookie was unapologetic.

“Very well. First of all, to delete wandering AI, you need a spear. However, this spear is of a special design that has been programmed differently. It cannot be equipped manually and used like a regular PC item,” said the Head Knight.

He showed his spear hand.

“Second, we prefer not to be seen using the spear by normal players. Do you understand that? So, that’s why we established a system whereby we corral wandering AI in this isolated town and delete them.”

He moved in closer after saying this.

“And, third..”

He set the volume higher on his microphone and shouted loudly.

“Read all of the debugging information! Do it in one hour and remember it all!”

His voice boomed like thunder and the rookie read the balloon and logged out in a hurry. Then the Deputy Head Knight added a balloon to the conversation.

“What an annoying guy...”

The Head Knight shrugged.

It was necessary to remove even trivial bugs. If they didn’t remove them, the game would quickly become unplayable. This was not an exaggeration. They could easily lead to the collapse of “The World.” To be a true Knight, one had to understand the burden created by wielding a spear.

At that moment, the Head Knight noticed a figure approaching the Main Square.

The figure was not a knight. Rather than being dressed in a helmet and armor, the figure wore a uniform and cap. The cap had a unique visor that covered the eyes and nose; a major feature of a system admin PC.

“This town is a restricted area,” said the figure.

When the figure reached the entrance to the Main Square, the Head Knight gave a warning through his microphone.

“This town is for debuggers only. This area is off-limits even to system administrators. You must be a Knight to remain here,” said the Head Knight.

“My apologies,” said the system administrator.

“I seem to have gotten lost. I’m still not... very familiar with The World,” the figure said in a deep, calm voice.

A soft smile appeared on the admin’s face. It was a smile that expressed something akin to a guilty conscience without saying a word.

“Who’s in charge here?” said the admin.

“I am. What do you need?” asked the Head Knight.

“Pardon my bluntness, but listen to what I have to say intently and quietly for a moment.”

“Huh?”

The admin looked at the knights standing further back in the square.

“I want to have a private chat. Please refrain from talking and there won’t be any issues,” said the admin.

This was debugger territory. They could logout or turn off their sound if the conversation was too much. The Head Knight nodded.

“Understood.”

The Head Knight wanted to prevent unnecessary conflict with other departments. The duties of a system admin and a debugger overlapped somewhat, so the relationship between the two was often marked by subtly and never went as far as making threats.

Even so, the figure wanted to get in touch and he made an appearance. His words were carefully chosen and exaggerated.

The Head Knight launched a balloon from the chat tool.

“Break time. Everyone, wait here.”

“Roger.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Understood, sir.”

“Now, proceed with the text check,” the Head Knight said while gesturing and the system admin nodded.

A moment later, the system admin was standing in place with hollow eyes, and he continued to mutter the same words again and again.

“I can’t hear you. There is no response...,” he muttered to himself as he faced the Head Knight.

“Sorry to have bothered you at such a busy time. Thank you for your time.”

After saying this, the admin’s eyes suddenly pointed towards the Head Knight’s hand.

“That’s a great weapon,” the admin said.

“Thank you,” said the Head Knight so as not to appear unsociable.

The system admin walked away from the Head Knight, heading towards the Chaos Gate.

The Head Knight glanced at his subordinates and told them to resume their work.

“Someone strange just bothered us.”

“A stray child?”

“Maybe he was a rookie, too. LOL”

“With that tone of voice... XD... A definite newbie. LOL.”

“LOLOLOL.”

The knights all laughed in their text balloons but no sound could be heard.

“Head Knight, ‘Guests’ has arrived. Six of them.”

“Roger. Resume work. Commence transfer.”

The Head Knight signaled and the water fountain base began to hum, then the next bugs transferred in.

Six wandering AI. Four of them looked like men and one looked like a woman. Then —

The Head Knight’s eyes widened slightly.

One was a child. It was a boy that looked to be not much older than four or five years old. This wandering AI looked a little younger than was usual. He appeared closer in age to general PCs. However, what appeared to be two

large bull's horns grew on top of his head, clearly showing that he was not a regular PC.

Of course, the knights' mission did not change, no matter the appearance of the wandering AI.

"Transfer complete!"

Sching! The spears were poised for attack.

They displayed a warning window and waited ten seconds.

"They're not reacting to the warning. Make sure they're not general PCs."

They gave the usual verbal warning.

"Six bugs. Based on the Terms and Conditions, they are not within specifications of The World, and I certify them to be irregular. Commence processing."

"Deleting."

Click and delete. Myriad spears flashed and four wandering AI fell.

Then something unexpected happened.

The female wandering AI picked up and embraced the child.

"Please, spare him," she pleaded as she fended off the spears.

"Please spare this child. Just spare —"

The Head Knight frowned.

This kind of AI rarely presented itself. The type of AI that 'looked' as though it had humanlike intelligence.

Blood relationships like those between humans did not exist for wandering AI. They just mimicked the role of the player and spouted automatic lines in the event something like this happened.

However, there are times when an inexperienced knight might be fooled by this behavior. Such cases have been recorded in the past. They would project their own mind to others not as smart as the so-called bot and would mislead them.

"Please, just spare the child."

The AI ran in an attempt to escape the Knight's spear, and the Knight pierced her from behind without any warning. Light flashed all around and the two AI fell.

The Head Knight stepped forward and looked down at the woman and boy.

The mother-like wandering AI held the child in a closed embrace as though trying to protect it.

“You’re good at acting human, aren’t you?”

The Head Knight sighed, and raised his spear for the finishing blow.

“I’m sorry. There’s something I have to ask.”

The gentle voice resounded in the square.

The Head Knight stopped his hand and looked up.

The System Admin who was supposed to have walked away stood before him. The admin must have returned to the square without anyone noticing.

“You again? I’m working right now. Please keep back,” said the Head Knight sharply, unable to hide his frustration.

“The spears you guys have are very intriguing. A very interesting weapon. I wish to examine it.”

The system admin continued to ignore the Head Knight’s words.

“You want to what?”

“I want to take a better look...”

When the System Admin said this, the sound of something wriggling and rustling could be heard in the square. Here and there traces could be heard flickering in the darkened corners, like the flickering of a shadow.

“We’re debugging. Do not interrupt us.”

The short-tempered deputy knight drew closer to the system administrator.

“What did you want before? Who do you work for? What’s your code-number?”

The System admin placed both hands gently on the shoulders of the deputy knight. He then began to tear apart the PC body with little effort. As though the deputy were made of paper.

The deputy attempted to cry out while being ripped apart, but no sound came out. He kept screaming to no avail.

The system admin cut diagonally through the deputy knight and piled up the pieces as he continued to tear the knight apart. This was repeated over and over. Then the screaming stopped.

He threw the pieces towards the other knights and they fell one by one to the ground with a sickening thud. They were strange objects that no longer resembled a person. A scene so hideous that you would have to see it to believe it.

Still the noise could be heard. It was now similar to a scraping sound. Like scraping sharp rocks against each other.

“Watch your back. There are more of them.”

While the Head Knight glared at the man, a text balloon popped up above him.

“Watch your surroundings, you two. Surround the rest of them.”

They stood in front in an Arts stance.

“I challenge you. If you breaks your posture, I’ll launch all my Arts at once.”

“Did you send a message to someone?” the man said without looking up.

“It’s the last one for you.—”

At these words, the Head Knight looked up.

Everyone had vanished. Camp had been set and the knights, who had been there until a moment before, disappeared without a word.

The Head Knight stood aghast.

A voice spoke in his ear.

“Now, lend me a spear. The one in your hands.”

The Head Knight threw the spear above his shoulder. He triggered an Art and attempted to launch an attack at the man with a strike which had hidden powers of exorcism.

The man suddenly grabbed the spear and stopped it.

“Thanks,” the man said with a smile.

The Head Knight, deprived of his weapon, was overwhelmed by an avalanche from the side and was thrown down to the ground. The avalanche was a black swarm. The swarm emitted a high-pitched, raspy voice. The Knight tried to stand up but was held down by the tremendous pressure. Something bit him. Before he realized what was happening, he started to slip out of consciousness.

The Head Knight finally realized that it was countless feet that were scratching him and shrouding him in darkness.

Silence once more.

The man remained still for a moment as if to enjoy the tranquility he had created. In his hand was the spear that he’d taken from the Head Knight. The Spear of Wotan. An out-of-place artifact of an ancient goddess.

The man gazed down upon the wandering AI. He was not smiling anymore. Instead, his face was now void of expression, like a Noh mask.

The mother AI hadn't survived. A single wound to the back. There was no way to recover. However, her body continued to convulse every so often as though suffering the throes of a biological death, without actually ever dying.

The man crouched down, stroked the woman's thin neck, then applied a little force. Finally the convulsions stopped and she faded away with a flash of light. This was in accordance with etiquette towards those who are dying in this "world."

Then he glanced towards the child.

Graphics depicting young facial features. The child's skin was pale and the eyes were tightly closed. A large scar appeared on the child's forehead. It must have been caused by the same spear that pierced the mother.

However, the wound was not as deep when compared to death. The child had simply lost consciousness.

The man stood up with the spear.

"Suffer," he said as though whistling through his teeth.

"Survive your own trial."

He began to walk without looking back. His feet were directed at the Chaos Gate.

If the Knights and wandering AI do not pass the ordeal, they return to their original state.

The man's left shoulder throbbed dully. This was not due to the struggle with the knight. It was a wound caused by Flügel. Thanks to getting sufficient rest in town, the man had recovered from the damage, but a faint pain remained.

However, he walked mindlessly. There was much to think about.

The man gave a "surveillance" command to the dozens of rats and sent them off to each town.

Yet, now, no matter how often he called to the rats, no matter how hard he listened, they did not give a reply.

It was not the work of Flügel. As he confirmed the hard way, this man had a magical special ability specialized for one on one combat, but was useless against swarms of rats. In the first place, he didn't think he'd have to go looking for the rats while monitoring them.

Then who did it? Who was responsible for this?

It had only been fourteen hours and he'd lost contact with the rats.
Something happened to them.

Chapter 28

War Council

Ahhh, Monday.

The beginning of a beautiful week. How happy I am. Or so I tried to think. That didn't go so well.

A call came in from David in the early afternoon.

"It's all arranged," he said.

"Impressive. That was quick," said Ryuuji.

"Come over... here... please," said David.

The voice suddenly seemed far away and two sneezes could be heard in succession.

"Excuse me, my nose gets irritated when it rains. It's very bothersome."

"That's quite alright. I have something to ask you."

As the rain fell, Ryuuji drove to Akasaka.

He headed through Hitotsugi-dori to a residential hotel where David was staying. It was a cheap hotel with a color that made it look as though it were a stack of stale bread. Ryuuji went through the reception hall and into the dining room.

David sat by a window eating a sandwich and sipping coffee as he stared blankly outside.

Ryuuji sat opposite David and a waitress arrived shortly thereafter. Ryuuji ordered a coffee.

"The United Nations people really know how to pick hotels," Ryuuji said after the waitress had left.

“This is out of my own pocket. Headquarters doesn’t provide travel expenses,” David said with a scowl before removing some items in his hands from their vinyl packaging and placing them in front of Ryuuji.

“This is your payment. It was prepared in Akasaka,” said David.

A new mobile terminal was removed from the vinyl.

“I got the same one. Telephone numbers and emails have already been loaded on to them,” said David.

“Wow, I got a cyber-penpal,” said Ryuuji.

“Well, I had a feeling that something nice would happen this morning. It was this. I’m glad,” Ryuuji continued.

“Really? That’s great. I’m glad too,” said David gloomily, his face retaining the same default expression it always carried.

Two days before, Yuri Seto appeared immediately after Ryuuji logged into Mac Anu. This was also when the members of NAB were gathered in Dol Dona. The timing was too perfect to be a coincidence. In order to control events in The World for himself, Yuri Seto used the rats to build up a system for gathering information.

As he talked during important interactions within the game, Ryuuji could prevent Seto from eavesdropping. He had to crank his whisper mode up a notch.

“Well, my mail-friend’s life has become prosperous,” said David.

“Shall we discuss our future strategy?” he added.

Ryuuji nodded. “Life has become prosperous.” That’s a good expression. He liked it.

“I heard several things yesterday, so I want to outline a few points before I have any alcohol in my system,” continued David.

“Go ahead,” said Ryuuji.

“First, concerning the number of rats. When you fought Seto in Mac Anu, how many rats did you destroy?” David asked.

“Several hundred. Possibly upwards of a thousand. I don’t think it was much more than that though,” Ryuuji conjectured.

“Hmm. In spite of him saying that he’ll ‘unleash it unto the world,’ I don’t feel like he has enough to do that,” said David.

“He may be hiding many more from us. Actually, it could be propagating,” stated Ryuuji.

“Propagating?” asked David, raising an eyebrow.

“Yes. In the game it takes on the form of rats, but it is basically a computer virus,” said Ryuuji.

“So, there will be even more rats to come? The more time that passes, the worse off we are?” asked David.

“I can’t say anything as I haven’t investigated any of the PC bodies. I can’t give specifics, but it could be the case that they are propagating,” said Ryuuji.

Ryuuji remained silent for a moment.

“However, the virus may not continue to grow indefinitely. The Schicksal PCs are operated by humans. Mental strength is a driving force behind it, and there is always a limit to a human’s mental strength,” he added.

“Seto has produced rats with his inner strength. There may be over a thousand rats, but there has to be a limit. Do you understand what I’m saying?” asked David.

“Yes. To put it simply, it turned into a gas,” said Ryuuji.

David bit into his sandwich carefully, and wiped his mouth with a napkin.

“How far does his abilities extend? In an extreme case, could he also release the rats upon networks other than The World?” asked David.

Ryuuji shook his head.

“Schicksal PC capabilities are limited only to ‘The World’. For example, in Yodogawa’s case, I had installed The World on his mobile terminal. I think he was struck by the rats’ light from that,” said Ryuuji.

As a precaution, this morning Ryuuji had also picked up a mobile terminal from Lilie. She has The World installed on her mobile terminal, but she is no longer an avid user.

That may be enough for Seto Yuri to target those closest to Ryuuji.

Lilie applied countermeasures against the virus that recently appeared, so this explanation was entirely possible.

“However, he was hit with a special one-time ability, so in this instance the effect can last outside the game. Those who got attacked by the rats’ light either fall into a coma or develop a desire to commit suicide by jumping from high places,” said Ryuuji.

This wasn’t limited to something special such as the Deadly Flash, and the same is true in a simple exchange of damage. Due to being bitten, Ryuuji suffered a lot for two days. This is, so to speak, an after-effect.

Of course, the damage Flügel caused to the left shoulder of Seto's PC was more or less supposed to extend beyond the game as well. It's not worth it otherwise.

"That's the crucial part. How can we get rid of that effect?" asked David.

"It'll need some time to pass. If the damage is normal, the person returns to their original state." replied Ryuuji.

"However, if the symptoms are serious, they may not recover. In that case, others means would be necessary. It kills quickly and effectively by hitting the body directly. A Schicksal PC is attacked by another Schicksal PC and loses HP, then this ability disappears and is 'cancelled'," he added.

Ryuuji himself experienced being killed once before.

During the Immortal Dusk incident of three years ago, his research assistant Nomura Kaname stabbed Ryuuji from behind with a knife of his Schicksal PC Metronom. At that time, the real-life Ryuuji felt such severe pain as though his right kidney had been ripped right from his body. His heart had raced, his blood pressure decreased, his skin went pale, his breathing became erratic, and at that moment Ryuuji realized the symptoms of shock. He then fainted and was hospitalized.

Then, somehow Ryuuji was able to recover, and Metronom killed the illusionist Geist because the knife's effect had not worked.

"I got it. Well, last but not least..." said David.

When David was about to speak, the waitress came with Ryuuji's coffee.

Ryuuji said thanks and took a sip of the black coffee.

"...Here's my plan for defeating him," David said as the waitress left.

The coffee was acceptable. Not too hot, not too cold, not too strong, not too weak, but this didn't mean that it was well-balanced either. A mediocre taste. Ryuuji felt it on his tongue. His sense of taste was returning. He was still recovering from the damage done to him by Seto.

"Not bad," said Ryuuji.

"That's usually true of coffee," David quipped.

David rubbed his hands to remove the bread crumbs.

"But not of this sandwich. The bread is flakey, and the ham is as thin as paper. You were saying?" David added.

"I caught one of Seto's rats," said Ryuuji as he removed a sugar cube from the sugar pot.

“Just before fighting with him in Mac Anu, I got shot with Brieler Rössle and became frozen. However, I was able to use my hand to modify one of the little rats. Incidentally, I added GPS functionality to follow its movements and locate its position. So, then when the pack of rats is attacked, they will disperse in confusion and leave Seto,” said Ryuuji.

As he spoke he dropped a sugar cube in his coffee.

“Then, when asked to be guided to the body’s whereabouts, we launch a surprise attack from here,” Ryuuji concluded.

“Do you suspect something?” asked David.

“Though I don’t believe in hunches, I think I have a hunch. However, I think it has a good chance of working. I speculated that, based on the information obtained from my previous encounter, Seto Yuri uses to different methods to move the rats. First, he operates them through his own will. I encountered this in the Pet Shop Chims. At that time, the rat acted as Seto’s eyes and he spoke through it,” said Ryuuji.

“So he did it... I see,” David said in surprise.

“In this case, it seems that Seto can only control a small number of rats. I think his limit is about ten rats at most,” Ryuuji said as he remembered the time when Seto used the rats as decoys to escape.

“One more thing, they’re operating with a simple AI. When he says ‘go bash’ or ‘protect my life’ gives a rough indication. The rats can’t do precise operations, but can do a lot of damage in a group. When we fought in the alley in Mac Anu, and they got hit with steam from the steam trap, the rats died off rather easily. Until Seto changed the instructions, they couldn’t respond to such an irregular attack,” Ryuuji added.

Ryuuji paused for a moment.

“In other words, no matter what way he controls them, there’s a way to slip in among them, like a ‘Trojan Rat,’” he said.

David let out a big sneeze and sprayed nasal drops into his nose. He took a deep breath, closed his eyes, kept still for a moment, exhaled, opened his eyes and looked at Ryuuji.

“The current strategy calls for a little guesswork and luck,” David said.

Ryuuji nodded.

“The main problem is when to release the rat. It’s no use for us to wait to be attacked first. We need to strike while the iron is hot,” David continued.

Ryuuji nodded.

“Also, if the rats come as we predict, we could safely release the Trojan Rat. Then, how do we get past the other rats?” David finished.

Ryuuji grinned.

“We’ll act depending on the situation and use resources as needed,” he said.

“It’s the perfect plan,” David said with an exaggerated sigh.

“Peace and prosperity will be brought about by this perfect plan,” Ryuuji said.

At that moment, Ryuuji’s new mobile terminal rang. The call was from Veronica Bain.

“Are you coming?” she said suddenly.

Ryuuji looked at the store clock. It was two o’clock in the afternoon.

“Is something wrong?” he asked.

“No, Ryuuji, but I have an important story,” she said.

“Like I said before, I have a story to tell you. See you at three o’clock, okay?” she said.

The phone hung up before Ryuuji could reply.

“Oh, I’m sorry. I promised someone a date,” Ryuuji said to David.

“A date? Like, a person to take out and talk with?” asked David.

Ryuuji waved his hands in front of him without saying anything. Matters relating to clients are not confided to David. Adherence to confidentiality. That is the way of the consultant.

“You don’t know the person, but she sounded like she was chewing your head off. But you don’t know her,” David said in reply to Ryuuji’s gesture.

“Were you listening?” asked Ryuuji.

“Weren’t you going to tell me?” asked David.

“No,” said Ryuuji bluntly.

“Well then, that’s silly,” said David with a chortle.

“Okay, let’s get to the ‘Trojan Rat’. The confined space worries me, but I don’t think it should be a problem. When should we do this?” said David, changing the subject.

“Right. Six o’clock this evening,” said Ryuuji.

“Location?” asked David.

“Let’s meet at the cafe in Mac Anu,” confirmed Ryuuji.

Ryuuji finished his coffee, took his documents, and stood up.

“After that, we’ll lure him out into a deserted area,” added Ryuuji.

“Copy that. I’ll prepare some top-notch cheeses and wait for you,” said David with a nod, before sneezing loudly.

Chapter 29

The Empress

The Baketon, Japan's leading high-luxury hotel.

He walked while contemplating the route that lead to Kokura, and he soon arrived in front of the penthouse suite where a bodyguard was waiting.

This man makes for a good landmark.

"Hey, Henry. Doing well?" Ryuuji said with a smile and a laugh as the man ignored Ryuuji's words and started to give him a security-frisking.

"Oh, yeah. That's right. I forgot about this," muttered Ryuuji.

The bodyguard's rugged hands snapped off the second button from Ryuuji's shirt.

"It's your job to pluck buttons off of people, isn't it, Henry?" asked Ryuuji.

"No voice recorders," Henry said, and he waved his hand at Ryuuji, signalling him to follow.

Ryuuji thought they were entering Veronica's room, but realized he was wrong when he got halfway inside.

They soon arrived at a black door. It looked like it belonged to a cocktail bar for use by the guest of honor as a suite room.

The bodyguard Henry looked at Ryuuji, opened the door and jerked his chin.

"Oh, sorry..." Ryuuji said quietly as he slipped past Henry.

"Aren't you coming, Henry?" Ryuuji asked.

"Go," said Henry.

Ryuuji nodded and went into the room.

The interior was dimly lit. There was a counter on one side of the room and a petite grey-haired bartender stood behind it wiping a glass. In the corner was installed a high-performance JBL Hartsfield softly playing jazz saxophone. It was the song “Gloomy Sunday.”

On the other side of the room sat Veronica Bain in a box seat.

Her skin was pale in the gentle light and her lipstick-covered lips stood out vividly on her face. Due to this, her smile was clear to see.

On the table was an empty glass.

There were no other guests.

“It’s good to see you, Ryuuji,” said Veronica as she pointed at the seat opposite her.

“Likewise, Ms. Bain. I should be the one saying that,” said Ryuuji as he took a seat.

The bartender approached.

“Give me the usual. What would you like?” she asked Ryuuji.

“I drove here actually. I’ll have a milkshake, please.”

The bartender nodded, then set down Veronica’s glass.

“So you fought Yuri Kazinsky Seto’s PC,” said Veronica.

“I read some of the report and it seems to me like Flügel doesn’t have much of a chance,” she said.

Since it didn’t seem to be a question, Ryuuji remained silent.

“How’s the wound?”

Since it was a question, it was answered.

“It recovered fairly well. Enough so that I can respond to clients’ calls anyway,” he said.

“I see. That’s good.”

The bartender came carrying drinks. He put a milkshake in front of Ryuuji and a glass filled with a red liquid in front of Veronica.

“This Virgin Mary at this place is absolutely delicious,” she added.

Veronica raised her glass towards Ryuuji.

“To your health...” said Ryuuji.

“To both our health...”

A toast between non-alcoholic beverages. Ryuuji held some of the cold sweet liquid in his mouth. It was high quality stuff. Ryuuji received a direct hit of a taste of luxury that caused his tongue, which was used to cheap coffee, to convulse.

“There were reports that the Japanese debugging team had fallen into comas,” said Veronica.

“Last night at twenty-five past eight in the evening, the PC of Seto pretending to be a system administrator entered the workplace of the debugging team and attacked their operation. Everyone was put into a coma save for one person.”

Ryuuji put down the glass and looked at Veronica.

“Was this debugging team called the ‘Cobalt Knights’?” he asked.

“I’ve heard of a team with such a name,” she responded.

“Were they flooded by ‘light’?”

“No. It seems they were engulfed by a horde of rats.”

Ryuuji closed his eyes. He had felt possessed by the rats and the thought of having experienced it even just once gave him goosebumps.

But at that moment a question crossed Ryuuji’s mind.

“But, that’s strange, isn’t it?”

“What is?” she asked.

After saying this, Veronica took out her red mobile terminal. It steadily vibrated, she pressed a button on the terminal and pressed it to her cheek.

“I’m having an important conversation right now. Please call back later.”

Veronica put the mobile terminal on the table and looked at Ryuuji.

“Ryuuji, what’s strange?”

“I don’t know if you know, but the Japanese CC Corp’s Cobalt Knights are not merely debuggers,” said Ryuuji.

“They are the specialists on how to handle non-specification entities. All of them have high-level combat skills, and they work day and night to eliminate any threats to the stability of the Japanese servers. There are too many dangerous enemies for them to waste time,” he explained.

The Divine Spear of Wotan was scarier than anything else. A sacred treasure bestowed upon the Knights by the old goddess Morganna Mode Gone. It would be utterly regrettable if a Schicksal PC were to strike a blow with it.

Indeed, if the Seto's rats have abilities, the Knights would likely owe their victory to their large numbers. But, out of a dozen tries, they might have to lose twice before turning things around. If the spear were suddenly stolen, the tables would turn for whoever held it.

Beautiful wrinkles between Veronica's eyebrows quickly appeared and then disappeared.

"There was a specific reason for Seto to take the risk and attack the Cobalt Knights. Care to say what it is?"

"I met with the guy and we had a talk," said Ryuuji.

"Except for the underlying principle of the action being crazy, I got the impression that he was very calm and logical. I got the impression that he's acting to eliminate the Knights and I don't think it's entirely in my head. I believe there is some sort of reason for him to do so," he continued.

Ryuuji continued after a brief pause.

"With the exception of one person, who I spoke with. Do you know who this person is?"

"He's a rookie who's just been assigned. Since he logged out before Seto appeared, he escaped the disaster," Veronica said.

"I want to hear the story from him."

"Is it important? Does it not finish with the words 'Yuri Kazinsky is extraordinary'?" she asked.

"He is a source of annoyance," said Ryuuji before he drank another sip of his milkshake. It still tasted amazing.

"I never know what is or is not important. What bothers me is that we have no choice but to use brute force," he added.

Veronica nodded.

"That's okay. You should arrange to meet with the debuggers," she said.

"Do that and we'll survive."

"Another thing, there's a story that will help. Your report was sent to San Diego and deliberated by the board of directors. Consequently, with respect to the rat extermination, they decided to bring in reinforcements."

"Reinforcements?"

"The Sophia Squad is coming," said Veronica.

"I think your burden will be mitigated significantly."

“This is true. Absolutely,” Ryuuji said with a nod.

“But I want to confirm one thing, what is the Sophia Squad?” he asked.

“You don’t know Sophia? It was sold as a download in Japan long ago.”

Ryuuji understood what Veronica was talking about in her way of speaking.

The trademarked “Sophia System Security,” also known as the SSS Version. It is an anti-virus software that started being sold two years ago.

“I don’t think it possible that a commercially available anti-virus software was circulated to Yuri Seto’s rats...”

“This Sophia is a little different from the Sophia Squad in general circulation. The Sophia Squad is not automated, but is operated by qualified players. In this respect, one could say they are similar to you and Seto’s Schicksal PC.”

Veronica picked up her red mobile terminal and operated it with expert precision.

“They have state-of-the-art anti-virus abilities, and when it comes to fighting a virus, they’re probably invincible. You’ve got to see them in person to fully understand them.”

The mobile terminal in Ryuuji’s pocket issued a mail ringtone.

“A guest-key was just sent. The guild’s name is ALGOS. If you meet the Sophia Squad, please show it to them.”

After she spoke, Veronica put the mobile terminal in the inside pocket of her suit.

“I made it instead of an ID card. When will you log-in next?”

“I’m scheduled to enter from Mac Anu at six o’clock tonight.”

“Well, let’s communicate that way.”

Ryuuji shook his head and picked up his milkshake.

“Oh my. If there were such a great secret weapon, I would have wanted you to give up. Perhaps you wouldn’t have tap danced with the rats.”

“It’s still in the experimental stages. Besides, we’re having trouble with the operator’s personality.”

Veronica said without hesitation.

“We’ve taken more time and effort than expected to persuade him. But, in any case, eventually we agreed to a deal by revoking our complaint against him.”

Ryuuji tried to bring the glass to his mouth while listening to Veronica, but changed his mind and returned it to the table.

“I don’t really understand. Perhaps I didn’t drink enough coffee this morning, or this delicious milkshake has put me in a dream-state. Just now, I thought I heard some troubling words.”

“The Sophia Squad’s pilot is a cracker. The same as Seto.”

Ryuuji didn’t say another word.

“He managed to hack into the San Diego branch in the spring of this year. The security department, which had become very sensitive with Seto’s electronic files, immediately identified the hacking location with a reverse hack, and the cracker was taken into custody by the police. So, his hacking abilities were not that big a deal. However, he showed a stunning aptitude for controlling the Sophia Squad. So I approached with a deal.”

“The test was carried out on a human in prison?”

“There is speculation that CyberConnect has these sorts of connections.”

“I see.”

Ryuuji nodded slightly.

“Your company’s personnel search has been overwhelming.”

“Ability takes precedence over everything. That’s an ironclad rule.”

The jazz saxophone music ended. For that brief moment, the shop was filled with silence. Behind the counter, the bartender could be heard gently wiping a tumbler.

“So...”

Veronica leaned her face in towards Ryuuji and whispered. Her breath had a sweet fragrance of tobacco even though she was not smoking a pipe.

“Let’s get down to business.”

Ryuuji frowned.

“That was not the main topic?”

“Here’s the story. I re-examined your profile. Ryuuji Sogabe; not a Network Trouble Consultant, but a psychiatrist and developer of medical technologies, as well as a expert on Real Digitalize.”

Hartsfield began to sing lower in Damia’s* voice.

*Translator’s note: Damia is the stage name of Marie-Louise Damien, a French singer and actress who toured Japan in 1953. Her career spanned more than 40 years. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marie-Louise_Damien)

“My interest grew as I learned more. Why did you quit CyberConnect Japan?”

“I couldn’t give up on my dream of becoming a baseball player.”

Ryuuji smiled coyly.

“And it was my last chance due to my age.”

“Granted that is an eccentric reason.”

Veronica gave a cold smile.

“I was surprised that CyberConnect Japan let go a unique employee such as you. What are you going to do now?”

“I don’t understand what you mean.”

“What will you do after the matter of Seto is finished. Don’t tell me, you’re not going to continue your mock detective work after this, are you?”

“Oh, I see. Honestly, I am thinking of starting a business. Maybe I’ll open a trendy cafe in Aoyama and make some decent money.”

“You should return to researching Real Digitalize. Someone such as yourself should never give up research.”

Veronica looked into Ryuuji’s eyes.

“Would you be willing to work at the San Diego branch?”

Ryuuji was slightly taken aback.

“What a surprise. Are you intending to replace Yuri Seto?”

“I have to do what’s best for the company. If that means firing someone, then I’ll fire someone. If that means making a deal, then I’ll make a deal. And if I have to poach an employee, I won’t hesitate to poach.”

“That’s a great management philosophy.”

“I worked with Harald,” Veronica said.

“The creator of The World, Harald Hoerwick, I mean. Around the time CC Corp. San Diego was established, he presented ‘fragment’ to us with a referral from ALTIMIT Corp. I adopted the project and a couple of weeks later, we were working side by side. I did this in order to take ‘fragment’ from him. I was rather arrogant as a programmer at the time. I was proud of being involved in the development of ALTIMIT OS. However, I was blown away by the work I witnessed him do on the project. I thought the man was a genius. I wanted to keep him at CC Corp...”

Damia continued to sing about her late lover.

“But I wasn’t able to...”

Veronica stretched out her hand and pick up her glass of Virgin Mary.

“Because his mind had already been captured by something else.”

She turned her head towards Ryuuji.

“I learned the lesson that a man with talent is hard to come by...”

An attractive smile emerged across her lips, and she drank her cocktail while looking at Ryuuji.

“I like a man with talent. It’s also what I like about you.”

“Thank you.”

“But, I cannot be impressed by man who abandons his own research for any reason.”

Veronica’s smile disappeared as fast as it first appeared.

“You abandoned your own research. I think it was inevitable that you’d arrive at Real Digitalize. To borrow Seto’s words from the report, you gave up. This decision is worthy of praise. But, did you have no other choice?”

Veronica put her right hand to her chin and crossed her legs. That pose on a woman such as her made her beauty stand out all the more. It was a regal beauty that overwhelmed all those who gazed upon her.

“Once perfected, the technology will not disappear. That is to say, Real Digitalize and The World will be one and the same. We have no choice but to advance the technology that has appeared in the world. If we can’t prevent the issues that occur, we should think about the next steps and how to control it. It’s no good at all to not think about it and hope it gets solved on its own. It’s no good to throw it all away and run.”

She added.

“You don’t believe you want to complete your research? If you come to the San Diego branch, we’ll provide the best environment for you.”

Ryuuji drank the rest of his glass. The ice cubes made a light clinking sound. The milkshake was delicious to the last drop. He winked towards the counter and the bartender came over immediately.

“Can I get you anything else?”

“We’re finished, thank you. Please bring us the bill. We’re together.”

“Certainly.”

“This is my first time having such a delicious milkshake.”

“Thank you very much.”

The bartender left and Ryuuji turned to Veronica.

“I’ll pay,” she said.

“No, that’s not necessary. I’d be punished if I asked you to pay for telling me a lovely story while I got to drink a delicious cocktail with such a beautiful woman,” Ryuuji said.

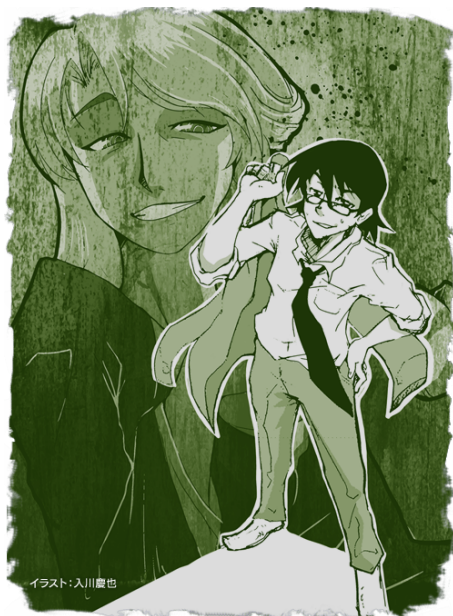
“Oh, at the moment I’m occupied with the rats. Honestly, it makes me wish I could borrow some cats. Now I’m working on planning my next move. I can’t imagine what to do next if I don’t solve the problem.”

Veronica looked Ryuuji square in the eyes.

“I see,” she said in a cold voice and crossed her legs.

“So, what is your next move?” she asked.

“I just try to do something. To take it one step at a time.”



The bartender came and gently placed the bill in front of Ryuuji.

Ryuuji took it in his hand and confirmed the amount.

“Well then, Ms. Bain. Please excuse me, I have work to attend to.”

She stood up and looked at his forehead once again.

Immediately it seemed like she had been struck by a curse.

“Ryuuji.”

Ryuuji was stopped by Veronica in front of the door.

He looked back.

The booth Veronica sat in was reminiscent of the beautiful white snake that coils in burrows.

“Should I think that you’ll refuse me again?”

“I will handle your request.”

A glossy smile appeared.

“I await a good report.”

Chapter 30

Reboot

He was standing in darkness.

He saw nothing and heard nothing.

He felt nothing and knew nothing.

Where is this place, he thought.

For quite some time, he felt as though he were speaking.

Right now, he felt as though he had just come to this place.

Which way do I go, he thought.

He considered it, looked around, and thought about it some more. He didn't know what to do.

When an idea didn't come to him, he tried to move, but he couldn't.

His body was not there.

The liquid-like darkness enveloped and digested his body to its original state. It was as though he were completely trapped.

He had a feeling like he was beginning to mix with his surroundings, like he was becoming liquid himself. He felt like he was spread out endlessly, like he completely covered this "world".

Then, he was nothing but a single consciousness floating in the vast darkness.

Once again, where is this place, he thought.

Just then, he realized that he suddenly somehow knew the answer. He remembered. The word "world" roused him and revived his memory.

Of course, he thought, this is Hell.

He received neither the light nor the warmth of the sun.

It was a place where an endless torrent of desire continually overflowed. A place where terrible screams and ominous cries roared.

A place he shouldn't have been led to.

Now he was being awakened from a sweet sleep like coming out of a deep hole, as if a ravenous beast had devoured a chunk of the darkness.

Absorbing the darkness, the fluttering feelings drifting in the darkness vanished without a trace, and instead, a dull back pain and fatigue rushed into his PC body.

He began to wake up, and like the darkness that wandered into his dream just now, his immediate vicinity was covered in a night like the black hole.

He tried to stand up, but felt a sudden dizziness and stopped moving.

A pressure permeated all throughout him from his body coming into contact with this "world". The electricity that exists all throughout cyberspace took hold of his spirit and shaved it off. It was slicing at his life.

He'd been prepared. He expected there to be danger.

However, this "world" was a harsher place than he thought.

And that's why it was a suitable stage for testing his commitment.

He took a deep breath, focused on his senses, and thought of the mission he had yet to complete.

He thought about the light he had to figure out.

He thought about the goddess.

As he did so, his dizziness subsided a little.

He thought about the goddess' location, a "garden," that he had to discover and get to.

Then his soul's righteousness would be proven.

There was supposed to be a light there.

It was supposed to be full of light.

The unclean darkness that seeped into his body would be peeled away and the most wonderful “Flash” of Heaven would brightly illuminate his presence.

A little more. If he could just withstand this hell for a little longer...

Arrangements would be ready by June 8th.

Arrangements to send the rats into every connected computer terminal.

Until then. It all happens then.

Chapter 31

Black Forest

It was evening and Flügel and Kusame were in Net Slum.

The World's garbage dump!

Welcome to a den of hackers and cheating scum!

After looking at the graffiti-covered walls for a moment, Kusame turned toward the slum-like cityscape.

“NAB's official position regarding illegal servers is to leave them be,” he said.

“What's in this heap of junk anyway?” he asked.

“My friend is here,” answered Flügel.

“A Net Slum hacker. A good friend or acquaintance?”

Kusame switched his mobile terminal to whisper mode.

“How about a meeting with the Sophia Squad? I have one at six o'clock.”

Flügel replied in whisper mode too.

“No problem. We'll return at that time. There's something I want to confirm. I just want to say a few words.”

The time was 5:05AM. He had logged in earlier than he had planned. The Sophia Squad meeting was still an hour away.

While the two of them continued to whisper to each other, they walked toward the back of the town.

They passed inhabitants of Net Slum as they walked the streets until they turned a corner and the @HOME came into sight.

Coincidentally, the informant came outside from the @HOME to greet them.

Kusame squinted at the informant.

“Is that a potted plant-like aviator hat*?” he asked.

“That’s right, my friend.”

The informant attempted to walk face down, but noticed the appearance of Flügel and stood straight upright.

Flügel smiled with upturned eyes.

“Hey, I came.”

“Eek!” the informant cried out. His eyes opened wide.

“Ahhhhh!”

As he screamed, he quickly turned on his heels and fled back into the @HOME.

Kusame looked at Flügel.

“...A friend of yours?”

“He’s a little shy,” said Flügel who took out a candy and popped it in his mouth.

“He always gets that way whenever I show up.”

“I don’t see why he should,” said Kusame with a nod.

In the informant’s @HOME, Flügel noticed that it had been subjected to a much more powerful security program since the last time he visited. It was the way one does things if they anticipate that uninvited guests may come by in the future. There was not a single chink in the barrier. A uniquely robust defense system.

However, the ruthless bullet of Brieler Rössle smashed the seal very easily.

Once inside, the informant sat on one of the stools. He looked at Flügel and Kusame and saw that their thin dark faces looked even darker and gaunter.

Jazz music was not playing and a sound effect that mimicked the grinding of hard coffee beans echoed throughout the store instead of the usual background music.

“Hey. This not a very cold atmosphere at all.”

Flügel started speaking and the informant shook his head. His mouth twitched in an obvious manner.

“I agree with you, I don’t have a good sense for things since being attacked by a rat monster.”

*Translator’s note: The informant’s plant-like aviator hat makes it possible that it is one of two people: either Sakisaka from .hack//Roots, or Geek from .hack//Quantum (which would fit the time frame better). It could however just be someone copying the style.

“That was a bit rude of me. I came to give you New Year’s greetings... So, Happy New Year.”

Flügel bowed deeply and very politely.

“I am extremely grateful for your invaluable patronage over the previous year. This year too I want to thank you so much for your continued patronage.”

The informant thrust out his finger.

“It’s now June. It’s the rainy season.”

“Oh, is that so? Recently my sense of time has been a little off. I have to wonder if I’m getting old...”

Flügel sat next to the informant.

“Or, perhaps I’ve strained myself from overworking. I am a hard worker after all. In all honesty, I enjoy working as hard as I can. But you see, it’s because I take it all very seriously. I unconsciously give it my all. I’m a model worker. I’m both amazed and embarrassed by myself. But on the other hand, I can’t help but like myself that way.”

Kusame listened in silence to the exchange between Flügel and the informant from behind Flügel. Flügel was trying to get something out of the man with the aviator’s cap. So far he had refrained from cutting into the conversation.

The informant interrupted Flügel’s endless stream of words.

“With your permission, I wonder if we could cancel our arrangement.”

“Cancel? Why?”

“Well, actually... my health is not very good. Ummm, also, there are several unfortunate circumstances in the real world to take care of. So, I think I should get away from the Net for a while...” he said, averting his eyes and muttering.

“Really? That’s unfortunate.”

The sound of the grinder echoed throughout the room.

“But, you can’t help the situation. I understand. Well, we’ll cancel it.”

“I’m sorry.”

The informant looked up. There was a light of relief in his eyes.

“But, please tell me one thing. What are you hiding?”

He blinked as though puzzled by Flügel’s question.

“What do you mean?”

“Is there something you’re not telling me? Previously, you said something during the rat hunt. Just before you logged out. Ah, one moment.”

Flügel removed the candy from his mouth, and spoke in a deliberately slow voice.

“Right, now I remember. You said, ‘I’m so deeply sorry to see you on such a day.’”

The informant’s entire body went stiff.

During the rat-monster’s attack, he said this over his shoulder and logged out.

At the time, Flügel hadn’t really thought much of it. To begin with, it wasn’t very important to the situation since they were on the verge of being eaten to death by a horde of rats.

But they escaped at the last moment and were able to take a moment to catch their breath from the brutal event, and the a doubt slowly began to take form within Flügel.

The informant turned his face away from Flügel.

“I don’t know anything about that.”

“You don’t know?”

“I don’t remember what I said. Perhaps you just misunderstood.”

“Could I have misunderstood? Indeed. I wonder, did it even happen? I certainly felt as though you said it. No, wait. I must be mistaken.”

Flügel waved his hand.

“There’s the chat log. My interaction with you in on record. Isn’t that a legal piece of evidence?” he said, turning to Kusame behind him.

The informant seemed to be caught off guard by the dangerous words of ‘legal evidence’. For the first time, he looked to Kusame who he had ignored up to this point.

“Hey, what’s this? Who’s the dog over there?”

“Oh, sorry. I forgot the introductions. This is Kusame of NAB.”

“I’m Kusame. Pleased to meet you.”

Kusame quickly bowed his head.

“Kusame Ofnab? What a bizarre name. Ofnab... of... nab.”[†]

[†]Translator’s note: In the original version, the joke is that Kusame is introduced with “This is Kusame of NAB” which is said as “nabunokusame.” The informant thinks

An audible snort came out that sounded as though it were from the real world.

“NAB!!”

The informant stood up, knocking his chair over.

“What are you thinking?! Why bring this kind of guy here?!”

Hackers hate NAB more than they hate system admins. It was fear more-so than hate. The reason goes without saying.

“Kusame is investigating the ‘rat hunt’ matter.”

Kusame glanced at Flügel, but didn’t say anything.

“So, I figured you may know something that Kusame doesn’t know. So you could offer some information.”

The informant raised his voice to a yell.

“Don’t be ridiculous! Once word gets around that a guy from NAB is coming and going here, I won’t be able to do business in Net Slum ever again!”

“Hmm. And here I thought this place was pretty good. You’re going to be away from the Net for a while, right?”

“No doubt about it!”

“I’ll confirm one more time in front of Kusame.”

Flügel ignored the other party’s appeal.

“You did not say even one of the words in ‘I’m so deeply sorry to see you on such a day.’ Is that correct?”

“Well, wait. I... may have intended to say it...”

Flügel looked at the informant’s face and smiled.

“Well! Then relax. Cooperate with NAB, tell us what you know, give us a good idea of what happened, and it would go a long way to improving the situation. I think it will, anyway. Isn’t that right?”

The last question was directed toward Kusame.

“That’s right.”

Kusame nodded.

“There you have it! It’s a good idea.”

Kusame’s name is Nabuno Kusame, which sounds pretty strange in Japanese. My version of the joke creates the name Kusame Ofnab, which sounds vaguely Eastern European but is nonetheless a strange name. This preserves the meaning of the joke in English.

“Alright. I’ll talk. It should be for the best...” moaned the informant.

He said he saw the actual spot where he saw the PC get killed by the monster was covered in a violet hexagon effect.

Half a year ago, on December 24, 2022, the day was Christmas Eve. It was the day that the Raid System was introduced to The World R:X. There was an incident in which many PC’s were rendered unconscious.

A big black tree appeared along with a horde of bug monsters and those who were attending the event were caught in the game, no longer able to log out.

The informant explained what had happened at this event..

Flügel thought that someone had mentioned this topic recently. A few days ago when Tokio Kuryuu had visited, he had mentioned it. An occult-classic of The World. The party concerned had been there.

“Actually, someone tipped me off. I knew in advance. The tree is not from The World, but is a part of a special computer from somewhere else entirely. I don’t know how or why, but it lost control and wandered into The World.”

The informant started talking once again. He became very serious.

“I smelled an opportunity for profit. I thought to obtain some materials and then I set up a reverse hack trap for the tree.”

“You must have been in the midst of chaos. Were you able to pull it off?” asked Flügel.

“Were you incorporated into the game?”

“I have skills and I didn’t enter due to a number of barriers. I ran an OS on top of another OS. It was my own system that combined a virtual machine with remote control. I can operate like a real computer in The World.”

He took a good look at the informant’s face.

“A shrewd looter,” Kusame muttered.

“As I thought, the tree security program did not work properly. I was not hindered, I ran the monitor on the inside of the tree.”

He said, then shut his mouth.

“Then?”

Flügel coaxed an answer.

But the informant wouldn’t talk.

It was not reluctance.

Flügel looked at the informant's face. His previous expression that showed confidence in his skills disappeared from his face. A look of fear came to the surface in its place.

"My monitor showed a place that looked like a vault inside."

After a while, the informant started speaking again.

"So, I tried looking at the files at random, but I didn't understand them at all. It was not in a common language. But then, while reading the files, I could recognize some words, and I caught on to the contents. The tree seemed to be a computer used by the government of some country other than Japan. The brain..."

He momentarily stammered.

"It was alongside a lot of data that controls the human brain..."

"What? The brain?"

Flügel asked again. The informant nodded.

"How do you know that?"

"Because words like 'hippocampus,' 'cerebral cortex' and 'brain stem' were itemized. Well, as I said earlier, I already knew about this. It's what's called a Special Computer. That's why I thought it was a research facility computer that specializes in such things... at some hospital or something. But something about it seemed strange. There were too many numbers to handle. It was six digits. No matter how you look at it, what sort of facilities are managed for the purpose of dealing with such absurd numbers?"

Flügel and Kusame looked at each other.

"At that time, I recalled a rumor I had heard long ago. Whether it's related to human trafficking or organ trafficking... what country it's happening in... it connects to a computer and stores the 'parts' that are pulled out of human beings. That way it's easy to manage and maintain freshness. It's easy to mess around with like a junk computer..."

"And?"

Flügel urged him onward.

"I got out of there as soon as I erased any traces of hacking. I don't know how that tree, incidents of comas, and rumors of organ trading are connected, but I want to know. This smells fishy all over. The scale is way too big. This is something that a good citizen like me shouldn't be poking their nose into."

The informant trembled.

“When I ran away, I saw some of the source code. There were some weird comments with it. I think perhaps one of the developers of the tree wrote it as a joke in poor taste. I read it. I remember it even now — ‘None of those who were swallowed up by the black forest will return...’”

“The black forest...,” said Flügel.

“It’s quite a poetic expression.”

“The rat monsters that appeared in Mac Anu three days ago are connected to the black forest.”

The informant continued.

“I was sure of that. It’s just like the tree incident six months ago. The monsters that appeared with the tree had a purple hexagonal effect on them. It was similar to the guy with the rats. He’s really dangerous. I regret getting caught up in all this trouble. I don’t want to be involved in this anymore...”

The informant stopped talking there.

Flügel was silent for a while.

The informant’s fear was unusual. Possibly, upon infiltrating the tree, he may have seen things that he was hesitant to speak of on this occasion.

However, Flügel felt that the informant was definitely telling the truth about the matter at hand.

“Thank you for talking with me.”

Flügel extended his arm and put his hand on the informant’s shoulder.

“I understand. You won’t be involved any longer. My request is canceled.”

As soon as he heard that, the informant’s face grew more relaxed.

“Sir, I’m sorry. I’m very sorry.”

As he apologized, it was obvious that he was wholeheartedly relieved to be freed from this burden.

“Actually, the information gathering process will soon be finished. I can’t sort it yet, but the moment I get paid, I’ll hand the information over to you. Please wait a little longer.”

He didn’t seem to say he’d return the money. The informant disappeared to the back of the shop with light dancing footsteps, and Kusame sneezed.

“I tried to contact the Akasaka branch,” he said with a whisper.

“It seems Aviator-Cap over there wasn’t lying about the incident of 2022. His word lined up with NAB’s report.”

The informant returned from the back holding thick parchment files in both hands.

He went at the counter and placed it in front of Flügel.

“Here. Import as much as you want and then bring this back.”

“You like this kind of prop, don’t you?”

Flügel looked at the bunch of parchment in his hands.

“One more thing, sir. This sort of atmosphere is important. It’s not limited to games.”

Flügel didn’t know if it was because the informant felt at ease or guilty for canceling the request, or both, but the informant started acting strangely and cracking jokes.

“Hey, listen. Did you have trouble customizing this shop so far?”

At the informant’s words, Flügel surveyed the shop interior for a moment.

“It would be simple to steal the official template, but then the @HOME would be dull and lifeless. Sometimes it’s in the spirit of hackers to spend a lot of time and effort on things. Well, there was a time once where it was destroyed by a machine gun. I cried as you could imagine...”

Flügel did not listen to the informant’s long story.

He looked up steeply at the ceiling.

Noticing this, the informant stopped talking.

“What’s wrong, sir? What’s going on?”

The informant followed Flügel’s eyes and looked at the ceiling, but he didn’t see anything strange.

Kusame said in a nervous tone beside Flügel.

“Flügel.”

“Oh, this is bad.”

“It’s too early. We’ll log in and still have twenty minutes.”

“Your suspicion that we are being watched is right on the money.”

“What? What are you guys talking about?” the informant said to both of them.

Flügel turned to the informant.

“Hey. I want you to relax and listen carefully.”

“Hm?”

“Earlier I promised not to involve you in all this, but it seems I can’t keep that promise.”

“What?”

Flügel pointed to the grinder on the counter.

“Could you turn that off please?”

The grinder finely ground the hard coffee beans and scattered the grounds around the container.

“That? Why?”

“Not important. Just please turn it off.”

The informant put his hand behind the grinder and switched it off.

The grinder immediately slowed its rotation and came to a halt.

Yet, the sound did not stop.

The sound, as though something was being crunched, kept ringing out.

“Hey, hey, hey...”

The informant nervously looked up at the ceiling.

“What’s that?”

A sound seemed to come from the ceiling as well as from the walls all around them.

Some sort of mass burst through from outside the @HOME.

The sound already changed to something different from that of the grinder. The sound was like nothing the informant had ever heard before. It sounded like something being dragged or strong wind causing branches to brush against each other. It sounded like the voice of something inhuman.

“I’m coming,” said Flügel.

Before he knew it he held a shiny black gun in his hand — Brieler Rössle.

When the informant noticed this he opened his mouth, but suddenly something fell in front of him.

Once he realized its true identity, more globs came down before him. Globs fell one after the other. It was as though a thick oil was being poured out. After a moment, a purple hexagonal effect spread across the floor.

The informant let out a guttural scream.

Chapter 32

The Sophia Squad

Flügel spoke to the informant as they stepped back to avoid the rats.

“What are you doing? Hurry and log out!”

“I’m trying, damn it!” the informant cried out. He pressed his back tightly against the wall behind the counter.

“I’ve been trying to get out for a while. I couldn’t even escape back in Mac Anu! It’s like the black forest six months ago. It’s started again. Damn. I can’t return to the real world...” he cried out once more.

“What?”

In front of the onlooking Flügel, a logout effect spread over the informant’s character. However, the effect disappeared and the informant still remained. The logout command had no effect.

There was a pressure closing in on the @HOME, perhaps even the entirety of Net Slum.

The whole store was ringing. The sound that was gnawing at objects rang out from everywhere.

“It’s no use. We can’t stay here,” the informant cried out.

“We have to get out soon!”

The informant immediately climbed over the counter and tried to get through the exit. However, Flügel put out his arms and blocked the informant.

“Wait a second...”

Flügel put Brieler Rössle at the ready and observed the rats running around. He estimated that about fifty to sixty rats had invaded the shop. All of were baring their little fangs and were squeaking loudly. However, Flügel realized that not a single one of them was attacking him or the informant.

Flügel called on Kusame in Whisper Mode.

“The rats activity will soon be over. It’s almost sunrise.”

“What?” Kusame replied in a whisper. He had opened a spell and considered setting a magical attack on the rats at that moment.

“They’re just running around like mad. They haven’t been given the command to attack us. It’s their job to scare their prey away from its nest.”

Kusame looked at Flügel with a relieved expression.

“Are they ambushing us? Trying to get us out of the @HOME?”

“Probably. The @HOME is likely surrounded by the rats.”

“What should we do?”

Flügel closed Whisper Mode and spoke to the informant out loud.

“Do you have a back door?”

“Of course not!”

“I see. Then I’ll make one now.”

Flügel shot the grinder on the counter.

“Hey, what are you doing?!”

The informant raised his voice in protest, but his mouth fell wide open when he saw the grinder turn into a small warp point.

They went through a sudden warp point and arrived at the main square by the Chaos Gate.

There was garbage data piled there and it looked like a small hill. Behind it, the vermillion torii stood, tilting slightly.

From that spot, they were able to see through the streets of the city that they had just snuck out of.

The informant spoke in a hoarse voice.

“Hey, I don’t believe it. What a joke...”

Roads, walls, and buildings were moving as though swelling. Flügel thought for a moment on this optical illusion. The hordes of rats moved together, pushing one another, as though they were a wriggling mass. The streets were painted with mixture of venomous purple and black colors.

Residents of Net Slum were running down the street screaming. They were sprinting with all of their power. The rats were clustering all around them. Their field of vision must have been low, because they would strike walls or stumble into something and the rats would flood in from all directions. The horrible flock devoured some of the residents, and the residents melted like butter on a frying pan.

The city was overflowing with rats. The frenzied masses swirled around.

“My oh my. You’ve gone and done it, Yuri Seto...,” muttered Flügel.

He had anticipated an ambush by the rats.

However, he never thought such a large group of rats would come into play. From previous experience, Flügel estimated that the number of rats possessed by Yuri Seto was about one thousand.

Right now, the rats that were here in Net Slum clearly exceeded that number. There was an unbelievable amount of them. Tens of thousands, perhaps even millions. This was a dark realization. It was like an overwhelming energy that drives people mad. How much mental power is needed to create such a tremendous number of rats?

No, it can’t be possible, though Flügel. This was beyond the level of a human being. There was no way that a Schicksal PC could produce such a huge number of rats.

“...It’s no use. I can’t log out. I also can’t return to Town.”

Kusame, who was fiddling with the Chaos Gate, shook his head.

“We’re trapped in this garbage heap...”

At that moment, the informant started to collapse and groan.

“Ow, ow.... ouch ouch ouch.”

Suddenly he stood up and shouted.

“That hurt!”

The informant put his hands behind his head, forcefully grabbed the rats that had attached themselves to his head, and pulled them off of him.

“Those little bastards! They bit my head!”

He screamed with a squeaking voice and struck at the ground.

The rats scattered from the informant’s hand, then they made a big jump and landed a few meters away.

Kusame’s spell had exploded on them. The light of Lei Zas tore through the plaza and slowed down the rats. Then the rats evaporated without making a

sound.

The rats' defense and hit points were very low. A normal attack could defeat them without much difficulty. That's if there's only a few of them, however. Knowing this is not much consolation in a situation like the one that just transpired.

"That rat-bastard. He's doesn't do things half-way, does he?" Flügel said as he looked around.

He made sure there were no signs of anyone in the area, and he then pulled out the "Trojan Rat" from his pocket.

It was a rat that had been modified to be harmless and had been equipped with a tracker. The rat looked up at Flügel with friendly, innocent eyes. Flügel squat down and gently put the rat on the ground and, after it twitched its nose a few times, it ran off toward a mountain of garbage.

Alright. That's good. Flügel stood up. Now he just had to wait for the "Trojan Rat" to infiltrate into the group of its fellow rats. Then it would guide him to the location of the main group. Then he could strike the rats and their boss all at the same time.

The only problem now was how to get out of here. How to get out of Net Slum which had been turned into a city of rats.

Flügel once again looked around at his periphery.

He stopped halfway. His whole body was tense.

Before he knew it, a shadow appeared on the torii before him. The shadow placed itself about five meters away from Flügel and Kusame. Like the shadow itself, the figure who had appeared made no sound. He was also no longer wearing a cap.

The man, who couldn't be further from a system admin, positioned himself across from them, pretending to be system admin.

It appeared as though he didn't see Flügel and Kusame. He walked a bit, stopped for a moment and looked up at the sky as though it was nice to look at. Of course, it was not. There are not many people who would climb a torii in the middle of a walk.

"Oh my. My oh my."

Flügel looked up at the torii and called out in an attempt to grab the figure's attention.

"What's going on? Why are you so far away? Come over and have a chat. That's a silly place to stand."

Flügel spoke cheerfully so as to disguise his unease.

Was he able to see the release of the rats? If he had seen it, things were as bad as they could be. Perhaps Seto would easily discover what Flügel and Kusame were planning to do.

“So that’s Seto. Fooling around like a typical hacker,” Kusame said to Flügel in a loud voice.

“I remember when I was a child. Decades ago now. My father took me fox hunting.”

The man spoke as though to himself.

“When hunting foxes, hounds would veer the fox towards the hunter. They purposefully give the fox only one place to go. However, sometimes there are foxes that don’t go in the direction you intended, and they end up getting away. Such foxes you have to pursue with force. So in most cases, you end up brutally wounding them, but then the fur is no longer usable...”

Flügel applauded this monologue by tapping his left hand against his right hand wrist since his right hand was holding a gun.

“Oh, what? How surprising, I thought the open-air opera had started up again,” he said.

“May I go home to get my opera glasses?”

“Brieler Rössle. Its ability is amazing. Its use can be trickier than you think.”

The man lowered his eyes and looked at Flügel for the first time since they started their chat.

“However, I think of it as omnipotent, but it isn’t. It cannot create anything. Isn’t that right? After shooting a bullet and freezing the target’s data — is that right? — it’s comparable to an RPG video game. ‘It infects and replaces the object’s parts’ — does that closely describe the gun’s ability? In other words, the object you modified is made to conform to the game’s specification.”

The man smiled.

Flügel did not respond. He changed the subject.

“I want to ask you something. What is the purpose of that silly herd of rats? I think there’s a limit, but just how many rats did you bring into this world?”

“I have been chosen for a trial and I want to overcome it,” replied the man.

“In that sense, the rats are separate from my will. They are determining the trial. Is that the sort of answer you’re looking for?”

“Oh, I see.”

Flügel nodded.

“I understand now. Thank you.”

“This conversation is not very engaging,” Kusame muttered in amazement.

Needless to say, there was no reason for Flügel to continue throwing out meaningless words. As he stood there, he thought of ways to get out of this situation.

Even if Flügel quickly shot Brieler Rössle and was able to hit the man standing on the torii, he probably still wouldn't get past the area. That man probably was not the real PC of Yuri Seto. He was likely just a fake created by the rats. Yuri Seto was likely manipulating the rats from a safe distance.

“By the way, Flügel, did you call me a rat-bastard earlier?”

The man's voice changed.

Or so Flügel thought. He noticed that some sort of emotion was in the man's voice. The voice was low, as though it were suppressed.

“You heard me? I thought of many things to call you, but in the end I figure it's best to keep it simple. Doesn't it describe you perfectly? You didn't like it? Rat-bastard.”

Flügel said the last word slowly to be provocative.

The man looked back up at the sky once more.

“At Mac Anu's port, I said that I don't care for the name of this PC. I told you to call me whatever you like. However, let me make two things very clear...”

His voice was harsh. It seemed as if he were forcibly suppressing his rage. His voice trembled faintly at the ends of his words.

The man put up the index and middle fingers of his right hand.

“Number one. It's easy to associate the word 'sewer' with 'rat.' It lacks imagination. That will be a fatal problem in both of our trials. Your crude imagination will invite foolish mistakes and bring about an unexpected defeat. You should change that now.”

The man had a tone like a teacher coaching a poorly performing student.

“Number two. But, despite that...”

The man turned his face towards Flügel. His face was shining with delight.

“It's the best name. Just superb. Absolutely wonderful.”

Flügel and Kusame looked at each other.

The man began to speak gently.

“The network that mankind developed was the drainage system; a sewer. That’s the theory anyway. Christians in the early Roman period used sewers to escape persecution and spread the doctrine. In other words, the sewer was the newest network at that time which allowed civilization to spread to the Roman Empire.”

“Pardon?” asked Flügel in confusion, but the question was disregarded.

“And nowadays, in this modern era where the internet, like a sewer, drips filth and pollutes the world, you call me — I who wish to abandon the internet — by a historically significant name. Do you understand what that means? That’s right, I was chosen. Indeed, you chose me.”

The man kept talking euphorically.

“Of course, you likened me to a low form and shallowly abased me. Yet, that’s why the name is noble. It’s because the inevitability that we were born at random is an undeniable truth. The name that you called me gives me a strong feeling of unprecedented happiness as I walk in my trial. I withdraw the foolish words I said about not caring about names. I must admit my lack of wisdom. It’s all thanks to you. You have cast light on my ignorance...”

The last word gradually became wet as his mouth accumulated spit. The man’s pupils dilated and his face took on a strange expression as his eyes slowly looked upward to the sky.

“From today onward, I shall be called Drain.”

In addition to the loud proclamation, Flügel heard war cries come from the outskirts of the city. Like a chorus of countless little goblins. The cries could only mean one thing. The herd of rats that tried to overrun Net Slum were about to start on their main course. In response to Drain’s invitation, they were now moving towards the plaza.

Flügel shot at the ground with Brieler Rössle. After a moment, he shot the ground a few more times around the group, rewriting the ground’s data, resulting in a damaged floor.

However, this was just a drop in the bucket. This only bought them a little time.

A sound similar to groaning drew nearer. The rat’s voices were twisted and grew louder, swelling to a dreadful level.

Finally the rats reached the plaza’s entrance and rushed in like roaring waves.

“Ah, ha, hehe.”

The informant immediately twisted around and fell on his back.

The rats were so crowded together that they were crawling all over each other. There was no break in the mass. They invaded the square one after the other. This was no longer just a mass of rats. It was a single, giant, evil organism of some unknown nature.

Suddenly, a roar echoed out and a pillar of fire rose up in a corner of the square. Then a ball of fire, swelling in yellow and orange colors, burst forth with a loud bang. A rain of fire poured down on the area, swallowing up the rats, blowing some up and driving others away.

Flügel and the others stood frozen in place, but they got caught in a blast and were knocked to the ground.

Then a second explosion struck inside the mass of rats. Then a third explosion and a fourth.

“Up there,” said Kusame, who had rolled on to his stomach and looked up at the sky.

Flügel looked up at the sky and saw several shadows whirling high up in the sky.

During the explosions, the man named Drain continued to stand on top of the torii.

A thorough destruction commenced. Not by the rats, but by the new arrivals.

Drain took notice of the beings who flew in the sky like birds. There were eight in all. They descended in a line formation and threw something down. It reached the ground and, like a blaze of hellfire, flames burned the rats.

Drain had given a surveillance command to twenty-two rats beforehand and sent them to various parts of Net Slum to check out the state of the city.

The surveillance rat-team had reported that there were Flügel and two colleagues in the square. Three people altogether. Four if Drain included himself. There ought not to have been anyone else in the square.

Therefore, it was inconceivable to Drain that there was someone who could escape detection by the rats.

“What are you? Your presense cannot be detected. Could you be...”

He didn't get to finish his sentence.

A single beam of light shot down from the sky and penetrated his abdomen. The beam easily divided Drain in two and he fell from the torii and struck the ground.

The air around where the laser had been released was strangely distorted.

Suddenly it seemed as though a smooth substance like mercury was born. The next moment the substance took the form of a person. It shone with a golden light.

Drain's upper half lay on its stomach and it clawed at the ground with both hands in an attempt to reach his lower half which fell farther away.

Before he could reach his other half, the golden assailant came down and landed soundlessly.

Drain ceased his struggle and looked up at the adversary. The adversary had a feminine body. It was a metallic PC body like an android, with a helmet that had a visor like a bird's beak.

He remembered seeing this somewhere before. That's right, it was a Sophia. The "Sophia System Security," also known as the SSS version. The Sophias were a commercial computer virus removal software.

But at this moment, before Drain's eyes, this Sophia was acting beyond the abilities of an automated program. She was being operated by a player.

"How do you feel? Rat-user," she said.

"I feel awful. Recently I've been constantly agitated. It seems this was caused by you, rat-user."

There was a sound like spitting in the real world.

"I don't like how you've been talking and acting, and I don't like what you've been doing to The World. So, please disappear from this place."

"That ability. I see. It was you."

Drain smiled thinly.

"You're the bitch who killed the rats I sent on reconnaissance..."

"Excuse me?"

Her beautiful face became greatly distorted and her mouth formed a malicious grin.

"A grovelling piece-of-shit rat like you is in no position to speak to me like that."

Drain focused his mind and summoned a rat to him. The rat jumped at the Sophia's face from her blind spot and exploded a "Deadly Flash" at close range.

But the Sophia remained cool and collected.

“Give it a rest. Your flash won’t work on me.”

Small pupils behind the visor looked down at Drain with disdain.

Then she lazily kicked his face with her right foot. Drain gave a muffled grunt and his upper half turned over on its back.

The Sophia bent down and brought her visor close enough to Drain’s face to touch his nose.

“Can you hear me, Yuri Kazinsky Seto? I’m not just some worthless mimic like you. You’re hiding around here manipulating this thing, you asshole. Do you hear me?”

She spoke to the person in front of her as if he were a phone receiver.

“As I said before, I really don’t like you. But to be honest, I love your rats. Do you know why?” she whispered.

“Every time I kill one hundred dirty rats, I receive a monetary reward. I get a bonus every 2000 kills. I earn plenty of money that way. I work as hard as I can to exterminate the little shits. I put all my strength into turning their assholes inside-out. Gahahaha.”

She bent over laughing.

“I’ll come back to hunt them again when it’s harvest season. Bahahahahaha-haha.”

The hunt was over at the plaza. It had been a one-sided massacre. Without being able to receive commands from their conductor, the rats had massed together, becoming easy targets for the slaughter.

The eight Sophias who had been flying in the sky were then able to skillfully drop napalm bullets right on the masses of rats so as to prevent their escape, ensuring that the rats burned.

The smell of burnt carcasses reached Drain’s nostrils.

Fanned by hot air, his black hair fluttered and covered his face. His hair waved as though it had a life of its own. Through a gap in his hair, the Sophia could see that Drain was still smirking and his eyes burned with hatred.

It was a hatred that dishonored his baptismal name, a hatred that burned like his precious rats.

“You...”

“Huh?”

“This is not a test,” Drain said softly.

“You are not worthy to stand in this place. Leave at once.”

A ghastly smile, different from before, crossed the lips of the golden Sophia.

“Hmmm?”

She stood up slowly and pointed the index finger of her right hand at Drain.

A laser shot out from the finger’s tip, burning Drain’s upper half. A scream rang out.

The burning figure twisted and distorted, then burst into a multitude of rats which scurried away. However, they could not outrun the flames that consumed them, leaving them dead and charred only a few meters away.

“I give you the gift of peace,” she said as though spitting, and then she burned Drain’s lower half.

Suddenly the square fell silent.

The mass of rats had been crushed and a few remaining rats scurried off and disappeared. The square had become completely still, except for the group of Sophias who were flying overhead.

Flügel, Kusame, and the informant stood in a corner of the square as though they had been forgotten. In order to avoid the explosions, they had hid themselves behind a mountain of garbage.

This was no longer a battle in a fantasy world. It was a modern war and the three of them were now akin to scared civilians caught in the fray.

“What could this feeling be?” said Flügel.

“It seems we’re in supporting roles when I thought we were the leads.”

“The... Sophia Squad, was it? We should meet again someone,” said Kusame in admiration.

“Her power is in a different league. She annihilated those hordes in less than an hour.”

“Hey, you guys. Over here!” yelled the informant.

The golden Sophia, who destroyed the mimic Drain, walked towards Flügel and the others.

The other Sophias landed one after the other and followed behind her.

The vanguard of the Sophia Squad was gold while the other eight were all clad in silver. Gold must be the color for the commander. There stood nine goddesses of gruesome destruction. Beautiful goddesses of death who reap

souls. Their smooth bodies shined elegantly as it reflected the flames enveloping the burning rats in the plaza.

When they came in front of the three standing there, they stopped moving.

The commander looked upon the face of Flügel, then Kusame, then the informant. Through her visor, her eyes shone brightly at the three men.

“I am Urania of the Sophia Squad,” she said.

“Which one of you is Flügel?”

Chapter 33

ALGOS

“How about it? Which one of you cockroaches is Flügel?” asked Urania.

“Uh, I am.”

Flügel presented Urania with the guest key bestowed upon him by Veronica Bain.

“You really saved us. Thank you very much. We narrowly escaped that. We were about to be burned cockroaches.”

“I’ve been told to bring you to our @HOME.”

Urania ignored both Flügel’s lip service and the guest key. Instead she looked Flügel up and down. Then she jerked her chin at Kusame and the informant.

“Who are these two? I wasn’t told about them.”

“I am NAB agent Kusame.”

Kusame took a step forward.

“We were investigating Net Slum with Mr. Flügel here. I’ve heard of you before. I’d like to have a chat with you after this if you don’t mind. How does that sound?”

Urania glared at Kusame.

“You’re with NAB?”

There was a fierce look in her eyes. While her face was stone cold, her eyes were filled with animosity. She let out a resigned groan.

“Do whatever you want. It would be an honor to work with an elite public servant such as yourself. And you are?”

The informant trembled.

“Oh, I’ve got nothing to do with this. I’m not even interested in this conversation. I just happen to be here with them. Really...”

The informant enthusiastically explained his standpoint, but Urania seemed to lose interest immediately.

“Come to Breg Epona.”

She turned towards Flügel.

“There you’ll find the ALGOS @HOME. The guildmaster is a man named K.K. He wants to talk with you.”

Then, seemingly having conveyed all she wished to convey, Urania turned her back to them. The other Sophias took her lead and also turned their backs to the three men. Their movements were precise and orderly, like a military formation.

“Wait, Ura,” called out Flügel.

Urania stopped and looked coldly over her shoulder at Flügel.

“Oh, can I call you Ura?”

“Sure, if you want me to shoot you in the ass.”

“Nevermind, then. Won’t you be coming with us? It’d be helpful if you showed us where to go.”

“I’m busy. There’re more rats to take care of. I don’t have time to hold your hand.”

“It’s too bad you’re busy. One more thing. How long have you been hiding in this square?”

“I arrived soon after you and the dog logged in. I saw you go into Flying Cap’s @HOME.”

“Wow, we didn’t notice you at all.”

“After that we estimated the time needed to wipe out those rats.”

Urania sneered like a cheerful shark.

“Since you all foolishly came to the square, it became easier to set a trap and save you.”

After she had finished speaking, Urania and the other Sophias silently flew up into the sky. At about ten meters in the air, she stopped and looked down at the trio below.

“See you. We’ll meet again. For now, be safe.”

The nine goddesses, glittering in gold and silver, flew off into the town.

“So, basically, we were used as decoys,” said Kusame.

“The @HOME...”

The informant watched the Sophias fly away and suddenly muttered to himself as though he had returned to his senses.

“That’s right. My @HOME...”

The inside of the informant’s jazz cafe was painted a dark grey as though a graphics-related bug had occurred. The rats had bitten, scratched, chewed, and devoured all the data inside until they couldn’t eat any more. The cloud repositories that contained everything the informant owned were also destroyed. All of his stored data had been devoured and it was now useless.

His base, which had been destroyed by Orgel’s machine gun and soon after had caught on fire during the trouble in the Black Forest, was now left in complete ruins due to the rats. This was the third scene of destruction, but this time it was just unrelated collateral damage.

The informant was speechless.

“Ah...” said Flügel.

“I made copies copies of the files you sent me. Shall I return them to you? Yeah, I’ll return them anyway.”

Flügel placed a bunch of scrolls and parchment on the grey object that was once a counter.

The informant was still speechless, so Flügel kept talking.

“Oh... hey. If you look at it from this perspective, it’s like yakisoba with seaweed. What’s done is done. This ship has sailed. So why don’t you fight for world peace with us? The three of us could form a team. We could come up with a cool team name. For example, umm, goggles, glasses, the Glasses Trio.”

“Glasses? I don’t wear glasses,” said Kusame.

“Alright, then let’s go go shopping! We’ll go buy some now!”

“Please, just go,” said the informant.

Flügel nodded.

“Yeah, you’re right.”

The informant slowly sat down on a gray object that looked like it had been a stool.

“From now on, please don’t involve me in this anymore. Please don’t contact me again.”

He slouched and put his hands on his knees, then sat motionless. He only looked to be about 15 years old.

Flügel put his hand on the kid's shoulder and gave him some encouragement.

"If you're half the guy I think you are, you can rebuild this place in no time. Pull yourself up by your bootstraps and cheer up! Once the dust has settled, I'll come and visit you again."

The informant lifted his head and looked at Flügel with an expression of such deep sorrow, the likes of which Flügel had never seen before. Flügel cast his eyes downward.

"That was a bad joke. I'm... sorry."

Flügel and Kusame left the @HOME.

To their surprise, Net Slum's residents started to reappear in the streets. The residents cautiously looked around at their surroundings as they filled the streets. They weren't sure how, but they had escaped the giant swarm of rats. Net Slum's citizens were tough and resilient, like weeds. The city had recovered from the unprecedented chaos faster than expected.

"Was the trojan successful?" Kusame asked in whisper mode.

"To prevent Seto from finding out, I set it to emit a signal after it's determined his true physical location. I'll need a little more time to determine if it will succeed."

Flügel shrugged his shoulders.

"However... he might have been caught in the bombing by those cool ladies."

"No, the timing's all wrong."

Kusame sneezed.

"But, if the Sophia Squad hadn't shown up, the rats would have gnawed us to the bone. What awful creatures. I'm lost for words."

"They're troubling beyond belief. It should be impossible for one Schicksal PC to be able to demonstrate this much power."

"He can manipulate millions of rats. More than enough to fill Net Slum."

Kusame crossed his arms.

"If we can't take Seto on by ourselves, then... how about multiple Schicksal PCs? For example, allies with the same abilities as him. Can you produce a lot of rats?"

Flügel shook his head.

A Schicksal PC reflects the player using it. The performance would be completely different. Flügel didn't think there'd be anyone with the same abilities as Seto.

Even if there was someone who could control rats on the same level as Seto, at best they'd only be able to produce one thousand to two thousand rats.

However, Flügel thought of another possibility.

Facing Seto alone would be impossible, but what about using some other sort of ability?

"That's it. Wait. Remember what we were talking about before the rats attacked the informant's shop?"

Kusame quickly understood what Flügel was saying.

"The Black Forest? Oh, you mean, a type of special computer connected to human parts."

"What if Yuri Seto uses this computer, gets more powerful, and produces a lot more rats?"

Flügel and Kusame were silent for a while.

"I feel like that could happen."

"I have the same feeling."

Kusame turned to face Flügel with a restless look.

"Alright, then. I'll go to the Akasaka branch and look into this. If I leave now, there should be some people still there when I arrive. Perhaps I can even meet with whoever is in charge. Can I leave the Sophia Squad meeting to you?"

Flügel nodded eagerly.

"Of course. I can get through that easily."

Kusame looked as though he was about to say something, but he didn't say it after all.

"Well, I'm counting on you," was all he said instead.

Dual City Breg Epona is a giant town embellished with high technology. In this town where tall skyscrapers stand, the gap between the rich and the poor is apparent. Rulers and socialites live in the gorgeous upper segments, while the poor people live in the slums below. This is how it was configured.

The ALGOS @HOME was located in the upper level, accessible by elevator.

Upon entering, Flügel was greeted by a system admin PC.

“Urania told us you’d be coming. Welcome.”

From the neck down he had the same look as a regular system administrator, but his headgear made him stand out. Instead of a hat, he was wearing a mask with a bird’s beak.

He had the appearance of a plague doctor found in medieval European artwork.

Flügel liked his sense of fashion.

“I am KK, the one responsible for this guild.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you. I’m Flügel.”

“I heard there would be a member of NAB with you.”

“Oh, he recalled some urgent business he had to attend to, so he logged out a little while ago.”

“Is that so? That’s disappointing.”

KK gently nodded.

“By the way, Flügel, this isn’t the first time we’ve met.”

Flügel looked right at KK’s face.

KK’s eyes and nose were obscured by the mask was wearing. The only way for Flügel to tell his expression was his mouth, which wore a smile.

“To be more specific, we met in the real world. At the Baketon Hotel. I took you to meet President Veronica Bain.”

Flügel remembered that it was about two weeks go. This was the man who led him to the penthouse. No doubt about it, he was the Secretarial Office Chief, Mr. Ogura.

“Do you remember? Allow me to properly introduce myself. In the real world, I am Kiyoshi Ogura. Please keep that in mind from now on,” said KK in a friendly tone.

KK invited Flügel in.

“Well, please come in. Let me show you inside.”

Flügel walked in, guided by KK.

“As I’m sure you’ve noticed, this guild’s name comes from the real life company ALGOS.”

KK began to explain as they walked.

“I work for CC Corp as a representative of the ALGOS Japan branch. I’m originally from ALGOS’ Odaiba division. I’ve been entrusted by President Bain to oversee the Sophia Squad.”

“I see,” Flügel interjected.

ALGOS is the Sophia development company that produces computer virus removal software, specifically the “Sophia System Security” software.

They passed through an automatic door and suddenly their surroundings went dark.

Flügel took a few steps into the darkness. All he could be sure of was the floor. The darkness enveloped him, extending outwards for what seemed like forever.

KK’s position was also unknown, though he ought to have been still right next to Flügel.

Suddenly, the space in front of Flügel cracked open with a bright light. The light ran across the wall and revealed a floating carving that looked like ancient ruins and a wall painting made of light.

“This is ALGOS’ monitoring room.”

KK stood in front of the previously unseen wall and seemed relieved to see his hands again.

Along with torrent of light, innumerable windows opened one by one like a tree of information.

Flügel was surprised by the pictures displayed in these windows. In several of these windows there were pictures of the rats with the purple hexagonal effect.

“This is live footage of various places in The World. We are taking control of all the areas that contain those rats,” said KK without trying to conceal his joy. He ran his left hand across the operations board and one by one the images changed. Each one of them displayed the sinister-looking rats.

“I see,” said Flügel.

“I thought Urania’s arrival in Net Slum was timed a bit too perfectly. It’s because she was monitoring the rats through this, right?”

KK nodded.

“In simple terms, it is like a real life satellite camera. It’s a camera that has been installed outside the limits of the program, that is, far above the entirety of The World. It circles once every 14 minutes and shoots photographs of everything in this world. This camera has the ability to distinguish exact objects on the ground with a success rate of over ninety percent. As long as

the object moves, we can track it, even if it's a small handful of rats. This is true of hidden objects as well."

KK again touched the operation board and the windows all closed at once.

However, the light on the wall continued to dimly illuminate the room.

KK turned to face Flügel.

"I think we can work together," KK said.

"You have an advantage in this matter. You should have plenty of useful information, and as you can see, we certainly have the technology to find and eradicate the rats. Flügel, would you like to join us and fight against Yuri Seto together?"

Flügel stayed silent for a while. He had several questions running through his mind, so he didn't hesitate to ask them.

"Before I answer, please answer a few questions."

"About what?"

"How many rats are there now?"

"There are now less than a hundred dispersed in groups of about ten lurking in the deepest parts of several areas. In total there were eight hundred and three. After today's battle, they're almost completely wiped out."

"Have you been able to determine the whereabouts of Yuri Seto's PC?"

KK's eyes looked gloomy.

"Unfortunately not. We haven't been able to locate his true form either."

"It seems like it'd be easy to find out with with the camera I believe you mentioned before."

"The World is just too vast. Even with ALGOS' cameras, it is impossible to photograph all areas at once. It is inevitable that there will be some delays and gaps in time. I think he probably finds his way into those gaps and disappears from view. It's a little mistake. We should find him soon. No doubt about it."

"I see," nodded Flügel. I see, indeed, he thought.

"Well, this surveillance system is indeed amazing. I don't think just one or two programmers could manage it. So, how do you manage it?"

"You make a fair point. This guild is operated and managed by a small team of programmers. These are the people I newly hired for this project. They are not logged in, but are still on duty. This interchange also does monitor checks in the real world."

“Is it alright if I talk with them?”

KK’s mouth appeared to stiffen.

“I’m... afraid not. For the sake of maintaining confidentiality.”

“I just want to ask two, maybe three, quick questions.”

“I’m afraid I can’t allow it.”

“Then, can you let me have a quick look at the system side of things?”

“My earlier explanation is as much as I can tell you without breaking the rules.”

Flügel nodded. I see, indeed, he thought.

Just then, a buzzer sounded in the room.

“It seems Urania has returned,” said KK.

Just as KK had said those words, the automatic door opened and Urania entered. She was alone. The other members of the Sophia team were nowhere to be seen.

“Immunization operation status?” KK said to her, but his voice was cold and emotionless.

“Completed once and for all. We collected data from the rat remains in the plaza and then burned it all to the ground.”

Urania smiled and laughed joyfully.

“If this were real, the rat carcasses would have stunk to high heaven.”

“You seem to be in a good mood.”

“Yeah. I earned more than six thousand dollars today.”

“Your harvest will analyzed and judged by the result monitor. Please wait to be contacted by the person in charge.”

“I’ll do that. I’m satisfied with my work for today, so I’ll be signing off.”

The buzzer sounded again. This time it was louder and lasted longer than before.

“Please wait, Urania. I hate to send you back to the place you just returned from, but it seems the remaining rats have started to gather all in one place.”

After KK finished interacting with something in the real world, he spoke to Urania.

“They’re all gathered together and there are less than a thousand, but it can’t be left to chance. Please remove them.”

She did not reply.

“Urania?”

“Not interested.”

Urania faced downward.

“What —”

“The herd is too small. It won’t net me any money.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Making money is the Golden Rule. I’ll harvest when the pack of rats is bigger.”

KK took a deep breath and then spoke.

“I’m telling you to follow my instructions.”

As long as users are not in harm’s way, I have final say on sorties. Doesn’t it state that in my contract?”

“I am the guildmaster.”

“Is that so? Congratulations on becoming the class representative.”

Urania smiled.

“You’re a perfect example of a useful idiot.”

The conversation between them turned into English partway through. Flügel did not know whether it was because the conversation was getting very heated, or because he was a third-party, but he did not ask for the contents of the conversation. Either way, even though he did not understand their words, it was too clear to Flügel from the look of the two people standing before him that they were quarreling rather than having a conversation.

KK looked at Flügel as though he came back to his senses.

“I’m terribly sorry you had to see that.”

“Oh, no. A spirited workplace is a gift of a boss’ virtues,” said Flügel.

KK looked at Urania and cleared his throat.

“Let’s start over. CC Corp and ALGOS will never give in to malicious crackers. Our mission at ALGOS is to protect users by eradicating Yuri Seto’s rats. Flügel’s job is to capture Yuri Seto. I think we can achieve each goal efficiently if we cooperate. Would you be willing to join ALGOS?”

“I saw Seto’s little exchange with you in Net Slum.”

Urania let out a light chuckle and quickly shook her head.

“I don’t think joining forces with you is of any use to me. I will not be your goddamned shield.”

“Urania, please be quiet,” KK said in a stern voice.

“Yeah, she’s right,” Flügel said after a while.

“I will hand over the information I’ve gathered so far. Use it as you wish. However, I don’t get the feeling that joining ALGOS and working with you will work. As she said, we’ll probably just get in each other’s way.”

“I see. That’s disappointing,” said KK with a tinge of disappointment.

He gave Urania a side glance.

“I hope you didn’t refuse because the mood was soured.”

“Far from it. It was good to see your lovely facilities.”

“If you change your mind, please come back at any time. I’ll be waiting.”

As Flügel was about to leave, he suddenly thought of something and turned to Urania.

“Your name, ‘Urania,’ does that come from Greek mythology?”

Urania glanced at Flügel.

“I don’t know.”

“Have the other members of the Sophia team also been given the names of the Muses?”

“Hey, I said I don’t know, didn’t I?”

“Now that I think about it, ALGOS is named for the Greek myth of Argos, isn’t it?”

Flügel kept talking regardless of KK and Urania’s reactions.

“Yeah, that’s right, there was a proverb about that in Greece.”

Flügel abruptly began to recite a verse from memory that sounded like a poem, but the words were not in Japanese.

It seemed that KK was taken aback by the poem that had suddenly been recited.

Urania was expressionless and did not react.

Flügel looked at each in turn and smiled.

“Well, thank you. Sorry to have disturbed you.”

With that said, Flügel left the ALGOS @HOME.

Flügel got on an elevator and descended to the main floor and, once outside, sat down on a bench in the shadow of the skyscraper. The rows of houses were bathed in a gentle sunlight reminiscent of early summer, but when Flügel checked the time, it was nearly eight o'clock in the evening. What a surprise. He had overworked. I should have called Lilie to let her know I'd be late for dinner, he thought.

In any case, food would have to wait. Flügel sat on the bench for another thirty minutes to see what would happen. He was unsure whether his plan had worked.

"Don't worry about anyone eavesdropping," said Urania.

She shifted around as she sat cross-legged next to Flügel.

"I set up a barrier to prevent wiretapping in this area. KK and the people at ALGOS can't detect that I'm here, and even if they realize where I am, they can't hear our conversation on this bench."

Flügel gazed at her face in profile.

"I see. That's one of Sophia abilities, isn't it?" he said.

"Could you not appear so suddenly again? You startled me."

"I came because you called. Well, it was more than that."

Urania groaned from the back of her throat.

"How did you know? I wasn't trying to hide it, but why didn't anyone notice it before?"

"It was the way you pronounced your words when speaking with KK. The accent sounded familiar to me. It was the same pronunciation a university professor of mine used when speaking English," said Flügel.

"The professor was an Eastern European Jew. Then it clicked. Your signature phrase. 'Peace be upon you' is a common Jewish greeting. Isn't that right? So, I figured you are a Jew or of Jewish descent."

"So, you spoke Yiddish."

The words Flügel had recited before leaving were not a Greek proverb, let alone Greek. He merely said the following words in Yiddish.

Hey, sweetheart, why don't the two of us go talk outside? I'll be waiting at the Chaos Gate.

Urania looked at Flügel deeply.

“Despite being kind of a punk, you’re pretty crafty. Right?”

“I’m glad you think so. I figured someone would realize that one day.”

“Tell me what you’ve got. You called me out here alone to talk about things you don’t want ALGOS to hear, right?”

“I think I’d like to hire you.”

“What?”

“I’d like you to divert data on the swarms of rats through illegal channels. Things like the location, size and behavior of the swarms, among other things, in a way that KK and ALGOS won’t be able to interpret.”

“What are you talking about? Earlier KK said he wanted to cooperate, didn’t he? Wouldn’t it be best to ask them directly?”

Flügel shook his head.

“KK can’t be trusted. Neither his attitude nor his abilities. I realized it as soon as he started talking. He lacks the power of imagination that is typical in The World.”

Why use a surveillance system that for some reason cannot locate Yuri Seto’s PC? While I can grasp that fact, I’m not trying to seek out the reason for it too deeply.

Also, KK said that ALGOS had several newly hired programmers. Can we be certain of their identities? Can we say with certainty that Seto’s Yuri Seto’s reach hasn’t extended to them?

And while he was willing to cooperate with Flügel, he was extremely wary of him knowing the systems interior. It was apparent that it was a scheme to take all of Flügel’s information.

“Urania, what do you think of KK?”

“I was a fool to not notice the crap he was tossing my way,” Urania said spitefully.

Flügel smiled bitterly as she said this.

“That’s harsh...”

“I didn’t think the rats were linked to the success of my career. If that guy is being commanded by that old Veronica bitch, I’ll gladly make him eat his words.”

“Don’t do business with such people. Isn’t that the Golden Rule of business?”

Urania gave a small smile.

“Hey, punk, it’s really fun talking to you, but why are you making me an offer like this?”

“Because you’re right in the thick of things. At ALGOS, only the Sophia team heads to the front line and engages with the rats. You can best understand the current situation,” Flügel said quietly.

“Earlier you refused KK’s instructions. By having a futile exchange of words, you were being careful to not give Seto an opportunity to analyze the Sophia team’s capabilities. Isn’t that right? You may be a fucking cracker, but I believe that I can trust your judgment.”

Urania sat very still on the bench and looked directly at Flügel.

“Will I get anything out of this?”

“Of course, I’ll pay you. How about in this place? It’ll have to be Japanese yen, though. Convert it to dollars on your end.”

Flügel opened a window, input a number and showed it to her.

Urania glanced at the number.

“Another thing. If you find Yuri Seto’s PC body, I will issue you a bonus.”

Flügel opened another window and entered a new number.

“Why can’t ALGOS’ monitoring system find Yuri Seto’s PC? Is it just a coincidence as KK says? Or is Seto taking precautions, and if so, what are they? I don’t know Seto well enough to tell if his intellect is outperforming both KK’s and yours — no offense! But, listen, don’t you think it’s a problem worth tackling?”

Urania did not take well to Flügel’s words. She spoke thoughtfully.

“If information is leaked, I’ll be in breach of contract with CC Corp and I won’t get paid by them. On the other hand, if I pay the penalty for breach of contract, my criminal record in San Diego won’t go away.”

“That’s if it happens, though.”

“If it happens, you’ll be in trouble too.”

Urania shook her head.

“I don’t know what to do. What do you get out of this? You’re also employed by CC Corp. Why do you seem to be working against them?”

“It’s not about money or advancing my career.”

“Then, why do it?”

“Because justice flows through my veins,” said Flügel.

Urania looked at Flügel with an expression that looked as though it had seen many incredible things, and scowled for a full minute.

“I’m shocked.”

Urania shook her head slightly.

“Completely shocked.”

Soon a nefarious smile spread across her face. She laughed in a way that made it look like sharks were jumping out of the sea and protruding from her chin. She decided to sink her teeth into it, metaphorically speaking.

“Very well, Flügel. I’ve taken a liking to you,” she said.

“I’ll join in on your plan. I’ll transmit information on the rats and I’ll help you capture Yuri Kazinsky Seto.”

After exchanging email addresses, Urania murmured in a self-deprecating tone.

“I’m a Cracker of Justice. This is the pinnacle of my career.”

“You’ve made it. You can write that on your resume.”

“I’ve got you to thank for it.”

Urania stood up.

“Well, see you. I’ll be going now.”

Flügel called out to her as she turned away.

“Be careful. Don’t take Yuri Seto lightly. Run away if you think things may get dangerous. You’re in charge of the most dangerous part of our plan.”

“I know. I don’t plan on being disposed of by CC Corp. I’ll earn as much money as I can. From them and from you.”

“Peace be upon you,” said Flügel.

“And peace be upon you.”

Urania returned to the bench. Then she smiled. Her eyes softened and her smile started to look somewhat charming.

“I want to meet you someday. I want to see your stupid face in the real world.”

As she said it, Urania silently flew off into the sky.

Like a shark that swims silently in the sea.

Chapter 34

Post Mortem

Upon returning home, Ryuuji looked over all the information received from the informant. There was something that tugged at his heartstrings, but he didn't know what it was.

He wasn't caught up by the appearance of things. He admonished himself, read the data over again, thought a bit, drank the rest of his Wild Turkey, thought some more, drank another Wild Turkey, drank even more, then went to bed.

The next morning it was still raining. The kind of rain so heavy that it makes you think it'll never stop raining.

"Have you been drinking again?" Lilie said with a frown after breakfast.

She was caught up by the appearance of things. She still hadn't had enough practice.

"Mental labor is difficult to measure."

"Wash your cup, okay?"

"Okay."

After getting Lilie to put on a raincoat and seeing her off to school, Ryuuji called David on the phone. He talked about the exchanges at ALGOS and explained that he would be receiving information from the Sophia Squad's Urania.

"Did that bomber lady become your friend?" asked David in amazement on the other side of the phone.

"That's such a strange story. Rather I should say, you've persuaded me."

"Let's leave things to her in the game for the time being. She's more reliable than the Pied Piper of Hamelin," said Ryuuji.

“How about you, David? Did you find out anything?”

“On my side, I made arrangements to speak with the person in charge of last year’s electronic prison incident. It’s later this afternoon. What will you do?”

Ryuuji finally spoke after taking a while to think.

“I’ll leave that to you, David. Actually, I can’t read the informant’s data yet. I’ll join in on your arrangement.”

“Really? I don’t even know if the talk will delve into the finer details of NAB or if things will go smoothly,” said David.

“Oh, that’s right. The analysis results for the log left by Travis Bond arrived. I will forward it to you.”

“Did you learn anything?”

“I feel from reading briefly that there were no major exchanges. Honestly, all I saw was that it indicated that Seto was trying to investigate the @HOME’s functions.”

“The @HOME’s functions?”

“Yeah. Stuff like weapon training, expanding the facilities, and upgrading the @HOME. Maybe he intended to do something with cheats.”

“Pet Shop Chims was a site for rat experiments,” said Ryuuji.

“A facility for Yuri Seto to learn to control his abilities. He abducted regular PCs who came into the shop as customers and tested the power of the flash.”

“Hmm, it’s like an online version of a psycho house.”

“However, I don’t quite understand the so-called @HOME cheats. He was tinkering with the house and not the rats. Why do that?”

“He likely did it for breeding and raising the rats,” answered David promptly.

That certainly seemed logical. An @HOME is an optimal place for concealing rats in increasing numbers. By using cheats and hacks on the room, one could increase the @HOME’s size and hold as many rats as desired.

Yet, what was KK saying? That masked man, who puts absolute trust in the ALGOS monitoring system, boasted by saying something along the lines of “even if he’s lurking in the shadow of an object, we can photograph through it” as an explanation of the surveillance system.

Would ALGOS overlook Yuri Seto’s PC body and the rats hidden in the @HOME?

Ryuuji thought that something was still missing. He felt that the cards for closing in on Yuri Seto’s scheme were not yet in hand.

“There may be a lot of clues in Travis’ chat log,” said David who seemed to notice Ryuuji’s hesitation.

“How’s his condition?”

“No changes. He’s been admitted to a new hospital in a coma. We can’t ask him directly,” David murmured as though purring.

“I’ll read the log again.”

“I’ll give it a look-over too,” said Ryuuji.

While sitting on the living room sofa, Ryuuji deployed his mobile terminal and palm PC, and returned to the previous night’s work. It took over three hours to focus and read the data he’d obtained.

There was the data handed over from Veronica Bain.

Data from David.

Data received from the informant.

He looked through all the various data he’d gotten so far. He didn’t realize what he was asking of himself. However, it felt as though there were serious clues dangling right in front of him, but he just couldn’t see them.

Just before noon, the telephone rang.

“Hello, have I reached Mr. Ryuuji Sogabe?”

It was a young woman’s voice.

“Yes, that’s right.”

“My name is Miki Tazawa and I’m a part of CyberConnect Corporation’s debug team.”

A debug team. It was the Cobalt Knights.

“I heard that you are investigating the incident that occurred four days ago,” she said in a breathy voice.

“I received instructions from upper management to tell you everything you want to know.”

“That’s very helpful. I’d like to know everything as soon as possible. What time is convenient for you?”

They decided to take time that afternoon. He was glad he declined NAB’s chat. They set up an appointment to meet at a coffee shop in Odaiba at 12:30 in the afternoon.

He interrupted the data checks that were still unfinished, went outside in the falling rain and started the car. Although it was noon, the sky was gloomy.

He quickly found the arranged shop. Inside, the shop was almost full, but the woman Ryuuji was to meet had already secured a table in the corner. When Ryuuji approached, she took notice and stood up.

“Ms. Tazawa, was it?”

Having been addressed, she awkwardly nodded her head and answered ‘yes’. She had a bob haircut, was wearing a suit, and looked very young. She could easily pass for a university student, but she should have graduated from school this spring at least. She then joined CC Corp as a new graduate, was assigned to the debug team the Cobalt Knights and immediately encountered the mega-disaster that was Yuri Seto. Well, she did not encounter him alone. It was a narrow escape. So, they were safe here. The same couldn’t be said for other members.

Ryuuji handed over his business card, finished his greeting and sat down opposite her.

“Umm, what would you like to talk about?” she asked. She looked around the shop. There were dark circles under her eyes.

“Please tell me everything you can about that day.”

“Everything?”

She blinked as though confused.

“Yeah. Actually, I don’t really know what I should inquire about. I have no idea what information I need or how useful it is. I’ll use anything I can get my hands on.”

Ryuuji scratched his head.

“Ms. Tazawa, you are a valuable witness who nearly escaped the man who annihilated the Cobalt Knights. I would like you to tell me everything you experienced that day. There may be some important clues in your story.”

The Cobalt Knights are an excellent debug team owned by CyberConnect Japan. There’s not one benefit to someone like Yuri Seto picking a fight with them. So why did Seto attack them? Even when there was a possibility of being counterattacked.

She talked about herself as she looked back at that situation.

That day, she was engaged in debugging work with the team as usual.

It was already past regular working hours and night had fallen.

She had made a mistake, was reprimanded by the Chief Knight and was logged out.

However, they had forgotten the location of the data required to correct the mistake, but as they were about to get angry again, she logged in again.

It had been less than thirty minutes since she had been away from The World. The situation had changed completely within that short time. It went from a typical day to extraordinary.

The knights were having an argument with an unknown man. While she was watching from a distance, the man suddenly tore the Deputy Chief Knight in two. Then something dark swallowed up the knights one after another. From a distance it looked like a mass of tar, but on closer inspection, it was a swarm of rats.

Finally, the Chief Knight tried to use a technique against the strange man, but it was countered and the next moment he was swarmed by the rats.

Eventually she saw the man trying to head to the chaos gates and she quickly logged out.

Back in the real world, she discovered all the members except her had lost consciousness.

The story ended there.

The content of her story, which she told only to Ryuuji, was detailed and fresh. However, it only served to support the explanation that Ryuuji received from Veronica Bain.

“Did you notice anything else?” asked Ryuuji.

“For example, did you notice anything about the man’s appearance that caught your eye?”

“No, nothing in particular.”

“Anything about his facial expressions or his gestures? Any information is great, even if it seems insignificant.”

She lowered her eyes and lightly bit her lip, but after a while she lifted her gaze.

“I’m sorry. I can’t think of anything.”

Ryuuji asked a few further questions, but her reaction did not change.

Ryuuji closed the Palm PC he had opened.

He wouldn’t hear any more stories. Unfortunately this seemed to be a waste of time.

Ryuuji started to stand up.

Sudden, Ms. Tazawa spoke as though muttering to herself.

“That man was staring at a woman.”

Ryuuji stopped moving. A woman?

“As in a female member of the Cobalt Knights?”

“What? No, that’s not it.”

“Please wait, Ms. Tazawa, umm...”

Ryuuji sat down again.

“Let me just confirm. Ah, was anyone else there?”

He reopened his palm PC.

“Besides the knights and the guy disguised as a system administrator, were there any third parties at the scene?”

“Umm, I’m sorry. My memory is fuzzy. No. There were no other people. There were some vagrant AI, though.”

After she had said this, she quickly put her hand over her mouth.

Ryuuji shook his head.

“Don’t worry if it’s classified information. I originally worked for CyberConnect. I have some sway in these circumstances.”

The existence of vagrant AI in The World is treated as classified information, but right now that wasn’t important. Ryuuji encouraged her to explain further.

“We, the debug team, were running vagrant AI deletion operations.”

She put her palms on her temples and wrapped her fingers over her head.

“I remember now. Back then, when I returned to town, there was a man who looked like a system administrator and he was talking casually to the Chief Knight. It looked as though they were conducting a business transaction. Then he left.”

“Who left? The man?”

“Yes. There was no trouble. After that, operations resumed. I missed my chance to go question the Chief Knight as I was standing in spot, trying to see the state of affairs.”

Ryuuji tapped the keyboard of his Palm PC and took notes.

“As I stood there, the knights caught a group of vagrant AIs and began to delete them. The last ones left were two of the vagrant AI I mentioned earlier.”

“Which vagrant AI were they?”

“They looked like a mother and her child. The mother was in her late twenties and the child looked to be about five years old. When the Chief Knight gathered them together and tried to pierce them with a spear, the man appeared again. Then, I think he exchanged some words with the Deputy Chief Knight.”

She paused for a moment and swallowed her saliva.

“After that, it went how I described at the beginning.”

When Ryuuji finished pondering the content of the story, he interlocked his fingers for a while.

Why did Yuri Seto, who ignored the knights, suddenly change his mind and come back to the plaza to begin a massacre. What was the purpose?

Ryuuji thought he had a grasp of the situation, but he needed ever more conclusive evidence.

He looked at Miki.

“Please tell me your impression of what you witnessed. Why do you think the man came back?”

“Now, when I think about it...”

She raised her pale face and looked back at Ryuuji.

“I think the man interrupted the Chief Knight for the two vagrant AI. Just like a parent trying to protect their child from the Knights.”

Before they knew it, a light rain started to fall.

Ryuuji returned to his car in the parking lot, took out a candy, peeled off the wrapper, and popped it in his mouth. It was cocoa flavor. While he tasted its rich sweetness, Ryuuji contemplated the information he had just acquired.

In order to save the vagrant AI, the man annihilated the Cobalt Knights. That devil unlike any other. That terrorist who sent out rats to erase the network. It was an interesting joke. Ryuuji didn't know if his notes would be useful anymore, but he would keep them on hand for a while.

Ryuuji opened the Palm PC on his knee and reread the notes he had input while in the shop. He opened several files at random, scrolled down the

screen, closed the keyboard and placed the Palm PC on the passenger-side seat. He suddenly got a strange feeling and took the Palm PC in hand once again.

The data that was handed off from Veronica Bain when she officially accepted his request had been left open. It was a profile concerning Yuri Kasinsky Seto, also known as Yuri Seto, also known as Drain.

Suddenly, without warning, something struck a chord in his head.

Ryuuji slowly reread the material that he had read through many times already.

Yuri Seto, from Okinawa Prefecture. Born to a US Armed Forces father and Japanese mother.

Immediately after his birth, he immigrated to the US with his family due to his father's reassignment.

When Seto was six years old, his father died in a training accident.

Seto returned to Japan with his mother, but two years later his mother died of natural causes.

He was taken care of by his mother's relatives until he became a high school student.

It was around his first year of junior high that he started to dabble in hacking.

Later he went to Tokyo, enrolled in Chikuba University and joined the faculty of medicine. His major was neurosurgery. He advanced to graduate school, but dropped out just before graduating. The reason is unknown.

Then, at the age of twenty-seven, he caused the Deadly Flash incident.

Ryuuji laid down the Palm PC, reclined back in his seat and closed his eyes.

An important keyword was missing.

Chapter 35

Doll Syndrome

He ran the car for about an hour, then entered the main street of Nishiarai in Adachi City. He bypassed the station, past the tree-lined avenues, until a concrete building came into view. Ryuuji passed through the gate above which was a sign that read “Data Device Research Museum,” parked in the parking lot and looked at the building’s entrance.

There were no signs of visitors. The surroundings were silent. This area was separated from the hustle and bustle of the city and it was quiet like the bottom of the sea.

Ryuuji exited his car and headed for the boorish concrete building in the thin rain.

On the door of the entrance hung a heavy old-fashioned lock. Ryuuji looked through the glass and peeked inside, but the lights were not on.

A man holding a yellow umbrella appeared from a side entrance. In his left hand he held a plastic bag from a convenience store.

He noticed Ryuuji and came over while closing his umbrella.

“We’re closed today,” the man said. He had a slightly high-pitched voice, his hairline was receding and on his face was a 5 o’clock shadow. His eyes looked at Ryuuji from behind thick-framed glasses. On his shirt was an ID badge indicating that he was the curator.

“Is it a holiday? Well, that’s unfortunate. Is it a regular closing day?”

“Yes, we are closed the second Wednesday of every month.”

As he said this, the man turned his back to Ryuuji and shook the water droplets off the umbrella.

It was a poorly timed holiday, but of course Ryuuji wouldn’t reveal what he really thought of it. There were important questions to ask.

“Oh, excuse me. Are you...” Ryuuji said to the man’s back.

“Are you by any chance the curator Professor Taichiro Sugai?”

The man stopped moving and slowly turned around.

When he looked back to Ryuuji’s face, the signs that showed he was capable of a warm and friendly reception, which had been there for quite a while, completely vanished. He now spoke with an intense and obstinate tone.

“Are you with mass communications?”

“No, I’m not.”

Ryuuji offered his business card.

The man took the business card and looked at Ryuuji’s name and title written there.

“What is it you want?”

“I’m sorry I don’t have an appointment. I came here because I have something to ask you.”

Ryuuji took out his mobile terminal, launched an e-book application and one of the books he had downloaded from the digital store — “Online Games Are Turning Our Children Into Dolls — The Dangers of Doll Syndrome!” was displayed on the front page.

“I’d like to ask you about the book you wrote.”

“There’s nothing to talk about. Please leave,” Taichiro Sugai said in a gruff voice. His face was turning red with thick blue veins appearing on his forehead.

“Every time some idiot causes an incident involving the internet, the press comes to me like I know everything and say ‘Professor, what’s your opinion on this?’ like deer caught in headlights. From my heart of hearts, even though I’m the author of that sensationalist book, I only pretend to be an expert on the internet. I’m getting fed up with it.”

Ryuuji waved his hand in a big motion.

“It’s not a sensationalist book at all. I got the impression that it is a wonderfully farsighted book.”

“Farsighted?”

Mr. Sugai’s eyes shone grudgingly. He thrust his right index finger at Ryuuji.

“You read it and thought that? Elaborate.”

“You sincerely proposed that we think more seriously about the influence of computers on children,” Ryuuji said immediately.

Mr. Sugai blinked as though he had just received an unexpected counterattack.

“For people without discernment, the personal computer is a present-day Mephistopheles. According to promoters of the Internet, all information on the internet is supposed to be free. However, whenever we use a computer, we are parting with something more valuable than money. What this present-day Mephistopheles desires is our most precious resource, time.”

Ryuuji recited the text from memory while being aware that he was not looking at the e-book on hand. Since he had read it yesterday, this morning, and in the early afternoon, some of the content was still fresh in his mind. He may have changed some details though.

“To use the internet, we must pay the cost with our time alive on this planet. What will happen to the children whose valuable time is sucked up when it could have been spent on developing themselves? Inner strength, social skills, decisiveness, perseverance. Such qualities cannot be downloaded from the internet. I think your assertion is exactly right.”

As he said this, Ryuuji looked at the e-book.

“Look, there are some good things written in here. ‘Social media does not foster social skills.’ That’s a wise sentiment.”

“Hmm.”

Mr. Sugai gave a low growl of displeasure and withdrew his finger from Ryuuji’s chest. He stared at Ryuuji’s face with eyes that looked as though they were looking at some strange being that was born of experimentation.

“‘Knowledge is power.’ What do you think of this as a statement that denotes the internet’s merits?”

“It’s like reheating cold bacon. It’s unappealing.”

“Hmm.”

Mr. Sugai let out a low growl again. This time his voice was clearly mixed with surprise.

“It’s rare that a person who has seriously read my book comes to me.”

It seemed his mood had improved.

“Oh, is that so?! If I could offer some honest feedback...” continued Ryuuji.

“I don’t really care for the title. I wonder if it’s perhaps a little too on the mark.”

“The publisher selected that without my input! I wanted to pick a more respectable title!” Mr. Sugai said with an angry voice, but his mood had become a bit more relaxed.

“So,” he said as he turned away. “What was it again?”

“Ryuuji Sogabe.”

“Not your name, your business here.”

“I wanted to get your side of the story on this book.”

“I see.”

Mr. Sugai held the closed umbrella between his hands and fastened the band around it.

“What are we doing standing outside talking on a rainy day like this?” he muttered without looking at Ryuuji.

“Let’s chat inside.”

Mr. Sugai entered the building through the rear entrance ahead of Ryuuji and passed through a hall on the museum’s ground floor.

There were no others in the building besides Ryuuji and Mr. Sugai. Only the vibrant emergency lights were illuminating the various exhibits.

“Please wait here. I’ll be back in a moment,” said Mr. Sugai who then disappeared into a small room in the back. It seemed to be a night-duty room.

While waiting for Mr. Sugai to return, Ryuuji looked at what was contained in the exhibition cases.

There were legacy devices from every time and place one could imagine. Machines that became obsolete due to the development of new technologies. It was a mortuary for old machines that were created as a result of changes in technology, flourished for a time, but soon became obsolete and vanished.

Things that Ryuuji himself had used before, things he hadn’t gotten to use and things he had never even seen before lined the cases.

Ryuuji spotted a machine housed in a big case beside him and suddenly felt nostalgic. He had used it many years ago. It was a communication device that acoustically couples to a telephone receiver using a speaker and a microphone to perform data communication.

“It’s an old-fashioned unit connection-machine,” said Mr. Sugai as he returned. He was still holding the plastic bag.

“Hackers from the early days were able to penetrate facilities from all over the world using that device and a telephone line.”

“There are a lot of nostalgic things lined up here. Do they still work?”

“I keep them maintained. If I set up the right circumstances, everything should work without issue. I don’t think I’ll get the change though.”

He proceeded to a simple service area set up on a table.

Mr. Sugai turned on a light in the corner, poured some coffee into a paper cup from a coffee dispenser and put it in front of Ryuuji. Then he took a small milk carton and anpan out of the bag and arranged them in front of himself.

“I’ll take care of this first. I haven’t eaten lunch yet, so I bought these.”

The time was close to three o’clock.

“I love bean paste,” said Mr. Sugai as he put a straw in the milk carton.

“My doctor warned me against it, but I can’t stop. When I eat this, I feel alive.”

Ryuuji drank his coffee. It tasted as though something had died in it.

Looking at him, Ryuuji felt that Mr. Sugai looked like an elderly person who was aging rapidly rather than a middle-aged man.

Ryuuji got the sense that Mr. Sugai was very lonely. Like a mood that emanates from a isolated and decaying tree.

“Sorry about before,” said Mr. Sugai, barely moving his lips.

“This is the first book I’ve written, but for me it’s like a plague. Thanks to that book, rude reporters often come to me and conduct one-sided interviews. So, I instinctively became brash.”

“I surmised as much,” said Ryuuji who then drank some coffee. Something definitely had died in it.

“The Dangers of Doll Syndrome!” was the best-selling book authored by Taichiro Sugai six years ago in 2017. It suggested that computers have a serious impact on human beings which caused a major sensation at the time.

However, among those who read the book, how many people could understand Mr. Sugai’s true intention? The greatest misfortune of the book “The Dangers of Doll Syndrome!” — and ironically its greatest fortune — was that its publication coincided with the AIDA phenomenon, one of the dark aspects related to The World.

Moreover, such a time is agreeable to a publisher who wants to make a best-seller and the expectations of the media who want to exaggerate the incident.



Of the nine chapters in “The Dangers of Doll Syndrome!”, the place that discusses the causes of the AIDA phenomenon actually takes up less than one chapter. In the first place, it is a proposal that people think about how they interact with computers, merely a collection of frank research papers unrelated to the occult and sensationalist pseudoscience literature.

The book was featured on a TV program and “The Dangers of Doll Syndrome!” eventually exceeded 400,000 copies, becoming a best-seller.

However, Ryuuji thought, as far as the current situation was concerned, Mr. Sugai alone continued to pay the price.

Academic societies in this country will never forgive people who have been exposed by the media. Mainstream academics will never let these people back into the fold.

This situation was more akin to a graveyard than to a workplace. Mr. Sugai himself seemed to be a legacy device. He was forced into a do-nothing job as a manager of a museum hidden away in a little corner of Tokyo, forgotten by everyone.

However, even though he thought this, Ryuuji liked the elderly man in front of him.

Although their ages were years apart, Mr. Sugai was somewhat similar to a teacher from Ryuuji’s college days.

“I don’t mean only the old days were good. That’s just meaningless nostalgia. Instead, we should rethink how we associate ourselves with computers. I wanted to say that in my book,” said Mr. Sugai.

“As you said, the concept expressed by Francis Bacon, ‘Knowledge is power’, which regards information and power as equivalent, is being abused and changing things for the worse. Bacon was conscious of the Old Testament when writing that. It represents the idea that personal growth is connected to ‘knowledge’ that is expressed in the Bible. It is experience, maturity and discernment. It is having a big-picture cognitive ability and a profound thoughtfulness that is unrelated to information rolling around on the internet. So, power has nothing to do with it. Even so, people want to think that the internet and the technology that supports them are omnipotent forces. They are convinced that innovative technology that is suddenly created one day will solve all of the problems and worries they’ve ever had.”

Mr. Sugai kept talking. Perhaps he was hungry to talk with others.

“So, what did you want to ask me?” asked Mr. Sugai, who suddenly remembered as he washed down the last piece of anpan with milk.

Ryuuji hesitated to speak.

What he was about to say may not be what Mr. Sugai had hoped for. There was a good chance of that. Ryuuji could not bear to disturb the man’s feelings by telling him things he was not prepared for.

Even so, it was impossible not to talk about it.

“If you’ll excuse me, I studied your career. You, Professor Sugai, taught at Chikuba University from 1999 to 2019. Is that correct?”

“That’s correct.”

“I am working now to find out about a certain person,” said Ryuuji.

“I have been looking for some kind of potential involvement between that person and you, Professor Sugai. I came here today to confirm that.”

“Hm?”

Sugai made a face as though he did not know what this was about.

“The problem is this book’s preface.”

Ryuuji took out his mobile terminal and displayed some text from “The Dangers of Doll Syndrome!”.

“Its preface?”

“Hell certainly exists...” Ryuuji read aloud.

“It is a place of filth. A place that does not even receive the sun’s light and warmth. A place where streams of endless desires overflow. A place where terrible and sinister screams roar all around you. A place you should not be connected with. Yes, that is Hell. It is a place you should not uncover.”

He stopped reading there.

“Should it be called an epigram? That is a sentence quoted from an American poet named Thompson.”

Mr. Sugai nodded.

“Ah, that’s right. I used to quote it often before my lectures. Rather than talking abstractly, I think it made it easier to imagine the negative side of the internet. So, I also used it in the preface of my book.”

“Is there anything else you remember about this epigram? Any memorable person? For example, was there someone who showed a strong interest in this poem at your lectures?”

When he saw Mr. Sugai’s reaction to the question, Ryuuji realized that he finally grasped a thread that could lead him somewhere.

Taichiro Sugai understood something that Ryuuji himself, who was seeking it, did not understand clearly.

“You know about him,” said Taichiro Sugai.

“Are you investigating Yuri Seto?”

Chapter 36

Cheers

Those words continued to echo in Ryuuji's mind. Like a reverberation that flies across a deathly quiet forest. Like a ghost wandering a vast graveyard. Along with memories of several years spent in Schwabing. Over and over. On and on.

2011, the year after Pluto Again.

Ryuuji became an assistant on the recommendation of Professor Manfred Neimann. He was a teaching assistant as opposed to a research assistant. A student pays tuition and studies academic subjects, but an assistant can earn an income while studying for a degree.

Better than anything else was the right to live in a special dormitory for married men. This special dormitory was on the west side of the university campus. Originally a part of a sanatorium for tuberculosis patients, the hospital was refurbished into condominiums shortly after the war. Cracks ran in places along the outer wall, which looked like a huge spider web from a distance.

There was no need to worry, though. Repair work was to start within the year, a senior administrator who showed Ryuuji and Kaya around told them.

It's been more than half a century and it's still the same, but if construction is ever completed, it will be as good as new. It'd be perfect for a new residence.

"What do you think?" Kaya asked after the preliminary inspection.

"It's pretty good," Ryuuji replied. He especially liked the shape of the cracks in the north wall. They could be used in a Rorschach test.

"Other than that, I like it. When should we do the report?"

Let's try today, said Ryuuji.

After dinner that evening, he informed the Weisses that he was thinking of moving out, Mr. and Mrs. Weiss looked at each other.

Mrs. Weiss knitted her lovely eyebrows.

"I wish you could stay here forever."

Mr. Weiss, who wanted to add to what Mrs. Weiss said, kept looking downwards and turned to Ryuuji and Kaya.

"I figured it was about time you started to consider being more independent," he said softly.

"Please go. Go and try to live life to the fullest. However, if you run into any trouble, please do not hesitate to call on us at any time. Even if you do not have any issues, please come visit us at least a couple of times a year. Both you and Kaya are like family to us, like a little brother and sister.

Mr. Weiss smiled broadly. "The dog will be really sad with you gone," he said as he extended his hand.

"I'm glad someone will miss us," Ryuuji replied and he grasped Mr. Weiss's hand.

Mrs. Weiss hugged Kaya.

The four of them embraced each other, pressing their cheeks together.

Lilie was sleeping asleep on the sofa in front of the fireplace.

Grit lay under the sofa and yawned.

They finished moving to the new house and Ryuuji took a day off. He bought a tent for three people and went out to the Baltic Sea along with Kaya. It was a substitute for their honeymoon. They headed north on the International E-road network. Kaya also had a license, so she and Ryuuji took turns driving on the way. After two days on the road, they arrived in Rostock.

The streets were chilly since it was early spring, but the coast was crowded with tourists.

Ryuuji and Kaya slowly walked around in the clear air as though blessing the fleeting spring and felt the fine sand shift under their feet. They bought sandwiches, potato chips and bottles of beer at a shop they found along the way, then found a grassy area and sat down.

When they saw the burning red sunset eventually fall over the Baltic, Ryuuji returned to his car and assembled a dome-shaped tent and the two of them crawled inside.

The next morning when Ryuuji awoke, the surroundings were covered in the darkness just before dawn. Ryuuji forgot where they were for a moment, but he was immediately reminded of Kaya's breath.

Ryuuji carefully crawled out of the tent so as to not wake her. He took a beer in his right hand, climbed the small sandy beach and sat down. He listened to the sound of the waves and downed the bottle in two gulps while taking in the smell of the tides.

Ryuuji thought about his life before coming to Munich, before he met Kaya. "I wonder if that was truly me," he said to himself. "And is that who I really am here now?" He didn't know how to feel about it.

Ryuuji was surprised that everything changed completely after their marriage and his behavior seemed to have completely changed.

He wondered what he should say about these feelings now. How should he express these emotions?

The sky was beginning to brighten.

Then, birds began to sing from somewhere. Ryuuji stood up and searched for the source of the sound, but could not find it.

Kaya came out from the tent and walked over to Ryuuji.

"Ryuuji?"

"Hey, good morning."

"Good morning," Kaya said as she looked at Ryuuji. It was dark and she couldn't see well, but was he smiling?

"I'll always be with you," Ryuuji said. "Want a beer?"

Kaya shook her head quickly to refuse the offer and the birds chirped again.

"Oh, Robins," Kaya said as she looked at the sea, the same moment that Ryuuji did likewise.

Ryuuji traced Kaya's line of sight and turned his face to the sea again.

However, he saw no birds anywhere.

The bright sunlight penetrated the cold air of the early morning and the sea began to regain its color.

"Hey, did you know?" Kaya asked.

“Among some types of migratory birds, there are individuals that will stay behind to live in the places they stopped at along their journey,” Kaya whispered as she gazed at the sea. She whispered so as to not startle the birds, even though they still hadn’t spotted any.

“It is a healthy individual. It doesn’t stay behind for reasons such as getting injured and not being able to fly or getting sick. Nothing like that. Nevertheless, it stays behind,” she continued. She looked at Ryuuji. “Why do you think that is?”

Kaya’s figure seemed to gradually become hazy in the dim light. Her question puzzled Ryuuji.

“Ah, why don’t we find a shop that serves good coffee?”

After thinking for a while, Ryuuji replied in a way he thought would be effective at changing the subject. It was all frivolous banter.

Kaya giggled and wrapped her arms around Ryuuji.

“Then shall we go back to the city and get some delicious coffee?” she asked.

“That’s a good idea,” Ryuuji said as he pulled Kaya close.

I’m glad you came, Ryuuji thought while he looked at the horizon. I won’t forget about this beach. Ryuuji had a good feeling about that. He wouldn’t forget yesterday’s silent talks. This moment at twilight. The scenery. The waves, the sand and the sky. The bird song. The sound of the tide. His wife standing beside him. I will never forget, Ryuuji thought to himself.

At the end of the year, Kaya gave birth to a daughter. Ryuuji and Kaya named her Sascha.

Then the busy days began. It was the most fulfilling time in Ryuuji’s life.

Every day he went to lectures as a student till two o’clock in the afternoon and after that he worked as an assistant. He served as an assistant to the research assistants, prepared instruments and gathered experimental data. In the meantime he found time to advance in his field and write several papers.

At one time, the building containing the psychiatric and neuropathology laboratory was demolished and it was decided to relocate the classroom to another building.

A large amount of clinical records became a problem. They were overwhelmingly short of the manpower needed to move the mountain of paper from a warehouse and organize it at its new home.

In order to cope with the record which had become a liability, Ryuuji appealed to the professor on the need for a computer. He got approval under the pretext of moving records more smoothly, so he immediately went to the general affairs department and borrowed a set of personal computers. Then before the professor changed his mind, Ryuuji directed some free students and they were able to enter the contents of all the charts into the computers in about five days.

After Professor Nyman realized this, he fulfilled his duty by destroying the entirety of the paper charts in a paper shredder.

Under the cover of the confusion of relocating, Ryuuji revamped the database management procedures, so to speak.

For some time after that, the professor spent his lectures with a look as though he had swallowed something sour.

Then, if for some reason it became necessary to investigate past records, he called on Ryuuji.

“You should check it out with your microcomputer.”

“Microcomputer?”

The professor was an extraordinarily intelligent and capable person except when it came to computers. Ryuuji continued to write his thesis under the guidance of the professor and soon participated in conferences and then presented the thesis. The information gathered while making the clinical records database was had been useful.

Two years later, Ryuuji was promoted to research assistant.

He was by no means a professor, but he could no longer spare time for odd jobs as he could before. As the professor’s representative, he would give lectures more often, though not enough to be paid as a professor, but he earned enough to meet his needs.

In the summer of that year, Kaya and Ryuuji visited Mr. and Mrs. Weiss, having been invited to a barbecue party.

After a long absence, the garden of the old house greeted them as before.

Along with Mr. Weiss’s longtime friends, a number of so-called ‘celebrities’ of the town were invited.

For a long time, Mr. Weiss had been working on procedures for preserving the family manor. The manor was a cultural property owned by Mr. Weiss, but the request was finally approved and the manor became the legal property of a public utility foundation where Mr. Weiss served as a representative. By doing so, it became possible to save a great deal of taxes incurred from the repair and maintenance costs of the manor.

Mr. Weiss was in good spirits from beginning to end. Mrs. Weiss was busy preparing food and greeting guests.

In a corner of the garden, Lilie, who seemed to have grown tired of helping in the kitchen, lay against Grit as she read a picture book. Grit listened to her awkwardly read the story aloud with an expression that suggested he understood every word.



Ryuuji and Kaya left Sascha with Grit and Lilie, then went to give Mr. and Mrs. Weiss some help.

Sascha, who was now one year old, looked like Lilie's sister. Sascha and Lilie seemed alike in almost every way. The only clear difference was that Sascha had black hair and Lilie was blonde.

The party, which began in the morning, ended late in the evening.

After seeing the guests out and tidying up, only Ryuuji, Kaya, and Mr. and Mrs. Weiss were left at the table in the garden. The sun was setting and the stars were beginning to twinkle. Sascha and Lilie were laying against Grit fast asleep.

Following Mr. Weiss's lead, all four raised their cups.

"Gesundheit," Mr. Weiss said in a dignified tone.

It was merely a toast greeting.

Yet Ryuuji could not forget this word.

Each time he looked back on those days, he could not help but feel the presence of someone who controls human destiny. If he thought about what would befall six people in this place over the next few years, himself included, the word was too ironic. Too cruel.

‘Health.’ Could there have been any other word less suitable for those six people?

Of course, at the time, he never considered such a thing.

The world gently shone. It was full of blessings.

Ryuuji looked at Kaya. Kaya returned the look and smiled.

Kaya looked so beautiful. Ryuuji could honestly say that she had never looked more beautiful than at this time.

That’s right, Ryuuji thought to himself. We should go to the beach at Rostock again when Sascha gets bigger and can travel long distances. We can all watch the ocean together. We can hear the birds sing. At that time, there could even be four of us. Whether it’s a son or daughter, our whole little family will go together.

No work, no research, no articles to write, Ryuuji thought.

Everything was going so well. Surely this would continue, Ryuuji thought.

Kaya and Sascha died six months later.

Chapter 37

A Malicious Horde

Thursday, June 8, 2023.

After sending Lilie off to school, Ryuuji headed to the office.

The rain had stopped which was unusual for this time of year. The sun was peeping through gaps in the clouds and the smell of wet grass wafted through the streets. He opened the window and let fresh air into the car. It was going to be a wonderful day. Unless Yuri Seto was quietly working towards his goal.

“On Thursday, June 8, I will unleash my rats on the whole world,”
Seto said in a back-alley of Mac Anu’s harbor.

“My rats will descend on every computer terminal and will render the Great Light of Salvation to all those who are tired of the internet.”

Ryuuji arrived at the office, sat at his desk and opened his handheld computer. He then looked up the NAB news site and carefully looked through every corner of each page. The front page, the financial column, editorials, national news, international news, and the obituaries. Ryuuji read through them all. The United States did something, Russia reacted, China did something, Britain apparently did something, something about the cabinet, imports, exports, baseball, soccer, a traffic accident, fires, an earthquake, stock prices, due to various factors, cucumbers are recommended as this year’s garden vegetables, and many more news items.

There were no cases that suggested any activity from Seto. The world seemed to be maintaining peace despite how much danger was out there.

However, Ryuuji still could not help feeling insecure. He felt like something unimaginable could happen.

A call came from David before ten o’clock in the morning. He said that he

was on his way to the office, but his voice had a gloomy resonance.

“Did something happen?”

There was an extended silence on the other end of the receiver.

“There’s news from the head office. Seto was found. In the real world,” David said.

Ryuuji gripped the receiver.

“Has he been arrested?”

“No, that’s impossible. He can’t be arrested now,” David said as though spitting something up.

“We found his body. It seems that he’s been dead for at least three months...”

Ryuuji hung up the phone and looked out the window.

It seemed as though he was witnessing a nightmare oozing out from under the early summer sun.

It was as he had predicted. Something unimaginable had happened.

At 10:30 AM, David arrived by taxi. His face was pale.

“Let’s put the course of events in order,” said Ryuuji.

“Yuri Seto was released from prison last June. After that, he was hired by the San Diego branch, but nine months later in April he disappeared. I met Drain in *The World* on June 3rd and today, Seto was found dead.”

It was reported that Yuri Seto was found in an abandoned shack in a suburb in Colorado. He had been sitting in a chair in the corner of the room and died in a position that suggested he had been taking a nap. There were no signs of a struggle and the police concluded that it was a suicide. Although the cause of death is unknown, it is speculated that he might have used drugs.

Thanks to the dry climate in Colorado, the corpse did not decay and became a mummy. His identity was confirmed with his fingerprints.

“From the corpse’s condition, Seto’s time of death is placed between January and March of this year. No later than April.”

David nodded.

“When we met with Seto in the game and talked with him, he was already dead in real life.”

“It looks that way.”

“Then, who is controlling Drain?”

“Perhaps someone else is impersonating Yuri Seto and operating his PC.”

Ryuuji shook his head in response to David’s suggestion.

“I don’t think so. If someone was impersonating Seto, the investigation should have uncovered it by now.”

“But... if you’re right, what would that mean in this case?” David asked cautiously. Naturally he knew the answer. He understood. He was trying to make Ryuuji say it to ensure they were thinking the same thing.

Ryuuji spoke.

“Only Yuri Seto’s mind is active inside the game.”

Ryuuji and David stared at each other.

“What a hilarious joke.”

“It really is a cruel joke, isn’t it?”

David shook his head.

“But, it is possible. We are talking about The World. There are reports of similar cases in the past. In R:1 and R:2. Yet, this time it was different since apparently that man wanted to become a Lost One himself. An artificially created Lost One — no, in this case, he should be called a voluntary Lost One.”

Why did he do such a thing? That was also clear. He had said it himself many times. It was for the trial that others couldn’t understand or sympathize with. He cast away his physical body so as not to be disturbed by anyone and went deep into the world of the electronic brain.

It turned out that it was now impossible to detain Seto in the real world. There was no choice but to stop him in the game.

Then David and Ryuuji went over other information for about an hour.

David told Ryuuji about the information he had learned from NAB’s Akasaka branch.

“In the background of the incident in 2022, there was a cat PC that made full use of the power of the Black Forest. This cat confined the consciousness of regular PCs to The World, split an airship in two, converted background data into huge monsters and moved them, and generally seems to have made quite a mess. Then, the information dealer’s side of the story could be properly interpreted. We could confirm the images of the rats with the person in

charge, but the exact same purple hexagonal effect that showed on the rats also showed on the monsters that appeared at the time.”

“It’s almost the same as this case,” Ryuuji said, and David nodded.

“There’s no doubt that Seto uses the power of the Black Forest.”

Just as Flügel linked his powers to the Akashic Records and made improvements to Brieler Rössle, Yuri Seto joined his powers with the Black Forest and created a large number of rats. This solved the secret of the huge swarm of rats.

Ryuuji explained that he met with Taichiro Sugai, a former Associate Professor at Chikuba University.

“He was involved in this before Seto was apprehended.”

“That’s a very old acquaintance. Seto was arrested in 2003. He’s an acquaintance from over two decades ago?”

“Right. He was a professor when Seto was a student at Chikuba University. I heard some interesting stories from him,” Ryuuji explained.

David had a strange expression on his face.

“Is that helpful?”

“Probably. He may be the secret weapon that puts a bullet in Seto.”

Just then, Ryuuji’s cell phone rang. The name displayed on the screen was “Unknown Caller.” There was only one person other than David who knew the number to this phone.

It was Urania.

“Flügel, can you come right away?”

“What’s wrong?”

“The fucking rats suddenly appeared in town. I don’t know where they’ve been hiding until now, but they’re transferring in one after the other. The Sophia Squad are going around burning them, but we need more helping hands.”

Ryuuji felt as if his entire body suddenly had a fever.

It seemed that Yuri Seto had set his plan in motion.

“Come to ALGOS and help us out.”

“Understood. I’ll be there soon.”

“KK is at his wit’s end and is completely useless. Give him a kick in the ass and put him to work.”

ALGOS' @HOME was in an uproar as though someone had disturbed a beehive.

About ten or so system administrators who had not shown up at all when Flügel last visited were now running this way and that. They must have been full-time programmers.

There was KK, blending in with them. When he saw Flügel and Kusame, he stood up from his seat at a terminal in surprise.

Flügel raised his hand.

"Thanks for the other day."

"Flügel, why are you here?"

"I just came by to kill some time. How's it going?"

KK was obviously frustrated. His bird mask was dangling a little from his face, but he did not seem to notice. He stared at Flügel with sharp eyes.

"I'm working right now. I'm sorry, but I cannot show our activities here to outsiders. Please leave immediately."

"Now, now. Now, now, now. I brought some very valuable material. Here, the manual of rat countermeasures I promised."

Of course, it was a lie. He had not prepared such a manual. Flügel looked around at the programmers moving excitedly.

"But, what happened? There's a very tense atmosphere here."

"Flügel."

"'We can work together.' That's what you said, isn't it?"

He said, affecting a light tone, then speaking in a low voice.

"You may be too late if you don't hurry. I do not know what is going on, but you're in charge here, aren't you?"

KK was at a loss for words. It seemed he was trying to weigh his options in his mind based on things such as advantages and disadvantages, posture, responsibility, trouble, confidentiality, and self-interest.

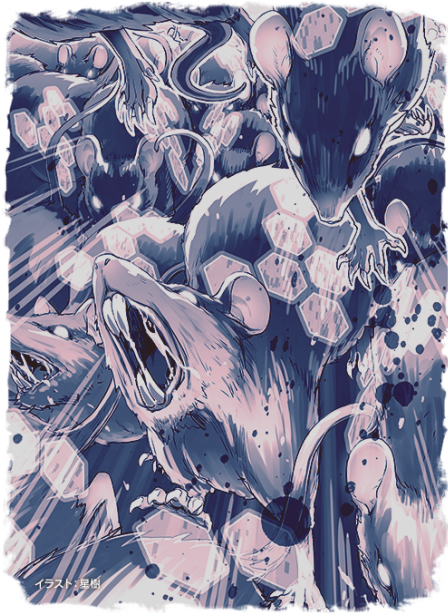
KK broke the silence after a pause of about two seconds. He passed by Flügel to the center of the room.

"Actually, right now the situation is abnormal."

KK signaled the nearby System Admins and numerous windows appeared on the surface of a wall. In the windows, images of the swarms of the rats and the Sophia squad following it were displayed.

Flügel was astonished.

Rats, rats, and more rats. All the windows were filled with rats. The rats were packed together very tightly. They kept running all over each other without any clear direction.



From the sky, the Sophia squad delivered napalm blasts, but in Net Slum, the bombing that should have been effective was now unable to clear out the rats. A direct hit from the napalm merely dispelled some of them.

However, once the fire dissipated and the smoke settled, rats crawled out from under the pile and resumed running around. There was no end to them. No matter where one looked, there was no end. It was as though the ground were covered in a dark brown carpet. The carpet moved as though landslides were occurring.

“Didn’t you chase the swarms of rats to the brink of destruction?”

“We were supposed to have done that. As of midnight, the number of rats had fallen to about three hundred. With a little more effort, we hoped to be able to eradicate them today. Then, this morning, swarms of rats suddenly appeared in all the towns and in some areas and the number keeps increasing. The Sophia Corps is tackling the situation and carrying out anti-viral

procedures, but they are short on hands. The speed at which the rats increase is too fast.”

“They keep increasing?” Ryuuji asked.

“How many are there now?”

KK seemed reluctant to answer.

“A few minutes ago, they exceeded 300 million.”

Flügel was speechless.

The number far surpassed all of his expectations.

In the battle in Net Slum, the Sophia squad overwhelmed the rats, but Ryuuji remembered that it took seven people and roughly 30 minutes to delete everything. The swarm of rats at that time was probably about 100 million. Now it was three times that number.

All the windows disappeared, and single large window expanded across the wall.

“This is a data diagram that integrates a bird’s eye view of each server in The World. Please note that each red dot represents one hundred rats.”

As though a brush of red paint was swiped across a canvas, innumerable small red dots appeared across the huge window. They were too numerous to count. The World was being eroded by the rats.

Is this the power of the Black Forest?

Drain said something behind the alley of Mac Anu.

“I will fill this this world with rats.”

Now the final match was getting underway.

This is a do-or-die situation, Flügel thought. I must get hit by his attack. I will endure and surpass it and my chance to counterattack will appear.

“By my calculations, we were supposed to be able to finish today. However, we couldn’t because Urania was reluctant to sortie...” KK muttered.

“I told her to annihilate them as soon as possible...”

It was a miscalculated view, but Ryuuji didn’t say anything.

“Where’s Urania?”

“She’s doing work in Mac Anu. That’s where most of the rats are.”

“I want to talk to her.”

“Well...” KK mumbled.

“Is there a problem?”

“As you probably know, Urania is a difficult person to handle. I hate to call you away from your work for this.”

“That’s okay. You’ve only asked two or three times.”

After looking at with suspicious eyes, KK switched on a desk microphone and gave it to Flügel.

“Well, please use this.”

Flügel moved to the mic and spoke.

“U, can you hear me?”

“Huh? Who’s this?” said Urania, her voice reverberating around the room.

“It’s Flügel. Sorry to bother you while you’re working, but I’d like to talk to you for a moment.”

There was a pause.

“To what do I owe this unannounced intrusion by a damn punk who should be here? Why are you calling? Especially when I’m so fucking busy...”

After she groaned sullenly, she hurled insults in an angry voice.

“KK, you brought him to the monitor room? What were you thinking?! Do you not understand that this is a really bad time right now?”

Flügel extended the microphone and KK approached and spoke. He was noticeably flinching.

“Sorry. I told him that and he didn’t listen to me, but I gave it a shot...”

“You jackass. Is this some ploy to pull me away from my backup files? Wouldn’t that be a breach of contract? What will you do if I fail to exterminate the rats because of your stupidity?!”

“Understood. We’ll talk about this later. Please just talk to Flügel for now.”

After KK tried to appease her, Flügel took back the mic and spoke.

“Ah, is that okay?”

“Go ahead, Flügel,” said Urania who changed the tone of her voice.

“What do you want to know?”

KK looked at Flügel in amazement, but Flügel moved to the microphone and spoke into it without any regard for KK’s expression.

“First, please tell me the situation.”

“We are dispersing to the town in each server, exterminating the rats and moving on to the next place.”

“I heard that the rats are increasing in real time. Why is that?”

“About a thousand rats are sent to the Chaos Gate at regular intervals. It’s unbearable. I have no time to catch my breath. The rats that transfer in do not attack general PCs and don’t fight back against the Sophia Corps. They just transfer in and start running. There doesn’t seem to be any rhyme or reason to their movements, but that doesn’t mean they’re running around without a purpose. It feels as though they’re running round and round along the same path.”

“Are they not getting incinerated? Like the time at Net Slum.”

“They’re tougher than that time. Even with the Sophia squad’s firepower, a single blow doesn’t delete them. They seem to be defeated after getting hit by two or three napalm strikes. It seems the enemy has implemented some kind of countermeasure program.”

“Has there been any damage to regular PCs?”

“No, at least not yet. As I said earlier, since this phenomenon began, the rats have not done any harm to the players. They’ve completely ignored them.”

She gave a little laugh.

“It seems that regular PCs believe this to be an event. Some of them are taking screenshots. It’s an easy-going atmosphere.”

“That’s a big relief,” said Flügel.

“It’s better than people panicking or becoming Lost Ones. I get it. Please continue things as they are.”

“Is there something you’re aiming to do? I’m getting tired of chasing this parade of rats.”

“From now on, I’ll concentrate on locating the swarm’s source.”

Urania whistled.

“Please tell me if you find it. I’ll send my complaints directly to the bastard. Then the shit will really hit the fan.”

Flügel ended the call and turned around to see KK and the programmers staring at Flügel, seemingly short of breath.

“So,” Flügel said to them.

“Rats are being sent to towns using the Chao Gates’ transfer function. That means that a battalion of rats is hiding and waiting somewhere in The World. Perhaps Drain will also be there.”

One of the programmers spoke up.

“But... we have been searching for him with ALGOS’ camera for a long time.”

Another programmer chimed in.

“Yet there’s no sign of him anywhere. We can’t find him.”

“Hold on, don’t just give out information arbitrarily,” KK said in a hysterical voice.

“I will answer Flügel’s question.”

Flügel thought back upon what was written in Travis Bond’s log.

Travis was analyzing the @HOME on the instructions of Seto. If Seto were concealing the rats, it is doubtful that he hid them near the @HOME.

“Oh, I would like to check the camera’s functionality. Can it peek inside a building?”

“Of course,” KK said with a nod.

“Even inside an @HOME like ALGOS?”

“It can certainly have a look.”

“What about an expanded room? What if one was added by a cheat rather than a legitimate system?”

“It can,” KK promptly answered.

“The method is not an issue. ALGOS cameras have absolutely not missed anything whether it’s a cheat or not. As long as there’s data there, the cameras will find it.”

As he listened to the answer, Flügel looked all around him. Suddenly one of the monitors caught his eye. An airship was floating in the sky above a town.

An airship is one of the systems of a guild. By upgrading an @HOME, users will be able to use an airship in the same way they use a motorcycle.

“How did that get there? That airship.”

Flügel pointed at the monitor.

“The same as any airship.”

KK shook his head shrewdly.

“The camera is set to the program’s highest height. Since the airship’s hover zone is far below that setting, the airship can be monitored like a normal @HOME.

While going back and forth with questions and answers with Flügel, KK seemed to calm down.

“ALGOS’ monitoring system is perfect. So, there would be no reason for it to miss anything.”

As long as they followed the correct procedure, this world would be protected, but if not, his tone of voice suggested that something strange may be happening in this world.

Flügel was silent for awhile.

“Can you change the height of the camera?”

“What?”

“Can you raise the camera’s position higher than the currently set height? Perhaps you can do it using the debugging function.”

“It’s no use,” KK said as he shook his head.

“There’s no graphical data beyond that point.”

“That’s okay. You can, though, right?”

“Well... even with admin privileges you can’t do that, but...”

“Please try raising the camera’s height anyway,” said Flügel.

There had to be a blind spot that ALGOS had while overlooking all data of The World. A place the camera could not see. A place where surveillance could not reach. In other words, behind the camera.

KK stubbornly asserted.

“We can’t do that without a solid reason. I have responsibilities as guild master of ALGOS. I cannot accept this. This would make the system unnecessarily unstable.”

“My reason is that I can’t think of any other options.”

“That’s not a good enough reason. I can’t take on such a massive liability.”

“That’s not it at all, is it?” said Kusame, who had kept silent in the shadows until now.

KK noticed Kusame for the first time.

“And you are...”

“I am NAB investigator Kusame. Real name David Steinberg, affiliated with the Washington D.C. Headquarters. Here on request of the Akasaka branch.”

The tall Kusame stood before KK, looking down at him.

“You should do as Flügel says. This is an urgent matter. You just have to nod your head and not worry about what you’re responsible for.”

“Do you know what you’re talking about?” KK replied.

“NAB works to preserve network stability, doesn’t it? Your remarks now directly refute that. On NAB’s authority, I would be forcing inappropriate conduct on the company. This will be a problem.”

“You are not being forced to do anything. I’m just making a suggestion.”

“A suggestion? Then, are you saying that NAB will take full responsibility? It is not you but the organization called NAB that will be responsible for the damages that may arise from here on. Is that what you’re saying? If that’s the case, I am willing to do it, but...”

“I don’t mind doing it that way,” Kusame said flatly.

“Let’s do it as soon as possible.”

KK tried to say something further, then closed his mouth.

KK looked back and forth at Flügel and Kusame.

The atmosphere became tense and KK cleared his throat to ease it.

“If that’s the case, I have no objections.”

KK gave instructions to the programmer beside him.

The programmer nodded and operated the computer terminal panel.

“We will raise the position of the camera as you requested. Let’s hope that, at the very least, the situation doesn’t get any worse.”

Just then, a lag occurred for a moment.

Everything in The World stopped moving and the audio was out of sync, but it soon return to normal. ALGOS’ camera penetrated the sky graphic pasted above them.

The programmer reported that a CPU load was beginning to be applied to the amount of data.

“Please keep steadily raising it.”

Darkness was projected through the camera to the view window. It showed a place where nothing exists. They couldn’t see anything. There was nothing there at all.

It was natural because the data did not exist.

“Not yet. Go higher,” Flügel instructed.

“The load is increasing.”

“Don’t worry, keep going.”

A few more noises occurred and the screen corrupted.

Unexpectedly, red dots little by little lit up in the middle of the window.

KK gasped as he came to realize.

Silence like still water spread through the monitor room.

One red dot became two, then after a moment it became several dots, then it became like a red vortex quickly spreading throughout the window. It looked like blood overflowing from a deep scratch.

These were not dots. All the screens were now painted red. There was no black margin anywhere.

“Switching from an overhead view to the normal camera,” said the programmer who operated the terminal board without waiting for instructions from KK.

The windows were switched, and from the integrated bird’s-eye view, the image changed to a picture that captured a airborne army floating in the data void.

Rather than an airborne army, it was more of a large fleet. Just going by what could be seen in the window, there were five super-huge battleships, roughly twenty smaller cruisers, and even smaller attack craft surrounding them, all flying soundlessly in formation in the complete dark.

It was a pity to think that all these ships were full of rats.

Ryuuji did not want to ask, but he asked anyway.

“How many rats are there?”

The programmer replied with a stutter.

“Uh, well, it’s... over three billion. We can’t get a count beyond that.”

Ryuuji wished he hadn’t heard the answer.

“Unbelievable. That’s insane...” KK said as he sank down to the floor.

“You said it,” murmured Kusame.

“To think that a rat breeding farm was floating in the sky above a town.”

“Please check whether there are any PCs on board.”

KK put his hands to his head and sat still, but the programmer beside him reported it to Flügel.

“A signal was found. There is an airplane that has just one PC on board. They’re alone.”

“Where is it?”

“Mac Anu.”

Flügel grabbed the microphone.

“Urania. I figured out where Drain is. He’s above your head. He’s in the sky above Mac Anu.”

He was standing in the dark.

He could not see anything, nor could he hear anything.

He did not sense anything, nor did he comprehend anything.

He felt as though this had been going on for a long time.

He felt as though he had come to this place at this very moment.

Where could I be, he thought.

At that moment, he realized that he already knew the answer. He remembered. A single word roused him and surfaced in his memory.

Yes, this was Hell...

A place where he did not even receive the sun’s light and warmth.

A place where a stream of endless desire keeps overflowing. A place where dreadful screams and ominous cries roar. An inescapable place.

He awoke and a darkness like a black hole surrounded him, the same darkness as though he was still wandering in his dream-state from a moment ago. In his periphery all he could see was an infinite jet-black expanse.

He got up and went down the stairway of the central deck from the bow where he had been lying down until then and entered the hangar of the hull.

The ship he was now on was a massive 200 meter battleship of a type that is classified as a battleship even among airships.

If it were the default setting, it should have had more than ten medium-sized battleships in the hangar, but no ships were loaded on this airship. It was completely empty with a huge vacant room hangar twenty meters square.

Drain did not look around and started walking with a steady gait.

The plan was progressing smoothly. The rats that were given the Exodus Command were steadily transferring into each town.

A town's Chaos Gate governs the management of logged-in players data. By using the records left there, they could follow logged-in PCs and travel to external computers all at once. This was the Exodus.

The rats, which were products of Schicksal PCs, could not go outside The World's system. However, if The World had been installed on the computer terminal, they could get in through the network lines. Just like they dealt with Kiyoteru Yodogawa, Senior Managing Director of Cyber Connect Japan Company.

Once they got into a person's terminal once, they could move by following the member address like a normal computer virus. From player to player. From acquaintance to acquaintance. The infection of rats would spread. If they got to that stage, no one could stop the march of the rats.

In less than one hour, everything would be over.

His trial would bring a beautiful end to this perfect harmony.

Then the next trial would begin. Then it would repeat. He would continue to produce and disseminate rats spray and produce rats as much as he desired in order to let the real world know the stench of humiliation that will envelop the network.

As Drain finished thinking about that, he stopped walking.

He saw a shadow inside the ship that was supposed to be empty except for him.

"Welcome. I figured you would come," Drain said softly.

A golden Sophia stood like a statue.

"This was somewhat sooner than I expected. Welcome, Urania."

How did she get into the ship? This anti-virus who thoroughly massacred the rats in the previous fight in Net Slum. CC's secret weapon with overwhelming fire power.

"Get your money ready. A bonus for when I've taken down the boss character."

Urania looked at Drain with cold eyes while she talked with someone in the chat. The edges of her mouth twisted and she scoffed.

"I'll destroy you."

“It is you who will be destroyed,” Drain said softly. A saintly smile spread across his face.

Chapter 38

Cracking

On the same day that German writer Emma Wieland passed away in a traffic accident, she was born far away in Eustis, Detroit, Michigan*.

In this setting of foul odors emitting from a drainage channel that became dull with rust like blood clinging to the wall of a slaughterhouse was a den of retched scum seeking violence, gambling and cheap alcohol. A town like shit slowly sinking down in a toilet bowl. This was Eustis.

Her grandparents immigrated from Germany and settled in this town. Even though there were countless towns of a larger size in the United States. They came to this town, of all the towns they could have chosen.

When she was seventeen, she left the town without saying goodbye to her family. She was tired of everything around her. Eustis was useless to her. There was no hope for her future there. All she had was her hacking skills acquired through self-study. She decided to live by relying on that.

From then on, she traveled to cities along of the east coast such as Boston, New York, and Washington D.C., among others. She changed residences frequently and changed “hunting grounds” even more frequently. There was nothing to restrict her if she were connected to a network. She roamed around the computers of famous large companies. She destroyed systems and exchanged the extracted information for money with anyone who wanted it.

*Translator’s note: It is unclear what place the writer is thinking of. In our reality, there is no Eustis/Eustice/Eustace within the Detroit Metro region, at least not one I can find. There is a small area called Eustis about a 7 hour drive from Detroit on the other side of Michigan, but there is nothing there save a few farm houses. It is, of course, nothing like the Eustis described in this chapter. The Eustis of our reality is a short drive from the Bark River Township which has a population of about 1500 people as of 2018. If this was the intended Eustis, the reference to Detroit is confusing. Therefore, we must assume that in the .hack universe, at some point before .hack//Bullet, a town, township, or neighborhood called Eustis was incorporated into the Detroit Metro region or perhaps always existed and had become a place for drunks and gamblers and other unpleasant sorts. I’m surprised the author didn’t pick a well-known area that already exists in Detroit.

She did not feel any hesitation about her cracking activities.

She had no political beliefs or faith. She did not intend to work for her former home country nor to harm her current country. She just asked for money online in exchange for her skills. She was only concerned with the reward.

She rarely looked back on her hometown.

She threw everything away beyond the red rust that covers the town.

The ALGOS monitor room was silent. Flügel, Kusame, KK and the other programmers held their breath and watched the screen in front of them.

The camera displayed the interior of one of the huge 200-meter battleships that were part of the large fleet floating out of bounds.

Urania and Drain were facing each other.

They were standing about 15 meters apart.

What was about to begin was a showdown between crackers. Two people with opposing roles, similar in terms of being harmful to the system.

A virus and an anti-virus. The one that destroys the world and the one that protects it.

Urania activated the wallhack radar while she kept her eyes on her opponent. There was no response. There was no character other than the man in front of her on this ship.

Yet Urania was skeptical of that information. This man hides rats as though in ambush. He is also an immensely skilled cracker. She did not know which programs he used to disguise data.

As she thought about this, Drain moved.

He raised his hands and clapped once in front of himself. Then, after a moment, he clapped once again. The sound echoed in the empty hangar.

“Congratulations. Allow me to bestow blessings upon you in regards to your arrival at this place.”

It seemed he intended to clap again at this moment.

“But... you’re alone? What happened to your usual team?”

Drain folded his arms and pretended to think deeply by placing his right fist under his chin.

“Did no one bring the Sophia Corps? I see, I see. This means there are many things to consider...”

He narrowed his eyes and looked at Urania as though assessing her.

“In preparation for the rat threat, others turned to protecting the town... no, that’s not it. If you strike me down, you should know that the rats will be released, so you ought to do your best here now. That’s not quite it. What I’m trying to say is, you can only act on your own now.”

There was no change in Urania’s expression.

“I observed your team in Net Slum. It appears that my abilities and your abilities are very similar in several respects. It could be said that viruses and anti-viruses are inseparable.”

Drain continued to talk.

“For eight people excluding you, moving is simple. They are not players. A semi-automatic unmanned PC that you control remotely — it’s an option in a shooting game. As I am responsible for the rats, you are responsible for the other goddesses.”

After he said that, he smiled.

“But, how many hours have passed since my rats started transferring? Are the Sophias working all the time? Tremendous mental power is needed to operate eight Sophias simultaneously. You must be exhausted. I saw that your limits are already drawing near, but what do you think?”

Urania was expressionless. While standing upright, she took a small step forward with your left foot. She stretched her left hand in front of her and pulled her right hand around her waist.

“It’s like the chirping of birds in early spring,” she muttered as though spitting.

She had an elegant look, like she had received an invitation to dance. However, it clearly differed in that both of her fists are clenched. It was an old, yet strong, style of boxing, close to the bare-knuckle boxing style.

“If you want to sing so much, I will make you sing plenty.”

Drain looked with apparent interest at Urania’s pose.

A saintly smile lingered on his face.

Then —

Urania moved in front of Drain. It was as though a flash ran a distance of fifteen meters.

By the time Drain realized what was happening, a golden PC body was standing in front of him. Her right fist came flying outward in a straight line.

A direct thrust.

Drain dodged the unexpectedly fast attack by a hair's breadth.

It was because bewilderment crossed his mind that he backed off without striking back.

Drain was wary of Urania's projectile weapons. There were two attack skills that the Sophia team showed in the previous Net Slum fight. Napalm and a laser. For both of them, Drain had already analyzed them and applied a countermeasure program to himself.

But in the current situation it was almost certain that the laser ought to be used. He read her skill frequency, so he would leap away at once and deal with it. That was what he thought. He wouldn't use rats. Even if one pitted a virus against an antivirus, the damage would only increase.

However, she did not use projectiles, but came to strike directly?

When he thought about it, he felt as though the ground was heavily tilted.

The battleship had not shifted.

He was shocked to realize that that fist was supposed to have scraped his forehead. His field of vision was blurred by this alone.

Drain's smile vanished from his face.

Urania came forward again in a flash. The same onrush. A right thrust of her fist.

Just before the strike landed, Drain smoothly lifted his hands with his fingers spread out and blocked Urania's fist.

He would stop Urania's blow with both hands. He would grab her and pull her arm, dislocating it from her shoulder. Just like he did to the deputy chief of the debug team. He would twist and break off this woman's right arm, he thought.

The timing was perfect, but the force put into the strike was unexpected. He couldn't stop it. Urania's fist penetrated through the gap between both of Drain's palms and the fist sunk into Drain's nose.

Flashes appeared before his eyes and the blurry environment became ever more distorted.

He stepped back to create some distance between them.

Urania stepped forward to close that distance.

A front kick was launched into Drain's abdomen like a stake.

He was struck directly in the pit of his stomach.

"Gaahhh."

He flew backwards and fell down. He then rolled over the ground and quickly sprang to his feet.

Urania posed the same as before. She stretched her left arm forward and pulled her right arm around her waist.

This woman — Drain thought as he tried to stabilize his disheveled breathing — was she not planning to use any projectiles in this place? Did she intend to fight with just her bare hands?

He was misled by her strange appearance and flashy arms. Now he understood. This woman's moves were based on those of a Grappler.

However, that was not the problem.

Drain felt that the data that was struck by Urania in this place would be torn apart. PC body data would be erased as though it had been scraped off with a giant baseball bat-like metal file. A strange sort of damage different from being shot by Brieler Rossel.

"Have you stopped singing already?" Urania sneered.

"What's wrong? Say something more interesting."

Drain put himself on guard.

This woman's abilities were a mystery, so it would not do to continue to receive further attacks.

Urania rushed in again with a smile on her face.

She quickly prepared her attack, but this time she did not strike with her right fist.

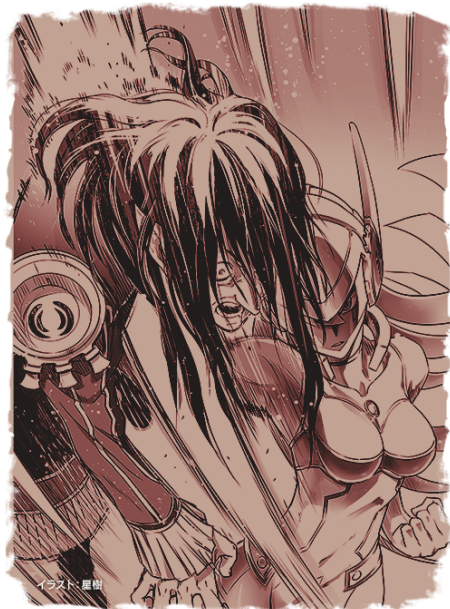
She used a feint. By the time Drain realized, Urania was already launching her next attack.

He realized that Urania's right leg swung out instead and a strong low-body kick hit him. It was not a low kick. She kicked Drain's left knee straight on with her heel.

"Arghhh."

The blow caused Drain to stagger. He tried to push the strike back with his hands, but he could not. He tried to guard himself with each of his arms, but a literal fist sunk into Drain's stomach. The same place struck by the front kick.

“Ack.”



Drain's PC body was bent at the waist and he got the air knocked out of his lungs. He couldn't breathe. It was as though the nerves within his abdomen had been grabbed directly.

“I don't use bullets,” Urania said.

“You've already applied the countermeasure program'... There's that, too. The most important thing is to make sure. To be sure, here and now, with this hand I'll destroy you and erase the rats. I'll beat you to death and dispose of you once and for all.”

An ominous roar escaped her beautiful lips.

“Don't think you can escape, rat-user. I won't leave a scrap of data behind.”

Then Urania moved into position to make another rush.

It was like being shocked by continuous shock-waves.

A thrust, a kick, rapidly sank into the Drain's body.

It was so fast, so powerful. He could not stop it. He took the full force of the blow.

Drain held his head with both hands.

It was not a substitute for guarding. He was just trying to avoid a critical hit to the head.

Despite being stupefied by the flurry of strikes, Drain tried to grasp his exact position in the hangar.

He did not intend to use it. He arranged it just to be on the safe side. It will be damaged accordingly. He had no choice but to do it.

Aiming his timing for when Urania dropped her guard for a moment, Drain was finally able to escape and create some distance.

Urania, who seemed already convinced of victory, followed Drain with a steady footstep without showing any signs of fear.

Drain caught the moment when her foot hit a corner of the floor and he switched from “standby” to an “attack” command.

Suddenly rats that were mimicking a wall simultaneously unraveled from their camouflage, passed over Drain and rushed toward Urania.

Urania could not react in time to the swarm of downpouring rats. In a moment her golden body was covered by a purple effect and she vanished from sight.

Beforehand, in one corner of this hangar, Drain had placed thousands of rats to mimic a wall.

As he watched Urania who was being swallowed up by the swarm of rats, Drain was finally able to catch his breath.

Urania was trying to escape her struggle to the death for now. Less than twenty percent of the rats would die by her armed resistance, but that would be all. Escape would be impossible once she was incorporated into the carpet of rats, unless she were to use a clever scheme like Flügel.

The rats were devouring her to their heart’s content.

Just then, a light began to appear from a person-shaped lump covered by rats.

It looked like lines like magic summoning circles were spreading over the carpet of rats, and a loud sound and dazzling light covered everything and blew all the rats away.

In that moment, Drain looked on as every one of the rats burned and vaporized.

“I thought you were planning something.”

The light faded and Urania, who had removed the carpet of rats, replied with a few words.

“Rats with a stealth function? How stupid.”

While the debris of the rats fell to the ground as scraps of data, Drain knelt down. He could not believe what happened before his eyes. He could not stop himself from trembling within the core of his body.

It was unbelievable. What had just happened was absurd.

Now she used a “Data Drain.”

The Sophia commonly known as the SSS version, or “Sophia System Security”, is a program created artificially by extracting the data of the goddess Aura.

Its development began right after the Akashic Records incident in 2010. And how could she artificially control the godlike power of “Data Drain?” She had a history of defiance.

The powerful non-specification skill Data Drain seeks the capabilities of those it strikes. And if those who do not meet requirements try to release the Data Drain, it brings disaster to the surroundings in the form of corrupted data. Like the wrath of God against humans who violated taboos.

When the initial development period had passed, the development team produced the prototype Sophia.

This software had sufficient performance as an anti-virus, however, it had not fully utilized Aura’s data. That was the best they could do. They were made to realize the unpleasant truth that even if they came to grapples with the genius Harold who created Aura, they could not compete with him.

So they changed their way of thinking.

If they could not precisely control it, then they did not have to control it from the start.

You always emit the Data Drain at low output, avoid accumulation of power, and therefore avoid unpredictable and fatal data corruption.

The golden Sophia Urania was designed with that idea in mind.

Take jellyfish cnidocytes for example. Urania’s whole body was covered by a group of infinitesimally tiny Data Drains which were fired when touched. That is to say, a contact-type Data Drain with an omnidirectional zero-distance fire. Just punching and kicking will destroy virus data.

The body always seemed to shine like gold because it was constantly ‘firing.’

Camouflage using this light was merely a byproduct.

Members of the Sophia other than Urania were optional beings and at the same time they had the role of lightning rods that mitigate and alleviate corrupt data.

Naturally, however, the burden on players would be tremendous. It was necessary to have a character with a different significance to the person eligible to wear the original bracelet.

That was why support and regularly maintenance was essential because to ALGOS. Startup time was limited to a very short time.

However, in regards to this problem, it could also be handled by a development team that was not full of geniuses like Harold. There was an expectation that it could be overcome by developing technology.

Due to the information that was sent just before the rats that touched Urania were erased, Drain understood these matters.

A virus opponent is almost unbeatable — what kind of humble words were these?

Drain realized he was mistaken about this opponent.

Urania was an opponent who should never be fought from the front.

It was a bad move that he led her to a one-on-one fight due to his fear of the rats being damaged.

He should have fought a war of attrition.

He was getting exhausted, and now he was fighting to force exhaustion.

“...I could win more easily...” he muttered from the back of his throat.

Urania did not hear his voice.

She did not try to attack Drain immediately.

She felt that her opponent was still hiding something.

The one that Urania despised was an evil-handed monster. He was kneeling on the ground, cowering, and staring up at her. If he tried anything sneaky, she would jump at his throat in an instant and crush him.

He was still smiling. What a disgusting face, thought Urania.

That monster opened its mouth.

“Incredible. There’s no way you should have that kind of ability...” he said, his voice shaking slightly. He had been showered with blows from handless

fists. He was shaken by the damage he suffered.

“Could it be... Data Drain?”

His voice seemed to fade. However, his voice grew loud.

““Drain! Data Drain!””

Drain slowly stood up.

His whole face radiated joy.

“Could it be it is here? Marvelous. Truly wonderful. You appeared, armed with Data Drain, before me, Drain, the one who wishes for the abandonment of the internet. What a miracle, what luck. Perhaps you do not understand the weight of these words. Data... and Drain!”

“What?” Urania replied, but she was ignored.

“That’s right. In retrospect, it was fatefully implicit from the events of Net Slum in the first place. At that time, I was provoked by Flügel’s words and named myself ‘Drain.’ I appeared immediately after that. You have ‘Data Drain.’ Incredible. Everything was made clear in advance. This is a revelation and a blessing bestowed upon me...”

Drain continued talking ecstatically.

“As before, I feel that I am walking the path of the light of truth. I am elected to the ‘trial.’ Some grand purpose is guiding me to my ‘trial.’”

“Okay, I get it.”

Urania crouched down and lifted her right fist.

“Now, die!”

“That’s why, from now on, what I said...”

Drain continued without regard to what she said.

“It is a small thank-you to you, Judy Goldman, for making me realize how right I am. Listen closely to my words. Let me share something with you honestly.”

Urania stopped in her tracks.

The one who called her by that name had been gone for a long time. A name that she had half forgotten. The name she had cast off in her hometown of Detroit.

“Judy, you are completely using technology given to you by CC Corp. You believe you fully understand Urania. But do you really? Was your understanding correct to begin with?”

Drain's voice echoed in the hangar.

"No one can run away from their deeply ingrained past. Two years ago, you left your hometown of Eustis. You ran away. From your parents, from your family, from your hometown, from the smell of rust."

Se did not want to hear Drain's words. However, Urania stood frozen as though held by an invisible force.

"I think you threw a part of yourself away. That's the impression I get. Perhaps you were disgusted by Detroit's wealthy Goldman family, but is that really the case? Is that the correct interpretation?"

It was as though Drain's eyes were growling.

"Of course not. Your family threw you away. That is why you left home. You must not make a mistake in the order of events. You made an effort to meet the expectations of your parents. You tried to live up to the Goldman family name."

This was something only she and her family knew.

"But it was impossible. You could not become the star child. Your parents were disappointed and they..."

He paused for a brief moment.

"...gave up on you. That is the truth of the matter."

Drain lightly shook his head and looked at Urania with eyes that can express even being filled with kindness.

"There is a legend that a high priest of Judea molded earth to make an artificial man and set him to work. Judy, you are that being... a golem. Used for the convenience of your maker... abandoned... rejected by everyone... no one who understands you. Nowhere for you to belong."

Drain's voiced echoed.

"A pitiable doll, a golem. You do not have a soul. Those without souls don't deserve to exist. That's why I said that, that you are not a 'trial'."

"Urania."

The chat was switched on for the first time since entering the battle and the voice of Flügel could be heard.

"I don't know the situation, but don't get hot-headed. He's provoking you. You're making a mistake."

"I know. I'm calm," Urania responded in the chat. Her voice remained steady.

“He’s talking nonsense. Damn cheap provocation. He’s inviting projectile attacks. Is he trying to create an opening to escape, or is this a counter-aim? But he’s not really doing anything. At this rate, I’ll destroy him in one fell swoop!”

As she finished saying this, Urania rushed toward Drain.

At that moment, Drain moved forward faster than Urania.

Perhaps there was some spare energy left where he was struck. The very moment she started to move, she was struck in an instant.

Struck by a tackle like a bolt of lightning. As though inviting a partner to waltz, Drain suddenly embraced Urania. He grappled with her.

Urania gently grasped her opponent’s neck with her left hand and tried to drive her right fist into his face, but Drain’s hand pressed down Urania’s wrist and held it with force like a vise.

A shiver ran through Urania. The hair on the back of her neck stood on end in the real world.

“This distance is best.”

Drain gently whispered in Urania’s ear.

“The one who lets go is the one who values what’s real. I never thought that it would end up like this. Thanks to you, my plans have gone a little awry.”

He smiled and laughed.

“But the most important thing is to make certain. Certainly, here and now, I will break you directly with this hand...”

At the same time he said the word “break,” Drain unleashed an explosive attack that he had been absorbing up to this point.

Since logging into The World, his energy had been growing little by little. He unleashed the power of the black forest which surpasses even God.

A glimpse of a jagged, black forest.

Urania felt like she was surrounded by an extraordinary light and heat.

The explosion’s vibration was able to be confirmed far away at ALGOS.

A noise subsided and the wind blasts died down one after the other.

“What was that just now?!” KK jumped up and shouted. His eyes looked upward.

“He destroyed them with the power of the black forest,” Kusame groaned from the back of his throat.

“What a powerful guy. He blew up his own fleet.”

ALGOS’ monitor room began to shake like there was an earthquake. It was not just ALGOS. The data of The World itself was swaying in the aftermath of the present explosion.

“I told you! Raising the camera makes the data unstable!”

KK launched into a misdirected roar once again.

“This is your fault! As guildmaster of ALGOS, I will take you two to court...”

Fortunately, they not have to listen to the end of his raving attempt to shift responsibility. They were interrupted partway through. A server error had occurred.

He was forcibly logged out.

Flügel, Kusame, KK, the programmers and all other players were taken outside of The World.

Players were not the only ones who were forced out.

Something similar was happening with the rats.

The rats, who had been engaged in aimless marching since transferring into the town, were sniffing a smell that drifted to their noses.

It was an attractive odor no less. Why hadn’t they noticed this smell up to this point? A sweet, warm, moist, fragrant smell. A rich fragrance that the human brain gives off.

They thought they had to go. They had to go to this scent, no matter what obstacles they had to overcome.

The rats, who gathered in all five towns except Net Slum of The World R: X, began their last action to complete the “Exodus.”

Server errors piled up there. Of course it was not a coincidence. It was structured that way. In response to this favorable situation of a forced logout, the rats began to run at full speed. The insignificant data loaded in their small bodies put as much power as possible into their limbs and off they went to a computer terminal, to a computer terminal, to a computer terminal.

A horde of identical digital copies, a large group of rats making a tremendous squeal like the noise of a gale, to a computer terminal, to a computer terminal, to the computer terminal.

They flashed their fangs, drool dripping in threads from their mouths, and like a raging sea, to a computer terminal, to a computer terminal, to a computer terminal.

Without regard for wires or wireless connections, they traced their way, being drawn by electricity, and opened the limits of their data, eating anything in their way, annihilating the obstacles and creating their path by ripping their way through it, to a computer terminal, to a computer terminal, to a computer terminal.

They were jumping out of The World through the network line, to a computer terminal, to a computer terminal, to a computer terminal.

Then, if they reached the end...

On that day, a light burst forth from the monitors of players who were logged into The World, and from the monitors of players who had acquaintances who were also playing The World, and from the monitors of their acquaintances and also from the monitors of the acquaintances' acquaintances.

The light lasted only for an instant and it was likely not even perceived, depending on the timing of a player's blink.

However, at that moment the rats had already reached the smell's origin. The promised land that their creator had shown them. A paradise. They had reached an enormous number of malleable minds.

The Exodus had succeeded.

Chapter 39

Surprise

An empty sky.

In the empty space, Drain was standing alone, looking down on the lower bounds. He was now the only one in The World.

But there was no pleasure in his expression. Instead he frowned with unrelenting pain that spread through his whole body.

The Sophia Corp's Urania had been a more formidable and difficult adversary than he initially assumed.

In order to defeat her, he had no choice but to use the energy of the black forest. He was forced to blow up his large fleet and the horde of rats which had taken a lot of time and effort to make with his own hands.

He would no longer be able to produce a large horde of rats since he could not take advantage of the black forest. Now, at most 100 rats could be produced. This was the original limit of the Schicksal PC Drain.

But he told himself that there was nothing wrong.

It would take time, but he could start accumulating black forest energy over again.

Besides, he already had enough rats to begin the "Exodus".

The loss would pay off. He could make up for it. It was an acceptable loss.

As he thought about that, Drain suddenly turned his eyes towards something hanging from his chest. An arm the color of rust. The carcass of Urania that had been completely cut off at the elbow.

It used to be completely golden, but now it had lost its shine and turned to a dull rusty color.

Drain pulled the arm off of him and threw it away.

The arm drifted away from Drain and fell outside of the bounds.

Without looking at it, Drain disappeared, leaving behind a transfer effect.

As soon as the glow effect disappeared, all that remained was Urania's left forearm and a remarkable silence like death itself.

When being forcibly disconnected from The World, for an ordinary PC it's only a matter of being disconnected.

However, circumstances are different for those who operate a Schicksal PC. It is a disconnect protocol that is performed in an irregular manner and a patient who did not correctly use the VR scanner, which is a medical treatment device, and will immediately pay the price.

Ryuuji, who was lying on the sofa in his office and who had logged in with the VR scanner, suddenly felt a jolt like a lightning bolt to his whole body and his conscious faded away.

Suddenly, something cold was being pressed against his cheek. It was the linoleum floor.

Ryuuji fell down beside the sofa with his arms and legs spread-eagle.

David put his hand on Ryuuji's shoulder and trembled.

"Ryuuji, are you okay?" he asked.

"This is serious. Urania lost. And the rats... did you see the rats, Ryuuji? The rats all together..."

Ryuuji stood up, tried to speak and steadied himself by David's hand. His feet were unsteady and he was about to vomit, but he held back. He needed to hurry. Would he make it in time?

He ran to a sink in the back of the office.

He made it in time. He hunched over the sink and vomited.

He experienced the illusion of being pulled forward while he spit up bitter bile. An aftershock occurred. The symptoms that should have dwindled in the past few days now resurfaced thanks to the forced disconnection. It was due to having a strain placed on him while not having fully recovered. Sweat dripped down his forehead.

Ryuuji waited for a while and was able to relax, so he turned on the faucet, took some water with both hands and drank it to wash the back of his throat. He washed his face and wiped it with a towel.

When he returned to the sofa, David was calmly checking things to confirm them as he tapped on the computer's keyboard. He was trying to log in again with his goggles on.

David raised his head and spoke.

"It's no good. I can't enter The World."

"What?!"

I tried it with two people, but the result was the same.

According to the official page, CC is also investigating the cause, but the prospect of recovery was not good. There seemed to be something wrong with the network line connected to The World rather than The World itself.

Ryuuji and David looked at each other.

It was a desperate situation.

Just before the two were disconnected, on the ALGOS monitor they witnessed the rats disappear one after another, being sent further and further away from the town.

The cyberterrorist Yuri Seto's plan had succeeded.

How many rats have now flowed outside of The World?

How many people were bathed in the light of death?

In half a day, in mere hours, the first victim would jump from somewhere high up. The number would spread and increase like a chain. It could no longer be stopped.

"It seems this, too, is probably his doing," David said with a stiff expression.

The only way to cancel the effects of the rats would be to remove Drain from The World. However, unless they could log in to The World, they would not be able to catch Drain, who had crawled into the digital world.

"He intentionally caused a server error and blocked the connection from the network line."

Ryuuji recalled the image of the swarms of rats making their own path as they ran, looking for food.

Drain became a form that besieges The World. It was for stalling for time. Until one of the rats did its job, he had entered The World to lock himself away and protect himself.

That's not all. He locked himself in the The World to start making rats again. The more time he would spend, the more the rats would multiply.

And when CC Corp's repair efforts are completed and operations are resumed, they will unleash the rats again. At the same time, this will cause a server error. This will create an infinite loop.

They were merely forestalling the inevitable. They had fallen into Drain's trap.

"Ryuuji, this is bad," David said. He rarely showed a sense of impatience.

"What should we do? Is there any we can do? Victims will start appearing soon. We have to try something."

Ryuuji folded his arms.

He had to calm himself down. He had to keep himself calm.

Actions decided in frustration usually fail.

However, the more he wanted to be calm, the more Ryuuji felt as impatient like David.

He looked at the clock on the wall. It was close to 2:00PM. It would be evening in a few hours. The victims would probably start appearing around six o'clock.

In order to solve the current situation, he had to destroy Drain inside the network. He had to get into The World and take him down. But how to log in?

Just then, a cell phone ringtone sounded throughout the room.

David looked frustrated at the ringing.

Ryuuji's coat was hanging on the back of a chair. The cell phone was ringing in one of its pockets.

Ryuuji and David looked at each other.

Ryuuji stood up and pulled out his mobile terminal. It was not the one received from David, but the one he used before that was ringing.

Only the word "Unknown" was displayed on the mobile terminal's screen.

Unknown?

Ryuuji answered the call.

"Hello," he answered, but there was no reply.

Someone was talking in the background. His mouth was away from the handset and he seemed to be talking to a person next to him.

There was something familiar about the voice. It was Tokio Kuryuu's voice.

Ryuuji listened closely.

“...Yeah, I heard the analog sticks are good. ...But, I thought he probably said they were adequate. Just to be sure, I should check once more. Yeah. That’s right. I’ll ask which is better. Wait a second, hey, wait... that’s not a pressure point. Don’t poke me... huh? Jeez. What are you doing? Ahaha-haha...”

He heard a laugh that was very out of place.

He waited for a while, but Tokio did not notice it, so Ryuuji cleared his throat.

“Tokio? What’s wrong?”

“Oh, Mr. Sogabe. Hello.”

Tokio hurried back to the phone.

“I am coming to Hakone hot spring now. So I’d like to ask you again about souvenirs.”

Hot spring? Now that he thought of it, Ryuuji recalled that he had to do something like that.

Ryuuji remembered Tokio coming to the office and talking with him. When was that? About two or three weeks ago. It was around the time when there was no contact with Yuri Seto. It seemed so long ago now.

Ryuuji realized that he had regained his composure.

It seemed that he had relaxed while listening to Tokio’s voice.

“Are you working right now? Sorry. Well then, I’ll leave you be. Sorry to bother you.”

Tokio was about to hang up the phone.

It seemed he felt that Ryuuji’s situation was different from usual.

At that moment, something took shape in Ryuuji’s head. He could not understand its identity at first.

“Wait. Hold on a second, Tokio.”

“Yes?”

“Are you using a phone card right now?”

“Yes. I got a hold of one. It’s the first phone card I’ve ever had.”

“A phone card, in other words...”

Something took shape in Ryuuji’s mind.

“You’re calling from a public phone, aren’t you?”

“Yes, that’s right,” Tokio said hesitantly.

“Oh, is that bad? I figured I’d showed off with my cool card, so I used it and bothered you. Sorry.”

“That’s not a problem. No, that’s not it at all. It’s the other way around. I think your timing was great,” Ryuuji said earnestly.

“Huh?”

“Any souvenir is fine. I will be grateful to receive anything. Is it a high-end hot spring? Please enjoy yourself.. Have a nice time at the hot spring. Bye now.”

He said things matter-of-factly and hung up.

He stood up, took the jacket he had hooked on a partition screen and put his arms into the sleeves.

“David, let’s go.”

“Where to?”

“Nishiarai in Adachi City. To a data machine research museum.”

Ryuuji went outside with a VR scanner. A light rain started to fall.

“We’ll arrive in an hour. We’ll get there before the flash effect gets out.”

“How will we get there?”

David followed behind Ryuuji.

“I will borrow the unit connection machine’s equipment.”

“A unit... connection machine?”

The two of them got into Ryuuji’s car.

“In Japan, the old telephone lines are still active,” Ryuuji explained.

“Yuri Seto is using the rats to do something to the network line, blocking entrance to The World. However, if we’re at a public phone, we may get into the The World. We could get into the telephone system through the old telephone line and log in using a specific signal from that location. A good old-fashioned hacker’s trick,” said Ryuuji who then turned the ignition key.

“Seto has been in an American prison for a long time. I am not sure about the communication situation in Japan. I might be able to apply a blind spot to his confinement.”

Taichiro Sugai accepted Ryuuji’s sudden request and allowed them to borrow the equipment.

With the box containing the unit connection machine, Ryuuji and David hurried to the station.

They soon found a telephone booth.

Ryuuji opened the door and exposed the dusty booth to the wind and rain and he went into the narrow glass-enclosed box.

He pulled out the unit connection machine, connected the power cable and connected it to the outlet of the modular jack on the phone's receiver. He specified the type of line and tried pressing the data communication button.

It seemed it was able to start without any problems.

David opened the door of the phone booth and thrust his head in, looking down at Ryuuji who was sitting on the floor.

"I talked with the station and they blocked entry from here."

"That's very helpful," Ryuuji said, expressing his gratitude with the VR scanner in hand.

"Is there anything else I can do for you?"

Ryuuji answered in a doleful voice.

"Will you stand by me and hold my hand?"

David snorted, closed the door halfway then stuck his head in the booth again.

"I'll pray for good luck."

"Thank you," Ryuuji replied.

David closed the door fully.

Ryuuji took a deep breath and put the VR scanner on his face.

Relax, Ryuuji thought to himself. There should be no mistakes from here on. Only one chance at this. I must ensure that this bullet hits Drain.

Before the rats devour the brains of the victims. Before suicides by jumping occur.

The device's physical condition was very bad. He couldn't say this was going smoothly.

But people always have to go through the eye of the storm.

Now, it was time for a "trial."

Hidden Forbidden Holy Ground.

The oldest Lost Ground, Hulle Granz Cathedral.

It is an isolated island jutting out from a lake, and a stone building rises from it with the sunset behind.

Drain was looking at the setting sun. An inexpressible sentiment came to his mind, but he quickly shook it off.

It was a small sentiment.

The location of the problem was here.

There ought to be “light” here, Drain thought.

It must be here that the former president of Cyber Connect Japan is said to have worked. Drain had to reach that place. Then, for the first time his “trial” would lead to a true completion.

While he indulged in this thought, something wriggled at the edge of his sight.

It was a rat.

Drain stopped moving.

His rats must already have everything in place where it should be. There were no rats wandering around aimlessly. Because he did not have more room for something to be under his control.

He stretched out his right hand and grasped the rat.

Did it carelessly forget its instruction?

Drain’s eyes opened wide.

It was not one of his rats.

It was very similar. Perhaps it was originally what he had invented.

But now it was being handled by someone else and it was moving by a different program.

He noticed that the rat kept transmitting some kind of data to the outside and Drain quickly came to a realization.

The rat made a squeal and vanished.

Someone had sent it in to find his whereabouts.

Just then something happened.

A noise sounded out in the cathedral.

Drain did not hesitate.

He ran down the path to the cathedral, pushed the double doors open and entered.

The inside was quiet. There was no one in the corridor. There couldn't be. He was supposed to be alone in The World right now.

But, at that moment, Drain stiffened at the sight of something that could not be.

Something that ought not to be there. Something that should not exist. Something that had been lost since The World R:2.

The statue of the goddess Aurora.

An strange groan escaped from Drain's mouth.

No. This was not the goddess statue. This was not a goddess statue at all.

The face was overlooking the visitor with an expression of compassion.

A face that Drain could never forget.

A face that he should never come across since he was separated from it by death at an early age.

A momentary rage spread through Drain's entire body.

It is because he realized who did it.

At that moment, in this place, in this situation, there was only one person who would possibly try to imitate such a thing.

“Flügel!”

As he shouted this, a shot accompanied by a tremendous pressure hit Drain's left temple.

Brieler Rössle's bullets took away any thoughts that might have been going through his mind at that time.

Flügel, who was lurking on the left side of the front doors of the Hulle Granz Cathedral, shot bullets at Drain's head from a distance of two meters.

He took a hit and Drain's long hair danced about.

Just as the doors got caught by a gust of wind, Drain fell to the right. He thought that the purple fabric was fluttering away and that it collapsed quietly. Rather, he fell down to the floor between the wooden pews and he stopped moving.



Suddenly frost began to fall on Drain's PC body and began to cover him with a thin layer of ice.

Brieler Rössle's freezing effect was activated.

As Drain's data was freezing, Flügel listened to the crisp sound of ice and put away his gun.

Flügel's whole body was stiff and tense.

He finally succeeded in firing off a bullet. It sealed away the devil Drain.

The power of the rats should be nullified by this. It had not been more than 30 minutes since Flügel logged in. He was able to settle things before victims started appearing. He managed to make it in time.

He took a big deep breath and looked down at Drain.

He could not see Drain's face which was hidden by his long hair and the pews.

Then Flügel saw the goddess statue..

He had shot a Chim Chim tree located in the area with Brieler Rössle, modified its data and brought it to the cathedral.

Based on information about Yuri Seto that he had obtained from Taichiro Sugai, he got a picture of Seto's mother who had died when Seto was a child.

He reproduced her appearance on the fake statue in order to make Seto drop his guard.

It seemed to be a callous move, but he could not keep taking the current situation too lightly.

Flügel remembered that David was waiting for his report back in the real world. David would likely be distracted by the outcome of the surprise attack.

He thought he'd report that he succeeded peacefully.

Flügel tried to turn on the whisper mode switch connected to his mobile terminal, but he could not.

His left hand was still stiff. He was still tense. He smiled bitterly and tried to shake the tension out of his hand.

Just then, the Spear of Wotan protruded from behind him, passed through the right side of his lower abdomen and skewered his right wrist which held Brieler Rössle.

Chapter 40

The World of Gray

He cried out.

It hurt. Just sheer, intense pain.

Flügel twisted and tried to escape from the searing pain. In front of him, the cutting edge of the spear slowly retreated. First the right arm, then the lower abdomen became free. He heard the sound of the spear drop behind him as it fell to the floor.

He turned around, but his legs got tangled and he fell down on the stone floor.

The pain was not fading. On the contrary, it was getting even worse.

What happened? What had been done? Had he just been stabbed? By whom?

“This...”

Before Ryuuji’s eyes, a hand was suspended from behind the back of a bench.

Drain slowly regained consciousness and stood up.

“This is what was chosen as the trial. This is what I was looking for.”

Flügel tried to get up, but again he was struck by severe pain and could not move.

“You shot me in the head. I was under the impression you hit me with a bullet. However...”

Drain shook his head back and forth. His hair swayed and something purple fell out from it. It was a bunch of rats. A dozen rats crammed around Drain.

Flügel clenched his teeth.

He noticed that the ice covering Drain’s PC body was fake data made by camouflaged rats.

“The bullet that struck me was held back only by a rat that was on my temple.”

Drain looked down at Flügel.

“But, this strike just now was wonderful. Truly wonderful. How did you log in to The World? How did you find my location? What did you do to catch me off guard? I can remember your hardships. You seriously tried to defeat me, you did your best. I understand that.”

Suddenly Brieler Roessel was falling to the floor. Flügel’s right hand clasped the gun grip. It was destroyed by the Spear of Wotan and it fell at his forearm.

“By crushing you, I was able to prove the correctness of my trial...”

Drain was no longer looking at Flügel. He was absorbed in his own words.

“Everything is a coincidence. It is not because my purpose was to take away the Spear of Wotan from the Cobalt Knights. I just took it because they had it. The only thing that could stop your bullets was to have rats on stand-by. So that is the most important thing. Inevitability born according to randomness is the true reality. My reality overcame your tactic that charged your total energy. Right now, I was chosen for the trial and I overcame it!”

Flügel gritted his teeth and stood up. He was about to lose his balance, probably because half his right arm was missing, but he held on.

“Good grief. Yuri Seto, your flaw...” Flügel said with a raspy voice.

“...is that you talk way too much. Everyone hates that kind of guy.”

At Flügel’s left hand was Brieler Roessel which he had removed from his right hand.

He pointed it at Drain.

Drain looked at Flügel. His eyes were glossy, somehow they were tinged with sorrow.

“Stop the show of courage. You may not have noticed it yourself, but here you can see the misery of your PC body. You have a fatal wound. You just escaped immediate death because you are a Schicksal PC. It is not the place to lose consciousness. You will die soon,” Drain said in a dull tone.

“You were the best ordeal for me. However, now it is over. No matter how tough you are, no matter how tough you speak, it is now meaningless. At least approach your final moments peacefully.”

Drain was less than two meters away, in front of Ryuuji. If he pulled the trigger, he would surely hit Drain.

However, Flügel's limbs suddenly grew weak and he dropped the gun. He was about to fall again so he held his hand against the side of a pew.

"What keeps you going? Is it pride? Obstinacy?" Drain said calmly.

"Or is it perhaps... for your daughter? If that's the case, then I promise you. I will remove those close to you from the rats' targeting system. I swear I will never attack the people close to you. Let this be proof of my gratitude and respect for you."

A rat jumped from Drain's foot. Flügel tried to avoid it, but he was too slow.

A flash of light burst in front of the Flügel's face. Just then, Flügel smelled a strong scent at the tip of his nose.

"It is an improved special light. It is eight times brighter than usual... you get a smell like rotten onions, right? That's evidence that definite damage has been done to your neocortex. However, you do not intend to jump to your death. You just immediately faint. At least you'll be in peace..."

Drain's voice struck Flügel's ears.

"Relax your body and rest. Who could blame you? You did well. Your suffering will be over soon..."

"Good night," said a rat.

"Good night," said a rat.

"Good night," said a rat.

"Good night," said a rat.

"Good night," said a rat.

"Good night," said a rat.

"Good night," said the rats in unison.

"Good night," said Drain.

Finally Flügel lost the strength in his feet. It was like his legs had disappeared.

He wondered if he was dead.

He felt no fear. Why did he relate his impending death with the color blue? He had some familiarity with that color. A memory he saw long ago. When did he see it? Blue like a ferocious predator.

But he could not think of anything anymore. His field of vision became dark and narrow as though he were falling.

Falling, Falling, Falling.

I played The World for the first time. Ten years ago. Kaya said I was good at it.

It was a holiday afternoon.

On the sofa next to Kaya, two-year-old Sasha was sleeping soundly.

“What about Fragment?” Ryuuji asked.

At that time Ryuuji was not very familiar with online games, but he knew that The World was an online game that had swept the world and that the trial version was called Fragment.

“No, that’s not it. I don’t think that’s the name,” Kaya said, shaking her head. “That was its name from a while ago. That’s not it now. I was still only a kid. I don’t remember all the details, but my father applied for a lottery and was selected. I was able to take part in a one-day personal tour. It was very interesting. It was so real and exciting.”

So I was very surprised when I saw The World after such a long time. It was the same game my father and I had played long ago.

“I didn’t know that you liked the game,” Ryuuji said.

“So are you going to buy something now?” he continued.

Kaya shook her head. “No. I’ll hold off.”

“Why? Like I’d done with you, I was going to make lots of game memories with Sascha, wasn’t I?”

Ryuuji turned his hand over Kaya’s shoulder and looked at Sasha’s sleeping face.

She is the most important thing to me, Ryuuji thought as he looked at his daughter.

“I reach out my hand and a range of happiness greets me. A wonderful range I must protect.”

“You’re such a poet, but I didn’t know it until now,” Kaya said with a slight smile.

Before he knew it, she said it out loud, but Ryuuji kept up a stern face.

“Yeah. I am a man with a strong foundation in poetry. Super poetic.”

Then he stood up.

Sascha and Kaya were taken out of the car and carried side by side on a stretcher.

Ryuuji tried to go to them and the ground began to undulate, the two of them were moving further away from him, he staggered towards them, but the two were getting further away, so he tried to run, the ground continued to swell, the distance was too far, now they were already too far away, though his legs tried to push his body forward, his movement was too slow, no matter how much he tried to get closer, the ground continued to swell, they were so far, getting farther, farther, separating evermore, reaching out to them, never coming to the women who should have been within reach, he could not reach them anymore, because now the ground was distorted, breaking apart, they were swallowed up by the dark, leaving Ryuuji behind, falling yet again, falling, falling, endlessly falling —

Everything ended like a needle that fell off a record that had completed its rotation. The Minnesang ended and advanced no further. It would just repeat. Now, always, forever —

Intersecting twice, separating, approaching, passing, reverberating —

Constantly, already, always, forever, many times, repeatedly —

Kaya had gotten into a car and fallen into a lake. She had placed her daughter in the passenger seat.

They went away. They just left. They disappeared.

Ryuuji wondered about this many times.

“Did I do something wrong? Did I not do the right thing?”

“I don’t understand. I don’t understand any of it.”

Kaya’s symptoms should have been in remission.

Her marriage with Ryuuji was supposed to stabilize her illness.

However, Kaya was terribly afraid that her illness could be transmitted to Sascha. She hoped that that she would not cause her daughter pain. No matter how much it was explained to her how unlikely it was to happen, it didn’t alleviate her concerns.

If his dissertation, which was under review, would be completed and recognized, Ryuuji had a chance for promotion. Then he might have been assigned to the team of Kaya's doctors. With only a short time left, Ryuuji could have been able to participate in Kaya's treatment.

A little later he was able to fulfill the promise he had made at the time of his proposal to her.

"Ryuuji, you have to pay attention to your own body," Mr. Weiss would say from time to time when he and his wife would visit Ryuuji.

"Thank you for your concern, but I'm fine," Ryuuji responded.

"Kaya talked about how important you are to her. That girl was so happy to meet you. That's why I think anyway," Mrs. Weiss said.

"It was me who was happy," Ryuuji responded.

Ryuuji got promoted after Kaya and Sascha died. Ryuuji became an associate professor.

It was a meaningless job title. He received the promotion without many strong feelings about it.

One day when he was walking after the last lecture of the day, someone called Ryuuji's name from behind him.

"Mr. Sogabe."

It was not German, it was dear old Japanese.

When he turned around, standing there was a young male student who seemed to have followed him from the lecture room.

Still young. Too young. Even though the Japanese tend to look young for their age, the student in front of Ryuuji looked like a young boy.

"Who are you?"

"My name is Yo Nomura. I'm an international student from Japan and I am attending your lectures."

"How many grades did you skip?"

The student who introduced himself blushed slightly.



“I’m sixteen years old,” he answered. “I heard that you are doing research on Real Digitalization. I wanted to know about Real Digitalize and chose to attend your lectures.”

“Why did you come to Germany?” Ryuuji asked. “The person who wrote the book is in Japan. You should have gone to him.”

“You don’t know, do you?” Yo asked. “Dr. Amagi has disappeared. Now, only you, Mr. Sogabe, are studying Real Digitalize.”

Ryuuji was standing in front of the graves of Kaya and Sascha in the light rain. His tears did not come. Not a single tear fell after the two women died. The tears seemed to dry up before they could come out.

Why is life so cruel? The world often shows glimpses of its evil nature.

Only Kaya herself understood her suffering. In the end, something inside her had worn out.

When Ryuuji held Sascha for the first time, he was surprised by how helpless and defenseless she was. She was so small and delicate that he had a hard

time believing she could be from this world. As he looked into her face, he saw her big eyes that she inherited from her mother.

If only I can protect them, Ryuuji remembered thinking. I must protect this child... I must protect this child from this cruel world...

My wife fell into a lake of her own volition. There is evidence to suggest that was the case. The man, who said he was an insurance investigator, told Ryuuji this.

A man who came with the investigator said that there was no sign that she stepped on the brake. The man was the police inspector in charge of Kaya's incident.

"Usually, in the case of an accident, there should be a sign that the brakes had been applied. She had no intention of stopping. That's the way it looks anyway," the insurance investigator had said after the police inspector spoke.

"Also, another point is that she put her child in the passenger seat instead of using a child's car-seat attached to the rear seat. This could also be considered indirect evidence.

"Of course it does not mean that this is one hundred percent correct. The accident may have been caused by something else. It may just be that she was unable to step on the brake. She may just been speeding. That is a possibility.

"In that case, you will need a trial to prove it. Therefore this is a consultation, so could you please sign this document?"

Ryuuji looked at the paper presented to him.

"It is a document that states your acceptance that your wife fell into the lake intentionally. It is unofficial and will not be published. If you sign it, you will be paid twenty percent extra insurance. We want to save the cost and time involved in the trial," the man continued.

Ryuuji nodded. He took the document, tore it in two and threw it away.

Then he made a fist and struck the investigator in the face.

Professor Manfred Neimann was not pleased that his student, Ryuuji, was devoted to the study of Real Digitalize.

"That is not science. It's occult," the professor said at that time. "It's good for occultists to dabble in the occult. However, I am not impressed that a

doctor plays with the occult.”

“My wife has always been plagued by the stigmata phenomenon,” Ryuuji said. “Whether occult or something else, if there’s nothing left to try, I will do it.”

The professor shook his head.

“But... you’re making too many enemies in the school.”

“I am, aren’t I?” Ryuuji answered.

Beside Ryuuji, only a whisky bottle was richly, purely and amiably shining.

He repeatedly read the papers left by Jotaro Amagi and thought to himself every day while drinking alcohol.

I can not go outside of my world. Kaya, I cannot go to your world.

What were you feeling and what were you thinking about?

The pain that has continually bothered you. It was unreasonable to accept it.

I cannot understand the beauty of your world that you saw in Rostock on that morning and that you tried to tell me about.

Here it was always 2014 and then 2016.

Intersecting twice, separating, approaching, passing, reverberating —

Constantly, already, always, forever, many times, repeatedly —

Like a needle moving over a worn record repeats the same phrase.

In 2014, Ryuuji was 23 years old. Kaya was 22 and Sascha was three.

In 2016, Ryuuji was 25 years old. Kaya would have been 24 and Sascha was supposed to be five.

April, 2016. It was a sunny, windless day. Suddenly the worst news disturbed Germany.

A train going from Munich to Hamburg was involved in an accident.

In addition to too much speed, there was a derailment due to deterioration. Unable to turn the curve, the first car was thrown into a pillar of a highway

bridge, the impact caused the bridge girder to fall, and it was a catastrophe in which vehicles on the highway crashed one after the other.

It was later called the worst railway accident in post-war German history, and it eventually resulted in the death of 186 people*.

The only survivor in the first car was a little girl. She was unconscious, but had miraculously survived. Her dog barked and this informed the rescue team. Two hours after being helped, her dog died.

It was a family reunion-like formality, but it was filled with people who had never met. Not one single relative who could be relied upon in regards to Lilie was there.

Everyone's eyes were shining brightly. They were the eyes of a hyena looking to scavenge.

Their only interest was how the Weiss family inheritance would be handled.

Ryuuji, who had been participating since morning, couldn't stand the atmosphere any longer and finally spoke up.

"What will happen to Lilie?"

"Who are you?" said the old lawyer who was going through the will process. He looked suspiciously at the young Asians who had come of the Oriental who showed up.

"I am her..." Ryuuji said, getting his words caught. "...I am her relative."

"She is now at a facility in Eschede. It's suitable for now, but she'll be released when the time comes. Anything else?"

"No, that's all."

Having said this, Ryuuji remained silent.

Those were the only remarks made concerning Lilie that day.

Ryuuji took custody of Lilie.

*Translator's note: While I can find no listing for a rail accident in Germany in April 2016, this fictional accident is likely partially derived from the Eschede Train Disaster (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eschede_derailment) which occurred on 3 June 1998. Given my previous notes about details that don't match up with our universe, it seems ever clearer that the .hack universe is its own self-contained meta universe that mimics ours in some ways but follows a different history. Therefore, the creators are not looking to use our world as we know it, rather they take places and events we would know of and fabricate details as needed to fit the story.

The department head spoke.

“I said that only lectures that are not improper for our school will be continued.”

“If it’s Real Digitalization, that’s right,” Ryuuji responded.

“It seems that you’ve been sued by an insurance company. Due to an assault on an investigator. You struck him in front of a police officer.”

“Yes,” said Ryuuji.

“I heard that you had some other lawsuits due to your relative’s troubles.”

“Yes,” said Ryuuji.

“Some voices have been raised that question your attitude to work. Professor Neimann, who returned to Japan last year, seemed to have misrepresented himself in that area, but I did not. Why do you disagree so strongly?” Ryuuji continued.

“This feels like cheap justice,” the department head said.

“It’s better than your toupee,” Ryuuji said.

“There is a problem with your current language.” The department head’s complexion changed.

“Yes,” said Ryuuji. “There is a slight problem with it.”

Ryuuji was called from behind.

“Mr. Sogabe.”

It was not German, it was dear old Japanese.

When he turned around, standing there was a young male student who seemed to have followed him from the lecture room.

Still young. Too young. Even though the Japanese tend to look young for their age, the student in front of Ryuuji looked like a young boy.

“Who are you?”

“My name is Yo Nomura. I’m an international student from Japan and I am attending your lectures. By the way, this is the second time we’ve had this exchange,” he quickly replied. He then presented Ryuuji with a letter.

Ryuuji took it.

“What’s this?”

“I found it on the department head’s desk. It was addressed to you, Professor Sogabe, so I secretly took it. Hey, are you quitting being a professor?” the boy asked.

“I got a warning earlier. I’m leaving here today,” said Ryuuji.

“But you’ll just move to another university, won’t you?” asked the boy.

“Not sure. It’s hard to find a university job nowadays.”

“Then, what will you do, Professor?”

“Maybe now’s my chance to try being a pro baseball player. I’m still in the right age range.”

“I’m kidding,” Ryuuji interjected after a pause.

Yo shook his head and pointed at the letter in Ryuuji’s hand.

“So, I think you should read that letter.”

“Why?”

“Please look at who sent it.”

Ryuuji turned over the letter. It was from CyberConnect Japan.

“What is this?”

“Indeed, what is it?” Yo said as though surprised.

“The Japanese branch is where Dr. Amagi was working. I think they’re probably looking for a successor to my research in Real Digitalization.”

Here it was always 2014 and then 2016.

Intersecting twice, separating, approaching, passing, reverberating —

Constantly, already, always, forever, many times, repeatedly —

Like a needle moving over a worn record repeats the same phrase.

In 2014, Ryuuji was 23 years old. Kaya was 22 and Sascha was three.

In 2016, Ryuuji was 25 years old. Kaya would have been 24 and Sascha was supposed to be five.

Everything ended like a needle that fell off a record that had completed its rotation. The Minnesang ended and advanced no further. It would just repeat. Now, always, forever —

Intersecting twice, separating, approaching, passing, reverberating —

Constantly, already, always, forever, many times, repeatedly —

Like a needle moving over a worn record repeats the same phrase.

However, if the needle advances, the record will play a new song that could not previously be reached.

Here in 2020, Ryuuji is 29 years old, Kaya is 28 years old and Sascha is nine years old.

When they finally got a vacation, they went out towards the Baltic Sea as they had planned for some time. They prepared a new tent because it was too narrow for the three of them when they bought it long ago. They bought a huge new tent for eight people.

They travelled north on the International E-road network. It's the same way they travelled ten years earlier.

A third of the way along the journey, Sascha and Lilie started to fight about something.

Sascha pulled Lilie's hair and Lilie began to cry. She heard Lilie cry and then Sascha started to cry.

"Stop it, you two," said Kaya, who was in the passenger seat, as she turned around and gave them a warning.

It's good to be lively, but the two of them were too energetic.

Just then, Grit put his large build between them.

"Look, Grit says the same thing. Get along now."

Grit was already over ten years old. In human years, Grit should have reached the age of the elderly, but he was just as youthful as when Ryuuji took him for walks.

By the time they arrived in Rostock, Sascha and Lilie had already made up and began to wander the beach together.

Ryuuji called his brother-in-law on a telephone after he set up the tent.

“We just arrived.”

“Really? Is that little rascal Lilie being good?”

Lillie and Sascha ran by Ryuuji.

“Yes, she’s very well-behaved. How’s the sister-in-law?”

“She’s in stable condition. Her due date is tomorrow. I can’t see her right now.”

“If that’s so, it would be nice if you took a break too. Have you been sleeping well?”

“You’re right. I should rest for a while, shouldn’t I? I’m sorry for being a bother.”

Grit followed after Lilie and Sascha.

“No need to be sorry. You originally intended to travel with us. No need to worry. I am an excellent babysitter. It’s not a problem.”

After hanging up the phone, he stopped by the store. It was the same as the store that was there ten years prior. Ryuuji bought sandwiches, cereal and diet cola, then returned to the tent.

After a while, the hungry little girls came back and Kaya got them to help with the cooking.

Ryuuji drank cola while watching them.

When dinner was over, he watched the burning red sunset fall over the Baltic Sea, and then he went into the tent.

When he woke up the next morning, he was surrounded by the darkness found before dawn. For a moment he did not know where he was, but he immediately remembered upon hearing Kaya, Sascha and Lilie breathing lightly as they slept.

Ryuuji went out of the tent, taking care not to wake them up. Grit, who was sleeping outside the entrance, opened his eyes, but knew that it was Ryuuji and closed his eyes again, uninterested.

With a cola in his right hand, he climbed the small sandy beach and sat down. He listened to the sound of the waves, smelled the tide and drank his drink in two gulps.

The sky was beginning to slowly brighten.

At that moment, a bird sang somewhere. Ryuuji got up and looked for the owner of the chirps, but could not find it.

Kaya came out of the tent and stood next to Ryuuji.

“Ryuuji?”

“Hey, good morning.”

“Good morning.”

Kaya looked into Ryuuji’s face.

“You always go outside in the morning when you sleep in a tent. Were you not like that before?”

“I’m overwhelmed with happiness. Hehehe,” Ryuuji said. “Want a cola?”

Kaya shook her head in refusal.

The two of them sat side-by-side.

“When I came here last time, the birds sang.”

After a pause, Ryuuji continued speaking.

“So you talked about a robin and migratory birds and things like that.”

“I remember it well,” Kaya laughed.

“Long after, when I thought back on that trip, I wondered why you would have said that.”

“You’re a serious person.”

“I guess so. It is often said that I lack sincerity.”

“No. You are very sincere. In the sense that you do not lie to yourself.”

Kaya shook her head.

“You always try to stick to your principles until the very end.”

The sea, at low tide, was far away.

“Because it can only be done by you.”

For a while, they silently listened to the sound of the waves.

“So,” Ryuuji said, “Can you tell me the significance of the robin?”

Kaya smiled.

“I already forgot.”

Suddenly they noticed that the surrounding area was rapidly getting brighter. They crossed the line from night into morning.

Ryuuji stood up and brush sand off his legs.

“Ryuuji.” Kaya called out.

Ryuuji turned around.

Kaya stood up and stared at Ryuuji.

Her appearance seemed to blend into the light of the early morning.

“Thank you,” said Kaya.

Ryuuji cast his eyes downward. He was silent for a while, then he scratched his nose and raised his head.

“Oh, I wonder. Whenever I have a dream like this, I say these things. I always have to decide what to say. I have been trying to decide for many years.”

He laughed a little.

“I forgot what I intended to say.”

Kaya had a calm and gentle expression on her face.

She had a faint smile. A kind smile, waiting patiently.

“Ryuuji,” said Kaya.

“Goodbye.”

“Yeah. Goodbye,” said Ryuuji.

Chapter 41

Endure

Falling, falling, falling —

Flügel, who was about to fall, took his right foot and stepped outward to try to prevent the fall. He steadied himself and was able to avoid falling.

He pulled back his hips and stumbled forward, but still stood up with both feet firmly planted.

Drain, who was watching over Flügel in anticipation of the trial's end, felt uneasy that Flügel did not fall.

In the real world, Ryuuji Sogabe blacked out and the VR scanner's connection was lost. Was only his PC body left here in an incomplete posture?

No, that was not it. There was still a player. He felt his existence. Still remaining in The World through Flügel. So, why did he not lose consciousness?

He could not see Flügel's face.

Suddenly Flügel started to raise his upper body.

Slowly, he lifted his the full body and head.

At Drain's feet, one of the rats, who had been giving a "halt" command instructions for "Arrest", was provoked by Flügel's movement and jumped on him, considering him an enemy to be eliminated.

It made a dry, crunchy sound. A sound like ringing the end of a washcloth.

Flügel raised his upper body as though nothing happened. He looked at the face.

What kind of facial expression was this? It was laughing. It was crying. It was angry. It was jeering. It was delighted. It was cursed. It was regretful. It was all of these, it was none of these.

Drain jumped down quickly along with the rats.

Drain's instinct told him that the man before him was dangerous.

Only a few seconds had passed since he flashed the light. In those few seconds, did something happen to Flügel's body?

More than that, what did he do?

The trap that attacked Flügel has disappeared.

Drain quickly counted the number of rats he currently had in his possession.

The total number used to be ninety eight. Now, there were none.

“Ohh. How could this be...’ is what you must be saying to yourself,” Flügel muttered.

He has already returned to his usual vague expression.

Why are you able to make such a face? Why are you able to stand?, Drain thought. I pierced Flügel's abdomen with the Spear of Wotan and cut off his right hand. I bathed him in a powerful light. He fell to the ground and was in a dire state.

Strange. Something strange is going on.

Drain controlled three rats and jumped towards Flügel. He was trying to determine what happened.

Again, he made a dry crunchy sound. A sound like ringing the end of a washcloth.

However, there was nothing there. Several sounds rang out at the same time.

Then the rat vanished.

Drain was stunned.

What did this mean? What happened? Were all three rats just killed?

That was not an ability of Brieler Rössle. At least it's not an ability of the current Brieler Rössle.

First of all, there was no gun in Flügel's hand. There was no Curse Gun anywhere.

“You should stop now. It's futile,” Flügel said.

“Well, you know... I understand in a sense. Your rats can't beat me anymore.”

Upon hearing Flügel's words, Drain got angry.

But Flügel was merely relaying what he felt.

Thanks to Drain setting the rats on him, Flügel was able to better understand the new form of the Brieler Rössle he had just used.

He had the ability to use Brieler Rössle to target and shoot anything that entered within two meters of it.

Just the sensing of something within two meters would set off the gun. As a result, the target would be eliminated.

You don't have to pull or hold the trigger, or even hold the gun in your hand.

A new power created by the Ryuuji Sogabe's spirit.

Or perhaps it could be called an original power?

Could it be... Drain trembled with fear?

Was it a mistake to pour the light on them? Could he be absolutely certain that he had not done something terribly wrong?

This man, Ryuuji Sogabe... in addition to being a developer of a medical device VR scanner, he has the aptitude of a Schicksal PC.

Did he not heal properly with the VR scanner until now?

For example, since something like an ego-shell is stronger than a normal human, was the healing effect of the VR scanner faulty?

The light emitted by Drain destroyed it. The moment the ego-shell collapsed, the VR scanner exuded its original power and healed the wounds of Ryuuji's mind...

"It's nice, isn't it, Flügel?"

Drain was already recovering from the mental shock the next moment. When he stepped forward with his right foot, Wotan's Spear, which had been lying on the floor, jumped up like a level and fell into Drain's hand.

"If this is also a test, I will overcome it again and again. I will beat you!"

A new instruction was quickly given and Drain's ninety-five remaining rats all exposed their fangs at once.

"My, my. At thirty years of age, I have awakened my abilities. Perhaps I'm getting old," Flügel muttered.

"I ended up writing ability and reading it as 'power.'"

He thought he saw Drain's hand shake and at once Wotan's Spear flew at him. Drain snapped his fingers and made it rotate like a windmill.

This spear destroys and deletes the thing that its blade hits. Just a few strikes can cause huge damage. It's not necessary to stab right away. Just a strike

somewhere on Flügel's PC body would do. Drain made it fly like a javelin.

Flügel did not try to evade it. He stood firmly in place.

He heard a dull sound and bullets, which fired from the gun without being held, struck the tip of the spear.

The spear, which lost its tip, fell at Flügel's feet.

Flügel stood still a while. He then took one step forward.

Drain's face took on a demonic aspect. He sent his rats charging at Flügel one after the other.

A rat jumped at him and struck him and was then blown away.

A rat jumped at him and struck him and was then blown to smithereens as well.

Flügel stood still a moment. Then he took one more step.

Some rats jumped at him and struck him and were then blown away. Flügel moved forward.

Some rats jumped at him and struck him and were then blown away. Flügel moved forward.

Some rats jumped at him and struck him and were then blown away. Flügel moved forward.

Some rats jumped at him and struck him and were then blown away. Flügel moved forward.

Some rats jumped at him and struck him and were then blown away. Flügel moved forward.

Some rats jumped at him and struck him and were then blown away. Flügel moved forward.

Some rats jumped at him and struck him and were then blown away. Flügel moved forward.

Some rats jumped at him and struck him and were then blown away...

In an instant the ninety-five rats disappeared from the rain of bullets and Drain was being driven to a corner of the cathedral.

No matter what they tried, the rats could not invade Flügel's space at a distance of two meters.

It was like a barrier of bullets. There was no way to break through.

No, there was only one way to break through. Or should he say there had been? The energy of the black forest. If it had been a sliver of the black for-

est's power, it ought to have defeated Flügel by penetrating the two-meter barrier.

But the black forest was no longer usable. It was used to deal with the golden Sophia, Urania.

"Wait, Flügel!"

Drain was driven to the wall and he shouted.

"The rats should be filling this world. This world should be filled with my rats! People will realize their errors by the rats that I have created. They will realize the repulsive creation known as the Internet and will begin working towards abandoning the Internet. Until that time comes, I must hide here at all costs. Now, if I die, the rats that I created will also disappear. Then all I worked for will have been for nothing!"

Drain kept talking. He was beginning to look desperate.

"If that happens, the Internet will continue to spew out filth like a drainage system as before. This world will slowly decay. Everything will be lost without anyone knowing. So, I cannot die yet. Understand that the Internet is the root of all evil!"

"Uh, what did you say?"

Flügel cut off Drain's words.

"That's right. 'The inevitable born of randomness is the ultimate truth'... was it? That's exactly it right now. This is our trial. That's right, isn't it?" Flügel snickered.

"Let's enjoy ourselves to the very end."

"Don't you understand?"

With a tinge of disappointment and hopelessness, Drain's voice became softer.

"Don't you understand?"

Drain shook his head.

"Don't you understand, Flügel?!" Drain suddenly yelled in a loud emotional voice and with glowing eyes he glanced at Flügel. It was no longer a human face. It was the face of a criminal.

There was only the intent to kill there.

Not to beat up the one standing before him. Not merely to hurt him. Not to restrain him.

But to kill.

Something was starting to happen to Drain's body.

Had such strong emotions caused something to progress deep inside his body?

His body, which was disguised as a system administrator, began to distort and swell. Bristles began to grow from Drain's body until he was covered in them. The tip of his nose extended for a long time and he started to look like a giant rat.

It was a drastic transformation.

Flügel let out a gasp. He soon understood the phenomena in front of him.

Outer Dependency Syndrome.

The fate of human beings who have spent too long a time in the electronic world.

The diffusion and extinction of the ego into space. By this process, the self "catabolize" into something other than a human being.

Perhaps there had been precursor symptoms such as the illusion of expanding out into space and periodic severe headaches.

The huge rat-beast Drain jumped with tremendous agility.

He extended his sharp-nailed, bony right claw and as soon as he tried to get within two meters of Flügel to scratch at Flügel's throat, a bullet was fired and flew at Drain.

Drain roared as he charged forward. He stuck out his left arm. Immediately after, he was struck with full force in his left arm. He was struck. He was struck. He was struck. Drain, who was being beaten by the force of the bullets that hit him, jumped down in an attempt to avoid the barrage, but the bullets hit his entire body. He was struck. He was struck. He was struck. He was struck. He was struck by more bullets. He was struck. He was struck. He was struck. He was struck. He was struck. He was struck. He was struck. He was struck. He was struck by a barrage like a wall. He was struck. He was struck. He was struck. He was struck. He was struck.

"You've already died in the real world," Flügel said.

"Here you are nothing but the 'remnant' of Yuri Seto. More or less..."

Once again Drain roared.

He pulled his hands to his chest, bared his fangs, and rushed with his fangs aimed at Flügel. A single blow struck Drain at full force.

"I hope you get this world cleaned up."

A bullet struck him in the middle of the forehead. He was struck. He was struck. He was struck. He was struck. He was struck.

Finally, a bullet penetrated Drain's skin, which had extraordinary durability, and became buried with incredible accuracy in the part of his head corresponding to the left parietal bone.

At that moment, the spirits of Flügel and Drain were connected for a brief instant through the bullet. Flügel traced Drain's memories backwards to the past.

He had entered the game, had killed himself in an abandoned mountain hut, had confronted Veronica Bain, had been hired as a programmer at CC Corp, had been released from prison, had gotten locked up in a cell, had executed the Deadly Flash program, had graduated from Chikuba University, and had received lectures from Taichiro Sugai, and then...

Good gracious, when did his life decide to go in its current direction? From the time he realized that his father was killed by a simple transmission error of an unmanned robot weapon, which at the time was under secret research and development in the US military? Or was it from the time he learned that his mother's death was caused by a medical computer's error?

If the "gears" of his life had differed only slightly. If his "fate" had been different.

Perhaps there may have been a future in which his extraordinary intelligence and exceptional sensitivity could have been harnessed socially.

But that was not the case. Just as Flügel did not walk the same path as Drain, Drain also did not walk the same path as Flügel. Drain had transformed into an evil monster hidden in the sewers.

Now, the bullet penetrated while precisely destroying the data around Drain's head and then it ejected from the occipital region.

Then the bullet rebounded. The true stopping power of the Brieler Rössle exploded. The bullet itself eroded as it entangled with the target's data, which also dissolved like dust.

Drain's PC body was vanishing, vanishing, vanishing —

Then silence. He was completely annihilated.

The wicked Drain was dead.

The life that had plagued the world for a long time, a life full of fanaticism, anger and humiliation, the life of Drain, that is Yuri Kazinski Seto, finally came to an end here.

Flügel shut his eyes.

He did not look back on the deadly battle that had just unfolded. There was a view of the sea in front of his closed eyes. Waves, sand and the sky. The

sound of birds. The noise of the tide.



Ryuuji removed the VR scanner and exited the phone booth.

David, who had been sitting on the sidewalk avoiding the rain, stood up quickly.

“You took a long time. Were you successful?”

Ryuuji tried to smile and give a thumbs up, but he did not have the strength to do it.

Ryuuji started to fall and David caught him and held him up.

“Ryuuji, are you okay?”

Ryuuji tried to answer, but could not speak. He was starting to feel as though his body was not his own.

David screamed something, but Ryuuji didn't understand anything anymore.

Ryuuji lost consciousness and sank into the darkness.

Chapter 42

Epilogue

Suddenly he noticed that a face was floating in the dark.

It was the face of a young girl he knew very well.

Her sleek eyebrows slanted downward and she looked at Ryuuji with an anxious look.

Then the face went away.

Another face appeared.

A man's face. He also recognized this face. A wide forehead with eyebrows and a nose denoting a strong will.

A third face appeared.

He did not know this face. Who could it be? This man seemed to be wearing a white lab coat.

The previous man spoke with a Kansai dialect.

"How's his condition?"

"He's terribly weak. He needs to rest for a week or so," answered the man in the white lab coat.

"That long?" the little girl said with a concerned tone.

"What time is it?" asked Ryuuji.

"Ryuuji, you're awake?"

"He's just talking in a state of delirium."

"No, I'm fine. Please tell me the time."

Ryuuji tried to raise himself up from the bed with his hands.

Then he blacked out.

Ryuuji suddenly realized that he was standing on the shores of a lake.

There was a huge rat nearby, drinking water.

For some reason, Ryuuji did not feel disgust.

The giant rat got up from drinking water and turned to face Ryuuji.

“We are all just characters in a game.” the rat cried out.

“I felt that way too,” said Ryuuji. The surroundings were very quiet.

The frozen silence seemed as though it were falling from the sky.

Suddenly Ryuuji realized that Lilie was by his side and was looking into his eyes.

“You’re awake? One second, I’ll call the doctor.”

Soon Lilie came back with the doctor.

“Do you know where you are?”

“The hospital.”

“That’s right, the hospital. How do you feel?”

“I feel like I’m in hospital.”

“You were brought here two days ago. Please don’t worry about anything. Our hospital is supported by CC Corp.”

“CC Corp?”

“Yes.”

“Now I’m worried.”

Ryuuji started to lose consciousness again.

It took Ryuuji eight days to fully regain his senses.

One day before discharge, David came in. He had a bunch of newspapers.

“How are you feeling?”

Laying in bed, Ryuuji shook his head.

“I have no choice but to give up my dream of becoming a professional baseball player.”

“Really? That’s unfortunate.”

David placed a bunch of newspapers on the bedside stand, pulled over a chair and sat down.

“This is the morning newspaper from the day after you lost consciousness, Ryuuji. I figured you would like to see the results of your efforts. I brought you a few copies.”

Ryuuji grabbed a few newspapers and skimmed through them briefly.

“There’s nothing about it.”

“Exactly. That day, nothing happened in the evening. There was no mass suicide. You were able to cancel Seto’s rats.”

David nodded.

“Gus and Travis have regained consciousness two days ago. Everyone’s fine, all thanks to you.”

“That’s good. By the way, David, I have a favor to ask.”

“What is it?”

While he had been asleep, various thoughts gathered in his head. He needed support.

“NAB has data from the Black Forest, doesn’t it? At least that’s what you told me.”

David nodded.

“It’s in a file that the person in charge investigated last year.”

“I want you to show me that file.”

David gave Ryuuji a suspicious look.

“Is there something to be worried about?”

Ryuuji shook his head.

“No. I just want to get a quick overview of the topic. It’s not a big deal.”

David gave Ryuuji another suspicious look, but eventually nodded.

“If you hadn’t been there, this case would not be solved. So, go ahead. I will ask the Akasaka branch to pass the file on to you.”

“Thank you. I owe you one.”

For a while, David was silent. It seemed that he could not decide whether he should say the following words.

“Hey, Ryuuji,” he said in a muffled tone.

“What if I were to take you up on that? NAB is looking for talented people.”

“As they definitely should be,” Ryuuji said with a smile.

“Well, you should join us. I think you ought to do.”

David got up from the chair.

“Well, I’ll be going.”

He looked at Ryuuji and put out his right hand.

“I am forever grateful to you. Please give my regards to Lillie.”

Ryuuji put out his right hand and grasped David’s hand.

The two shook hands.

“Did you find any of Aura’s clues?” Ryuuji asked after releasing his hand from David’s.

“Thanks to you.”

With a broad grin, David left the room.

Ryuuji spent the rest of the day looking up at the ceiling.

Seto died, the rats disappeared and CC Corp’s confidential matters were protected. A happy ending. The story was coming to an end. At the cost of Ryuuji’s dream of becoming a professional baseball player. From now on, he would aim to become a master of trendy cafes in Aoyama.

But was that really so?

“Of course not,” Ryuuji said aloud.

The last problem still remained. He had to be rid of it.

She looked at the internet from her net-phone screen. She looked like she was just in her late teens or twenty.

“Hmmm, so you’re Flügel,” she said in plain English as she looked Ryuuji up and down.

“Are you single?”

“That’s right, I’m Flügel. Umm, what? Are you interested in me?”

“Your appearance is rough, a little dirty.”

“Oh, I see... hey! I guess that’s one way to look at it.”

Ryuuji nodded.

“How are you? Have you recovered?”

“I’m fine, doing well. My contract with CC has expired. I’m glad I don’t have to look at KK’s mug anymore,” she said.

She had a short platinum blonde haircut and bright eyes. She was petite and slender. Ryuuji could not tell her height because she was sitting, but he did not really see her as the player who operated the Sofia Squad’s Urania and was quite the match for Drain in their fight.

“I was just using the net-phone because I wanted to see how silly you looked in the real world. Not for any other reason. The one you asked for you has already been emailed,” she said before turning to the other side.

“Thank you. Charges will be transferred to the same account as before.”

“No, I don’t want money. This is a free gift. I’ve sabotaged you before. So consider us even.”

“Are you sure about that? That’s very helpful. Well, let’s do that then.”

“Well, more than that...” she said hesitantly.

“What are you doing here?”

“What? Me? No, no, no,” said Ryuuji as he waved his hand in rejection.

“I’m just collecting materials to make a report.”

“You’re kidding. Do you have to collect it right now? Such old materials. And a guy who looks pretty good. You’re planning something.”

“Oh? Is that so? Whatever could it be?” Ryuuji said jokingly.

“For some reason, I can imagine, but...”

She shook her head.

“You’re an idiot.”

“So I’m told.”

The rainy season would end this weekend. The news broadcast said so.

On that day, it began to rain soon after noon, but it was only a light drizzle that wet the road. The last vain struggle of the rainy season as it fades away. The long rainy season was over and full summer is about to come.

Ryuuji arrived at the Baketon Hotel just before evening.

Veronica Bain greeted him at the dimly cocktail bar.

Her skin was still as pale as ever and her lipstick-painted lips stood out.

When he sat down at the innermost part of the booth, Ryuuji reported on the matter. Most reports had already been submitted, so he would just add some supplements in person.

While he reported, Veronica looked very upbeat.

“Yuri Kazinski Seto disappeared both online and in the real world. You did what I asked you to do.”

Veronica nodded with satisfaction once Ryuuji’s report was over.

“Ahh, exactly the opposite. All I did was prevent further leaks of confidential data stolen by Yuri Kazinski Seto.”

Ryuuji corrected her.

“I left data collection to the San Diego branch.”

“It’s a trivial matter. You defeated Seto. We have to make a toast.”

Veronica called the old yet elegant bartender.

“A Bloody Mary. Can you have a drink today?”

Ryuuji put his hand to his head.

“Damn. I came by car. Sorry, I’ll have a milkshake, please.”

“Certainly. It’s French Vanilla.”

As the bartender left, Veronica looked at Ryuuji as though taking him to task.

“Thank you very much. In this country, drinking before the sun sets is a vice.”

“It’s a shame you can’t drink alcohol. Well, it is what it is.”

Veronica brought her face near to Ryuuji’s. She smiled alluringly.

“We still have some unfinished business between us.”

“That’s right. I also wanted to talk about that,” Ryuuji said with a wry smile.

“I was thinking about it all the time. Well, actually I had a dream while in hospital.”

Veronica frowned.

“A dream?”

“For some reason, I had a dream about you talking to Seto. I don’t know the place in the dream, but it was like a mountain hut somewhere. Uh, Seto’s body was found in an abandoned house outside of Colorado. Perhaps I was drawn in by this image.”

It was not exactly a dream he had at the time of his admission to hospital. When he shot Drain in the game, the dream came in an instant like a memory flooding back into Ryuuji’s brain.

Veronica narrowed her eyes and smiled.

“What kind of things did Seto and I talk about?”

“I didn’t understand the contents of the conversation,” Ryuuji answered.

“However, this dream led me to open my eyes. Thanks to that, various questions concerning that business have been solved.”

“Questions?”

“About the Black Forest. As you reported, quantum computers are heavily involved in this matter. Yuri Seto used the power of the black forest to mass produce rats.”

The bartender brought the cocktail and milkshake. Sogabe thanked her, received his milkshake and drank some.

“That cocktail looks delicious.”

“What happened to the Black Forest?” said Veronica.

“I wonder whether Seto could have used the black forest on his own. He, as a company employee, borrowed a laptop computer from a manager. Quantum computers are goods that are handled by large enterprises and sometimes by national governments. Did Yuri Seto handle one alone? I was worried about it initially.”

Ryuuji took out the palm computer from his pocket and opened the folding keyboard. He took out the copy of the newspaper that was sandwiched inside the palm computer and put it in front of Veronica.

“Did Seto perhaps have an accomplice? I thought so and examined it in various ways. Please look at this. It’s a copy of a newspaper from San Diego. The photos are blurred, because they are so old,” said Ryuuji.

“This article is from the year 2000. Do you understand? It’s about a new venture company that is focusing on developing new computers. The company’s name is...”

Ryuuji pointed out the place with a finger.

“ALTIMIT Corp.”

Veronica smiled and listened to Ryuuji’s explanation.

“After that, this company will become known all over the world for the ALTIMIT OS. It seems that the story of the quantum computer had vanished because its impact was too strong. What I want to show you is the photo, and this line below it. The members are listed in order, here. This woman. Please have a look at her.”

Having said that, Ryuuji did not look at the photo. He looked at Veronica’s face.

“Isn’t this you, Ms. Veronica? A much younger you.”

Veronica did not look at the picture. She was looking at Ryuuji’s face.

“Is it? I can’t really tell from this photo.”

For the first time, she took up her glass of virgin Bloody Mary and drank it.

“You’re right, this picture is certainly hard to see clearly. However, there was an accomplice to Seto. That much seems certain. For example, Seto knew about the existence of the camera at ALGOS. In order to outmanoeuvre the camera, he floated his large fleet behind it. This is not something you can do without knowing the system beforehand.”

“Perhaps one of the programmers that ALGOS hired leaked the specifications?”

“I also suspected that. Their background check was perfect. No one is connected to Seto. There are other points that I thought were strange.”

“What would those be?”

“Sophia Corp’s Urania. Her abilities were too specialized to rats. There’s no chance. It seems that the person who prepared her had known about the rats well before I reported it.”

“I don’t understand. Why would Seto’s collaborator prepare Urania who’s an anti-virus?”

“Seto had a collaborator. But that person was not Seto’s perfect companion,” Ryuuji continued.

“The collaborator sent a Sophia team to defeat Seto while supplying the black forest. In other words, the collaborator advanced things in the spirit of a game master and made fine adjustments to enliven the game.”

“That’s an interesting way of thinking about it.”

“Ms. Veronica, I have checked your schedule since you arrived in Japan. Most of the time, you stay at this hotel except for a few meetings. It’s as if you were afraid to be attacked by someone.”

Ryuuji was not smiling anymore.

“This Baketon Hotel was founded in the Meiji period, and it is hand-crafted, so to speak, and it endeavors to provide service that places importance on the connection between people. It’s an abstract way of speaking, but, in short, there is no computer here at all. All guest records are handled in analog. In other words, it is a safe area where an online attack does not work at all. Naturally, you could escape from the Deadly Flash.”

“It’s not what you say, it’s how you say it.”

She smiled, but it was more a laugh than a smile.

“You were here already when you called me. Because you knew the threat the rats posed. While you were supporting Yuri Seto’s acts of terrorism, you did not remove your alert protocol.”

Veronica was still laughing. But her eyes reflected the light strangely and she was now giving off an energy from her body as though emitting electricity.

“Why would I do such a dangerous thing?”

“Well...”

Ryuuji shook his head.

“I don’t know, unfortunately, but I can guess.”

“Let’s hear it then.”

“Didn’t you have some sort of feud with Harold Hoerwick?”

When Ryuuji said this, it seemed that a new expression appeared on Veronica’s face.

“Your attitude towards The World is quite cold. This has always bothered me. Certainly, as a manager, it may be right. But you are looking at The World in an emotionless way.”

Ryuuji stopped his monologue.

Veronica began to laugh and laugh.

As her lovely figure wriggled like a white snake, she said something odd.

“That’s okay. It’s fine,” she said and smiled, showing her bright white teeth.

“Ryuuji. As I thought, you are wonderful. So I’ll tell you the truth.”

Veronica took out a pipe decorated with roses and began to pack leaves into the bowl.

“I did take advantage of Yuri Seto’s scheme somewhat. I prepared what was needed as commanded and I just gave him some rear support. As you said, I helped him to use the power of the Black Forest and I also taught him about ALGOS’ specs.”

Suddenly the atmosphere became serious. Ryuuji was puzzled.

“Why did you do that?”

“You said it yourself. It’s a gamemaster’s pretense. I think that expression is very easy to understand.”

Contrary to her roguish tone, Veronica’s voice was as cold as a tombstone. Realizing that she had begun to speak the truth without remorse, Ryuuji was appalled.

“I like talented people. Yuri Seto was disorganized in his thoughts, but he was a genius. Did he create anything? Did he produce anything using the existing technologies at his disposal? I wanted to find out.”

Veronica rubbed a match against the matchbook with one hand and carefully lit the pipe.

“Seto’s work was satisfactory. He proved that splendidly. We are already surpassing the power of the Ultimate AI. We no longer need Aura. So, I chose you as an obstacle to the rise of Seto. The good news is that you were a better bargain than Seto.”

She held the pipe’s mouthpiece between her lips and began to smoke contentedly.

“So now we can finally return to our original business.”

“And what was that?”

“It’s not a beautiful world that we live in, Ryuuji. The circumstances do not matter. That is not a problem. Please look at the status quo,” Veronica whispered in Ryuuji’s ear.

Smoke tickled Ryuuji’s nose.

“Your intelligence has the capability of being at the forefront of technology. The San Diego branch has an environment where you can demonstrate its power. We are ready to accept you.”

The trial was persisting. It would tag along forever.

“I’ll have to decline. It’s a terrible story,” Ryuuji said.

Veronica’s beautiful eyebrows momentarily moved.

“At ALTIMIT, it seems that development of a new type of quantum computer... has been extremely difficult. In fact, I, by chance, obtained the development data of that time.”

After Ryuuji said that, he started his palm PC and the screen turned on.

The last data he had arranged recently. He asked Urania, or Judy Goldman, to steal the data stored at ALTIMIT.

“...The Black Forest is a prison built by electrons. Prisoners are separated from their real bodies by special techniques and are sentenced to remain in digital space. The prisoner, a so-called Lost One, by lacking common sense and by the lawless act to control the Black Forest, is subjected to a literal imprisonment without pardon or parole. The more the prisoners increase, the more pain they are given, the machine expands, and its efficiency improves. For this purpose, verification by human experimentation is essential. It is necessary to secure the distribution channel of bio-elements by any means...”

Ryuuji looked at Veronica.

“That writing is rather dangerous. A bio-element is essentially a natural unconscious person. It is a Lost One who has been involved in the anomalous phenomenon of The World. That was stated in the documents of a case from last year that NAB seized. However, it is unlikely that there were any Lost Ones when ALTIMIT was working on quantum computers. At that time, The World itself did not exist. So, what happened?”

He moved his finger as he scrolled the page.

“ALTIMIT used very healthy ordinary people, people who were not unconscious, as subjects. For example, they would tell a user that the user had won a free game campaign and under the pretense of experiencing the latest online games, the user would put on the FMD and then bio-elementing operations would be applied without the user’s knowledge...”

The desired page appeared.

Ryuuji stabbed his finder at the screen and stopped the screen’s scrolling, then showed the screen to Veronica.

“From here on there is a page that summarizes the subject’s medical records. The experiment observation records for the subject are written here.”

Ryuuji read aloud.

“Headaches. Intense pain. A searing rash. Sometimes accompanied by blisters. These symptoms do not occur at computer startup. The aforementioned symptoms occur during bedtime over a period of one to two days. Damage received during virtual reality experiences is relived in dreams...”

At that moment, Ryuuji stopped talking and breathed deeply to calm himself.

“Is that okay?”

His voice seemed to go up, but he suppressed it with his willpower. Even so, there spoke as though about to cry.

“These are the same symptoms my wife had!”

ALTIMIT, located in San Diego, was developing quantum computers connected to the Black Forest.

Kaya Fröbe lived in San Diego until she came to Germany with the help of the Weiss family.

She had been taken there by her father at an early age and then participated in a campaign for an online game, the true nature of which was unknown at the time.

Then a mark of karmic suffering was engraved deep in their bodies.

Veronica was silent after Ryuuji started talking about the medical records.

She put the pipe on the desk and looked over it. The upper half of her face was shaded by the angle of the light.

It seemed like she was thinking of a way to deal with it.

That was not the case, however. As Veronica raised her face, the light moved and her eyes appeared out of the shade.

Something had happened to her feminine face. Something in her eyes was seething and her personality changed.

“That’s a shame.”

Her bewitching career woman’s attire was held under the light and something unpleasant made an appearance.

An non-human element stood out in the foreground.

“You’ve already realized that it was my intention to inform you a little,” said Veronica Bain.



“Then you could have created great research to overcome your suffering.”

She was not the person to discuss things with. It had become clear.

Ryuuji got up and looked down at Veronica.

“So, what are you going to do?” asked Veronica.

“There is no evidence that you talked with me here today. It’s just a delusion built up from vague and dumb speculation.”

“Yes, but thanks to you, I now understand what I should do,” Ryuuji said. He had already returned to his usual voice.

“All I need to do is to prove what I just talked about. I will seek out the evidence. Exhaustively.”

Veronica slowly got up. It was like a snake that lifted its neck and raised its upper body.

Ryuuji did not draw back.

Ryuuji and the snake locked eyes.

“Are you in your right mind? I mean, you’re turning CC Corp... and AL-TIMIT Corp... into enemies.”

“Perhaps that’s the case.”

“You know, I like people like you.”

Veronica nodded.

“I am generous to my favorite people. So, I will let you leave this hotel. Please go.”

Veronica spoke again as Ryuuji reached the exit.

“Ryuuji.”

Ryuuji stopped, but did not look back.

“I look forward to seeing you again,” said Veronica.

“You are indifferent to the pain of others, like a snake that strangles a rat,” Ryuuji said with his back turned. He took out a candy from his jacket pocket, peeled off the wrapping paper and put the candy in his mouth.

“You will get your recompense. Sooner or later, it will come.”

When he left the Baketon Hotel, the rain had already stopped.

Ryuuji squinted and looked up at the sky. It was a sunny cloudless day.

Just then, he thought he saw the shadow of a bird fly over his head.

Ryuuji turned around and looked all around, but could not find the bird.

(The End)