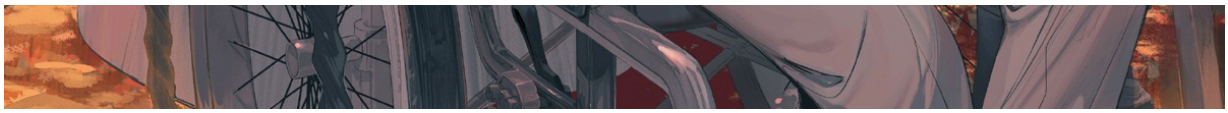

The Detective Is Already Dead
10
nigozyu
Illustration by
Umibouzu
La detective está muerta


The Detective Is Already Dead
10
La detective está muerta.
nigozyu
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Umibouzu




“Take that!”
Nagisa
Natsunagi


"Say! Why don't you come in, too?"
Charlotte Arisaka Anderson


"Yes—I'll be waiting, just like last year."
Siesta
Kimihiko Kimizuka

A CERTAIN DETECTIVE'S MEMOIRS

XX/XX/20XX

I'd bet the odds that this journal will be around in the future are pretty close to zero. Either the enemy will find and burn it, or [redacted] will censor it. As [redacted], though, I'll leave as much of a record as I can. I'll entrust this to future heroes, believing that someone will find it someday.

Be wary of [redacted].

He'll steal and break everything, then create an evil beyond anything we've imagined. I probably won't make it in time. About all I can leave behind are this journal and a little [redacted].

You people use your [redacted] to stop him someday.

If you can't do it, the world will have two fates to choose from: Be controlled by [redacted] or invaded by [redacted]. The enemy is near and far. If you just remember that, you won't suffer by it.

—Was that threat a bit too harsh?

If all else fails, search for [redacted]. It's in a corner of the world.

I wish from the bottom of my heart that the one who acquires this journal will reach the future they hope for.



The Detective Is Already Dead

10

nigozyu
Illustration by Umibouzu

YEN ON
New York



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The Detective Is Already Dead, Vol. 10

nigozyu

Translation by Taylor Engel
Cover art by Umibouzu

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A prologue from the future

My leather shoe came down on broken glass, and the sound echoed through the silent, abandoned building.

"Are you stupid, Kimi?" A voice immediately got on my case. For somebody telling other people not to make noise, she was being pretty loud.

"There's no point in being quiet after you made a noise like that, is there?"

"Yeah, yeah, my bad."

The dark interior was in ruins. Stepping carefully, I came up to stand beside the detective…Siesta.

"If you didn't want us making noise, shouldn't you have carried me in the first place?"

"That's a weird take." Siesta sighed heavily, but she did turn her back to me. "Want to climb on?"

"In terms of how it'll look to the rest of the world, which do you think is better—piggyback or bridal carry?"

"I think they're both so bad it doesn't matter."

I see. Adult men have it rough.

"Still, it's been a long time since we went overseas and did a job like this, just the two of us."

Siesta and I were currently about ten thousand kilometers from Japan, in an abandoned building on the outskirts of a rural town in the eastern United States. We'd come here in search of a certain person.

"Are you stupid, Kimi?"

"You're moving really fast here."

"We don't have time for nostalgia. If this isn't the place, we have to go to the next one right away."

"I know. Nagisa and Mia are probably doing the same thing, too."

As I was thinking about those two, who were on a mission in another distant foreign country, Siesta stopped in her tracks. *Don't tell me…*

"Get back."

By the time I realized something was coming, Siesta had already dashed forward to intercept it. A gunshot rang out; Siesta had fired.

"……!"

She missed, though. She *tsk*ed.

In the darkness, *the enemy's shadow* moved. I heard a thud, and the gun fell from Siesta's hand.

"Siesta!" I tossed her a knife with a cap on it. Considering who we were up against, fighting with it might actually have been easier.

"How many years has it been since I fought you?"

As Siesta uncapped the knife, I got the feeling she'd smiled slightly.

A metallic sound echoed in the darkness. Like Siesta, the enemy had drawn a weapon. When it clashed with the knife, sparks literally flew. Both visibility and the terrain were bad here, but the pair had chosen this place as their battlefield, and now they were competing to see who would come out on top.

I didn't know the fight had been temporarily settled until the sound of crashing blades stopped entirely. I'd been searching for the building's emergency generator, and when I found it, I powered it up. Even then, only dim light illuminated Siesta, her opponent, and their broken weapons.

"What do you want to do? We could keep fighting… Fuubi." Siesta was addressing a redheaded police officer—or rather, the Assassin. "You can fight without a weapon, can't you?"

"In pure hand-to-hand combat, I might end up killing you. I've forgotten how to hold back, see." The corners of Ms. Fuubi's lips curved upward.

"Then, what, you're saying you were holding back just now?"

"Ha! You're still a kid, Ace Detective. I'm saying that was a draw." Leaning back against the wall, Ms. Fuubi lit a cigarette. How long

had it been since I'd seen this woman smoke?

"We've been looking for you," I said. She glanced at me briefly, then exhaled a long stream of smoke.

Fuubi Kase, the former Assassin. Although I'd known her as a police officer for ages, she'd actually been a hired killer who was quietly active in the underworld. From what I'd heard, she'd stealthily killed many targets on orders from the Federation Government. Sometimes she was my ally, and sometimes my enemy. Which one was she now?

About a year ago, just after the conclusion of a global crisis known as the Great Cataclysm, Ms. Fuubi had been jailed for alleged treason. She'd seemed satisfied with that, but then, under cover of Bruno Belmondo's revolt at the Ritual of Sacred Return, she'd broken out.

Our group was working to recover the world's lost memories—particularly information regarding the Phantom Thief—and because Fuubi Kase had investigated him before, we'd been trying to track her down.

"How did you know I was here?" Ms. Fuubi asked, holding her cigarette between her fingertips.

"Since you're evading government pursuers, I thought Bruno would still be guiding you," Siesta told her. "We've just been working down the list of his old hideouts, one by one."

That was why Nagisa and Mia weren't with us. We'd split up to check places Ms. Fuubi might be hiding out.

"The other former Tuners aren't with you, I see."

The Inventor, the Revolutionary, and the Hero had all been working toward Bruno's goal with him.

"We aren't a monolith. I act on my own code."

"So you don't trust anybody? —Even now?" I asked.

Ms. Fuubi's only answer was silence.

After a short pause, Siesta spoke instead. "Do you know where Charlotte is? It sounded as if she was chasing you."

That was one of the biggest questions we had: A few weeks ago, we'd lost contact with Charlotte. According to the last message she'd left Siesta, she'd wanted us to look for Fuubi Kase if we stopped being able to contact her.

"No clue." Ms. Fuubi stubbed out her cigarette in her portable ashtray, looking dubious. "Besides, if she or anybody else had been tailing me, I definitely would've picked up on it."

Her self-confidence was pretty impressive, but she didn't seem to be lying.

"Does that mean something happened to Charlie before she could do that?"

Maybe she'd been snatched by somebody, for example.

"At present, even the Men in Black haven't been able to find her. Conversely, that means our enemy is someone such a move wouldn't work on."

Siesta deliberately used a strong word like "enemy" as she considered the situation. "In that case, could Charlie's kidnappers be… It can't have been the Federation Government, can it?"

Were they planning to use Charlie to threaten us? "If you value your friend's life," et cetera… No, if so, they would have made contact with us ages ago. The government must have had another logical reason to snatch her…

"Is that all you wanted?" Ms. Fuubi asked, seeing that we were stuck. "I've got work to do. A ton of it piled up during the year I was in the pen. Go home before I change my mind." Her gaze sharpened. Those eyes said she could swap that cigarette for her knife again at any moment.

"Oh? I thought you and I probably had the same goal," Siesta said. Ms. Fuubi's eyebrows twitched slightly. "Retaking the lost records of the past, or at least remembering them ourselves. If you're acting on guidance Bruno left you, that must be what you're thinking, too."

Bruno had noticed the crisis the world was going through before anyone else. He'd realized that records about the Phantom Thief, the

Akashic records, and the Singularity had vanished off the face of the Earth, and that humanity's collective memory had been rewritten.

That was why he'd sounded the alarm, even rebelled against the government. Then he'd entrusted his will to the remaining former Tuners. Although our positions were different, Ms. Fuubi, Siesta, and I had to be heading in the same direction.

"Say, Fuubi. How much do you remember? How far do your memories go?" Siesta asked.

Not for the first time, silence fell. We suspected Ms. Fuubi had been in contact with Bruno for quite a long time, and there was a good possibility that she was closer to the truth than we were.

"You're looking for a tool to help you get them back, aren't you?" Ms. Fuubi said.

She hadn't answered our question, but what she had said was significant. She must have heard about the Sacred Relics from Bruno.

"We've found two Sacred Relics so far. I think the third may be here," Siesta elaborated, holding up fingers as she went. "The first was found at Bruno's residence, precisely ten thousand kilometers from a certain spot in Japan. Mia found the second one beside the Doomsday Clock; the clock was also ten thousand kilometers from that same spot. So is our current location. It's too vague to be called a theory, but it really does seem as if it might mean something."

"And that's why you pegged this as the place where I'd be hiding out?" Ms. Fuubi asked. Siesta smiled thinly. "So where is the spot in Japan you mentioned?"

"Mm, well, take a look at a world map later."

As a matter of fact, the general location wasn't hard to figure out. The spot Siesta meant was in Japan's Hokuriku region.

However, Siesta was currently the only person who'd narrowed its location down in greater detail. She'd figured it out when she'd learned the locations of Bruno's residence and the Doomsday Clock from Noel and Mia, but she hadn't told me where it was.

Still, I had the vague feeling I knew. It was a place I'd visited during Golden Week roughly seven years ago, during a certain incident. A place jam-packed with memories and fated connections.

"Even now, we're here because he showed us the way."

Who was the "he" Siesta was talking about?

I had a guess. At the same time, though, I suspected that now wasn't the time to know for sure.

"All right, let's split up and look for the Sacred Relic." Siesta set off, leading the way.

The abandoned building was gloomy and overgrown with vegetation. Had it been a mansion belonging to the local elite once? After we'd searched for five minutes or so, Siesta called to us. "Over here. It sounds different."

She stomped on the floor a few times, and the noise seemed to echo faintly.

"Stand back." Ms. Fuubi made us move back about five meters, then threw something.

A few seconds later, an explosion kicked up a cloud of dust.

"All right, let's go get this 'Sacred Relic' thing."

"What if you just broke it?"

Sighing, I peeked into the hole in the demolished floor…and saw a cave. Apparently, there was an underground passage here.

"I'll go."

Flashlight in hand, Siesta jumped down with no hesitation. I heard the hollow echo of her footsteps recede, but the noise stopped in half a minute. Then it promptly started coming back toward us. When Siesta reappeared, she was holding an ocher-colored, pyramid-shaped object.

"It was displayed on something that looked like an altar," Siesta said, catching the hand Ms. Fuubi held out to her and climbing up out of the hole. The thing she was holding in her other arm definitely looked like a third Sacred Relic.

"Assistant?" Siesta had noticed that I wasn't reaching out for the relic.

"I know. I have to be the one to do it. I have to touch it and get the memories back. I'm probably going to learn about things I shouldn't know, though."

That was how it had been last time: I'd seen the death of the vampire king, and the story had felt like something I wasn't supposed to know. It had felt like a tale that should have been completed in a world that belonged only to the king and his bride.

"No one should have the right to interfere in other people's stories, really," I said.

That was true of the Singularity, the nature I'd forgotten about until just recently. Maybe I'd forgotten because I wanted to. Had I fled from that role, as Ice Doll had once told me to, voluntarily refusing to get involved with the world?

"…Kidding."

I knew: Unless I touched this thing, the story wouldn't start.

Siesta smiled wryly, but she laid her hand over mine. She didn't say anything. We'd exchanged plenty of words since she'd woken up… No, even before that.

Our hands, one on top of the other, touched the Sacred Relic.

For the third time, memories raced through me as if my life were flashing before my eyes. Missing pieces clicked into place, rapidly filling in a story I hadn't even realized I'd lost. And—

"____!"

The amount of information that rushed into me was even greater than the last two times I'd done this, and I felt a surge of nausea. "—Oh, right. That's right."

Siesta rubbed my back, and I calmed down a little. We'd found out what the Akashic records really were that day, and once we had…

"……"

For a moment, I made eye contact with Ms. Fuubi, but she promptly looked away.

She knew the story I was about to tell would have that man in it. The one she'd been deeply tied to. That ally of justice.

“Assistant, would you tell us about it?” Siesta’s blue eyes were gazing at me.

This story began after the Vampire Rebellion, when confusion had begun to break out in the Federation Government and all around the world. It was a tale of the incident that had brought us near the twelfth Tuner, the Phantom Thief—and the Akashic records, the core of the world’s secret.

“I really don’t think I’m qualified to tell this one. If you feel there’s a problem with anything I say, you can interrupt me right then and there.”

With that preamble, I got down to business as the narrator.

This was a tale that called various ideas of justice into question.



Chapter 1

◆ A mistake-riddled swimsuit episode

It was an August afternoon, and the blue ocean sparkled under the summer sun.

If this had been Japan, the water would have been crowded with kids in swimsuits frolicking enthusiastically, but apparently people in this country mostly came to the beach to sunbathe, and the ocean was pretty empty. Like them, I sat on the pebble beach and gazed aimlessly at the water.

"Sorry to keep you waiting."

A few minutes later, the person I'd been waiting for showed up. It was my swimsuit-clad business partner and college classmate, Nagisa Natsunagi. We'd made a trip to England during our summer break.

"Hm? This doesn't look like what I was expecting." Natsunagi sat down beside me, apparently perplexed by the fact that the beach wasn't much like a beach in Japan. "And actually, it's a little chilly."

"Even in midsummer, temperatures in England don't get much higher than the seventies."

"I didn't know that. And here I thought this was going to be the swimsuit episode…" Natsunagi pouted, looking down at her own swimsuit. She said she'd bought it especially for the trip.

I got the feeling she'd said something like that the year before, too, but whatever.

"Well, it's not like we're here to have fun in the first place."

"I know that. I need to attend the Federal Council as the Ace Detective."

As a rule, the Tuners were scattered around the world, but they assembled for meetings whenever the Federation Government requested it. The invitation for this one had arrived a week ago.

It had been a boilerplate message without any specific information about the agenda, and Tuners were required to attend, so Natsunagi and I had gone to the country where the council would be held.

"It's probably not going to be a good time, either," I said.

If everything was going well, there wouldn't have been any need to hold a Federal Council.

In fact, the Federation Government and the rest of the world had been rushing around since the Vampire Rebellion. Naturally, no one had been appointed to replace the Vampire yet, which left one of the Tuner positions empty. Even the Ace Detective's next mission was still undetermined. This council could get fairly ugly.

"The council starts in the evening, right?"

"Yes. That means we need to enjoy ourselves at least a little before then." Smiling, Natsunagi hugged her knees. Like the former Ace Detective, she seemed to be enjoying this expedition as if it were just a regular trip. "Come on, put some suntan lotion on me." Lowering her voice, she turned her back to me.

The sun wasn't all that strong here, but if she was going to expose her bare skin to the elements, it was probably good to be careful. I picked up the bottle, squirted lotion into my palm, and began rubbing it into Natsunagi's healthy skin.

"……Mm!"

The second my hand touched her back, Natsunagi flinched.

"Don't make weird noises!" I said.

"I-it's a standard trope for a swimsuit episode!"

She was being a little too particular about the "swimsuit episode" bit.

"You just don't understand the classics, Kimizuka."

"I really don't think your idea of 'classic' matches what's common sense for the rest of the world, Natsunagi."

"That's mean! It's just stuff like splashing each other with water and playing beach volleyball, and your swimsuit accidentally gets washed away and the boy you have a crush on sees your boobs, but he only gets a little embarrassed and leads you behind some rocks so that other people won't see you!"

"Don't go wishing for the guy you have a crush on to accidentally see you naked."

Geez. This side of Natsunagi really made me worry. It's like she would sacrifice herself at the drop of a hat for someone else.

"Don't let people take what's important to you, all right?"

When I'd finished rubbing the lotion onto her back, Natsunagi turned to face me again. "I know that. I'll make sure the people who are important to me get to hold onto it." She gazed at me steadily, her eyes shining like jewels. When we'd met, there had still been something childish about her. Now she was grown-up and more beautiful than ever.

After that, Natsunagi had me go down to the water with her. Apparently she really did want to do all the clichéd stuff, so she splashed water on me, saying "Take that!" It was pretty cold, so I splashed her back with twice as much.

"Eep! Hey, that's going too far!"

"I heard the detective wanted classic stuff, so— Whoa!"

She hadn't just paid me back double. A wave about ten times as big crashed over my head, soaking me.

"Not fair."

"Ah-ha-ha! Did you do this stuff with Siesta, too?"

"Well, when you spend three whole years traveling together…"

I remembered the beaches in several countries I'd visited with Siesta. We'd played in the water like this, and ridden on a banana boat, and played a little beach volleyball.

Solving cases had been our top priority; those weren't the important events…and yet those "unimportant" memories were the ones that always surfaced out of nowhere as I went about my day.

"In that case, we'll have to tell her about lots and lots of things."

"Yeah. No matter how much time we've got, I bet it won't be enough."

Siesta's operation was coming up fast.

It was going to be a major surgery. Stephen the Inventor would trade the artificial heart he'd made for her original one, which was being eaten away by the seed. Even if the transplant succeeded, Siesta's heart was special; she'd entrusted her consciousness to it, and when she woke up, both her memories and her personality might be gone.

But we'd chosen this anyway. We wanted her to live, even if that would be the price. And so, when Siesta woke someday, we were going to tell her all sorts of things. Her code name. The fragrance of the black tea she'd loved. The memories of the time we'd spent together. We'd make Siesta a detective again with our own hands.

"I remember everything. I'll remember it for her."

That meant it was going to be okay.

Just a little longer. It wouldn't be long until the day the detective could get up and walk through this warm sunlight.

"Just sit tight, Siesta."

In my heart, I reached out toward that dazzling sun.

◆ The land of eternal justice

When we left the beach, Natsunagi and I got into a car the Federation Government had sent for us. It took us to a palace, a World Heritage Site that had been cleared of any tourists. This was where the Federal Council would take place.

At four in the afternoon, Natsunagi and I walked through the main door. The hall where the conference would be held was at the end of a long corridor, and several people were already waiting inside.

"Th-thank goodness. Someone I know finally showed up…"

A blue-haired girl who was dressed like a shrine maiden came trotting up to us. This was the Oracle, Mia Whitlock. We always met

virtually over video chat, and it had been quite a while since we had seen her in person.

"Mia. You came."

"Yes, but I was just thinking about going home."

Don't try to go home before the council even starts.

"Isn't Olivia with you?" Natsunagi asked. I didn't see the Oracle's assistant nearby.

"She says things are very busy with her other job. She's been on airplanes all the time lately." Mia puffed out her cheeks a little as she complained about Olivia, who was working as a cabin attendant somewhere at ten thousand meters.

"So you came by yourself? For a shut-in, that's really impressive."

"D-don't call me that… This council is in my home country, so I pushed myself a bit. I thought it might be bad if I didn't come."

I see. Still, no one she knew had been present, and she'd felt unbearably awkward as soon as she had walked through the door. She was as pathetic and cute as ever.

"Come sit with me, then!" Tugging Mia along by the hand, Natsunagi sat down on an expensive-looking sofa nearby.

Left on my own, I looked around the room again.

It looked like a parlor in a European-style mansion. Tables and chairs that appeared to be the creations of a famous designer were placed casually around the room, and the Tuners who'd arrived earlier had found places to settle in.

One was a man in a dark suit and sunglasses: one of the Men in Black, who were always helping me out. There were two others: a tall woman whose face was hidden behind a black veil, and a man in a motorcycle jacket and a bike helmet. Neither of their faces were visible.

"The girl is the Revolutionary, and the boy is the Hero."

This abrupt explanation had come from somewhere very close by, and I turned to look. An elderly man was standing next to me, although I hadn't sensed his approach.

"It's been a long time, Singularity and Ace Detective's assistant."

It was Bruno Belmondo, the Information Broker. I hadn't seen him since last summer, when Siesta and I had attended another Federal Council.

"I hear you helped Natsunagi out the other day."

Although it was possible to meet Bruno at official functions like this, it was hard to connect with him for personal business. However, a few months ago, Natsunagi had reached out for help during the Vampire Rebellion.

"No, that confidential conversation was meaningful for me as well. The balance has been tuned," Bruno said, his eyes turning to Natsunagi. "I see. So you've built a community, have you?"

Natsunagi had her laptop open. Mia was looking at the screen from beside her, and they were having some sort of hushed conversation.

The screen showed Reloaded, the Magical Girl. She was attending the council remotely from her hometown in Scandinavia. She and Mia seemed to be arguing about something, but as usual, it probably wasn't anything serious.

"And? Are you close to those two, Bruno?" I glanced at the Revolutionary and the Hero. The former had probably taken over for Fritz Stewart after his death, but what sort of position was the Hero?

"The most important thing in the world is not to misjudge the way the scales are leaning. If the day comes when I can preserve the world's balance by joining hands with them, I'm sure I won't hesitate for a moment." With that rather evasive remark, Bruno sat down in a nearby rocking chair. Apparently, he wasn't going to introduce me to the other two.

"It looks like the Inventor isn't here. That's no surprise."

Stephen was extremely busy as a doctor as well. Lots of patients besides Siesta needed those brilliant hands of his. He was probably wielding a scalpel somewhere at this very minute.

"About the only other one who's likely to be here is Ms. Fuubi."

"Yes, but I expect the Assassin will be busy now as well." Bruno stroked his beard. "I would have liked to see her, though. It's been a

long time."

That meant there would be seven Tuners in attendance: the Ace Detective, the Oracle, the Man in Black, the Revolutionary, the Hero, the Information Broker, and (remotely) the Magical Girl.

The Vampire, who'd been a Tuner until just a little while ago, was gone. The name of his profession would never be engraved on the world again—

"It should be about time." Bruno glanced at the grandfather clock.

Just then, the door to the hall opened.

The individual who entered was wearing a mask. This was bound to be a high-level Federation Government official. Another figure appeared from behind the bureaucrat. This one was a familiar man in a suit.

"Huh? Ookami?" Natsunagi called; she'd noticed him, too.

Ookami, the detective's former proxy assistant. The government had sent him to support Natsunagi while I was working as Reloaded's familiar. We'd met him through Ms. Fuubi once after that, but…

"Why's Ookami here? He's not a Tuner."

"Kimihiko Kimizuka, I send that question back to you verbatim," Ookami parried calmly, and I realized I didn't have a good response.

"I'm, uh, you know. Whatever anyone says, I'm the Singularity and all."

"You started leaning on that out of nowhere."

"…Man, shut up. So what are you doing with a government bureaucrat?" I repeated.

"Ask Doberman," Ookami told me.

"Doberman? What's that about? Are you talking about me being Rill's faithful hound? I mean, you're not wrong there, but…"

"Kimihiko, have you lost all your pride?"

The sharp retort was perfectly timed.

Natsunagi had turned the computer to face me, and Rill was glaring at me coldly from the screen. *"Doberman is that bureaucrat's*

code name. He wasn't actually in charge of the Magical Girl, but we've spoken a few times."

Ah, I see. Ice Doll, Odin… One by one, we were learning the officials' names.

"This man will be assuming the position of Enforcer," Doberman said, pointing to Ookami. "Ever since the previous Enforcer's death, the position has remained empty. However, between the Vampire's recent death and the Magical Girl's injuries, we urgently needed to have as many Tuners as possible to mobilize."

"Apparently that's how it is. I had no particular attachment to the position, but…" Ookami shrugged. However, this position had been held by his old friend, Douglas Amon, and there was probably no one better suited for the job.

"Still, it's unusual for a government official to attend one of these councils. They always left that sort of thing to the Tuners." Even though she was remote, the Magical Girl wasn't holding back. *"What's the topic for discussion at this council? The biggest recent crisis was the Vampire Rebellion, and it's already been three months since then."*

"Yes, today concerns another matter. I'd like to discuss a crisis that's about to begin—or is already underway, actually."

Just as Doberman finished his sentence, an image appeared on the screen in the back of the hall. Put briefly, it was of a crime scene: A man and a woman lay on the ground, covered in blood.

"The victims were residents of Greece: a husband and wife, both in their forties. They were stabbed to death by their only son, who was in middle school."

"…So the incident's been solved?"

The crime was definitely so atrocious it made me want to cover my eyes, but why would Doberman be telling the Tuners about a murder case that was already closed?

"There's something written there." Natsunagi got up from the sofa; she was looking at the screen. "A letter from the English alphabet… No, the Greek letter 'alpha'?"

Just as the detective had said, there was a red letter *A* beside the husband's body.

It had been written in blood.

"Over the past month, many other similar incidents have occurred around the world." As Doberman spoke, the image on the screen began shifting through other murder scenes. The letter *A* had been written in blood at all of them.

"These incidents have one thing in common besides the letter. All of the perpetrators were the victims' children. In other words, these are all parricides."

Several dozen photos appeared on the screen, all of bloody crime scenes. The victims all appeared to be in their thirties and forties. Apparently, every one of them had been killed by their own sons and daughters.

"Their nationalities are all different, though?" I said.

There seemed to be similarities, but I couldn't pin down the connection. What on earth was this?

"What does the Oracle's sacred text say about the incidents?" Doberman asked. He seemed to feel certain of something.

"So that is why you called us here."

When I turned to look at the source of the voice, I saw that Mia had risen to her feet.

"These incidents are the 'Neverland Project,' and Abel A. Schoenberg is involved."

The Oracle, who predicted all sorts of disasters, had just given us the name of a great criminal.

Abel A. Schoenberg was an enigma. His nationality, his age, and any other details that could have been used to identify him were unclear. He was believed to have been involved in most of the unsolved crimes that had occurred around the world, and the police

and other law enforcement organizations were constantly pursuing him.

"I'd heard that the Assassin was currently dealing with this crisis, though."

"Yes, that's correct. Apparently, she's so focused on her mission that she can't even attend the Federal Council."

…Was that what was going on? As a matter of fact, I'd heard earlier that Ms. Fuubi's mission was to dispose of Abel.

"However, if Abel is masterminding these incidents, resolving them should be the Assassin's duty as well. Why would you go out of your way to convene the Tuners?" Ookami asked Doberman. He wasn't about to be timid just because he was new. He'd probably accepted the Tuner position for reasons of his own.

"There must be some sort of irregular situation," I murmured. "For example…"

Ookami and everyone else turned to look at me.

"…Abel is actually Arsene the Phantom Thief."

This was a theory Ms. Fuubi had told me earlier.

I heard several people gulp, and silence fell for fifteen seconds or so.

"I have heard that theory," Doberman said finally. "However, at the very least, the threat posed by Abel A. Schoenberg is incalculable. Leaving him entirely in the Assassin's hands seems unwise. Therefore, we are creating an exception to the Federal Charter."

Doberman's masked face scanned the assembly.

"Allies of justice. Put the Tuners' reputation on the line and help us apprehend Abel."

◆ Still here a century from now

"Huh! So, Kimihiko, this was your love nest with the previous Ace Detective."

After the council, we returned to the apartment in London. Rill was currently looking around the room from the screen of the laptop, which was resting on the dining room table.

"That sentence contained nothing but misleading statements. This was just our base of operations."

Siesta had leased this apartment, ages ago. As her assistant, I'd lived and worked here, too. Natsunagi and I had stopped by briefly last year, but I hadn't been back since.

"It's been years, though. If this was just a place where you worked, why haven't you canceled your lease?"

"…Well, you know. It's convenient when we have work in London."

"For a once-a-year job? That's basically the opposite of cost-effective." My desperate excuse got a wry smile out of Rill.

"Rill, don't pick on him too much. This place is important to Kimizuka. It's packed with his memories with Siesta." Sitting down beside me, Natsunagi threw me a lifeline.

"What's that supposed to mean, hm? Feeling secure because you're his legal wife or something?"

"There, there. Since you're his ex-girlfriend, I understand why you'd be anxious, but calm down. Okay?"

For some unknown reason, they'd started needling each other over video chat.

I shouldn't need to point this out, but I hadn't married or dated either of them.

"This apartment is getting pretty old, though. It sounds like they're going to tear it down soon."

As Natsunagi had said, I had lots of memories with Siesta here. I'd hoped to be able to bring her here if she no longer had her memories when she woke up…but apparently that wasn't going to happen in time.

"In that case, you'll have to tell her about this, too, Kimizuka." Natsunagi gazed at me, smiling gently. "The jobs you did when you lived here, and how you spent your days."

"…Yeah, you're right." Even if the apartment was gone, my memories of those days wouldn't vanish. Passing on the story of them was probably an assistant's job, too.

"By the way, what happened to Mia?"

We'd brought her back with us, but come to think of it, I hadn't seen her for a while.

"Oh, I showed her the bedroom. She said she was tired and asked me to let her rest for a few minutes."

"Natsunagi, you're placing too much trust in that Oracle."

I got up and headed for the bedroom. When I opened the door, there was Mia, face down on the bed. Her face was buried in a pillow.

"Mia, that's not Siesta's pillow. It's mine."

"Yaugh!"

Mia sprang up, then flung the pillow at me.

"It doesn't even smell like anything anymore."

"I—I wasn't trying to sniff Boss's scent! I wouldn't do anything that pervy!" Mia went back to the dining room, stomping as heavily as her petite frame could manage.

"Oh my. Who would have imagined the Oracle who holds the world's fate in her hands was so naughty?" Rill smirked from the screen, as though she'd stumbled onto something entertaining. *"The hero was actually a closet pervert. That's asking kind of a lot of your character—"*

"Now then, it's about time we got down to business." Casually closing the laptop, Mia sat down across from Natsunagi and me.

She'd gotten pretty gutsy about dealing with Rill.

"What are you going to do about what that official said?"

"About helping them capture Abel, you mean?"

It was rare for a government official to ask us for a favor (although typically "asking a favor" is much more respectful). It

probably just went to show how great a threat Abel was.

"Doberman didn't acknowledge it back there, but…if Abel really is the true identity of Phantom Thief Arsene, capturing him is the mission of the Ace Detective and her assistant." Siesta had said as much, long ago.

"Right. Since that's true, we'll need to investigate the chain of incidents Doberman told us about." Natsunagi's expression was grave.

The incidents Abel was contributing to were tragic: children around the world, slaughtering their parents. According to Mia, this was called the Neverland Project, but…

"Even with my clairvoyance, I don't know the truth of these incidents. Still…" Mia bit her lip. "No matter how much hatred they felt, it must have taken a serious trigger to get children to the point where they'd kill their own parents. If Abel's involved in that, I absolutely can't forgive him."

"I see. Mia, long ago, you…" I recalled what I knew of her past. One day, Mia had developed the ability to see the future, and her parents had started a religion and celebrated her as its founder, turning her into their tool. Even so, Mia hadn't been able to give up on them, and she'd fought to prevent the future in which they were killed by their followers.

"It's strange for me to say this, but please… I want you two to shut this down." The Oracle bowed her head to the detective, as if she were a client.

"So does Rill, then," Rill said from the computer screen—Natsunagi had opened it back up. *"Now that her body's like this, she can't help actively. However, she's praying that your justice will prevail."*

When we heard those words, Natsunagi and I looked at each other and nodded.

"Sometimes even you say some pretty decent things, Rill."

"Uh, excuse me? Don't get full of yourself, Mia."

Mia and Rill argued through the screen, noisily and cheerfully. They'd been fighting all day today, even since before the council…

However—

"Huh? Did you two always call each other by your first names?"

"Natsunagi, it's important to pretend not to notice this stuff."

You know what they say—"the more people fight," or whatever. This probably counted as communicating.

"You could call me by my first name, too, Kimizuka."

"…Well, you know. If you'd said that when we first met, then sure, but…"

"…So I messed up our first meeting, huh?" Natsunagi twirled her bangs around her finger, moping a little.

Just then, the smartphone I'd set on the table vibrated. It stopped almost immediately, but then five seconds later, it began ringing again. When this cycle repeated once more, I glanced at the display.

"Who is it?" Natsunagi asked.

"Dunno. Withheld number," I told her, getting up. "I think I'll go buy something to drink." The local supermarket was probably still open.

"I'd like some ice cream, then! Something fruity."

"I want snacks. Something that's sweet and something that's salty."

"Rill wishes she were there in person. Well, it's fine; you can send her something instead."

"What do you people think I am?" Ignoring all three of their orders, I left the apartment.

I walked down the dark street under the stars, feeling the mild chill in the air.

The supermarket was on the main road, but I headed for an alley just behind it. When I'd walked for about three minutes, a gust of wind raced right past my face. —Or maybe I should call it "an intent to kill."

"—! I think you grazed me." I tried to see whether my cheek was bleeding, but my opponent didn't give me the chance; they struck twice more.

"Look, I'm unarmed here." I threw myself to the side, evading desperately, but when the fourth strike came, I couldn't even see it. If my opponent hadn't shown me mercy, I probably would have died then and there.

"You've still got a long way to go."

My assailant twirled her dagger and smiled, her hostility evaporating.

"Yeesh. After I came all the way out here for you. That was mean, Charlie."

I was sitting on my butt on the pavement, and the blond agent reached out to help me up.

It was the first time I'd seen Charlotte Arisaka Anderson in eight months.

◆ The main heroine (?) shows up late

At an hour when most of the supermarkets in London were closed, a car drove through the city's streets.

"You know, you actually look pretty sharp behind the wheel." I shot Charlie a sidelong glance from the passenger seat. She was wearing a low-cut shirt and black slacks. She'd always had a good figure, but it had gotten even better since we'd last met. Her makeup looked rather mature; she wouldn't have seemed out of place in a spy movie. "Even though you looked kinda dumb just a little while ago."

"That's definitely not a compliment, is it?" Still facing forward, Charlie reached out with her left hand and twisted my nose.

"Not fair."

"Your voice sounds weird. Did it change since we last met?"

"It's because you're trying to rip my nose off."

Chuckling, the agent withdrew her hand, setting it back on the steering wheel. “Let’s try this again: It’s been quite a while since we met. Have you been well?”

“Yeah. Haven’t died yet anyway.”

The last time I’d seen Charlie had been at Saikawa’s birthday party last year. Right after that, I’d gotten dragged into the incident with the Magical Girl, and Charlie’s job as an agent had taken her overseas long-term.

Over the next eight months, Charlie had touched base with us about Siesta from time to time, but I’d never expected to meet her like this today. She’d said she just happened to have been assigned a job in this country.

“I’m glad you’re okay, too. You must’ve run into plenty of dangerous stuff.”

“Yes, well. I’ll never be hard up for good stories to tell.” With a wry smile, Charlie gradually braked for a red light up ahead. “Still, Kimizuka, I’m surprised you remembered the phone signal.”

“Yeah, even though it’s been four years or so. It’s weird what sticks with you.”

In that number-withheld call I’d received at the apartment, the odd interval between calls was the signal to begin an operation. Charlie and I had used it when we were working together, way back when. Siesta had told us to set up that signal. And that was how I’d immediately understood that Charlie was nearby just now. Granted, I hadn’t expected her to attack me instead of saying hello…

“So I read between the lines and came out here alone, but why did you call me by myself?”

“…Do I have to say?” The light turned green, and we started moving again. Charlie was hesitating for some reason, but it didn’t seem like she was trying to hide something; if anything, she looked a little embarrassed.

“I wanted to talk with you a little.” Just for a moment, Charlie’s eyes flicked over to me. “It’s not like that, though. It’s not some special something-or-other. I just heard that you happened to be

over here, and I thought it would be weird if I didn't say hi… You remember what Ma'am said, right? About how she wanted us to get along better?"

Charlie had started rambling out of nowhere. I didn't know what she was getting flustered over, but I really wished she'd ease up on the accelerator; the scenery outside the window was zipping by way too fast.





"You could have just stopped by the apartment like a normal person, then. Natsunagi was there, too."

"O-oh, shut up. I'll double-kill you!"

"Don't steal people's speech tics."

"Well, I'm the only one who doesn't have one of her own."

"Don't try to make yourself stand out by doing weird stuff this late in the game," I shot back. Glancing at the driver's seat, I caught Charlie watching me. Those emerald eyes of hers gazed back at me, and her rouged lips curved in a smile.

"Fighting with you like this once in a while isn't bad, Kimizuka."

"…If you don't watch the road, we're gonna crash," I said, turning to face forward myself.

Good grief. This was going to throw me off. What was up with Charlie today? She was being weirdly genuine and uncharacteristically nice to me. What had brought on this change of heart?

"And? Would you at least tell me where we're going already?"

"Is it not okay to go for a drive if we're not going anywhere specific?" For some reason, that made Charlie sulk. It almost sounded like we really were just driving so she could chat about nothing in particular with me…

"…Figure it out already, dummy."

Just for a moment, the headlights of a car in the opposite lane illuminated our car's dark interior. The agent had always been cold and strict with me, but now her face might have been just a little flushed.

After another thirty minutes of night driving, we reached a wharf near the coast.

"Let's take a break," Charlie said, and I got out of the car with her. Even if it was summer, the beach was a little chilly at this hour.

"Want my jacket?" I took it off and held it out to Charlie, who was rubbing her arms lightly. She looked startled for a second, then thanked me and took it.

"So you've learned to do these things now, too, Kimizuka."

"Yeah, well. You know, Natsunagi scolded me for not being able to do this a few months back."

If I got this sort of opportunity with Saikawa later, I'd immediately take her hands and warm them up for her. She'd get a kick out of that.

"…Hm?"

Out of nowhere, I sensed a car behind me. Turning around, I was just in time to see several shiny black cars pull up and stop haphazardly.

"So no more peace for us tonight, huh?"

There were several cars in front of us now. Behind us was the ocean. It seemed safe to assume they'd intentionally cut off our retreat.

Almost immediately, a group in strange masks got out of the cars. They were all wearing cloaks; I couldn't tell what they were hiding underneath them.

"Charlie, do you have your gun?" I asked in a low voice. We always had to assume the worst. I didn't know who these people were, but we had to find a way to give ourselves at least a small advantage…

"Wha—? Hey! Charlie!"

The blond agent was walking up to the mysterious group. A member in a goat mask stepped out to meet her.

They stopped when they were face-to-face, and glared at each other for a few seconds.

It was Charlie who finally broke the silence. "Tell me where Kozue Arisaka is. You promised."

The individual in the goat mask took a scrap of notepaper out of their mantle. Charlotte took it, then started walking away.

"No, just a— Charlie, wait!" I yelled at her retreating back. However, the ones who came toward me were the masked group. They were carrying handguns and restraints. In other words, this was—

"Charlie, did you trick me?!"

In response to my pathetic scream, the agent looked back just once. “Sorry about this, Kimizuka!”

She was wearing a disgustingly brilliant smile.

◆ Assassins of eternal darkness

“This is just way too unfair,” I grumbled.

Charlie had left on her own, and I’d been loaded into a car by the masked mystery group. They’d cuffed my wrists and ankles, then dumped me in the back seat.

The drive here with Charlie had been unusually fun, and now this… Dammit, that was a low trick. I was a loser for falling for it, though. I’d gotten carried away and loaned her my jacket ten minutes ago; now I wanted to go back in time and deck myself for it.

“And? Where are you taking me?” I’d beat Charlie up for this someday, but I had to get out of this mess first. I asked the driver—the person in the goat mask—where this hellish cruise was bound for. “I assume we’re not going out for tea.”

The two of us were the only ones in the car.

“You sure talk a lot.” The goat-masked driver was a woman. From her voice, she seemed fairly young. “You’re not scared?”

“Unfortunately, I’m used to getting kidnapped. By the way, would you take off that mask? I’m a sucker for beautiful people.”

No answer. Apparently she wasn’t the type to play along with pointless banter.

In that case…

“Let me ask you one more time: Where are you taking me?” They weren’t planning to kill me right away, at least. That meant there had to be room to negotiate. “If this is a kidnapping, there must be somebody who’s trying to buy me. Are we headed to them?”

“There are buyers who want your organs all over the world. I can’t give you a specific location.”

“You’re going to sell me for parts?!”

Apparently, I was dealing with a human trafficking organization. I'd had no idea my value had jumped that far; was this because I was the Singularity? In that case…

"Is that why Charlie sold me?" And as for what she'd gotten in exchange… "Kozue Arisaka is Charlotte's mom, isn't she."

No answer again. However, this time, the silence seemed like affirmation.

I only knew two bits of personal information about Charlotte Arisaka Anderson. The first was that she was Japanese on her mother's side. The second was that she was secretly searching for her missing parents.

Her parents had always been in the military. One day, out of nowhere, they dropped out of touch entirely and disappeared. That had always been a possibility due to their work, and Charlotte knew it. Even if she wasn't able to see them, she assumed her parents were carrying out important missions somewhere in the world.

But although she'd made herself accept the situation, somewhere in her heart, she'd kept on searching for her parents. She'd held out just a little hope that, while she flew around the world as an agent, she might be reunited with them someday.

I'd heard about that a long time ago. She hadn't told me herself, of course. I'd just happened to overhear her talking about it with Siesta.

"What's your group's relationship to Kozue Arisaka?"

Back there on the wharf, Charlie had asked these people where Kozue was.

"Nothing in particular," the woman in the goat mask said flatly, as if this didn't interest her much. "We have a lot of underworld connections; that's all. We're very good at finding people."

"You're saying Charlotte sold me to you because she was counting on that?"

"Poor thing. Betrayed by your companion."

Companion. How did Charlie see that word anyway?

"Hm? Is somebody up there?"

I spotted a small figure ahead of us, walking right down the center of the road.

The goat-masked woman didn't step on the brakes. The car kept traveling straight ahead at a good speed, as if declaring it would hit anything that got in its way…and then the figure vanished.

Actually, no: *It had lunged at the car.*

"—Who is that?!" the masked woman screamed. She'd realized not even this mass of iron would be a match for that shape.

Almost instantly, I was getting banged around in the back seat, the sound of brakes squealing in my ears. The driver couldn't turn sharply enough, and we smashed into the safety barrier on the side of the road.

"…Owww…"

I sat up; my nose was bleeding. The windshield was smashed. The driver's seat had been crushed pretty thoroughly, and the goat-masked woman had collapsed limply over the steering wheel.

"I'd like to save you," I said, "even if you are the enemy, but there's not much I can do like this."

My wrists and ankles were both chained up. I couldn't move. And worse was coming to worst—flames were beginning to rise from the car. If the gas in the tank caught fire…

"—Man, I really can't die here." I twisted around like a bagworm, trying to wriggle out of the car somehow. "I still have things I need to do and stuff I haven't said."

"Oh? What did you want your last words to be, hm?"

"That's obvious. They're about the detective. Specifically, just how much I genuinely, seriously—"

…Wait. Who was I talking to?

My body rose into the air, and the next thing I knew, somebody was carrying me out of the car.

When we were a short distance away from the wreck, there was a violent explosion. The car I'd just been in had gone up in flames.

"If I'd been a second later, you'd have been carbonized. You'd better be grateful."

"I'm not a fan of the smugness in that, but…thanks. You did save my butt," I told my savior, the figure who'd appeared in the road. "But do you think you could put me down now, Ms. Fuubi?"

◆ A crimson will that splits the battlefield

We retreated to a back alley a little ways from the crash site, and I sat down, leaning back against the wall of a building. "Thanks." I rubbed at my cuff-free wrists. The redheaded police officer had unlocked the restraints on my wrists and ankles for me.

"The cleanup crew will be here soon." The woman who'd just saved my life came back; she'd been making a phone call.

In public, Fuubi Kase was a police officer. In the shadows, she was the Assassin.

I couldn't count the number of times she'd saved me, but since she'd also dumped a lot of trouble on me, we were pretty even.

"Is the 'cleanup crew' the local police? Or is it the Men in Black?"

"Who cares? They're a group that's good at that sort of thing."

As if to say she was done working, Ms. Fuubi lit a cigarette. Apparently she was planning to let the appropriate organizations clean up after that explosion and deal with the masked group.

"And? What are you doing here, Ms. Fuubi?" I wasn't planning to criticize the person who'd just saved my life, but why was she in England? She hadn't been at the Federal Council.

"I was planning to come to the council. I just changed my mind right before it started."

Yeesh. She'd blown off a meeting that important on a whim?

It was August right now, midsummer, so there was no way this was a "woman's heart is as changeable as the autumn sky" sort of thing.

"Actually, I guess a 'woman's heart' isn't an expression that suits you in the first place, Ms. Fuubi. Sorry."

"What did you just apologize for? Or are you about to apologize for real?" The scary police officer got out her gun like it was

completely natural. I calmed her down, and we got the conversation back on track. “How many Tuners showed up?” Ms. Fuubi asked.

I counted on my fingers: the Ace Detective, the Oracle, the Magical Girl, the Information Broker, the Man in Black, the Revolutionary, the Hero, and the new Enforcer. Eight in all. Almost all the Tuners I could think of had attended.

“I had a thought. As things stand, we won’t be able to outfox the enemy.”

“The enemy?” I echoed the word without thinking, but for both the current Assassin and the rest of us, there was probably only one person that could refer to: Abel A. Schoenberg.

“At this point, I really doubt the Federation Government stands a chance against Abel. I bet they told all the Tuners to capture him or something, didn’t they? It’s naive.” Ms. Fuubi spoke like she’d seen the conversation happen. “So I figured I’d ignore the higher-ups’ playbook and act on my own. It’ll be dangerous if everyone’s facing in the same direction when we try to take down Abel.” Without waiting for me to respond, Ms. Fuubi stubbed out her cigarette in her portable ashtray. “Stuff like this can happen, for example.”

In the next moment, she’d shoved me to the asphalt. Her red hair fell over my cheek. Ms. Fuubi’s face was right in front of me.

“That’s a pretty aggressive come-on.”

“Who’d hook up with a damn brat like you?”

Right after that, I heard a nearby *boomf* as something small exploded.

Somebody was attacking us, and the Assassin had just protected me again. Ms. Fuubi got off me, and I raised my head.

The woman in the goat mask was standing there.

“…You’re going to give that boy back.”

The enemy, who was wearing a black combat bodysuit, charged at us with no hesitation. Shoving me lightly behind her, Ms. Fuubi headed into battle with the other woman. The enemy was unarmed, but her very body seemed to be a weapon, and the kicks and punches she paid out targeted Ms. Fuubi sharply.

"Looks like you're not just a kidnapper."

Ms. Fuubi parried the blows, but finally one of the masked woman's kicks grazed her face. Blood from a cut above her eyelid blotted out her vision, and in that moment, the enemy vanished.

She hadn't turned invisible; she was running along the wall. She raced up the building, then leaped, dropping a guillotine of a kick from two stories up.

"Fancy moves. But—" Ms. Fuubi rolled across the asphalt, evading the kick. And then… "You're being too picky about the flash, without a lot of bang."

She drew her gun and fired. However, the enemy wasn't there anymore. Instead, there was—

"Are you trying to kill me?!"

"It's your fault for being in my line of fire."

"Sure, and your 'line of fire' probably covers all of London."

While we were bantering, the masked woman closed the distance to Ms. Fuubi, now armed with a dagger. She swung the blade in an undulating line, so fast that it whistled through the air. The redheaded Assassin bent backward, evading, then twisted her upper body to pay out a kick as beautiful as a martial arts kata—and knocked the knife out of the enemy's hand.

"That hardness. Is that a combat-use prosthetic?" Ms. Fuubi gazed at the enemy's right hand, eyes narrowed. "In that case, I take back my original assessment. That's not actually your strength."

"…Might makes right."

The woman in the goat mask spoke for the first time since the battle had begun.

Then she swung her right fist. Ms. Fuubi blocked with both arms, but a dull sound echoed. Unable to absorb the impact, Ms. Fuubi skidded back several meters.

"You're 'right'? What sort of justice do human trafficking organizations claim?"

"People who should live do, and people who should disappear vanish. I call that justice."

The masked woman glanced at me.

So I was somebody who should disappear, huh?

"I see. You're even more wrong, then." Ms. Fuubi's red hair streamed in the night wind. "At the very least, even if it's in exchange for ten million people's lives, that kid should survive."

Those definitely weren't Ms. Fuubi's personal feelings. She'd just subjectively weighed the value of Kimihiko Kimizuka the human being… No, the Singularity.

"You're not normal."

"Nope. That's why I'm doing this job."

That brief exchange signaled the upcoming end of the showdown. Both combatants started sprinting at once, raising their fists just before they crossed paths.

"I do feel bad about this."

In the next moment, there was a small explosion.

The goat-masked woman's raised left arm had blown itself off.

"Ms. Fuubi…!"

The prosthetic had been rigged with a bomb, and Ms. Fuubi took the blast of it squarely. The masked woman charged through the standing cloud of black smoke. I was still her real target.

"Listen, I've got a justice of my own." Pulling out the gun Ms. Fuubi had slipped me when she'd rescued me, I fired. One shot, two —but the woman dodged both. Finally, I managed to hit her right leg.

"…Another prosthetic?!"

The bullet didn't punch through the metal leg. The enemy was right in front of me now.

However, just then—

"What made you think that little blast was enough to kill me?"

A crimson light raced through the darkness.

The woman in the goat mask pulled out a gun with her remaining arm and fired. Her aim was true. The bullet definitely sped toward that flash of red—but it didn't hit her.

"This is a battlefield. Go leave your hesitation and spoiled-brat reliance in bed and try again."

Faster than a bullet, the Assassin raced through the darkness.

"If you want to break my 'will,' you'll need to try a thousand times harder than that."

Fuubi Kase swung her fist; there was a dull impact, and the masked woman sailed through the air.

"You would've been plenty heavy without all that extra iron."

Tottering a little, Ms. Fuubi lowered her fist. Her arm dangled limply. After a blast at point-blank range, it would have been weirder if she wasn't injured. I half forced her to lean on my shoulder for support. "It's bizarre enough that you managed to survive that."

"What, did you want me to die or something?"

Heck no. I'm pretty sure I'll need you to protect me later on, too.

"Dammit," said a trembling voice.

The trembling was caused by anger, not sadness. The goat-masked woman got to her feet. She'd already retrieved her knife.

"Dammit, dammit! I always hated the way you got all sanctimonious!"

"? Uh, have we met?" Ms. Fuubi asked.

Instead of responding, the masked woman charged.

My gun was out of bullets. Ms. Fuubi stuck her right arm out in front of me, shielding me.

"Okay. I'll take over from here," said someone who wasn't any of us.

In the next moment, the newcomer had grabbed the goat-masked woman's arm and pinned her down.

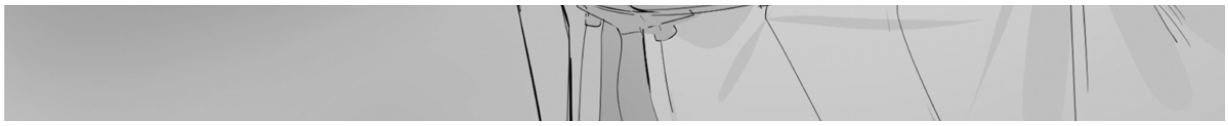
"—! What are you doing here, Ryan?"

Although the Assassin was usually unflappable, she sounded surprised. Ms. Fuubi was gazing at the intruder, stunned. *So…she knows him?*

"Hi there, Fuubi. How've you been?"

The man was slender, with a mild face and wavy golden hair. He was wearing what looked like a white military uniform, and he clearly wasn't just a civilian.





Even though the goat-masked woman was pinned and her expression was agonized, she seemed to have come to some sort of resolution.

"Ryan! She's planning to blow herself up again!"

"It's all right, Fuubi. It's over."

Even as the man spoke, the woman's head flopped forward as if she'd died. He'd made her pass out so fast I hadn't even seen him do it.

Then I heard sirens, and several police cars converged on us. There was even a helicopter. The guy in uniform was probably in charge of all of them.

"Who in the world are you…?"

At the very least, he didn't seem to be a regular police officer. As questions raced through my mind, Ms. Fuubi got unsteadily to her feet and went over to the man and the goat-masked woman.

"What are you planning to do with her?"

"'Judge evil with the law, not with power.' That's Ryan White's motto." Smiling, the uniformed man rose to his feet. He was big; he had to be a hundred and ninety centimeters tall. Walking up to Ms. Fuubi, he said—

"I've missed you all this time."

Then he gently pulled her into an embrace.

"Hm? Uh? …Huh?" I caught myself making incredulous noises.

Ms. Fuubi was first to respond. Twisting halfway around to look at me, she began trying to explain. "You've got it wrong. This guy is—"

However, the harder she tried, the more suspicious she seemed, and…

"What's the matter? This is an awfully cold reception. We haven't seen each other in ages, you know."

Then the man who'd introduced himself as Ryan gave me the answer to my question.

"I think you could be a little nicer to me, don't you? After all, we're engaged."

◆ In the name of this immaculate justice

The next evening, I was in the Oracle's clock tower room.

Olivia still wasn't there, and I took a sip of the black tea Mia had shakily made for me. "This is good."

"Don't give me that." Mia glared down at me.

"What's wrong? Did you want me to compliment your 'maid' look?"

There was no telling what she'd done with her usual shrine maiden outfit, but Mia was wearing an extremely ornate maid costume.

"Ngh! I didn't say that at all. Besides, Olivia taught me it's good manners to wear this sort of outfit when you're serving someone else."

"I think she was probably just teasing you."

"…I—I knew that! I was being nice and letting her trick me on purpose!" Mia yelled, turning red. She'd gotten much better at expressing her emotions lately. "That's not what I meant. I was asking what was up with this situation."

Mia scanned the room. We weren't the only ones there, and it was actually a little lively. For example…

"Listen, Charlie. That was categorically not okay. No selling out your companions."

Natsunagi was scolding Charlotte Arisaka Anderson, her tone serious. Charlie had been forced to kneel formally on the hard floor, and there was a sign that said *I sold a companion* hanging around her neck. Natsunagi had found out about last night's incident.

"Y-you've got it all wrong, Nagisa. I was planning to save him later!" Charlie defended herself desperately. According to her, she'd meant to rescue me as soon as she'd confirmed that the information she'd gotten from the goat-masked woman's group was useful. "I'm sorry. I'll apologize to Kimizuka again later, so forgive me, just this once."

"If Kimizuka says he forgives you, then okay, but…I am pretty seriously mad, all right?" Pouting, Natsunagi glanced at me. Who'd have thought she'd go this far to stick up for me?

"When it comes to that guy, you really do get desperate, huh, Nagisa?"

"…What? Well, I mean… That's, you know, because he's a friend! He's also my business partner, and a classmate, and my assistant, and, um…"

"I'm really sorry for selling out your dearest beloved."

"I didn't go that far, okay?!"

On the opposite side of the room, three adults were chatting.

"I thought there had to be some sort of reason for your absence from the Federal Council, but the possibility of a secret rendezvous never even occurred to me." The black-suited Ookami looked at Ms. Fuubi, the corners of his mouth curving up slightly.

"Ookami, if you've officially become a Tuner, then don't say things that could be misinterpreted. I wasn't rendezvousing secretly with anybody."

"Hey, Fuubi, no. You shouldn't draw that so casually." Ms. Fuubi had her gun pointed at Ookami, and Ryan White, the man in the military uniform, interrupted. "Guns aren't tools for killing. You use them to protect people."

"…You're as naive as ever. I'm amazed you're managing to do your job like that."

"Ha-ha! My men scold me quite a bit, too!" Laughing cheerfully, Ryan gently pushed down Ms. Fuubi's gun hand. Ms. Fuubi was still scowling, but she didn't resist.

"So the Assassin is human, too, hm?" Ookami gave a nihilistic smile, and Ms. Fuubi sent him an ominous glare.

"Listen, Kimihiko, what kind of situation is this?"

"Listen, Mia, I only got dragged into it myself." I took another swallow of tea, then sighed.

The one who'd assembled this group at the clock tower was Ryan White.

"I'm sorry; I'm afraid I'm the type who likes chatting. My men scold me quite a bit, too."

Ryan seemed to have noticed me looking at him, because he stopped chatting and got down to business. He kept talking about his subordinates scolding him as if that was all they did; was this guy going to be okay?

"Today I wanted to talk about something that's important both to me, and to the rest of you. As a matter of fact, everyone here has something in common. Do you know what it is?"

Ryan scanned the group.

The Assassin, the Enforcer, the Oracle, the Ace Detective, an agent, and—someone who was either an ordinary guy or the Singularity. When I looked at us this way, the members of this group were all highly distinct individuals. But…

"You say everyone here has something in common, but I don't know much about you to begin with. Shouldn't we start there?"

"Actually, yes, that's true. I beg your pardon." Ryan smiled lightly. "Let's start over, then. My name is Ryan White. I'm an Interpol investigator."

The badges on his white military uniform seemed to shine. They were proof of his many achievements.

"What's Interpol?" Natsunagi whispered in my ear.

"The International Criminal Police Organization. In simple terms, they're the world's police."

One could call them the public world's symbol of justice. People like Ms. Fuubi and Siesta, those who tried to protect the world from the shadows, were their opposite.

"He always conducts his investigations with absolute integrity and transparency, making sure justice is served. His rep is as spotless as you'd expect from his last name. 'Immaculate justice' is the guy's nickname." Even though she seemed irritated, Ms. Fuubi explained Ryan's identity.

"Ha-ha. Aw, you'll make me blush. Who'd have thought I'd be getting compliments from you, Fuubi?"

"All I did was tell them what the world thinks of you. I know you're really a pitch-black schemer on the inside."

"That's mean." Ryan gave a wry smile. "I swear to God, I only do what's right for the world."

"So you're…a friend of Ms. Fuubi's. Right?"

"Yes. Put simply, we're childhood friends." Ryan looked at Ms. Fuubi. She looked away crossly. "Both of our fathers were police officers. They worked together in Japan on a certain job; as their children, we grew close to each other as well."

I'd never heard that Ms. Fuubi's father had been a police officer, too. Come to think of it, I knew almost nothing about her past. She never talked about it.

"As a child, Fuubi was the cutest thing you ever saw. She was always tagging along after me, going 'Ryan, Ryan.'"

"Ryan White, do you have your last will and testament drawn up?"

"As you can see, she grew up into someone who can't be honest about her feelings at all. As far as I'm concerned, though, she's still one hundred percent cute."

A gunshot rang out. However, Ryan had tilted the muzzle of Ms. Fuubi's gun to point at the ceiling. Their methods of communicating were way too unique.

"Y-you put a hole in my house…" As always, Mia was both pathetic and cute.

"Childhood friends, huh? So what did you mean when you said you were engaged yesterday?"

"Huh?! Engaged?!" The second I let that word slip, Natsunagi latched on to the love story with excitement.

"…It's just nonsense from when we were kids." Ms. Fuubi scowled uncomfortably under her gaze.

"Ha-ha. Well, getting back on topic… Various things happened, and Fuubi and I both started to carry out our missions. I work from Interpol in the surface world, and she works from the underworld. We hadn't seen each other in ages, but we always respect each other's brands of justice. And I've watched Fuubi work from the shadows."

Ryan seemed to know a lot about this side of the world, Tuners included. Was that why he'd gathered us, then?

"Get to the point, Ryan." Ms. Fuubi was growing impatient. "If you look at the timing and the group you've got here, it's pretty obvious. This is about Abel, right?"

"…Yes, that's right. As an Interpol investigator, I'm staking the reputation of the police on pursuing him."

Him too, huh? Abel A. Schoenberg was the world's worst criminal, and there was a good possibility that he and Phantom Thief Arsene were one and the same person. He was the enemy of everyone here. This was the same group that had attended the previous day's Federal Council… No.

"What about Charlie? Is she somehow connected to Abel, too?"

Charlie hadn't attended the council the day before. Since she wasn't a Tuner, that was only to be expected, but then why had she been called here today?

"So you people have really been snooping around, huh?" Charlie turned narrowed eyes on Ryan.

"Yes. Your mother, Kozue Arisaka, was active both in the military and as an agent. She pursued Abel as well. I hear she had him pretty well cornered once."

…I see. That was where our stories linked up, huh?

Charlie sighed. "Yes, that's what I heard as well. Could I have learned where she was faster by asking you people?"

"No, we don't know that much, either. We only stumbled across that information when we were investigating yesterday's human trafficking group. And? Where did they say she was?"

"At this point, all I know is it's 'a certain place in Japan.' I plan to go check it out as soon as I get back, but…"

So that was why Ryan had included Charlie: Her search for Kozue Arisaka might bring him one step closer to arresting Abel.

"Did you assemble us here because you want us to work together to capture Abel?" Natsunagi asked. That would mean he had the

same goal as the Federal Council, but in that case, we had a potential problem.

""Will the Assassin agree to that approach?""

Ookami and I ended up speaking in unison, then shrugged at each other. Apparently, great minds worked alike.

The day before, Ms. Fuubi had said it would be dangerous to just follow the Federation Government's lead if we were up against Abel, and that she planned to work alone.

"Good point. This is an opportunity to convince Fuubi as well." Ryan turned to face Ms. Fuubi, who did look dissatisfied. "I mentioned there was something this group has in common, but there is one other thing. That's the fact that everyone here can be trusted. With this group, we won't necessarily have to go through the Federation Government in order to stand against Abel." He scanned our group. The Assassin, who did her job without blindly accepting the government's approach; the Ace Detective, who had inherited an unbroken will for justice; the Enforcer, who'd inherited his mission and his weapon from his deceased friend; the Oracle, who was more sensitive to the world's crises than anyone. And Charlie and me… What about us? I suspected we might not be terribly trustworthy.

"I-I'm part of the group that's going to fight, too?" Mia couldn't completely hide her unease.

"As the Oracle, you won't need to stand on the front line. However, I'd like you to use your ability to support us quietly from the rear."

"O-oh, good… In that case, of course I will. Preventing global crises has been my mission ever since the day I met Boss." Visibly relieved, Mia faced forward proudly. I really would have liked to have added Reloaded to this group, but considering the shape she was in physically, that wasn't likely to happen.

Bruno would have been helpful as well…but we probably wouldn't have been able to get him to join our team. His top priority was always preserving the balance of the world's information.

That meant there was just one person left.

"I'm…" Fuubi Kase's brow was furrowed. She was still hesitating.

"Fuubi. You must understand that it's dangerous to go up against Abel on your own."

As Ryan said, we all knew that if our enemy really was the Phantom Thief, the victims he stole from wouldn't even know what had happened. It was possible that if we lost to him, we wouldn't even be properly aware that we'd lost.

"This won't mean obeying the Federation Government. Can't those of us who are here believe in each other, though, if no one else?"

I was sure Fuubi Kase had never trusted anyone, in the truest sense of the word. That was only natural. For the Assassin, depending on others was the most dangerous thing there was.

"If you can't believe what I've just said, that's fine. In exchange, though, I want you to remember the promise we made back then."

Ms. Fuubi's shoulders jumped slightly. What was Ryan talking about?

For a little while, silence fell.

It was a full thirty seconds before she reluctantly spoke. "This doesn't mean I trust everyone here." She glared around with the eyes of a guard dog, as though she were searching for a werewolf lurking in our midst. "Not believing in others is my code, and it's the only way my missions get completed… However, I do believe this world will get just a little better."

I remembered what I'd spoken about with Ms. Fuubi at the station a while back. She'd already been aware of the danger the Phantom Thief posed then, and she'd shared some of the information from the investigation with me.

That probably hadn't stemmed from trust or confidence in me. If I had to guess, it had been a calculated decision. When she gave someone a hand, she never did it for free… However, it might only have been a tiny bit, but even Fuubi Kase had been willing to rely on someone. I was sure of that.

"I won't say 'Let's trust each other.' I have zero intention of saying that. But…"

Fuubi Kase raised her head and looked each of us in the face, one at a time.

"I acknowledge that we share a goal, and I'll do my best."

In that moment…

The fight between the world's worst criminal and the amassed forces of justice began.



Eight years ago, Charlotte

That day, like always, I was lying on Noah's bed, reading a book to him.

"Um, wait just a second, Noah. 'Just then, having sent the enemy spy into a…tow, ring? A toe-ring fury, I—'"

"It's 'towering.'"

"Oh, right, right. Towering, towering. 'Just then, having sent the enemy spy into a towering fury, I re, reloud…reloud-dead'?"

"Reloaded."

"Mm-hmm, mm-hmm, that's right. Um, so, uh, where was I? Oh, here: 'I defeated all the bad guys and preserved national security. Everyone lived happily ever after, the end.'"

Shutting the book, I exhaled.

Yup, I'd say I did some good reading today.

"Sis, did you skip about a hundred pages?"

"No, not at all. I was speed-reading."

"I'm pretty sure that's not what 'speed-reading' is." Lying in bed, Noah looked up at me. I was sitting with my back against the headboard. "Do you want to study kanji with me?"

…My little brother, who was two years younger than me, was asserting his dominance.

"Well, see, I'm good at English instead."

I bet I'd inherited more of our dad's genes. Or at least I'd have said that's what it was. I cleared my throat. "Actually, you can read

books on your own, can't you, Noah?"

So why did he always pester me to read to him?

"Sure, I can read them myself, but…"

"But?"

"It's more fun if you read them to me, Sis."

"……"

I was pretty close to jumping up and throwing my arms around him, but I controlled myself. Little brothers were way too cute… He tended to act too big for his britches, but sometimes he was adorably honest.

"Sis, are you going to be like this when you grow up?" Noah asked, picking up the book. It was a story about a strong, cool female agent who knocked evil down left and right like it was easy.

"Yes, I am. Someday I'll be like Mom and Dad."

Not that I knew what an agent was, specifically.

Were soldiers and mercenaries different? What about intelligence agents and spies?

Well, whatever. The point was that I was going to take down bad guys for a living. In terms of being an ally of justice, "police officer" would be an okay job, too.

"I see. If you do, it'll make me happy, too." Noah gave me a smile that looked just a little lonely. "Since it's not something I can do."

Noah couldn't go outside much. He'd been born sickly. Mom and Dad wouldn't tell me the name of his illness. They'd said I wouldn't be able to understand it.

"Noah, if you can't go outside, you should be a scholar," I said, and Noah looked up. "You're really smart. Even if you don't go to school, I bet you'll be a great, respected scholar. For sure." I squeezed his hand.

"Uh-huh," he said, smiling at me, but his hand was really, really cold.

"Oh!" Noah murmured then. "It sounds like she's back."

Before long, the bedroom door opened, and someone came in.

Bright blond hair and a cold, beautiful face: Kozue Arisaka. Our mom.

"Oh, welcome…home…"

I'd stood up to greet her, but Mom went right past me.

When I turned around, she was hugging Noah close.

"I'm sorry. I just wasn't able to get back."

It was the first time Mom had been home in two weeks. She'd just completed another important mission in a distant country.

"I really am sorry, Noah." Mom sounded incredibly tired. She apologized to Noah over and over again. Just to him, though.

"No, it's fine. Sis stayed with me." When Noah said that, Mom turned to look at me for the first time. Her face was strict; it was an expression she never showed Noah.

"Charlotte. You're not slacking off on your training, are you?"

There were soldiers in this house; Mom and Dad had hired them. Two years ago, they'd started to train me in close combat and the use of firearms.

"This isn't self-defense training. You'll fight to protect the world. You were born with a sturdy body, and that is your mission. You understand that, don't you?"

"Yes, I understand."

When I nodded, Mom turned back to Noah without another word.

It was always like this. Kozue Arisaka and I could never be a normal mother and daughter. There was no helping that, though. I didn't think of it as something painful.

After all, becoming a hero was my mission. I'd do what Noah couldn't. That was the only way I could get our mom to acknowledge me.

"I know."

I said it again, murmuring the words to myself this time, then left the room.

Over the past two years, I hadn’t called Kozue “Mom” out loud. Not even once.



Chapter 2

◆ The code that signals the beginning

A week had passed since our return from England.

Summer vacation was longer in university than it was in high school, and it wasn't over yet. We had various jobs to do, but even so, we ended up with free time. Natsunagi spent hers meeting up with old friends from high school or new ones from college, but for some reason, I didn't have anybody like that.

Saikawa had gone back to work again just recently, so I couldn't pester her for attention. I got the feeling Reloaded would scold me if I talked to her on the phone for ages for no reason, so I gritted my teeth and resisted the urge.

It was fine, though. It wasn't like I was friendless or anything. Even first thing in the morning, there was always someone I could talk to here.

"So that floor cushion turned out to be what clinched it, and we realized the criminal had hemorrhoids."

As I related a side-splitting anecdote in a hospital room on the third floor, Siesta lay on the bed, smiling as if she were enjoying herself enormously.

"Kimihiko, please stop using your internal voice to falsify reality." In a corner of the room, a girl closed her book decisively. It was Noches, Siesta's maid, who could easily have been her identical twin.

"No, take a good look. She's smiling. See?"

"Mistress Siesta always wears an angelic smile."

"You love your mistress too much, maid."

"I don't know what you're talking about." Noches played dumb. When she behaved like this, I tended to forget she was a robot.

"Still, I won't get to hear your failed comedy routines much longer, Kimihiko."

"That's a hideous thing to call them."

Part of what Noches was saying was correct, though—it wouldn't be long before I couldn't talk with Siesta like this anymore.

"Siesta's transplant is coming up fast, huh?"

Stephen had said he'd be starting the preparation phase soon. During that phase, and while he was monitoring her progress after surgery, she wouldn't be allowed to have visitors. In less than a month, I'd stop being able to see Siesta for a while. It had been very close to a year since she'd fallen asleep.

"Does that make you lonely?" Noches asked, without even looking at me. "Or are you afraid?"

…Yeesh. How did this maid read my mind so accurately?

"I trust Stephen's skills. I'm sure the surgery itself will be fine… But afterward, Siesta may lose her memories and her personality." Strangely, when I was with Noches, I could say what I actually felt: I was terrified of Siesta not being Siesta anymore. "That could happen to you, too, though, couldn't it?"

I got the feeling Noches had flinched very slightly. "Is it strange for a machine like me to feel that way?"

"Nah. I said so before, didn't I? If you're able to think about other people to that extent, there's no way you're just a machine."

Our eyes finally met, and we both smiled. At least, it looked as if Noches was smiling, too. "But remember this, Kimihiko. I've merely been programmed to behave like a human." She blinked slowly as she spoke. Technically, blinking wasn't something she needed to do. "For example, when I'm teased, I'm supposed to act angry. When someone near me is discouraged, I'm supposed to comfort them. If someone smiles, my expression should soften as well. I've only been mechanically programmed to do these things."

I had the urge to tell her that wasn't true, but I couldn't do it.

Noches was the product of Stephen's science. Canceling out that fact with some pat answer would be denying the proof of her

existence.

"Because of that, sometimes I become frightened." Noches gazed out the window, into the distance. "I'm worried that someone may get the idea that robots and AIs like myself truly have emotions, sympathize with us, and give machines too much authority. If AIs ever rebel against the human race, as they do in science fiction movies, no doubt it will be human kindness that triggers it."

Noches was wearing a lonely smile.

Even if she was a machine, her words and gestures were just the output of some program. Even so, I liked her the way she was. That was the one thing I knew for sure.

"Oh my, it appears we have a visitor." Noches looked at the door.

She must have heard footsteps. A few moments later, someone knocked three times.

"That's a guest I wasn't expecting," I muttered when I opened the door and saw who was there.

"You're the one who said to stop by at least once."

It was Fuubi Kase, the redheaded police officer.

Holding a bouquet of flowers that didn't really suit her tough expression, she stepped into the hospital room. "So that's what she looks like when she's asleep, huh?" Handing the flowers to Noches, Ms. Fuubi looked down into Siesta's face. Their relationship was unexpectedly deep in ways I didn't even know about. As fellow Tuners, they were…well, I wouldn't have called them "close," but they seemed to get along for business.

"Didn't you trust Siesta, either?" I asked Ms. Fuubi casually.

Back in London, she'd said she didn't trust anybody.

"No. But the detective wasn't genuinely looking for trust from me anyway." Gazing at Siesta, Ms. Fuubi spoke as if she were reminiscing. "That makes us even. I thought we'd probably stop being able to use each other eventually, and I figured if one of us died, that would be that. It was convenient for me."

Now that she mentioned it, Siesta might have been the same way. She'd always been logical and rational, and she never injected

unnecessary personal feelings into situations. She'd been better at doubting people than trusting them.

"Near the end, though, I think she and I became a little different. To me, it seemed she did want to believe in somebody."

"Did she?"

Would I be able to see Siesta like that again?

"Could I have a minute?" Ms. Fuubi pointed out the door. Leaving Noches in charge of the room, I stepped out into the hall.

"How does it look?" Once we'd walked a little ways, Ms. Fuubi leaned against the corridor wall. "The Neverland Project. You and the detective are checking into it, too, right?"

After Ryan White had called that meeting last week, we'd all started working from various angles to capture Abel. For the past week, Natsunagi and I had been investigating the Neverland Project. Mia and Rill had been asked to work on it individually as well.

"First, the Oracle had no prophecies this week. We're keeping an eye on the world news, but no relevant incidents have occurred as far as we can tell. Instead, Natsunagi and I have been reviewing past incidents one by one."

Concrete, not abstract. From a perspective that was micro, not macro.

"In most of them, the perpetrators were in middle school, and the victims were their parents. In all cases, there was acknowledged trouble between the child and their parents before the incident. Quite a lot of that trouble was child abuse. The general view is that the kids couldn't take it anymore, so they killed their parents."

However, a dozen or so similar events had occurred around the world over the past month, and a letter *A* had been left at each crime scene, written in blood.

"We checked to see whether the cases had anything in common besides that blood letter. Whether the attackers had a common interest, for example, or if they followed a specific religion, or if they'd connected over social media. We didn't find anything, though."

In other words, if there were any sort of common thread running beneath the incidents, we'd have to assume it was Abel, as the Oracle had prophesied. Granted, I didn't know why he'd go out of his way to leave an *A* in blood at each crime scene…

"Either way, Abel is making children kill their parents somehow… The enemy we're up against can do things like that, right?"

Ms. Fuubi nodded, her expression grim. "Yeah. He never does the deed himself; he makes other people commit his crimes for him. You remember how that goes, don't you?"

If Abel really was the Phantom Thief, Siesta and I had actually seen him do something like this a year ago.

"They say Abel may use something like a unique 'code' to control the waves of human emotions. That would be true of the Neverland Project as well."

"A code that gives someone the impulse to commit murder…"

The enemy's ability had been vague, but now the outline of it was taking shape.

"That's the theory Ryan, Ookami, and I came up with. How close it comes to the truth isn't clear."

Apparently that was what the adults had been discussing for the past week.

"Ryan…" When I spoke, Ms. Fuubi flinched slightly. "You don't trust Ryan, either?"

They'd known each other for ages, they were both allies of justice, they were both police officers, and they were engaged to each other… Well, that aside, she was close to the guy. But what did she actually think of him?

"Next time you bring up that topic to mess with me, I'll kill you."

"I'm not messing with you. Not at all." I waved my hands in denial.

Ms. Fuubi gave me a glare. "Anyway," she went on, "right now, we each just need to do whatever we can in order to apprehend Abel. Words like 'trust' and 'confidence' and things like people's pasts don't matter. Am I wrong?"

"You look like you'll hit me if I say 'yes,' so let's go with what you said."

"Want me to arrest you first, you damn brat?"

Could she still call me a brat? I was in college… Well, whatever. "Arresting Abel is my only goal right now, too."

"Oh-ho. Did something happen to make you fixate so much on him?"

"The Ace Detective's enemy is my enemy, so…"

"If Abel's the Phantom Thief, he's the one the Daydream failed to take down and entrusted to Natsunagi, huh?"

"That's right," I said, starting back toward Siesta's room.

Ms. Fuubi left, too, saying she had work to do.

"Why I'm fixated on Abel, huh?"

I hadn't told Ms. Fuubi, but I did have one more reason. There was one more person who'd surfaced in my mind.

He might not have been a detective like Siesta and Natsunagi. He'd called himself my teacher, though, and he'd once told me this:

"Parents are all kids have."

Abel had twisted that incontrovertible fact, and I was going to capture him in my teacher's place.

◆ Find the distance between two straight, parallel lines

Three days later, early morning found me at the train station.

In front of the Shinkansen ticket barrier, I waited for a certain girl to arrive. I'd already grabbed tickets for both of us.

"She's late."

It was almost fifteen minutes past the time we'd said we'd meet. At this rate, these tickets were going to go to waste…but just as I was starting to worry, my wish reached whoever it needed to reach, and something light thumped me on the back.

"That's quite a greeting for somebody who's late, Charlie."

When I turned around, there was the blond agent, swinging a small shoulder bag. She was wearing a summery outfit and carrying a basket.

"I couldn't help it. I got lost," Charlie complained, making excuses.

"Is it that easy to get lost in here?"

"No, I mean I got lost in thought wondering whether I should show up."

"I'm really impressed you can say that after making me wait!"

Charlie averted her face huffily. Apparently, her attitude toward me in England had all been an act. This woman really was…

"Anyway, this is your errand today, right, Charlie? We're going to meet your mom, Kozue Arisaka."

It had been two weeks since she'd gotten that information from the goat-masked woman and the human trafficking organization. Charlie had finally said she was going to meet Kozue Arisaka today, so I'd come along to act as her escort. Frankly, I got the feeling we weren't the best combination, but for some reason, Natsunagi had ordered me to go.

"We could just drive. Why are we taking the train?" Charlie expressed doubts about the day's mode of transportation.

"Remember what you did to me the other day. The trauma from that is going to keep me out of cars for a while."

"Pfft! Even the memory of it is funny. Your face when you fell right into my honey trap…"

"Don't call that shit a 'honey trap'! That was something a lot uglier."

Dammit, to think Charlie of all people would be messing with me like this now.

"Wait, did you actually have feelings for me? Are you always spoiling for a fight because you're embarrassed and trying to hide it?"

"Oh yeah, right. Even if the world flipped upside down and morning and night showed up at once, that would never happen."

"…When you go that far, it's actually pretty hurtful, you know."

"…Oh, um, sorry."

"I'm kidding."

"I'm never believing anything you say again!"

Geez. We always end up like this.

We'd always gotten along terribly. After everything we'd been through, I thought we'd managed to improve our relationship a bit… but apparently not. *Maybe I'll just go home.*

"Ahhh, hilarious. You really are as simpleminded as ever."

"Being called 'simple' or 'stupid' by you is the peak of humiliation."

"You really are simple, and a busybody, and a pushover, and…hard to understand." Charlie looked away a bit awkwardly. "Why are you coming with me today?"

It was almost like she was saying, *This has nothing to do with you.*

"I've never told you about my parents. Maybe you heard me telling Ma'am about them, but I've never come to you for advice. What reason do you have to get involved with me now?"

…Oh, right. When she'd said she wasn't sure whether she should come today, had she been wondering if it was all right to drag me into this?

"You already sold me off to human traffickers. Isn't it pretty late to ask?"

"L-like I said, I was planning to rescue you later. Even if we don't get along, I don't think you should die or anything."

Apparently she was being genuine this time. Charlie looked down awkwardly. She really was bad at communicating. *And that probably makes two of us.*

"Your mother once hunted Abel, so searching for her may lead to a clue to arresting him. That's a big plus for me, too." I spoke very fast; I didn't meet her eyes, but I told myself that was okay. "And since Abel is involved, acting solo is dangerous. Of the group Ryan assembled, I've got the most free time. It's logical for me to be the one who goes with you… It's not because I'm worried about you or anything."

Silence fell for a few moments. Then Charlie gave a wry smile. “You sure aren’t honest about your feelings. Let’s go.” She set off toward the ticket gate, holding the Shinkansen ticket she’d taken from me.

“You aren’t, either.”

“I’d rather us not be birds of a feather.”

“Yeah, you’re right. I’m not dumb like you are.”

“Exactly. I’m not as weedy and weak as you, and I’m not a guy.”

“Rude. Want to get our seats changed, right this minute?”

“Why did you get adjacent seats for us anyway? Are you dumb?”

◆ Tomato-flavored affection

Apparently, Kozue Arisaka lived in a summer resort area a little ways from the city, and as Charlie and I headed toward her hideout, we transferred from the Shinkansen to a local train.

This might have been a fun trip if I’d been with Natsunagi or Saikawa, but being alone with Charlie was pretty uncomfortable. We’d changed the seats on our Shinkansen tickets, and on the local train, we were sitting on opposite ends of the row of sideways-facing seats.

Although our relationship wasn’t as awful as it used to be, whenever we met or talked, it naturally turned into a fight. Unlike the detective or the idol or the Oracle or the Magical Girl, Charlie and I didn’t have a relationship I could put into words yet.

“Good thing it is sunny today, huh?” I pushed myself to move closer and tried striking up a conversation with Charlie. It was worth a shot. Since we had to be with each other anyway, I wanted the time to be as pleasant as possible.

“Why did you come over here by me?”

“I figured we should sit close to make room for other people.”

“The car’s completely empty,” she retorted coolly.

We didn’t talk for a while.

Clackety-clack, clackety-clack. The only sound was the calm noise of the train.

"Come to think of it, maybe because I had two bananas this morning, I had zero trouble in the bathroom."

"Could you pick a worse topic for small talk?" Charlie finally looked at me; she was frowning with dismay.

I still hadn't managed to improve my small-talk game. It looked like I'd just have to let Natsunagi put me through special training.

"I guess it's fine, though. Just keep talking." Turning to face forward, Charlie gazed out the window. Her eyes were distant. "It's a distraction anyway."

If Charlie wanted to forget about this train's destination and the person she was about to meet, just for now…

"Okay, why don't I talk about the stuff that happened while you were overseas?"

I told her the stories about the Magical Girl and the Vampire, without expecting her to be an active listener.

About thirty minutes later, we got off the train, then took a taxi down a mountain road.

A little before we reached our destination, we got out of the car and kept going on foot, just in case. Finally, Charlie stopped in her tracks.

"Is this the house?"

There was an isolated log cabin right in front of us, in the midst of lush vegetation.

So this was where Kozue Arisaka was lying low?

"It's no good." Charlie pointed. The house had a FOR SALE sign up.

I peeked in one of the windows. There was no furniture, and no sign that anyone was there.

"Want to look around just in case?"

With a silent apology to the building's manager, I opened the door with some special tools I'd brought along, and Charlie and I took off

our shoes and stepped into the living room.

The house was silent. The first floor had the living room, kitchen, and bathroom; the second floor held a bedroom and what seemed to be a guest room. We searched them all and confirmed that there was definitely no trace of anyone's presence.

Kozue Arisaka wasn't here anymore.

"You never did ask, did you?" Charlie murmured as we went downstairs. "Why I waited almost two weeks to do something after getting the memo, I mean."

True, I had thought it was strange. She'd been searching all over for her mother, she'd set up a reckless plan, and yet when she'd finally gotten a hint, she'd gone nearly two weeks without using it.

"Pathetic, isn't it? I wanted to know the answer, and yet when I was about to learn it, I suddenly got scared. I wanted to meet her, but some part of my heart still didn't. Even now, I'm a little relieved."

Back on the first floor, Charlie looked outside through the uncurtained window; she was wearing a self-deprecating smile. "I just didn't commit; that's why it turned out like this. If I'd come here right after getting that memo, I might have made it in time."

"No, it's been a lot longer than two weeks since Kozue was here." Swiping a fingertip across the curtain rail, I showed Charlie all the dust it had picked up. "You didn't fail because you hesitated. You just weren't fated to meet her here, that's all."

For a moment, Charlie's eyes went wide. Then she smiled faintly.

We locked the place back up, then walked to the riverbank. Using a big rock as a bench, we sat down side by side, and Charlie opened the basket.

The contents turned out to be sandwiches. Apparently she'd made us lunch.

"I didn't say I'd give you any."

"I didn't ask for any."

Then, with incredibly clichéd timing, my stomach growled.

"Well, I didn't say I wouldn't give you any, either."

"And I didn't say I didn't want any."

So share with me, all right?

"Oh, wait a second." Charlie took a bite first, then pulled a face. "What would you like: tomato, egg, or ham? Actually, do you want them all?"

"Right, you're bad at cooking, huh?"

How was it possible to mess up a sandwich?

Why had she made lunch, anyway?

"…Well, I haven't seen my mother in ages; I didn't know what to talk about. I thought if I brought something like this along, it might at least be a conversation starter… Not that it mattered in the end." Charlie tucked her hair behind her ear.

I capitalized on that opening to snitch an egg sandwich from the basket.

"Hey!" Charlie tried to stop me.

Ignoring her, I bit into it, then finished it off in two or three bites. "It tastes unique, all right."

"You don't have to force yourself."

It hadn't been bad enough to count as "forcing" myself.

I'd made nasty curry in the past, and Siesta had eaten that frequently, complaining the whole time.

"Mm. The tomato's actually pretty good."

"…You're so dumb." Seeing me finish off the sandwich, Charlie suddenly smiled. "Well, this might have been for the best. I can't even imagine me and that woman eating sandwiches together all chummy like this."

"So you didn't get along?"

No, maybe the issue was more fundamental than that. Charlie's parents had been soldiers. Their family probably hadn't looked much like the average family.

"My oldest memory is from when I was four or five. Even then, my parents' love was never focused on me."

"If they were military, I guess their jobs would have kept them away from home a lot of the time."

"Yes, so I was raised by a sort of maid or caretaker." As if she were remembering the distant past, Charlie looked up at the summer sky, eyes narrowed. "Even when she was home, Kozue didn't see me. She only had eyes for my little brother; he was two years younger than me."

I'd never known that Charlie had a little brother.

"He was fragile. As soon as he was born, they had to put him in an incubator. All of Kozue's love was focused on him, as worry. All I remember is how she looked when she tended to my brother."

I listened silently. Glancing at me, Charlie gave a little smile. "I'm not complaining about it. I was worried about him, too. As a little kid, I genuinely wanted to give half of my healthy body to him. I understand how Kozue felt so well it hurts. But that makes it even worse," she went on. "Even now, it's my little brother she wants to see, not me."

Charlie had told me something once: Assuming a mother had two children, her emotions would be focused on the child who was farthest from her. At the time, I hadn't understood why Charlie would give an example like that, but thinking about it now…

"Charlie, is your brother—?"

Before I could finish the question, Charlie got up and started walking, polishing off a sandwich as she went. "It's just like you said. It's a good thing it's sunny."

She slipped off her sandals and stepped into the river, soaking her bare feet. The clear stream splashed against the rock, sending up glassy spray.

"That's cold!"

Under the blue sky, illuminated by the high sun, Charlie turned around. "Say! Why don't you come in, too?"

Just for now, the fact that she was an agent had nothing to do with anything. She was smiling like an innocent young girl.

◆ The countdown's started

We ended up just going home after that. Our search for Kozue Arisaka was back at square one.

Charlie wasn't as discouraged as I'd expected, though; she said she'd keep looking for clues. I hoped she wouldn't sell out her friends this time, at least.

The next day, I met up with Charlie again at a certain luxury high-rise condo. It wasn't just the two of us, though. We were also with Ms. Fuubi, the apartment's owner; Natsunagi; and Mia, on the screen of a laptop. We were all gazing at a video feed projected onto a white wall.

"It looks like you're all there." A man in a white uniform, Ryan White, looked back at us. I saw Ookami next to him. *"I have bad news. The Neverland Project has claimed another victim."* Ryan narrowed his eyes.

"If only my prophecy had been sooner…" On the laptop's screen, Mia bit her lip in frustration. The prophecy had come to the Oracle the previous day, right after I'd split up with Charlie and gotten home.

She'd prophesied that within forty-eight hours, a new Neverland Project would be implemented in a certain country in North Africa. Ryan and Ookami had been free at the time, and they'd rushed to the scene…but it had been too late.

"There's no way it's your fault, Mia," I told the discouraged Oracle. "Everyone here knows how much time you spend carrying out your role every day."

Mia hadn't neglected her job, and she hadn't messed up. Sometimes the Oracle's prophecies were about enemies of the world that would appear a decade from now, and other times they unexpectedly predicted a global crisis that was only a day away. That meant that sometimes she didn't make it in time.

"Mia, we'll need your help again before you know it. Would you lend us your strength again then?" Natsunagi smiled at the

computer.

Mia still looked depressed, but she gave a small nod.

"Ookami. Details?" Ms. Fuubi asked, lighting a cigarette.

"The incident itself is like the previous cases: The victim and attacker were a father and child. The victim was mercilessly killed with a knife, and a letter A *was written in blood next to his corpse."*

"'The incident itself is like the previous cases'… Meaning something else was different? There was some issue so big that you had to call us together like this," Ms. Fuubi said, picking up on what Ookami wasn't saying.

A trail of white smoke rose from her cigarette. Once it had disappeared, Ryan spoke. *"Yes, the attacker fled—and they took with them a map to the Akashic records, which had been in the victim's possession."*

I heard several people gulp.

"Why would the victim have had top secret information like that?" Charlie asked Ryan.

"Because he was a member of the country's royal family. He'd been charged with keeping that map safe."

…The situation couldn't have been worse: If the attacker was on the run, it was very likely that the map to the Akashic records had fallen into Abel's hands.

"Listen, what exactly is the map to the Akashic records anyway?" Natsunagi timidly raised her hand. "If I recall, the records are said to be the plans for a weapon that might be capable of destroying the world, or a catalog of bits of inconvenient history that countries all over the world are hiding…but only a few powerful people know what they actually are."

"Yes, ace detective, that's right. The Akashic records once precipitated a great war. They are what everyone fears, and no one truly knows. After the crisis of a world war passed, the Mizoev Federation is said to have hidden them. That map is supposed to show the way to their hiding place."

I'd have expected no less of a security police officer who was well-acquainted with the underworld. Ookami broke down the concept of the Akashic records and the map for Natsunagi.

"Th-then we have to get it back, fast! Abel might use it for evil, right?"

"Yeah, we'll take the map back for sure. Right now, though, there's no need to get too impatient," Ms. Fuubi said, stubbing out her cigarette in the ashtray. "What got stolen is just a piece of the actual map. Most of the pieces are held by individuals in power around the world who've been acknowledged by the Federation Government."

Ah. In other words, the map had been designed so that one piece wouldn't be enough to get you anywhere.

"Also, it's not just a piece of paper. There are layers of complicated programs pieced together; you need all the data before it will show the location of the records."

"So anyone can acquire the Akashic records as long as they find that spot?"

"I dunno. Rumor has it that you need some sort of key, too. The rest of the details are unclear," Ms. Fuubi finished.

"I see. In that case, we'll need to make our move before Abel retrieves all the pieces of the map," Natsunagi murmured, looking serious.

Silence fell.

Charlie's eyes had widened as if she was startled. On the screen, so had Mia's.

"Huh? What? Did I say something weird?" Natsunagi thought back over what she'd said, and then it hit her. "—I see. Abel's main objective is *to steal the Akashic records*. The Neverland Project is just a distraction from that."

In other words, those incidents were going to keep happening until he found all the pieces of the map.

"Come to think of it, there was another time when Abel…" As I muttered, Charlie raised her head. "Charlie, do you remember?

There was one incident where Siesta and I were involved with Abel indirectly. You were there that time, too, right?"

"…Yes, actually. When was it, about three years ago? Abel was after a necklace that was a national treasure in the Republic of Singapore. That necklace was said to hold map data that would lead to the Akashic records…"

It had happened while I was wandering the world with Siesta. A certain individual had asked us to protect that necklace, and in the course of that, we'd faced off with Abel just once. Naturally, Abel had set someone else up to perpetrate the actual crime. He never did show himself directly, and both Siesta and I had been spending our days fighting SPES, so in the end, the incident hadn't gone past that point. However, had Abel been searching for the map to the Akashic records back then, too? Was this just a continuation of that?

"Of course, we can't completely discount the possibility that it's a coincidence," Ryan said from the screen. He and Ookami had probably had us assemble specifically so they could talk about this. *"Did someone related to the Akashic records just happen to get caught in the Neverland Project's net, or is Abel really plotting to collect the map? If so, what does he plan to do with the records? There are many things we still can't form theories about, but as the Ace Detective says, we should take steps to stop him."*

After Ryan finished, a brief silence fell again.

Everyone here was waiting for a certain individual to speak.

"Hey. Damn brat. Say something."

"No, they're waiting for you, Ms. Fuubi."

The tense atmosphere relaxed a little.

"I thought it would be best to donate my turn to the protagonist."

"Nobody needs that kind of consideration. So, Ms. Fuubi. What do we do?"

Now that Abel's true objective was becoming clear, what move should we make? The Assassin had been given the mission of capturing him, and we needed to hear her decision.

"Ha! What's this? If I give orders, you people will obey me?"

"Well, I mean, if we don't behave and obey, you'll just force us to submit with violence."

"I agree. When things don't go her way, she gets angry like you would not believe."

"Both you damn brats stay after the others leave." Ms. Fuubi glared at me and Charlie with the eyes of a demon.

"Your companions really trust you, Fuubi." For some reason, Ryan nodded with apparent satisfaction.

Ms. Fuubi sighed, scratching her head. "There's something wrong with everybody here… Well, that's fine. I don't have many objections to this, either. If Abel really is trying to access the Akashic records, we'll have to stop him no matter why he's doing it."

Scanning our group, Ms. Fuubi laid out our future course for us.

"We'll collect the scattered pieces of the map to the Akashic records from around the world ourselves."

◆ Two right arms

The map that led to the Akashic records.

That was easy to say, but who held those pieces now, and what form did they take? It was going to be pretty tough to find out. After all, these were secrets of ultimate global importance, and both the Federation Government as well as the Mizoev Federation at its core would have them under tight guard.

As a matter of fact, even when Nagisa Natsunagi—the Ace Detective—had asked about them, the government officials had just told her "We're not authorized to give you any answers about that."

That was all they'd said, and we hadn't managed to obtain any of the information we were after.

After that, though, Mia Whitlock the Oracle predicted the identity of more victims who'd be caught up in the Neverland Project. There were a total of seven.

When the Assassin saw the names, she nodded as if it all made sense to her. *"At least three of those definitely have pieces of the map."*

Apparently she'd investigated that much on her own.

Put bluntly, it had been spying. I was worried that she'd get fired from being a Tuner if she got caught, but she told me, *"Remember this, Kimizuka. In the face of true evil, justice wavers like nobody's business."*

If Fuubi Kase was justice, then was Abel true evil? Was she saying that she'd walk on razor-thin ice if that was what it took to catch him?

If so, where had her drive to complete her mission come from? This will to destroy a great evil, even at the cost of destabilizing her own justice…

Ms. Fuubi didn't tell me anything more than that, though. She took off for a foreign country, taking Ryan and Charlie with her. She had just one goal: retrieve the map that led to the Akashic records. She was traveling with others for safety, and they'd work as a team in order to efficiently collect the map before Abel could.

For the same reasons, Natsunagi, Ookami, and I were also working as a team.

In accordance with Mia's prophesy, we headed to an island nation in Southeast Asia—the Republic of Singapore. There was supposed to be another individual with a piece of the map to the Akashic records here, but…

"Come on, this place is waaay too hot, isn't it? Is it actually September?"

Blue sky and high sunlight. The moment we stepped outside the airport, Natsunagi wilted.

"Well, the heat and humidity are both high in this country. We were here around this time last year, too, remember?"

That had been right after Siesta fell asleep. Responding to a summons by the Federation Government official Ice Doll, we'd taken Saikawa and Charlie and visited this country. That was when Natsunagi had officially been appointed the Ace Detective, and we hadn't been back since.

"I think it's hotter than it was last year. Kimizuka, stop global warming. You're the Singularity, aren't you?"

"Like it could ever be that convenient! Come on, straighten up." I tried to thump her lightly on the back, but Natsunagi hastily evaded.

"I'm sweaty. Don't touch me." She averted her face in seeming embarrassment… And I resolved to be more careful next time.

"So, Kimizuka? Where is the person we're meeting?"

"Mm… They should be here already." Through a certain connection, I'd managed to make contact with the person who had the map. I'd let them know our arrival time in advance, and they'd said they'd send a car to the airport to pick us up, but…

"You're sure we can trust this connection of yours?" Ookami said. As always, he was looking sharp in a suit, with his hair combed back.

"Probably. They were connected to a job Siesta and I did here, way back when."

As I'd said the other day, Siesta and I had once protected part of the map to the Akashic records in Singapore. The person who'd had the map then had recently died of an illness, but a relative of theirs had inherited it.





"I won't let Abel steal it this time, either."

Now we just had to hope the map's current owner cooperated with us.

"—I'm sorry to keep you waiting."

Just then, a voice spoke behind us. When we turned around, we saw a man in a gray suit. He bowed, then held out a business card. "I've come on behalf of Doctor Yu Han."

Yu Han Lin was the person we were here to see, the one with the map. The proxy told us that five o'clock that evening was the earliest we'd be able to meet him, and that Yu Han wanted us to spend our time as we pleased until then. He handed us a credit card, bowed again, and left.

"So apparently that's how it is. What do you want to do, Natsunagi?"

We still had about five hours until then. Apparently it was okay to use this black card however we wanted in the meantime, so where should we go?

"Somewhere that's about as cold as your jokes, Kimizuka."

"Not fair."

The three of us got into a taxi and headed for a nearby shopping mall.

The icy-cold interior made us forget the heat. Thinking we should fortify ourselves first, we went into a restaurant and ordered lunch.

"Hm?! Yum!" Looking so blissful it seemed as if she might literally melt, Natsunagi dug into her chili crab. She had some red sauce at the corner of her mouth. *She's still a little kid about this stuff*, I thought as I got out my handkerchief, but— "Excuse me, Ace Detective." Ookami, who was sitting next to Natsunagi, wiped away the sauce with his handkerchief first.

"…Ah-ha-ha. That's kinda embarrassing."

"A little mischief makes ladies more charming," Ookami told her.

Natsunagi blinked at him. "You're good, Ookami," she said, and laughed.

…What the heck were they making me watch?

"What's the matter, Kimihiko Kimizuka? You look like you're in a very bad mood."

"Shut up. My face is always like this."

I was getting tired of picking away at my bright-red crab with a fork, so I started to gnaw on it.

"I guess I'll tie my hair back," said Natsunagi.

Maybe she was planning to imitate my eating method; Natsunagi started to pull her hair into an elastic. She'd chopped it off last year and had kept it short for quite a while, but it had started growing out a bit lately.

"That's nice, too."

"Wow, that's unusual. You like ponytails, Kimizuka?"

"I doubt any guys hate 'em." Probably not even the adult sitting over there looking cool.

"Once it grows out a bit more, I might be able to use it again. It's been a long time."

"That ribbon, you mean?"

The color of the bright-red ribbon seemed to symbolize Natsunagi's passions. It had originally been Siesta's; Natsunagi had inherited it from her, but she'd kept it carefully shut away ever since she'd cut her hair.

"When do you think that'll be? How many millimeters does your hair grow per day?"

"You look more excited than I've ever seen you, Kimizuka…" For some reason, Natsunagi seemed a bit turned off, but then she giggled. "Think up plenty of compliments in advance, okay?"

Her current mini ponytail swung gently.

At Natsunagi's request, we went shopping after we'd finished eating.

"Okay, Kimizuka and Ookami. I'll be back!" Natsunagi hustled right into a nearby boutique. She was definitely a college girl about things like this.

"She doesn't even see us anymore…"

"Ha! That focused attitude looks good on a hero." Talking as if he knew, Ookami slowly followed Natsunagi.

"Ookami. You really are soft on Natsunagi, aren't you?"

"That's the role of the Ace Detective's right arm."

Hey, quit acting like you're a proxy assistant already.

"Are you planning to help her out this time, too?"

"No, I'm involved for my own reasons. If Abel is really the Phantom Thief, catching him may help me avenge Amon."

"…I see. The Seven Deadly Sins killed your old friend, and it might have been the Phantom Thief who created them."

Everyone who was involved in this operation had a serious bone to pick with Abel. That was why we could trust each other.

Ookami and I stepped into the boutique a minute or so after Natsunagi. Noticing us, she held up two dresses. "Say, you two! Which do you think is better?"

Ookami and I made eye contact briefly, and then we each pointed to a different dress.

"…! Really? Okay, I'll get both!"

I see. Apparently having two assistants had been the right call, just this once.

After using the card for her purchases, Natsunagi headed to a different store, leaving me, Ookami, and a ton of paper bags filled with clothes.

"Ookami, take a few of these. Don't just stand there looking cool by yourself."

"If I must."

Ookami took half of the paper bags, shifting them to his right arm. Then for some reason, he looked at me, and the corners of his lips quirked up.

"…Actually, give 'em back," I said. "I'm the only right arm Natsunagi needs."

"I recommend saying that directly to her."

◆ Nagisa Natsunagi, negotiator

After that, the three of us kept killing time shopping and eating until finally, late at night, the proxy contacted us.

He called us to a bar on the top floor of a luxury hotel. After being frisked at the entrance, we stepped inside. From what we'd heard, the whole place had been reserved.

"It's you, hm? I'm glad you came." The speaker was sitting at the back of a wide, cushioned booth seat. This was the man who held the piece of the map, a member of the Parliament of Singapore—Yu Han Lin.

"Also, I'm sorry for asking you to adjust your schedule to suit mine."

Still in his forties, he was comparatively young for a politician. Even so, he already had lots of experience in positions of responsibility, and he was considered a next-generation leader candidate. That was only natural. His father, Liu Shen Lin, had been the previous prime minister.

"I'm told my father was in your debt." Yu Han held his hand out to me for a handshake.

His deceased father had been the one who'd held the map.

"I really don't remember having the prime minister of a nation in my debt. If anything, it was the previous detective who helped him."

"Ha-ha. Is that how it was? Well, have a seat. You look very young; are you past the age when alcohol would be a problem?"

Exchanging polite, social smiles, Yu Han and I seated ourselves on the cushioned benches. Watching us as if she were mystified, Natsunagi took a seat beside me. "You look kind of mature, Kimizuka. You're used to this sort of thing."

Well, Siesta had made me keep her company through a ton of similar stuff.

"Now then, if I recall, your goal was…"

"Right. A certain individual is targeting your piece of the map to the Akashic records."

I told him that, in order to forestall that person, we wanted to collect the map instead. He already knew about this, though; we'd told him before we came.

"I see. So Abel's after this again?" Taking a drink from his whiskey, Yu Han narrowed his eyes. "What was it you called it—the Neverland Project? Abel may incite my children to kill me, because I hold this map… Is that correct?"

He described his situation briefly and calmly. He was a politician, all right.

"There are two potential attackers." Ookami, who'd stayed standing, held up two fingers. "Liu Ho, your sixteen-year-old son, and Mei Fang, your twenty-three-year-old daughter. Considering the ages of previous Neverland Project perpetrators, it seems likely that your son will be chosen."

"Yes, I agree. My daughter is currently active overseas as a journalist. I doubt she'll be back in Singapore for a while."

Siesta and I had interacted with Yu Han's oldest, Mei Fang, during the earlier map incident. Apparently she was doing well.

Sometimes past clients and even people we'd met by accident ended up reconnecting with us later on. Siesta had valued those connections more highly than anything. That was also why we'd been able to meet and talk with Yu Han like this.

"So the problem is Liu Ho, hm? True, I haven't spoken with him much lately. I wouldn't go so far as to say there's discord in our home, though."

That was how Yu Han saw it, hm? Still, even if it was true, Abel wouldn't care. He had a "code" which could forcibly overwrite human emotions.

"Will you give us the map?" I asked Yu Han again.

Before Abel stole it—before this man was killed by his son.

"The thing is, I don't fear losing my life." Yu Han poked at the round ice cube in his glass with a fingertip. "Neither did my father. We've devoted our lives to the nation. Therefore, I can't hand over

what I inherited from him so easily. The value of my life can't begin to compare to the value of that map."

…He'd go that far to protect the map?

What in the world were the Akashic records? Who actually knew?

"Still, at this rate, Abel might steal that extremely valuable map."

"Yes, that's true. However, *I also have to suspect you of being Abel's minions*."

In the next moment, men in dark suits all pointed their guns at us. These weren't the Men in Black; they were probably Yu Han's security team. Now even moving was going to be tough.

"Oh-ho. I see you two have an outstanding bodyguard as well."

Yu Han's eyes narrowed as if he was impressed. He was looking at Ookami, who had his gun trained on Yu Han. So that was why Ookami had stayed on his feet…

"How did you get that through the pat down at the entrance?"

"It's a mandatory security police skill." Ookami wasn't speaking politely anymore; he cocked the hammer on his gun.

"Ookami, wait!" Natsunagi raised her voice. "Please, let me do this."

She turned pleading red eyes on him. She was saying this was her job.

"…I trust you."

Ookami lowered his gun. Natsunagi hadn't even used her word-soul ability on him. When Yu Han saw that, he gestured for his guards to lower their weapons as well.

"—Three months. Would you let us have custody of the map for just three months?" Natsunagi asked, opening the negotiations. "We'll capture Abel while it's in our care, and I swear we'll return it to you."

"And how am I supposed to believe you?"

"For the next three months, I'll always be wearing the clothes or shoes or carrying a bag that I bought here today. I'll put a transmitter in them." As Natsunagi spoke, she returned the credit card we'd borrowed from Yu Han.

"So you don't mind if I keep you under surveillance?"

"No. If I betray you, or if you decide we've failed and let Abel steal the map, have no mercy on me. Come to kidnap me, if you want. I'll take the map's place," she said. As Natsunagi gazed at Yu Han, her eyes were firm and resolute. "You're not attached to the map itself. You just said as much: What you consider most important isn't the map or your life—it's the nation. The position and national interests of Singapore."

Yu Han's eyebrows twitched slightly.

In all probability he—no, this country—had a deal with the Federation Government. As long as they kept this map safe, they'd be able to conclude advantageous treaties with the Mizoev Federation, for example. Working backward from that, to Yu Han, that map was just a way to protect his country.

"In the unlikely event that I fail and lose the map, you'll still have something that lets you negotiate on equal terms with the Federation Government. There are only twelve Tuners in the world; I'd be a valuable hostage."

In positive terms, she had grit; in less positive terms, this was reckless. Who'd have believed she'd actually turn herself into a hostage in order to get the map? …But Natsunagi was the type of person who did things like that.

"Oh, wait a second. I think there's a person who'd make a better hostage than me."

Abruptly, Natsunagi seemed to realize something. She looked my way. *…Don't tell me.*

"—You just told Charlie off for trying that with me the other day!"

"Ah-ha-ha. But listen, in terms of this role, doesn't the Singularity sound stronger than the Ace Detective?"

"Don't compare our value on a scale you'd use for poker!"

Except this wasn't the time for banter.

I sneaked an apprehensive glance at Yu Han, but he wasn't paying any attention to our comedy skit. He was drinking his whiskey slowly, as if he were thinking about something.

"……"

At present, he probably couldn't trust us across the board. Still, as things stood, he had to be well aware there was a danger that Abel would steal the map. In that case, I was sure…

"Six months ago, when the Revolutionary offered to take custody of the map in my place, I refused her. But…" Draining his glass, Yu Han finally looked at Natsunagi. "Three months, and I won't ease up on my surveillance. You'd never be able to escape."

"Yes, I understand."

"I see. In that case, take it."

One of the men in dark suits set an attaché case on the table.

Inside was a pearl necklace.

One of those pearls had an IC chip embedded in it—a tiny chip that held data for the map to the Akashic records.

"Thank you very much."

Natsunagi nodded, looking serious, but then she exhaled softly with relief.

It had been a huge job, and the Ace Detective had outperformed the Revolutionary.

◆ Polar-opposite guideposts

After that, our journey to collect the map continued.

As soon as we returned from Singapore, I flew to Los Angeles.

It was almost like the three years I'd spent wandering with Siesta. I was pretty used to such an intense schedule, but it was still tiring.

"I wish I had someone to talk to, at least."

I was making this trip on my own; Natsunagi and Ookami had picked up Charlie and headed to another country.

I did have other companions, though. As we'd arranged, I was waiting for them on a broad downtown avenue when I saw a flashy red sports car coming my way.

"I'm really glad I don't know anybody like that."

A man in a loud suit and sunglasses was holding the steering wheel with one hand; the woman in the passenger seat was also wearing sunglasses. They weren't the type I wanted to get closer to, so I averted my eyes.

Almost immediately, the horn honked, and the sports car pulled up right beside me.

"Hi there. Sorry to keep you waiting." The driver took off his sunglasses, and so did the woman next to him.

"Wear something that stands out more. I thought you were a video game mob or something," the woman said, insulting me as she lit a cigarette.

…Incredibly, I did know these people. Ryan and Ms. Fuubi had found me. *This sucks.*

"If you two showed up in a disaster film, I bet you'd be the first to die." Probably at the hands of a serial killer or an extraterrestrial or because of a man-eating shark.

"We wouldn't let anything like that get the jump on us. We'd star as the ultimate married spy couple."

"Who's married, huh? I'll slit your throat."

With that completely revolting lovers' spat in my ears, I climbed into the back seat. *I have very few good memories of going on drives…* Without paying any attention to my sigh, the car pulled back into traffic.

"It's been forever, but driving through this town feels great." The wind was ruffling Ryan's bright-blond hair.

"Are you from America?"

"Yes, although my job makes it easy to forget my roots."

Interpol was said to be active all over the world. Ryan White was basically a symbol of the surface world's justice. Ms. Fuubi might have talked smack about him, but even she respected him.

"Ryan, didn't you ever consider becoming a Tuner?"

For example, Fritz Stewart—the former Revolutionary—had secretly held that post while publicly working as a politician. He'd

been a city mayor, but I did get the feeling that the president of a country might turn out to be a Tuner someday.

"That would be pretty difficult." Ryan shook his head mildly. "The Revolutionary is an exception to the rule; due to the peculiarities of the Tuner role, the Federation Government feels that decentralizing authority is important. They think it's dangerous to give one person too much power in both the public world and the underworld. On top of that, I'm satisfied with my current position."

"…Is that why Ms. Fuubi, who actually is a Tuner, officially works as a pretty ordinary police officer?"

"Yes. That was the promise we made long ago. We'd both protect the world: I from the surface, and Fuubi from the underworld."

I'd seen Ms. Fuubi's obsession with justice many times before. That was what had brought us to a face-off a year ago.

However, was Ryan part of the reason she'd ended up that way? What had this promise of theirs been about? I was curious, but when I looked at her…

"……"

"A silent smoker in sunglasses is way too scary."

She seemed to be telling me not to go there.

"So, Ms. Fuubi. Who's got the map this time?"

That had to be where this car was heading, but I had yet to hear the details.

Reaching back, Ms. Fuubi held out a photo to me. The subject was a big, tall man.

"Nicholas Goldschmidt, retired NBA player. In his prime, his popularity was as much of a force as his extreme skill. He had countless sponsors, and people said he could earn a million dollars just by breathing."

"A basketball player, huh? Why would someone like that have a map to the Akashic records?"

"Basically, he spent a fortune to buy the right to have it. He probably wanted the authority as a status symbol. I couldn't tell you why the Federation Government signed off on it, though."

Ah. So apparently not everyone with a map was a politician.

"So what is Nicholas doing now?"

"He retired kicking and screaming due to injury, and he's let the bottle get the better of him. He's currently divorced and living with his fourteen-year-old son in a mansion he built back when he made his fortune."

That was a police officer for you: She investigated fast.

"If he has family problems, that matches the Neverland Project, too, doesn't it?"

This man's name had come up in Mia's prophecy, and it seemed safe to say Abel was targeting the map. Hopefully we'd be able to get in ahead of Abel and retrieve the piece without trouble, but…

"Hey, you two? It looks like the situation's changed a bit."

In the rearview mirror, Ryan's eyes had sharpened.

The car made a right turn into a narrow street.

"Someone's tailing us. They're keeping an eye on us from a rotation of several cars. Once we leave this alley, if the blue Ford several cars behind us comes up toward us, we'll know for sure."

Before long, we came out onto a broad avenue. When I casually turned to look back, I saw the car Ryan had been talking about. He turned the steering wheel sharply, and we fled down another side street.

"What do you think, Fuubi?"

"It's either the Men in Black or someone a bit higher up."

"I'm with you there. And I'd bet the second option is correct."

Maybe it was because of what Ryan said, or maybe she'd picked up on a trace of someone's presence, but Ms. Fuubi took off her sunglasses and looked up at the building right next to us. A woman was standing there, looking down at our car as it drove past. She wore a black veil over her head.

"It can't be. Is that…?"

"The Revolutionary," Ms. Fuubi said.

So it really was the woman who'd been at that Federal Council in England.

"The higher-ups have apparently picked up on the fact that we're taking action. They know we're trying to collect the map without permission."

In that case, had the Revolutionary come to stop us on the Federation Government's orders?

"Can't we convince them that we're doing it to stop Abel's plot?"

"That would normally work, but they're so against us getting involved with the Akashic records that they won't accept it."

…Oh. That was probably why Ryan had limited this team operation to trustworthy comrades: so that our group could collect the map and stop Abel by ourselves.

"Ryan, it's not too late for you," Ms. Fuubi said, without looking at the driver's seat. "You don't belong to the underworld as much as I and the brat do. You've done your best to keep a certain distance between yourself and the Tuners. Just like you've avoided getting involved with me," she added lightly. "So it's not too late for you to wash your hands of all this. There's no need for you to attract the Federation Government's attention. You can stay a shiny-clean Interpol officer, with your 'immaculate justice'…"

Just then, the sports car screeched to a stop.

"We did make a promise that day. We said you'd protect the world from the shadows, and I'd protect it from the surface. But I won't abandon a companion, not even to keep that position. Besides…" As Ryan got out of the car, the corners of his lips curved up. "Even if I'm stealthy about it, you know I'm a schemer on the inside."

Then Ryan looked at the enemy. She'd alighted on the opposite side of the road, several dozen meters ahead of us: the Revolutionary, who could sway the world with her special political might.

"You take the wheel, Fuubi. I'll take her on."

"There you go again, trying to tackle pain-in-the-butt stuff by yourself." Ms. Fuubi gave a grumpy *tsk*, but even so, a few seconds later… "Don't let her seduce you, Ryan."

"Ha-ha! Negotiation's a strong suit of mine. Go on ahead," Ryan said, sending us off. He didn't even look back.

Without so much as glancing at him, Ms. Fuubi took the wheel—and the red sports car promptly sped off.

"The trust in this relationship is white-hot, huh."

"I told you I'd kill you next time you teased me about that."

◆ The Assassin can't tell

"So this is Nicholas Goldschmidt's place."

Looking from the map app to the mansion in front of us, Ms. Fuubi started to get out of the car. "Hey, what's wrong? Let's go, you damn brat."

"Don't punch people and then act like nothing happened."

I rubbed my left cheek, glaring at her with all the resentment I could muster. Ten minutes ago, after I'd joked about her relationship with Ryan, the Assassin had hit me with a straight right punch.

"That's what happens when you mock adults."

"You can't call somebody who snaps over a thing like that an adult!"

…Ghk. Yelling made it hurt again.

And yes, when she'd hit me, the pain and the shock had made me cry a little.

"You punched me so hard in the past that I flew through the air, kid."

"…I had a good reason for doing that."

I followed Ms. Fuubi out of the car.

Nicholas Goldschmidt's mansion was as big as a modest castle.

"This gives Saikawa's place a run for its money."

Just imagining a dad and his kid living by themselves in a house this size was a little lonely.

…Saikawa's case wasn't much different, though. Except I'd heard that her servants lived in the house, too.

"Maybe I'll go over there more often."

Assuming she had the time for visitors anyway; she was even busier now.

"No answer, huh? Well, we weren't expecting one."

Ms. Fuubi had rung the doorbell, but there was no response. Either he wasn't home, or he was passed out drunk in the middle of the day.

Then, with no hesitation, Ms. Fuubi climbed up to the top of the gate and held out a hand to me.

"Did you forget you're a police officer?"

"What are you talking about? I'm just patrolling the area."

Smiling wryly, I took her hand.

There was a vast garden between the gate and the front door. It didn't seem to be tended very well, though. Apparently they didn't have servants.

"It's late to be asking this, but were you not able to talk to him in advance?"

"Nope. His fourteen-year-old answered the phone and then immediately hung up."

I was only working from what I'd heard, but there really did seem to be trouble here.

Way back when, I'd seen lots of houses like this one. Danny Bryant, the guy who'd called himself my teacher, had taken me to them. Was it coincidence that I was involved in a similar problem now, or…?

"It's not locked. We're going in." Ms. Fuubi turned the doorknob. I stepped over the threshold after her, and we started to search the rooms.

"Come to think of it, I don't remember actually working with you much, Ms. Fuubi."

We'd been indirectly involved pretty frequently, and we'd discussed common problems countless times, but we'd almost never actually worked together.

"Just don't hold me back."

"Even if you had me hugging your ankle, you could move just fine."

Just then, I noticed a nearby door was standing slightly ajar.

When I peeked in, it looked like a kid's room. It was a simple one, practically empty except for a desk and a bed. It was neat and had been thoroughly cleaned.

The only remarkable thing was a big poster on the wall beside the window. It showed a certain basketball player I'd just seen in a photo.

"What are you doing with a dangerous thing like that?" said a voice outside the room.

I ran back into the hall. Ms. Fuubi was standing on the opposite side of it. Beyond her, there was a boy—who was holding a carving knife.

"Nicholas Goldschmidt's son, hm?"

His back was hunched, and his eyes were vacant. Something was clearly wrong.

There was no mistake. He was being controlled by Abel's code, and it was obvious what he'd been planning to do with that knife.

"Get back, Kimizuka." At some point, the redheaded Assassin had drawn her weapon. The sharp blade of the survival knife gleamed dark gray.

"Ms. Fuubi, what's your goal here?"

"Collecting that map, of course."

I see. No, from her perspective, that was correct. Both as the Assassin, and in terms of our original mission. However…

"My biggest goal is to keep that kid from committing murder."

I stepped out in front of Ms. Fuubi.

I'd save both that boy and his father. That was definitely what the Ace Detective or Danny Bryant would have done, if they'd been here.

"I know you don't actually hate your dad enough to kill him."

Was that a groundless, emotion-based argument? Or was it my wish?

There's no way children hate their parents enough to kill them? Some might have said that, but if you searched the world over… No, even within Japan, you'd probably find a ton of kids who did feel that way. It wasn't something I could just gloss over.

At the very least, though, this boy was different.

There was that poster from his father's glory days in his room, for example. The way that room had been carefully cleaned, even though the rest of the house wasn't. The way the boy hadn't tried to run away, even though the house wasn't locked up. He was here of his own free will. And so…

"You don't have a reason to brandish that knife."

I used firm words to try to shake off the nightmare that was attacking the boy.

Maybe I was just imitating Natsunagi's word-soul; that was fine. As long as my words could cancel out this reality. As long as I could overwrite Abel's code.

"……"

The hand that held the carving knife seemed to tremble just a little.

"What are you doing to my son?!"

A figure appeared from the depths of the hall. It was a big man, over two meters tall—Nicholas Goldschmidt. He was holding a rifle.

"—Get down!"

By the time Ms. Fuubi yelled, my head was already pressed against the hall floor. Or rather, she'd shoved it there.

Immediately, a shot rang out. If Ms. Fuubi had been a second later, that bullet would have put a massive hole in me. The next thing I saw was a red figure, racing like the wind. Nicholas was startled; his eyes widened, but he stepped in front of his son and leveled the rifle again.

"Go ahead and try it. Shoot."

A second gunshot, followed by a metallic clang. I hadn't been able to track the motion with my eyes, but Ms. Fuubi had probably slashed the bullet in two with her knife.

"If you're that strong, then start by protecting your kid."

Right after that, she tossed her knife aside and broke the rifle with a sharp kick.

"This is my piece of the map."

The uproar had quieted down, and we were in the spacious dining room.

Nicholas Goldschmidt held out an old pocket watch. Apparently that was where the map data for the Akashic records was hidden.

"You're sure it's all right for us to take it?"

"Yes. As long as I have it, this sort of thing could happen again. Letting it go is the best move."

Nicholas gazed at his son, who was asleep on a nearby sofa. The brainwashing from Abel's code seemed to have worn off. He should wake up soon.

"I see I've ventured into a world I should have steered clear of." Nicholas hunched his big frame. Did he regret meddling with the Akashic records for the sake of his own pride and status? After all, he'd drawn Abel's attention to himself. "I guess humans shouldn't try to be bigger than they are," he murmured. Somehow, he looked as if a weight had rolled off his shoulders.

By the time we went outside, it was well past sundown.

"Ryan says to come pick him up," Ms. Fuubi said, checking the messages on her phone.

Could we assume that the fight—or negotiation—with the Revolutionary was settled? Sighing with relief, I looked up.

A waning moon was floating in the dim sky.

"I bet I lost track of how big I'm supposed to be ages back." The words slipped out of me, and Ms. Fuubi stopped in the middle of getting into the car. "I deviated from my story, dragged a crowd of other people in, and I'm venturing into parts of the world that shouldn't be touched. I need to take the bare minimum of

responsibility, though. In order to surpass my ‘role,’ I won’t stop until it’s over.”

Just as the king of vampires had told me to, at the end.

“I see. Well, it’s your life. Drag other people into it, drag the whole world in, but even that’s part of your life. Just do what you want to.”

“That’s nice of you, for once. You sound like a mom.”

“I’m not old enough to have a kid your age. Are you gonna stick your right cheek out here, too?”

Spare me. I’d just learned that she couldn’t take a joke earlier.

“However, if justice is lost because of any selfish crap you did—I’ll show you no mercy.”

“Yeah, actually, that’s a huge help.”

At that point, we finally made eye contact, then shrugged at each other.

“Ms. Fuubi. Why did you join the police?”

I could just as well have asked why she’d become a Tuner. I had the vague feeling that the answers to both questions would be the same.

Leaning back against the car, Ms. Fuubi lit a cigarette. “Did the Magical Girl and the Vampire answer when you asked them that?”

“Rill kept her secret hidden, and some of Scarlet’s answer was a lie.”

Even so, they’d both told me about their pasts.

That was why I’d thought Ms. Fuubi might tell me something, too, even if she kept secrets or lied about parts of it. Was that dumb of me? We’d known each other for six or seven years already, but I knew next to nothing about her past.

“You don’t need to know.” She blew out a long, long stream of smoke. “Not about me, not about my past. Why I joined the police, why I became a Tuner… None of it has anything to do with you. You move your story forward your way, and I’ll do what I want, too.”

Her expression wasn’t exactly cheerful, but it also wasn’t dark and gloomy. All I could tell was that I wouldn’t be getting anything else out of her.

“Your guard’s as tight as ever.”

“Ha! I just have a duty of confidentiality as a national public servant.”

Stubbing out the cigarette that still had a lot of life in it, Ms. Fuubi got into the car. “If you want to know more about me, grow up a bit and ask again. Damn brat.”

As she said it, unusually, the corners of her lips curved up. What did I think of that expression?

I won’t get into that here.



Fifteen years ago, Fuubi

"There you are, Fuubi."

While I waited for the cremation to be over, I'd gone outside for some fresh air, and now Ryan White was tossing a can of juice to me. I'd thought I was projecting a "Don't talk to me" aura, but this guy never could read the mood.

"I genuinely think there's no emptier time in life than when you're waiting for a body to burn up… Want to sit?" Ryan sat down on a nearby step, and I sat on another one a little ways from him.

"Corpses won't come back to life; we can't just keep them around forever. Space is too limited to bury them as is. Regardless of your religious views, cremation is a rational system." I opened my can of juice and took a swallow. The saccharine taste of artificial sweetener filled my mouth.

"Are you sure you're in middle school, Fuubi?" As Ryan looked at me, for some reason, his smile was a little lonely. And then…

"The body they're burning is your father's, though. You could be sadder about it."

My dad was dead. It wasn't as if I hadn't accepted that fact.

They'd notified me of his death two days ago. I'd been to the wake, then the funeral, and now his corpse was being cremated.

I'd seen all those things properly, and yet I hadn't abandoned myself to grief like a character in a movie.

"It's not just in movies and TV shows," Ryan said, as if he'd read my mind. "When a relative dies, it's normal to grieve in reality, too. Especially because your dad was the only parent you had, and he raised you all by himself."

Ryan was probably right. I didn't think what he was saying was wrong. I knew it was common sense for most of the world. But…

"*You're* telling me this? You're in the exact same boat, Ryan."

Two days ago, his father had died, too.

Coincidence? No.

He'd died at the same place as my dad, in the same way.

A meeting of major world leaders, or "summit," had been held here in Japan the other day, and a suicide bomber had attacked it. The terrorist had strapped explosives to himself and tried to take down the leaders of the Mizoev Federation.

However, just before he did it, two police officers had seized him. They'd averted the worst-case scenario—but they'd been killed in the blast. Those officers had been our fathers; they'd been charged with guarding the VIPs.

"Our dads died in service of justice. They protected important people from a dirty terrorist and fell in the line of duty. I'm proud of them." Ryan looked up at the blue sky. This boy, who was arrogantly lecturing me—or clumsily trying to comfort me—hadn't shed a single tear, either.

"Both my dad and yours fought right up until the moment they died, Ryan. They carried out their justice until the end; there was no time for tears. We grew up watching the example they set. There's no way it's okay for us to cry."

"…You're that man's daughter, all right. You've definitely inherited his will." Ryan knew my father just as well as I knew his. We understood better than anyone that they'd fought constantly to

protect nations, towns, people, and lives. “But listen, Fuubi.” Ryan’s tone changed abruptly. “If you keep that up, your heart will break someday. You should learn how to go easier on yourself.”

“Are you saying I’m bluffing?”

“No—it’s the other way around. What you’re saying is definitely what you feel. It’s just that your body isn’t keeping up with you.”

What was he even talking about?

As I sat there trying to figure out what he meant, Ryan pointed at me.

“You’ve been crying this whole time.”

The moment he said it, I felt the hot tears trickling down my cheeks. I didn’t know when they’d begun to fall.





"When your heart and your body aren't on the same page, it gets harder to control yourself. If we want to see our justice through, we can't afford to misread our hearts. We can't avert our eyes from what we really think and want."

This guy was always like this. Was it the difference in our ages, or the fact that he was a boy and I was a girl? No, there was a bigger difference between us, one that was harder to put into words. He was always peeking over the other side of that enormous wall, all by himself. And so, this time, too— "I heard you're going to America," I murmured.

"Yeah. My dad had connections over there. I won't come back to Japan for a while."

I knew. He was an American citizen. He was just going home, as he should. And over there, I was sure Ryan White would— "I'm going to join the police, too."

Even if it was frustrating, I wiped my tears away—an admission that I'd been crying.

It wasn't because I was determined to inherit my dad's will or anything like that. It was just… "I want to see what the world he was trying to protect is going to look like."

What was this world my dad had risked his life to defend? What was justice? That was what I wanted to know.

"In that case, do you want to come to America, too? I could help set that up for—"

"No, I'll pass." I stood up before he'd finished his offer. I was sure Ryan White would become a noble police officer with as much integrity as his name suggested. He was upright and strong, and I was sure he'd be an active champion of justice around the world.

In that case, there was no need for two people who faced in the same direction.

"I'll look for justice in a different way. That means this is good-bye for us, Ryan."

This time, my tears really had dried up. I glared at the clouds I could see at the very edge of the blue sky.

"Do you have something in mind?"

"Oh, I dunno."

I did know, though. Actually, Ryan must have picked up on it as well. Our fathers *hadn't been ordinary police officers*.

In that case, if I genuinely wanted it, if I had the will, someone would notice and make contact with me someday. Somewhere in the world, there was a way to become an ally of justice who wasn't the normal kind.

"I'm going to aim for the top like that."

I'd scale that enormous wall, fly through the sky at ten thousand meters, and if even that wasn't enough, where would I go? How far would I have to go to be able to see the shape of the world from above? The only thing I knew was that this was going to be a long journey.

"I see. Then I bet we'll meet again someday, somewhere."

"Were you even listening? I said I wasn't doing this the same way you—"

Just then, he put his arms around me softly from behind.

"A long time ago, there was a scholar who actually risked his life to prove the world was round. As long as we don't stop walking, our paths are bound to cross again somewhere." Ryan whispered these words in my ear, then gently stepped away.

"…That line wasn't all that clever."

"Ha-ha! Man, you're as harsh as ever."

Ryan laughed the way he always did. I tried to smile back, since that seemed to be the thing to do…but then I remembered this guy had just seen me cry and I stopped myself.

Showing him a smile on top of that would have been irritating.



Chapter 3

◆ Campus life, for a change

My university's long summer break was over.

We were still working to collect the pieces of the map to the Akashic records, but it wasn't as if I had to go along every time. In my free time, I attended class with Natsunagi.

Today, after our fifth-period lecture, Natsunagi had suggested that we stay at the library again. Lately, we'd started studying and doing our homework there until night fell, then getting dinner together on the way home.

"Mmf! I'm worn out."

We'd been at the library for an hour and a half. Setting down the complicated-looking book she'd been reading, Natsunagi stretched. The motion emphasized her chest, and frankly, I didn't really know where to look. That was a problem, so I decided not to bother averting my eyes.

"Um, you're staring."

"Sorry. Honestly, I thought you'd probably forgive me."

"Kimizuka, somebody important should yell at you at least once. Pervert." Natsunagi gave me a long, cold look.

I knew I'd never win if this went to trial, so I changed the subject fast. "You're reading another difficult book."

"Well, I don't have the sort of knowledge Siesta does. I have to catch up at least a little."

Just from what I'd seen, Natsunagi had been doing a lot of reading recently. The genres were all over the place, from classic literature to world history texts and even biology dictionaries. Of her own accord, she was trying to become a real Ace Detective.

"By the way, Kimizuka, did you manage to visit Siesta one last time?"

"Yeah, this morning. I'd just missed the cutoff, but I begged and got them to let me in anyway."

It had been my final visit before the preparations for Siesta's surgery began. According to Stephen the Inventor, it would be a minimum of two months before everything was over and we could see her again. —Not that we knew what she'd be like when she woke up.

"I see. I went quietly by myself yesterday evening."

"You could've come with me today, you know."

"There are some things girls want to talk about on their own."

Ah, that kinda thing, huh? They'd better not have been talking smack about me.

"It sounds like Charlie visited before I did. Noches told me."

"I see. Well, she's probably got a lot on her mind."

Particularly now, Charlie was wrestling with a big personal issue. If Siesta had been here, Charlie would have wanted to discuss it with her. For ages, Siesta had been the only person she could show her weaknesses to. Now, though…

"Kimizuka, I'm leaving Charlie to you," Natsunagi said, as if she'd been reading my mind.

"I'm not refusing, but why me? Charlie and I aren't… I mean, you know how we get along."

"Mm, yes. That might actually be the reason, though," Natsunagi said in a roundabout way, smiling wryly. Come to think of it, when Charlie was looking for her mother, Natsunagi had told me to go with her.

"You know, I bet watching over your relationship with Charlie is a job for the successive Ace Detectives."

"…Did they put that in the transfer instructions, too?"

"Ah-ha-ha! Boy, do you look grumpy." Laughing, Natsunagi poked at my cheek with the blunt end of her pen.

"You don't get to say that when it's your fault."

"It's fine. I like that face."

"Well, this is all kinds of convenient for you, huh?"

Just then…

"It looks as if I read you right," someone else said. "You do seem close to her."

When I looked up, a man in a white lab coat was standing there. The hypnotist and professor of psychology— "Professor Moriya?" Natsunagi's eyes were round.

"In the library, hard at work studying at this hour. That's quite admirable. Although, at the same time, you seem to be enjoying your youth…"

Embarrassed, Natsunagi cleared her throat.

We'd met Professor Moriya at a pre-lecture right after starting university. His hypnotism demonstration had shown us how fascinating his lectures would be, and both Natsunagi and I had been attending them for the past several months.

"What brings you here, Professor?" Natsunagi asked him.

"I needed something from the stacks. I'm looking for a book to use in my research," he told her. His voice was calm, and he was wearing his usual mild smile. I could see why he was popular with female students… The next thing I knew, Professor Moriya was gazing at me.

"Are you planning to read my mind again?"

At that pre-lecture in April, Professor Moriya had told me he suspected I was "currently hesitating, confronted with a big question." At the time, I'd been worried about what direction to take with Siesta's treatment.

"No. I can't see any cloudiness in you today. There's nothing like the hesitation you used to have, and your eyes are focused on your mission. As a matter of fact, you've begun to extend a helping hand to the people around you and support them."

…Yeah, he was reading my mind plenty.

Then Professor Moriya's expression clouded slightly. "However, in that case, you must also steel yourself. If the person you've tried to

support doesn't get their wish, you must be prepared to accept it."

Once again, his words struck a chord with me.

What if I tried to save someone, desperately reaching out with both hands, trying to make their ideal a reality—and it didn't happen? What would I…?

"Ah, I'm sorry. I didn't intend to startle you, or to threaten you." Gently setting one hand on my shoulder and the other on Natsunagi's, Professor Moriya left us with a lesson. "It's just that you students have a future ahead of you, and I want you to really worry, think, then live with a firm will. Telling you so is my role, you see."

◆ Wills that can change the world

The next day, having received a summons from a certain person, I was in a car driven by a Man in Black when I got a call. Seeing the name, I picked up.

"You haven't been checking in regularly," said Reloaded the Magical Girl. She sounded extremely cross.

"Did we have a regular contact system? That's the first I've heard of it."

"They just passed a bill about it. Familiars must check in with their masters once every three days. Look at the National Diet."

"I see. I'll make sure to vote from now on," I quipped, then looked out the car window. The outskirts of the city were streaming past.

"Are you on your way somewhere?"

"Yeah, I got summoned by a Tuner who's not you, Rill."

Silence fell for a little while.

"Rill's sorry. She can't do much to help you this time."

She didn't give any specifics. However, it was clear what had been bothering her enough to make her call me.

"Capturing Abel was the Assassin's mission in the first place. The Ace Detective and the Oracle are only involved because that's how it worked out, or maybe because they were the right ones for the job… And anyway, you've got your own job, Rill. Right?"

"Rill isn't sure. She's done practically nothing as the Magical Girl." With a hint of self-mockery, Rill told me about the job she'd been assigned. *"It's only creating a written record of all the global crises that have ever occurred, and the Tuners who resolved them. That's the sort of job you'd give a nominal 'manager' who's on the verge of retiring and can't even use a computer."*

"Quit sniping specific individuals."

That said, was this technically consideration on the part of the Federation Government? They'd given Rill a job she could do even if her legs didn't work…

"Still, I bet that's an important job, too. What happened to the world, who was saved, and who saved them—there's definitely meaning in leaving a record of that for posterity."

For example, the Oracle prophesied the future, but those prophecies didn't necessarily come true. In fact, the Tuners defeated enemies and salvaged crises in order to change those worst-possible futures. People who left a record of those things, those stories, were definitely needed. After all, in every age, the wise learned from history.

"…Thanks," Rill said in a tiny voice. She sounded a bit embarrassed.

To tell the truth, I was bummed that I couldn't see her face.

"How have your parents been?"

Since Rill had been living as the Magical Girl, she hadn't contacted her parents for several years. However, after settling things with that Supernatural, Gluttony, she'd returned to her home in Scandinavia about six months ago.

"Rill hasn't seen them lately. She's moved out on her own."

"…Hey, nobody mentioned that."

Maybe I really did need to check in regularly.

"Well, Rill isn't a child. She can't lean on her parents forever."

"Yeah, I guess not."

True, she probably couldn't tell her family the details of her current job, but Rill was also solidly independent.

"You don't have to worry; it's not that Rill doesn't get along with her parents. She's calling them and going to see them once in a while so that things won't end up the way they did before. Maybe we aren't exactly best friends, but… Well, that's the shape Rill's family takes, that's all. 'The ideal family' is just an illusion."

I didn't know my own family. Coming from me, that sentence would have sounded like sour grapes, but Rill's words rang true. I didn't agree or disagree with them. I wasn't in a position to offer an opinion.

…For that very reason, if I ran into someone who was chasing that ideal, could I say something to them? If there was a lonely agent who was pursuing her mother, her family, her ideal, what could I…

"Kimihiko?"

"Right, sorry. It looks like we're almost there."

"Yes, yes. So you don't need your ex anymore."

"You're actually pretty high-maintenance, aren't you, Rill?" We laughed together, ignoring the eight thousand kilometers between us. "I'll call again."

"Do. It doesn't have to be in three days. A week from now, or tomorrow, or even tonight."

I hung up. Strangely, my heart felt lighter.

Before long, the car stopped, and I got out alone.

It was an old quarry just outside the city. I didn't have to walk far before I saw them. Under the cloudy sky, in a place that looked like the set for a special effects–driven hero show, two figures stood.

Crimson and golden. The two shapes ran like the wind, crossed, and clashed.

Put briefly, there was a white-hot hand-to-hand fight in progress. However, once my eyes got used to it, I realized this was a practice match.

The crimson figure was clearly holding back; that was how outmatched their opponent was. Even so, the golden figure didn't get discouraged; they got back up again and again. There's no need

for me to vague up the details, really: For a little while, I watched Fuubi Kase train Charlotte Arisaka Anderson.

Fifteen minutes later, once they'd reached a stopping point, I went over to them.

"You okay, Charlie?"

"…That's a pretty considerate move for you."

Charlie took the bottle of water I was holding out to her. She was sitting on the ground, wearing a black combat suit, and there were big beads of sweat on the back of her neck.

"You've got a long way to go." Ms. Fuubi was still on her feet, nonchalantly smoking a cigarette. "Your ability to fight with lethal intent is abysmally low. Even if you used your sword or machine gun, you would be no match for my knife."

This master/apprentice relationship of theirs had begun back when Siesta had died. Charlie had idolized Siesta, and Siesta had been worried about what would happen to her after she was gone, so she'd spoken to Ms. Fuubi about her. As a result, for better or for worse, Charlie had really been put through the mill.

"Charlotte, when will you catch up to me? I've waited two years already."

"—! I know, all right? Don't just keep repeating yourself." Charlie glared up at Ms. Fuubi resentfully. "I mean, I can see how you'd be really sensitive to time, since you're a whole ten years older than me."

"Hey, why have you people felt safe making fun of me lately?"

For some reason, Ms. Fuubi hauled *me* up by my shirtfront. Unfair.

"…Fuubi. Why are you so strong?" Charlie asked, sounding serious again. "I've worked hard to learn close combat and sniping skills, but I really can't see myself ever reaching your level. That's been true of all *your other apprentices*, too, hasn't it?"

Apparently Charlie wasn't Fuubi Kase's first apprentice, and none of the earlier ones had managed to measure up, either.

"I noticed it again when you were training me a moment ago. There really is something strange about the way you move.

Physically, I mean; sometimes you clearly react faster than a normal human could. What exactly do you see during battle?”

I’d seen the way Fuubi Kase fought and her abnormal strength before. I wasn’t a combat expert like Charlie, though, and Charlie seemed to be even more conscious of how odd it was.

“Way back when, you wouldn’t even have noticed that anything seemed weird. I guess that’s progress.” Ms. Fuubi exhaled a long stream of white cigarette smoke. “You don’t need anything special, though. Just do what I’ve taught you: Get rid of your softness and hesitation. Sharpen your intent to kill. Think only of surpassing the enemy, even if it’s just in this one moment. It all comes down to your ‘will,’” she said.

Come to think of it, she’d said something similar when she was fighting the woman in the goat mask.

“You’re saying you got this strong through sheer willpower?”

“Doubt it if you want, but that’s how it is,” Ms. Fuubi told me. “That’s the rule of this world. Those who wish with determination are given the power they seek. One day, for example, the power of the Oracle came to dwell in Mia Whitlock, and Bruno Belmondo became all-knowing. That was all because of their wills.”

That explanation sounded a little vague. Ms. Fuubi never said fuzzy stuff like this, though, and she was being serious. I knew enough to understand what that meant.

“Then is that how Siesta and Natsunagi became the Ace Detective, too?”

“The Ace Detective is… Well, yeah, it’s basically the same thing. The word doesn’t matter,” Ms. Fuubi went on. “If you don’t like the term ‘will,’ pick another one. This stuff is going to mean something important to both of you.”

Charlie and I exchanged looks. Then we both decided to file away what we’d just heard for now.

Power came to dwell in human wills, then made wishes come true.

Sure, it sounded good, but it was also scary.

Appropriate scales might be necessary to balance that great power.

"So? Why did you call me here?" I turned the conversation back to the main topic. Ms. Fuubi was the one who'd summoned me. *She can't just have wanted me to watch her put Charlie through combat training.*

"Right. We've found out where Kozue Arisaka is."

Stubbing out her cigarette, Ms. Fuubi fiddled with her smartphone. Almost immediately, mine vibrated to let me know I had a text. There was a map attached to it. So Charlie's mom was here…?

"Sorry about this. I'm making you come with me again." Charlie's expression was hard; she must have heard about this already.

"It's nothing for you to apologize for, Charlie. I chose to get involved. That aside, Ms. Fuubi, how did you find this place?"

"It wasn't me. The Oracle prophesied it."

"Mia? But she can only make prophesies in connection with global crises."

Was Kozue going to be involved in a global crisis, then? …No, wait, she'd made contact with Abel before. Meaning—

"Does Kozue have a map to the Akashic records?"

Was that why she'd showed up in Mia's prophecy? Because if nothing changed, Abel would steal her map?

"This matter being what it is, the Oracle contacted me first."

The Assassin was the one who was officially in charge of capturing Abel. Mia had made the right decision. The important question was what we were going to do now.

"So are the three of us heading over there next?" I asked, guessing what Ms. Fuubi wanted. When collecting map pieces before this, we'd always worked in groups.

"No, I'm about to fly to Europe. We need to retrieve a map from a bit of a tough customer."

"If they're sending you, does that mean they're expecting a fight?"

"Yeah. From what I hear, the target's a former Tuner. It wasn't in the Oracle's prophecy; Ryan investigated and found out. Traveling alone with him is irritating, but that's how it has to be."

I see. Mia's prophecies couldn't show us all the information we wanted whenever we wanted it. We'd probably have to find some pieces through slow, steady investigation.

"With strength like yours, I doubt I need to worry, but please come home safe," I joked, and Ms. Fuubi grimaced.

"Good God, don't set me up for trouble like that."

Frankly, that grimace was really beginning to grow on me…but I'd keep that to myself.

"Charlie, are you okay with this?"

Did she mind me going with her again? Was Charlie even going to go see Kozue? Last time she'd decided to do that, she'd needed nearly two weeks to prepare, but now— "Yes, I'll go." Although Charlie had been silent up till now, her expression was resolute. Her emerald eyes were so sharp they seemed to pierce the cloudy sky. "I give you my word—I'll collect the map from Kozue Arisaka. That's my mission, and my will."

◆ My beloved child

After that, we spent three hours in a car driven by a Man in Black.

"This is it, huh?"

Having reached an enormous apartment complex, Charlie and I glanced at the long rows of buildings. This was where Kozue Arisaka was living.

It was past five in the afternoon, and the sun was setting as we walked through the gloomy complex.

"Are you nervous?" I asked Charlie. She hadn't said much for a while.

"Putting everything into words like that is pretty tactless."

…Actually, yeah, it probably was.

However, that response gave me my answer.

"It's still better than last time. I'm here for work now, so I won't hesitate."

Her personal situation had been the stronger element last time; that was true. This time, though, we had to retrieve the map. Charlie wasn't the type of person who'd leave a job unfinished.

"Charlie, you're right that it's not great to put absolutely everything into words. Let me just say this, though." As I spoke, I was remembering my phone call with Rill and what it had made me think. "I don't know how you see me, or Natsunagi, or Saikawa, or Noches. At the very least, though, we consider you a friend."

If she didn't like the word "friend," she could pick another one. Either way…

"No matter who you clash with, what makes you unsure, or where you go from here on out, we'll be on your side."

From this point on, everything was just a guess.

I suspected Charlotte had been searching for something to rely on all this time.

She couldn't have a normal family relationship with her military parents, and she'd said she'd been with various organizations since she'd left home. Then she'd found someone she could call "teacher" for the first time in Siesta, but Siesta's death had torn that relationship asunder. Now she'd reached Fuubi Kase, and she spent all her time constantly carrying out missions.

In other words, I thought Charlie might have been searching for the right to follow in someone's footsteps.

She couldn't turn to her blood family. In that case, could Natsunagi and Saikawa and Noches stand in for them, at least? It didn't have to be me. If her trusted companions could become what she relied on— She didn't respond, and I looked back with concern. Charlie had stopped in her tracks, seeming a little startled. I'd charged too far ahead on my own, huh?

"Sorry. I shouldn't have stuck my oar in like that."

"That habit you've got of apologizing right away must be Ma'am's doing." Charlie's expression softened. "You know, you might be a

pretty good guy.” She caught up to me, her footsteps light, and went right on past.

“What, you’re just now figuring that out?”

“And there you go, getting full of yourself again. Subtract twenty affection points.”

“Out of how many?”

“Who knows? In my life to date, I’ve never spent even a second thinking about you.”

“…I bet us not getting along is one hundred percent your fault, isn’t it?”

Charlie turned around, grinning a little bashfully. “Oh, very well. Starting now, I’ll think about you for three seconds a day or so.”

I was going to say *Just three seconds isn’t fair*, but I thought better of it. If that had helped Charlie relax a little, things were probably fine this way.

When we reached the farthest building on the north side, we went to the innermost apartment on the third floor. That one was Kozue Arisaka’s. Looking at the doorbell, Charlie sucked in a deep breath, then exhaled heavily.

Silence fell for a few seconds.

“Want me to ring it?”

“No, I’m fine.”

Charlie pressed the doorbell. There was no response.

She waited a bit, then tried again. No answer.

A third try. After a little while, we heard a faint sound.

Before she could ring the bell a fourth time, the rusty door slowly opened.

“……”

A haggard woman stood in the entryway. Her clothes were shabby, and she wasn’t wearing any makeup. Her short hair was a dull shade of blond.

“It’s been a long time,” Charlie said. “Do you recognize me? I’m Charlotte.”

Kozue's vacant eyes widened slightly as she realized she was looking at her own daughter.

"I'll be nineteen this year."

How many years had it actually been since they'd seen each other? What had happened when they'd last parted from each other? I'd never heard. However, their connection had apparently been so tenuous that her own daughter needed to remind her of her age.

What would Kozue say during a reunion like this? I didn't really belong here, and all I could do was wait silently.

"—What are you here to do?"

Kozue's voice was cold, and those weren't words someone should say to a daughter she hadn't seen in years. I glanced to the side. Charlie's expression hadn't changed a bit.

"There was something I wanted to ask you." For now, Charlie stifled her personal feelings and got to work. "Do you still have the map to the Akashic records?"

Immediately, an abrupt change came over Kozue. "I know nothing! I don't know, I don't know, I don't know! There's no way I'd know about that…!" Emerald eyes wide, she clutched at her head and shrieked. "Why?! Why you, Charlotte?! Why, why?! How?! Are you planning to torture me, too?! *Why would even you come to steal that?!*"

She clearly wasn't normal. What was making her like this?

Before I could think about it, though, Kozue moved. Her arm reached for Charlie's neck.

"That's enough." I caught the woman's wrist. It was so thin it didn't seem as if it could belong to a former service member.

"Kimizuka." Charlie shook her head slightly. Her smile looked lonely. "It's all right. I'll take care of the rest."

"Oh, but… That's true. Yes, that's fine." Kozue looked down, muttering something. Then her eyes went to Charlie. "If you want that map so badly, I'll give it to you, Charlotte."

"……! Really?" Charlie asked.

For the first time, Kozue smiled. “In exchange, bring that child here.”

“That child?” Charlie frowned, then realized what she meant. Her eyes widened.

“Yes. Bring Noah here.”

I felt the air freeze.

“Okay? That’s all right, isn’t it? I’ll give you the key to the safe where the map is first, so bring him to me after that. Bring me Noah. All right?” Kozue caught Charlie by the shoulders and shook her. “You will, won’t you? You can, right? You’re his big sister, so you’ll be able to bring him here. Won’t you? Won’t you?!”

“……!” Charlie’s lips were trembling.

I could tell just from looking that Kozue was asking for something Charlie couldn’t do. In other words, this “Noah” was already— “All right.” Before I could break in again, Charlie spoke. “I’ll bring Noah here. Tell me where the map is.”

◆ The code that leads to slaughter

Back in the car driven by the Man in Black, Charlie and I headed to a certain underground facility.

After we’d walked down a sealed-off tunnel for a while, we found a ladder that took us even deeper underground, to a place Kozue had once used as a hideout. Long ago, during her days as an agent, she’d used this place as a secret base when she was working in Japan.

There were old maps and photos of people on the walls, and she’d left her computer and other equipment all over the place. When we opened the locker, we found a gun and ammunition lying within, as

if it just belonged there. It was clear this place had been pretty illegal.

We kept searching the base until we finally found a safe. It was so dusty it appeared there was no one else in the world who remembered it.

"There. This is probably it." Taking out the key she'd gotten from Kozue, Charlie gazed at the safe.

There was a piece of the map to the Akashic records in there. I texted Ms. Fuubi and Natsunagi to let them know we'd achieved our objective.

When I looked up from my phone, Charlie was sitting in front of the safe. She hadn't unlocked it yet. The tension seemed to have drained out of her all at once. There was no need to rush, though. I sat down cross-legged on the floor, leaving enough space for a couple of people between us.

"Why are you intentionally putting space between us?"

"I seem to recall getting scolded for doing the exact opposite thing before."

"It's okay this time."

I couldn't hear a single outside noise in this gloomy underground space.

A few minutes later, Charlie broke the silence. "I lied. When I told her I'd bring Noah to her."

She was talking about the promise she'd made to Kozue.

"Noah's your little brother's name, isn't it?"

I'd heard about him just a little while ago. Charlie had said he'd been born with a weak constitution.

"Yes. My little brother, and the most precious thing in the world to Kozue. He doesn't exist anymore, though. Noah went to heaven seven years ago."

"…I thought that might be the case."

"His illness got worse. Kozue was overseas then… She rushed back home, but she didn't make it in time. She was devastated. For a few days, she didn't even eat or sleep; she just cried. All I could do was

watch over her from nearby. Not too close." Charlie hugged her knees. "She didn't say anything to me. It would have been easier if she'd yelled. *Why wasn't it you instead of Noah?* or something like that. It happens a lot, you know? People vent their anger in ways that aren't fair. I wanted to get yelled at, but she didn't say a word." Charlie gazed up at the ceiling. "That was the last I saw of her. At some point, she left the house, and I wasn't able to contact her. My father had always kept a certain distance between himself and the rest of us, so that was the end of my family. People from an organization that had a connection to my parents took me in, and I started to live as an agent."

I'd never known this part of Charlie's background.

That was why Charlotte Arisaka Anderson had started to live for her missions and nothing else. They were the only direction she'd had in life.

"So Kozue is still trapped in that time seven years ago."

"Yes. I think I wasn't able to meet her earlier because I didn't want to see her that way."

I recalled how haggard Kozue had been when we'd met her an hour ago.

Did she understand that her son was dead? Was she so emotionally traumatized that she couldn't even process that? … Frankly, she'd seemed so abnormal I suspected there might be some other reason at play.

"I'm the worst, aren't I? Tricking her, lying that I'd bring Noah, just so I could retrieve the map. Using my mission as an excuse. I haven't changed."

Acting on Siesta's instructions, Noches had once freed Charlie from the spell of her mission, but now she was relapsing. Her awareness of this left her conflicted.

"I'm not so sure… If things would have circled back around to that no matter what, I don't think you really need to call it a bad thing."

I hadn't managed to get my words in order, but I said them anyway. Charlie, who was hugging her knees, reacted slightly.

"If you come to the conclusion that living through your missions is how you live, period, no matter how many times you feel unsure about it, then that's fine. I think the important part is stopping to think."

Maybe that was what Siesta had meant as well. The important thing was her will: the fact that she chose to live like this, instead of feeling compelled to.

Even if it ended up being the same as her original answer, it wouldn't be a mistake. It would be a route she'd chosen for herself, even if she'd taken the long way to get there.

"Really?" Charlie raised her head, but her eyes were wavering uneasily. "Prioritizing my mission, even if it means betraying my mom and using my dead brother? Would you people accept me as part of your circle if I did all that?"

"—Hang on a second, Charlie."

"I even tried to attack Yui for the sake of a mission, way back when. If I choose to live just for my mission again, I'm sure I'll…!" Charlie's voice was a pathetic shriek.

She was scared. If she decided how she should live on her own, and no one understood that ideal, what would she do?

"Charlie, that's…" I couldn't seem to get my thoughts in order. I had to tell her something, though. Words were what Charlie needed right now. Natsunagi wasn't here, so what could I say in her place?

"—Oh, you poor thing. Even though you've always worked so hard in the service of your ideals."

Someone else spoke.

Charlie and I started to our feet, looking around warily.

"Maybe no one else knows about your efforts, but I do. I know your ideals. I also know what's making you suffer right now."

Moving to the center of the room, Charlie and I stood back-to-back and drew our guns. We'd found these down here and borrowed them.

"If only Kozue Arisaka weren't here. If it weren't for her, you wouldn't have to hesitate. —What do you say? I could help you stop

hurting.”

I blinked, and in that moment, he appeared right in front of Charlie.

It was a man in a suit and top hat, *with his face wrapped in bandages*.

“I have a way for you to break the shackles on your ideals.”

The man held out a hand to Charlie.

When I saw that—no, by the time I saw it, I’d already maneuvered into the guy’s blind spot.

My instincts, all the cells in my body, were screaming.

I didn’t need to show this guy mercy. With no hesitation, I fired at his head.

“Charlotte Arisaka Anderson. Let me grant you the code of slaughter.”

The bullet didn’t hit him.

He’d dodged. Actually, it was more like he’d teleported. By the time I fired, the bandaged man was already somewhere completely different.

“Charlie!”

The blond agent was standing there stunned, her eyes wide.

She couldn’t already be—

“—! Abel!” I yelled.

Abel A. Schoenberg.

The world’s worst criminal had just appeared.

◆ Seed of evil

“Charlie, snap out of it!”

Charlie collapsed as suddenly as if she’d passed out, and I hastily caught her.

"—It's fine. I'll handle the rest." I lowered her to the floor, then gently took the key to the safe from her. Straightening up, I spoke to the man with the bandaged face. "Are you the Phantom Thief?"

"Indeed I am."

He didn't seem surprised. His voice was even as he gave me his real name.

"My name is Abel Arsene Schoenberg. I'm one of the twelve Tuners—the Phantom Thief."

Finally. We'd met again. How long had it been—a year?

When I'd faced off against him with Siesta, he'd taken over the identity of Fritz Stewart the Revolutionary…and apparently he wasn't planning to show his face this time, either.

"Arsene—or Abel. What did you do to Charlie?"

I hadn't seen it. However, Abel's hand had definitely eaten away at her. He'd said he was giving her his code of slaughter…

"I haven't done a thing. If anyone does anything, it will be her."

"…You're saying your 'code of slaughter' is going to make Charlie kill Kozue Arisaka?"

Abel's Neverland Project always dragged in children and parents from unhappy homes. Recently, he'd been using it as a cover to kill people who had maps to the Akashic records. —Kozue and her daughter fit this pattern perfectly.

"I simply gave her a little encouragement. In the depths of her heart, she hates her mother; I simply took that tiny seed and lit a spark. *I lent a hand to someone in need.* It's the same job you do, detective's assistant."

"Shut up…!" I almost fired again, but I stopped myself before I squeezed the trigger. There was something I still needed to ask this guy. "Answer me. What is the Neverland Project, anyway? Why are you making children kill their parents?"

"This world is riddled with mistakes. I want to convert it to a better one," Abel responded immediately. "War, violence, poverty, all the sins to which the human race has turned a blind eye—it's too late to atone for all those things. At the very least, though, I will judge those who approved of that world. Everyone who's died as a result of the Neverland Project fits that profile."

My brain was refusing to understand. However, a few meters away, Abel began to walk as he impassively described his ideals.

"In that way, I'll gradually convert the world. My experiments in eliminating evil will continue."

When Siesta and I had confronted him a year ago, he'd said he was experimenting by ordering others to commit senseless crimes. However, what he'd actually been after was— "How do you decide what crime someone's committed? And why drag in people who aren't involved?"

"What are you talking about? No man is without sin." His voice was so cold it practically froze me in my tracks. "However, as one would expect, those experiments don't go well every time. It looks as if the girl hasn't completely accepted my code."

Abel's voice had returned to normal, and his bandaged head was turned this way. He seemed to be looking at Charlie. Was she fighting Abel's code in her subconscious mind?

"Tell me one more thing. The Akashic records." I still had one big question. Why was Abel trying to collect the map to the records? "Do you know what they really are?"

Silence fell for a few seconds.

"I want you to understand my plan, so I will tell you just a little. The Akashic records are not, at the very least, the blueprints for a weapon of mass destruction or classified information from all over the world. *They're nothing so tame.* However," Abel went on, "if they're brought into the light of day, the world will turn upside down. And I want to see it happen."

Oh, I see. Even if I didn't know exactly what the records were, Abel's objective was clear: As the Phantom Thief, he was going to

steal the Akashic records—and turn all phenomena and cause-and-effect relationships inside out.

"What do you intend to do with that knowledge?"

"Stop you, of course."

I did fire this time, but the bullet cut through empty space.

Abel had moved several meters ahead, without the slightest sign that he was going to.

"If that isn't teleportation, is it like what Scarlet had?"

Was he using an invention like the Vampire's wings? Or was it…?

"Why would you stop me?"

The next thing I knew, Abel was closing in on me from behind. I hastily fired, but the shot missed.

What was this? What was he doing to me?

"State your reason. Why are you standing in my way?" Abel had materialized at a distance again. "You aren't a Tuner. Why are you trying to obstruct my plan?"

"—You took the words right out of my mouth. You're a Tuner; why are you plotting to turn the world upside down?"

You should be on the side of justice, so why…?

"You already know of a case in which justice did evil." Abel's tone was eerily soft. "Recall the Vampire Rebellion that you and your detective just resolved. What sort of incident was that? What kind of global crisis?"

"Well, um…"

Scarlet, who should technically have been a hero, had led a horde of undead in a rebellion against the Federation Government for the sake of his own wish. He'd fallen to evil.

"Therein lies the reason we are called 'Tuners.' The twelve of us sometimes divide ourselves between justice and evil to preserve the balance. We tune it. When the world has begun to tilt too far toward peace, some of the Tuners turn evil. That is how the world works," Abel said mildly. "The Ace Detective you're so familiar with should have done so as well, technically. I'm sure you know what I'm referring to."

It had happened a year ago, after we'd defeated Seed. The seed in Siesta's heart had sprouted, threatening to turn her into a monster. She'd seen it coming and tried to make herself disappear; we'd stopped her, and here we all were. However, technically…

"I see. So all the Tuners become enemies of the world someday?"

It was an absolute, universal rule laid down by the world.

"The Federation Government understands that. As a result, even Bruno Belmondo, the all-knowing king, will someday reign over this world as a great evil."

That's ridiculous. Then Natsunagi, too? And Mia, and Rill, someday?

"Impossible."

I wouldn't let it happen. I'd stop it. Me. The guy cast as the Singularity.

"……!"

Just then, a chill ran through me.

Abel's face was hidden by those bandages, but I could have sworn he'd smiled.

"You really are like me."

What about us was the same?

"Like me, you've been defined as something that's outside the world."

Enough. I didn't want to hear what this guy had to say. I'd be the one to stop Abel, and I'd do it right here.

Hit him, I prayed as I fired, and the bullet punched through his left shoulder.

"I see. Is that how it is?" Abel raised a hand to his wound, murmuring something. "So this is the Singularity's program, hm?"

"…What are you talking about?"

Just then, I heard several sets of running footsteps.

"Kimizuka!" Natsunagi dashed in.

She'd probably come because I'd texted to say we were collecting the map. When she took in the scene, her eyes widened in realization.

One other person had arrived, too.

"—Abel!"

Someone else had picked up on everything and started sprinting toward Abel. It was Ookami, the Enforcer, wielding an enormous sickle. "If you created the Seven Deadly Sins, I'll pass judgment on you with this!"

Ookami swung his weapon, bent on avenging his old friend's death.

"Abel A. Schoenberg, *you can't take a single step from that spot*!"

Natsunagi activated her word-soul.

Abel stood stock-still in the path of Ookami's raised sickle.

In the next moment, the fight was settled.

"……!"

The one who fell was Ookami.

The sickle that had buried countless villains slipped out of his hand. Of course it did—*his right arm had just been cut off at the shoulder*.

"Ookami…!"

I didn't know how it had happened, but it was clear who was responsible.

The next thing I knew, the culprit was standing right in front of me.

"It looks as if it's been removed already, but there are traces of an evil seed inside you. I'll pick up the loose end of that story here and turn it into a program that won't fail."

I couldn't move. Abel held his black-gloved hand in front of my face.

"I grant you the code of loss."

Abruptly, darkness filled my vision. I rapidly began losing my sight, my hearing, my taste—all five of my senses. I probably wasn't still

on my feet, but I hadn't felt my knees buckle under me, nor any pain as I hit the concrete.

"……N…no." I couldn't hear my own words.

Even so, I was dimly aware that things couldn't stay like this. I knew. Long ago, I'd been in this same state, and I remembered the regret I'd felt.

"…If nothing…changes…Natsunagi…will…"

Our companion had collapsed. I'd blacked out. Left on her own, the detective—Natsunagi—would confront a great evil. It was just like that day.

When she'd faced Seed alone, Natsunagi had fought desperately, and as a result—

"It's all right."

Just for a moment, I thought I saw a red light in the darkness.

"It's going to be all right."

I couldn't hear her voice.

I had the feeling that Natsunagi had left some sort of message for me, though.

"I'll keep that promise. I won't let anyone take anything important from me."

The last thing I sensed before falling into a deep sleep was the proud Ace Detective's will.

◇ The agent's wail

When I got up and looked around, I saw a familiar, nostalgic view.

"Is this my room?"

It wasn't the place where I lived now, though. It was the house where I'd lived as a child. I remembered that small bed and the ceiling light. What was I doing here?

My memories were shaky. Why was I wearing pajamas? Had I been sleeping here? What had I been doing before I came here?

"I have to find…"

Find what? Who? I didn't know. I had to look, though.

I dashed out of the room, went downstairs, and walked through the whole house. It was silent. Wasn't anyone here? That couldn't be right. After all, that boy couldn't go outside by himself.

"That's right—where's Noah?"

I was pretty sure his room was…

I went back upstairs, shouting "Noah!" I opened the door of the room next to the one I'd just left, but the only thing in there was an empty bed.

"Noah's not here. Hey, Noah's gone!" I yelled as I searched.

Silently calling *Mom!* in my heart, I opened every door in the house.

Had there always been this many doors? Had the stairs always been this long? *Something isn't right*, I thought, and then I came to a room that was bigger than the others.

"—Why?"

When I opened the door, Kozue Arisaka was lying in the center of that white room, covered in blood.

This was weird. This couldn't be right. Why? Why, why, why?!

"Who would do this?!" I shouted, but there was a bloody kitchen knife in my hand.

No, that was wrong. That couldn't happen. It was wrong. Wrong, wrong, wrong!

"I didn't do it! I didn't wish for this!"

The knife slipped out of my fingers, falling to the floor with a clatter.

This wasn't what I wanted. *It wasn't my will.* I didn't hate Kozue Arisaka.

"I just wanted you to—!"

I woke up before I could finish screaming.

I was lying in a hospital bed, gushing sweat.

Was that a dream?

I clenched my hands, then opened them. Naturally, there was no knife. I hadn't killed Kozue. I shuddered with relief, but right after that, I remembered what had happened.

"Abel."

Right. I'd gone to see Kozue with Kimizuka, and while we were retrieving the map, Abel had attacked. Then he'd given me the "code of slaughter," and I'd blacked out…

"What happened after that?"

There was an electronic calendar on the shelf near the bed. Two days had passed since then. Something had begun and ended before I knew it was happening.

What had happened to Kimizuka? He didn't try to take on Abel by himself after I'd passed out, did he? —There was no way he could've won.

"Ghk! Where is he?"

There was an IV stuck in my arm. I yanked it out and dashed out of the hospital room. My body felt heavy, but now wasn't the time to complain about things like that. I had to find Kimizuka.

I went out into the hall and scanned the area. It seemed deserted. I'd seen this place before, though. I'd been here lots of times—to visit Ma'am. In that case, just maybe…

"It's the same in dreams and reality. All I do is look for people." Holding the handrail, I made my way down the corridor, climbed the stairs, and finally reached the room at the back of the third floor. When I opened the door, there he was, on the bed by the window.

"…Geez. Don't worry me like that."

Kimizuka was sitting up, gazing out the window.

Feeling the adrenaline drain out of me, I approached the bed. Then I saw that his face was as blank as a doll's.

"Kimi…zuka?"

He was expressionless. He only seemed to be looking out the window; he wasn't actually seeing anything. Maybe it was his eyes

or maybe it was his complexion, but I couldn't sense any awareness in him at all.

"H-hey. Come on, what's the matter?" I realized I was shaking him.

There was no response. It was as if he couldn't hear me or even sense that I was there. "What is this?"

Who was this? Was this a dream, too? …No—no, it wasn't. This time, it was reality.

Then what in the world had happened to Kimizuka?

"Charlie!" somebody called.

The door to the room was open, and a girl was standing in the doorway.

"Nagisa?"

It was the black-haired detective. Out of breath, her red eyes wide, she came over to me. She flung her arms around me and hugged me as hard as she could.

"…That hurts."

"Shut up!"

…Huh? I was perplexed, but I held still and waited. Nagisa was sniffling.

"Were we actually this close?" Close enough that she'd worry and cry over me like this.

"Frankly, I'm surprised, too. I guess I like you more than I thought I did." Finally letting go, Nagisa looked at me and smiled a little. "I'm glad you're okay, Charlie."

"Thanks." But there was somebody here who wasn't okay. "Nagisa, would you tell me what happened?"

Nagisa's expression clouded. Hesitating a little, she told me about Kimizuka's condition.

"If you tried talking to him, then you already know he doesn't respond. He isn't seeing anything, and he can't hear. He won't talk, either. It's as if he's lost all his senses."

We were talking right next to him, but Kimizuka just sat there, his face blank.

Long ago, he'd swallowed a seed that had belonged to Chameleon, a SPES executive. The seed was said to cause nearly universal side effects in humans that ingested it, and Kimizuka had steeled himself to pay the price someday. Could this be—?

"It isn't necessarily just because of the seed," Nagisa explained, as if she'd picked up on what I was thinking. "That doctor, Drachma, did an examination and found that only traces of the seed were left. Drachma doubted they could have triggered symptoms this severe. The only possibility he could think of was that someone might have forcibly expanded those traces."

"—It can't be. Was it Abel's code?" I asked.

Nagisa nodded, her expression hard. "Both Ookami and I went to the site that day. By the time we got there, you were unconscious and Kimizuka was facing Abel by himself."

Then she filled me in on the rest.

The fact that Kimizuka had shot Abel. That she and the Enforcer had worked with him and struck additional blows. That the Enforcer had been badly wounded, and that Abel's code had rendered Kimizuka unconscious.

"After that, it was just me facing off against Abel… I steeled myself for combat, but Abel didn't even try to fight me. He disappeared almost immediately, through a door."

"A door?"

"Yes, *a door that appeared out of nowhere*. The moment Abel walked through it, the door disappeared, too."

…When the enemy was this much of an enigma, even a stunt like that wasn't surprising.

From what I'd heard, they hadn't managed to defeat Abel. Either he'd left because he'd done enough of what he'd come to do, or he'd been forced to temporarily withdraw.

It would be a problem if he never showed himself again, though. We had to get some information out of him. Specifically, how to turn Kimizuka back to normal.

"This is boring," I griped. Kimizuka was still staring vaguely out the window. "Did you forget what you're usually like? You always had a comeback for everything I said. If I hit you, you'd hit back and then say something about gender equality." *You probably don't even know the phrase "Ladies first," do you?* "You always made fun of me. You made it my fault we didn't get along. Oh, I know. I bet you hated me, didn't you?" *That makes us even, then. From the first time I met you… No, even before that, I completely loathed you.*

"Charlie…" Nagisa set a gentle hand on my back. "That's right; that's fine. You can hate each other."

Even if we'd pretended to get along for Ma'am's sake, it had just been an act. It was impossible to get along with some people, no matter what. *That was you and me, wasn't it?*

"And yet, why…?"

The things he'd said and done just the other day skimmed through my mind.

"Sometimes he's weirdly considerate, and he says what I want to hear, and he eats sandwiches for me."

Seriously, what's with you, anyway?

"You hate me, right? Then don't yank me around like this."

Let me keep hating you.

"Answer me."

Without thinking, I grabbed his collar.

The guy I loathed didn't respond.

◇ The story from here on out…

After parting from Charlie in Kimizuka's hospital room, I went to the roof. This was where Scarlet the Vampire had gone on his rampage some time ago, but by now, it had been neatly repaired.

"There you are." Up on the roof, I found the person I'd been searching for. "I've been looking for you, Ookami."

He was my proxy assistant, but now he was also the Enforcer—one of the Tuners.

He was wearing hospital pajamas and standing near the edge of the roof, gazing into the distance.

"You've got it rough, ace detective. All these people to pay sick visits to." Ookami turned back, as mildly sarcastic as ever. His attitude was a bit of a relief, but no matter what I did, I couldn't ignore what was different about him. Ookami's right shoulder was wrapped in bandages, and the rest of his arm was gone.

"The enemy was the Phantom Thief. Stealing my arm must have been a cakewalk for him."





His arm had been taken by Abel Arsene Schoenberg. None of us knew how he did it. But the enemy clearly had power beyond human comprehension.

"What did Drachma say?"

"At the very least, it won't be possible to reattach the severed arm, so the best move is to wait for Dr. Stephen the Inventor to provide a prosthetic limb."

…Oh, of course. Right now, Stephen was fully occupied with Siesta's surgery and treatment. Until that was settled, Ookami's arm wouldn't be…

"I'm very sorry." For some reason, Ookami bowed to me. "I can't be your right arm anymore."

"—! That's not…" I shook my head. "Ookami, you're not my proxy assistant now. You're the Enforcer, a fine hero in your own right—remember?"

Just as I'd once graduated from being a proxy detective and become the Ace Detective.

"I see. I hadn't thought of that." Ookami's eyes widened slightly. "Well, personally, I did like being your assistant, too."

I hadn't been expecting that remark. He smiled just a little.

"Ookami. It's not nice to con younger women like that."

"Ah, excuse me. I really doubt you'd give your heart to me this late in the game, though. Deep down, you've already settled on someone else," he told me.

"…Wh-who would that be?" I asked.

"Who knows?" he said, and I knew he was playing dumb. "I'm watching over you two, though. That's my role."

"Watching over us is your role…?" What was that supposed to mean?

Instead of answering, Ookami narrowed his eyes as he spotted something behind me. "It looks like someone else has an apology for you."

When I turned, a woman in a suit was standing there.

She looked me in the eye. "I'm ashamed of myself for not being there when it really mattered."

It was the Assassin, Fuubi Kase. As a rule, she never brought up her own errors or mistakes, but I saw deep regret in her face.

"No, it's nothing you need to apologize for. Even the Oracle couldn't predict Abel's sudden attack."

That didn't mean this was Mia's fault, of course.

Her clairvoyance had always been unstable. She'd still contributed more than enough to shutting down the Neverland Project.

"Besides, you were in Europe to retrieve a piece of the map. You really couldn't help this."

"…Yeah. But I'm sorry anyway." Ms. Fuubi averted her eyes. She was acting more evasive than I'd ever seen her.

Since she knew what had happened to Kimizuka and Ookami, she probably couldn't just tell herself that none of the blame was hers. More than anything, capturing Abel had originally been the Assassin's mission.

"And? Where is Ryan White?" Ookami asked.

We knew that Ryan and Ms. Fuubi had been traveling together for the past few days.

"He disappeared when the report of Abel's attack came in. All he left was a note saying `*Thank you for all your help*.'"

"Don't tell me. Is he…?"

"He's probably planning to settle this by himself. I bet he'll use the map data we collected to lure Abel to him—although I don't know how he'll negotiate after that."

Irritably, Ms. Fuubi started to reach for her cigarettes, but then stopped.

"You mean now that he's seen Abel's strength, he's trying to protect us?"

"He's always been that type. He doesn't tell you any of the really important stuff, and he quietly takes all the pain-in-the-butt jobs himself. He isn't even consciously trying to look cool; it's just a bad habit."

"Isn't there any way to find him? What about the Men in Black?"

"Yeah, they're working on it. For some reason, though, they still haven't managed to find any intel."

Silence fell under a frustratingly clear sky.

"I thought this was going to be the time, too." I clenched my fists, knowing it was pointless. This time, I'd meant to protect everything. But the enemy hadn't even tried to fight. He hadn't even looked at me.

"As enemies go, Abel's just that tough," Ms. Fuubi said, sticking up for me. Abel was overwhelmingly powerful. That meant I couldn't have expected to win… But she might as well have been saying the Ace Detective was below the Phantom Thief. She hadn't acknowledged me as the real thing yet.

"We can't let things stay like this, though."

I'd once tried to sacrifice myself to save a girl. I hadn't felt any hesitation; I'd only been sending my life back where it came from. But she'd saved me first, and then I'd told myself it was my turn.

A boy had said that was wrong, though. He said he couldn't call that a happy ending, so he'd chosen to continue the adventure. Even after I awakened, our search for the one route where everyone would be saved had continued.

I'd wanted to stay with him—because we were friends. Business partners. Classmates. Because he was my assistant. And also… No. I'd just wanted to grant his wish, as the Ace Detective this time.

…But this was the result.

"Well, true. The guys are looking too cool."

The unexpected murmur made me look up.

With a white cigarette between her teeth, the redheaded police officer glowered up at the blue sky. "A great evil attacked. Ookami challenged it in battle and lost his arm, and that damn brat risked his life, too. Now Ryan White's gone to settle the score with it by himself."

She was right. Me, Charlie, Ms. Fuubi—we'd all ended up being protected. The boys had taken all the losses, while we'd…

"That's why, Nagisa Natsunagi…"

Her crimson hair streamed in the wind.

Her expression was filled with determination. Fuubi Kase's will was creating an aura that could engulf any justice, and even evil.

"From this point on, it's our turn."

◇ The Assassin's apprentice

A week later, I left Japan for London.

"…Dammit."

I'd called Ryan White from a certain facility, but he hadn't picked up today, either. *Don't screw with me*, I thought, but that was a garden-variety parting shot. I leaned back in the metal folding chair.

He was definitely trying to make contact with Abel by himself. He was trying to take on all the burdens alone, like always. Cool as you please, without talking it over with anyone.

"I've always hated that side of him."

"Immaculate justice" was just the pure-white surface. He wasn't like that beneath.

On the inside was a churning, black morass of self-sacrifice.

"That's why his face ended up like that."

After we'd gone our separate ways, I hadn't seen Ryan for over a decade. However, during that time, I'd seen his face once in the media.

That face was different.

I don't mean someone else was impersonating him, or that he'd had plastic surgery or anything. It was just his expression. It wasn't the one I'd always seen at close range on my childhood friend. His smile and his tone hadn't changed, but they'd all looked fake.

It had been at a press conference a few days after Ryan had captured a terrorist in a certain country, shutting down a military coup d'état before it happened. What pitch-black sacrifice had Ryan White made in order to get immaculate justice that time?

"I didn't know it was okay to play with those things in the visitation room." The door opened and a woman came in, accompanied by a prison guard.

She was young, with green hair. With an accusing glance at the smartphone in my hand, she sat down on the other side of the acrylic barrier.

"It's been a while," I said.

The woman's jade-colored eyes widened slightly. "…You remembered?"

"I thought I'd heard your voice somewhere before."

Mind you, if she hadn't been wearing that ugly mask, I would have known her right away.

"I mean, that mask basically screamed my code name."

"Ha! I guess it did, huh, Goat?"

We exchanged thin smiles. "Goat" was the code name of the goat-masked individual from the human trafficking organization we'd caught in London last month. She was my former apprentice.

"I never thought you'd come to visit me."

"Well, people worry about their clumsy students."

How many years had it been since I'd taken her on as an apprentice…and ultimately labeled her a failure?

"You recruited strays like me and said you'd train us to be outstanding agents, but you were all talk. Even during training, everything you said was nonsense. In the end, most of us were abandoned."

As she reminisced, Goat scowled, warping the burn scar on her cheek. Come to think of it, she'd always used to cover her face with a muffler to hide it.

"'Abandoned'? That's quite a statement. Don't blame your lack of ability on someone else."

"Is this another of your sermons?" Goat gave a nihilistic smile. Yeah, I remember she used to make that expression sometimes. "Well, if you want to make fun of me, go right ahead. After failing to become an agent, I ended up in a criminal organization that does

human trafficking. That's falling pretty far," she said. She didn't seem to think much of herself.

"Don't you have your own kind of justice?"

She'd said as much during our fight earlier anyway.

"……"

Goat didn't answer. After letting the silence stretch for a bit, she said, "And? Why are you really here?"

She'd asked me a question instead of responding to mine: Why had I come all the way to a foreign prison to visit a former student?

"I know you're not that noble. You offer yourself up for the sake of the world every day; you'd never be concerned about someone like me."

She had an absolute lack of faith in me. That was only natural.

I'd never even considered forming a relationship of trust with Goat or any of the agents I'd instructed. I hadn't told them who I actually was, or anything about my past.

That was fine, though. We didn't need compromises. That wasn't why I'd tried to train them.

"I have a question for you," I said.

Goat was completely right, so I brought up my main reason for coming here.

"Who actually ordered you to snatch Kimihiko Kimizuka that day?"

Goat's expression didn't change. It was less of a poker face and more as if she'd been prepared for that question.

"My job was arranging and conducting the sale of people. We kidnapped him for a client who wanted him. Isn't that enough of an answer?"

"Yeah, I bet this side of the world's lousy with people who want that kid. Even then, though, *the timing was way too perfect*."

It was like a cleverly plotted story.

Kimihiko Kimizuka had been brought to London by a summons from the Federation Government, which was plotting to capture Abel. After learning about that, Charlotte Arisaka Anderson had sold

him to traffickers on the condition that they tell her where her missing mother was.

But Ryan and I had also been in London to arrest Abel, and we'd rescued Kimizuka, who had then started working with our group. Even though Kimizuka and Charlotte were like oil and water, he was concerned about her, and when he'd learned that Kozue Arisaka and Abel were connected, he'd gotten even more deeply involved.

He'd continued to help us shut down Abel's criminal project—until he had an encounter with Abel, and the code of loss turned him into a living corpse.

…But what if all of this was part of Abel's plan? What if it had been a plot to trap the Singularity? Thinking back, the original Neverland Project had been the sort of incident Kimizuka was likely to fixate on. That would have been enough to get him stirred up before he even noticed.

"The scenario needed to be as natural as possible," Goat said softly. "The script had to feel unforced so that Kimihiko Kimizuka wouldn't pick up on it. He'd reunite with a companion he didn't get along with; they'd get closer to each other in their attempt to fulfill a common goal, but in the process, they'd encounter a great evil and meet with a frustrating defeat. The crime I had to implement was extremely natural."

I didn't even have to ask why she'd do something so roundabout. There was no telling how much Goat understood, but I knew one thing: With Kimihiko Kimizuka, you had to go that far.

He'd never allow a failed story. His Singularity power wouldn't let him. The moment his subconscious determined the route he was traveling down was unreasonable or unfair, the power of the Singularity activated. *It used the word "miracle" to paint over all unfairness and inconsistencies, and make it so they'd never been.*

"Was Abel afraid of that?"

Was that why he'd used Goat to pull Kimizuka into this well-planned story? To get the potential threat of the Singularity out of the picture naturally?

"Why did you go along with Abel's plan? Wasn't there justice in your evil as well?"

It wasn't just Kimizuka. He'd manipulated Charlotte, too, by making use of Kozue. What sort of justice had there been in that?

"Justice? No, there isn't any." Pressing a hand to her burn-scarred face, Goat smiled weakly. "In the face of true evil, justice wavers like nobody's business."

When I'd heard her out, I got up. I had the information I'd come for. My job was done.

"Goat."

That meant anything that came after this would just be nonsense. Turning my back on her, I spoke without expecting a response.

"If you get sick of evil, come see me."

I'd take responsibility for my apprentice's misconduct, at least.

◇ The Ace Detective's fate

That day, I was taking a walk in a park near the hospital with Kimizuka. That was enough to let you sense that autumn was in the air. The leaves had started to turn red, and the angle of the sunlight, the feel of the air, and the songs of the insects all spoke to the change in seasons.

"Huh? It really has to be too early for the leaves to turn, though, doesn't it?"

Maybe there was some unexplained weather weirdness going on, aside from global warming.

"Hey, couldn't your power do something about that, Kimizuka? It could be a global crisis, you know."

Kidding. I'd turned my question into a bit of a joke, but Kimizuka didn't answer. As he sat in the wheelchair, his vacant, emotionless eyes just gazed straight ahead.

"…So even taking you out for a walk doesn't change anything."

It had been a week since Abel's attack had left Kimizuka like this.

His condition hadn't changed. According to Drachma, there was no way to treat it. All we could do was give him nutrients through an IV and move his body on a regular basis so that his muscles wouldn't cramp up and get stiff. His situation was similar to Siesta's.

"Kimizuka, do you know what day it is? October tenth. That's Charlie's birthday."

It really should have been a fun day. I'd wanted to throw a party, the way we'd done for Yui's birthday the year before. With things as they were, though… I hadn't been able to get a hold of Charlie lately anyway. Everyone just disappeared without checking in with me first.

"Come to think of it, we haven't celebrated my birthday properly, either."

According to Kimizuka, he hadn't given me a present because he hadn't been able to decide what to get me. In the end, all we'd done was go out to eat together. I'd been really looking forward to that present, too…

"Later on, when everything's over. Okay?"

Once things were genuinely peaceful, I'd get everyone together for real this time. We'd do it after Siesta woke up, so it would really be all of us.

"Oh, I've got a message from Mia."

Pushing the wheelchair over to a nearby bench, I opened the messaging app on my smartphone. Two windows promptly appeared, showing Mia and one other person.

"Yaugh, Rill's here, too…"

"Excuse me? 'Yaugh'? Mia, you're getting too full of yourself."

The pair started fighting as soon as the chat began. *I swear, these two…* "Mia. Rill. Cut it out," I scolded, sighing.

…Wait a second. When it was the three of us, was I the one who had to keep us on track?

"Now that we're actually all here, this is kind of a strange combination."

Me, Mia, and Rill. The Ace Detective, the Oracle, and the Magical Girl. Somehow, it was the first time we three Tuners had talked

together in private.

"You're the one who suggested this, you know." Rill glared at me.

Well, yes, that's true. But when it's just me, I don't really know what to do. "You two fight, but you're actually pretty close, aren't you?"

""Uh, no, we're definitely not.""

The two of them waved their hands in perfect sync, denying it.

Their looks and personalities were total opposites, but they made a weirdly good team. I knew exactly who had made them both face forward and build this relationship, too.

"……"

My words suddenly deserted me.

Mia broached the topic, although she seemed to have a hard time doing it. *"Um, is Kimihiko still the same?"*

"…Yeah. He's next to me right now." That was why I'd reached out to them; I wanted to talk about this.

"What happened to Rill's regular contact? What's the point of being the same as Rill?" Rill looked down at her feet. She knew better than anyone the frustration of having legs that wouldn't work.

"When it's really important, this ability never saves the people I care about." Mia bit her lip. She hadn't managed to save her parents or Siesta, and those experiences had left their scars.

For a little while, silence fell.

"This won't do. We didn't get together so we could be depressed." Rill shook her head hard. Then she smacked her own cheeks sharply, and by the time she faced the camera again, there was no sadness in her expression. *"Nagisa. You call Kimihiko,"* Rill said. She told me to talk to him a lot. To keep calling him again and again, so that he wouldn't get lost. So that he'd find his way back home.

"He might not be able to hear, though…"

"It's still fine. After all, your words reach more than people's ears. They reach into people's cells, all through their bodies. That's not a sentimental argument; Rill's actually experienced it. Long ago, Rill

was alive half through the power of science, and it even worked on her. There's no mistake."

Rill gazed at me kindly. I thought she was probably talking about the time she'd fought Gluttony the Supernatural.

"I have something to say, too. You said you called yourself a proxy detective, long ago. You may feel as if you don't have enough power to be a detective now, either, but there has to be something only you can do." Mia laid a hand on her chest. *"I'm not just trying to encourage you. As the Oracle, I know more than anyone about past global crises. At the same time, I know the many special roles past Ace Detectives have played. The achievements of those men and women have become a sort of fate, and they've all gathered in you. That is how you detectives are designed,"* Mia said, speaking more firmly and insistently than I'd ever heard her speak.

"…I see. Is that right?"

There was a soft warmth in Rill and Mia's words.

Oh no. I felt myself tearing up a little. Still, I was sure any girl who cried at a time like this couldn't be a protagonist or a heroine, or a real Ace Detective.

"Thanks."

So for now, all I did was tell them thank you.

That, and one other thing.

"Someday, let's all get together and have a girls' night!"

Mia and Rill stared at me for a moment, and then they laughed. *"Um, what??"*

The Ace Detective, the Oracle, and the Magical Girl.

That might actually be a pretty good combination.

When I pushed the wheelchair back to the hospital, I found someone unexpected in Kimizuka's room.

"Huh? Yui?!"

Her outfit had an autumnal look to it, and she was just setting some pretty flowers by the window.

I'd thought she was on tour, but…

"Eh-heh-heh. I slipped out for a bit. It's been a long time, Nagisa." Yui greeted me with her usual smile, and then she lowered her eyes slightly, speaking to Kimizuka in his wheelchair. "You too, Kimizuka. We haven't seen each other in a while."

There was no response, of course. Yui gave a rather lonely smile. I'd told her about Kimizuka's condition earlier.

"There's never a moment when we're all in good shape, is there? I wonder why."

"…Seriously."

This wasn't a new thing for us.

For example, Siesta and I had hardly ever been around at the same time, and now that her surgery was finally happening, Kimizuka had ended up like this. Even Yui had been battling aphonia, a serious illness, a few months ago.

"When that's the case, though, the ones who are in good shape just have to do their best."

That was the responsibility of those of us who remained.

"I wonder what Siesta would do."

I wasn't comparing the two of us, as Mia had said, but…still, was there something I could use for reference, at least? Siesta had spent more time with Kimizuka, after all. I couldn't beat her when it came to the number of memories they shared.

Rill had told me to talk to Kimizuka a lot. To keep speaking to him so that he'd make it back. What sort of things would Siesta have said? What sort of guideposts would she have given him?

"I'm not sure you absolutely need to use Siesta as a reference." Coming closer, Yui gazed up at me. Her eyes were gentle. "You're the one who's here now, Nagisa. The important thing is what you say to him, and what you tell him."

"Uh-huh. But I do think he'd be more likely to listen to Siesta. Doesn't it seem like Kimizuka would do anything that girl told him?"

"Ah-ha-ha. Well, um, yes. Kimizuka's crazy about Siesta, after all. I'll state that categorically in his place."

"…Kimizuka, if you don't get back here fast, Yui's going to say whatever she wants about you."

The two of us laughed together, just a little.

"Still, Kimizuka thinks so much of you, Nagisa. You really shouldn't discount that." Yui gently took my hand. "You two were my saviors. A year ago, as the detective and her assistant, you and Kimizuka saved me. I'm proud to have been your first client. And so this time, I have another favor to ask of you, detective."

Then my client, Yui Saikawa, placed her request.

"Nagisa. Please save Kimizuka."



Intermission of a certain dream

When I came to, Siesta was right in front of me, drinking tea.

"—What is this?"

I squeezed my hands, then opened them a few times. They were definitely my hands, and this was my body.

I looked around. The place made me think of the garden of a castle, or maybe an open café somewhere out in nature. Siesta was lifting a teacup to her lips as calmly as if she'd been there all along, and I found myself staring at her, stunned.

"What's the matter? You look as startled as a detective's assistant who just got blasted with a shotgun." Just like always—the way she always used to—Siesta coolly tilted her head.

"The expression you're looking for is 'a pigeon who's been hit by a popgun.' If you blasted somebody with a shotgun, they'd be way more than 'surprised.'"

"You have the devil's own luck, so I think you might manage to survive."

"Don't drag people into your nasty games of chicken," I shot back, and Siesta's expression suddenly softened.

There was no mistake. This was the Ace Detective I'd spent three years traveling with.

"It's been a long time, huh?"

"Are you stupid, Kimi?"

"Not fair…"

All I'd done was say something to celebrate our reunion, and here she was calling me names.

That said, I did get the feeling that was a very Siesta thing to do.

"This isn't necessarily reality, you know." Using a rather vague expression, Siesta undercut my hopes.

"Is it a dream, then?"

"I don't know. But I've spoken with Nagisa and Hel here, too."

Oh, was that what she meant? This was where Siesta had spoken with the other two, using her heart as the medium. An imagined landscape—or maybe an illusory daydream.

"But how did I get here?"

In a way, Natsunagi and Hel had shared a body with Siesta through that heart. I'd assumed that was why they'd been able to talk like this.

"That's a good question. I can think of several possibilities. One is that it's because I'm undergoing heart surgery right now. I couldn't say specifically how, but that may have expanded this space."

…Huh. Did that mean the surgery was going well, or that she was really struggling? It was pretty hard to tell from the situation.

"The second possibility is that you've gotten inside me somehow."

For a moment, my brain froze up.

Me, inside Siesta?

What? What was that supposed to mean? Had anything like that ever happened? Was she talking about a dream or a delusion? That really wouldn't count, would it? As my thoughts spun uselessly in circles, Siesta said, "You know, during that incident with Scarlet the other day. I don't have a clear memory of it, but I'm pretty sure *I drank your blood*."

"…Is that what you meant?"

When Scarlet had partially turned Siesta into a vampire, she'd bitten me on the neck and taken some blood. When she had, my genes had gotten mixed up with hers.

"Honestly, Kimi. You do some really reckless things." Siesta gave me a troubled smile. Still, if that was what was letting me talk to her like this, a little blood was a cheap price to pay.

"And the biggest reason you're here is that you're in danger in the real world, and your consciousness has grown extremely thin." Siesta's straightforward blue eyes gazed at me. "Do you remember why that happened?"

"…Yeah, it's been coming back to me as we've been talking."

I remembered who I'd fought with, and who'd made me like this. But how many hours—or days—had passed since then? What was happening in the outside world now?

"How can I get back to normal?" I asked Siesta, who was technically in charge of this space. I was sure everybody else was still fighting in the world on the other side.

"It's important to have someone call you, I think." Sipping her tea, Siesta advised me. "Then, when that someone drives in a wedge, use it as your guide and go in that direction. Even if it rains, even through the dark, walk toward that ray of light."

Was there anyone who'd do that for me?

"Of course, even then, it won't work if you don't throw your will behind it. Think about how you want to live, and where you want to go. Say, Assistant? What do you want to do tomorrow?"

"I…"

I posed that question to my own heart. What did I want? What path was I trying to take?

…I probably had the answers already. All I'd needed was the resolve. The determination to see things through to the end, even if my own ideals or someone else's fell apart, unfulfilled.

"This is pretty rough."

"That's what shouldering something is like."

Had it been this way for Siesta, too, back then? When she'd lived as the Ace Detective, carrying a story as its protagonist?

"Well, I had someone with me who shouldered half of it." Returning her cup to its saucer, Siesta glanced at me. "Half… No,

thirty percent… Actually, maybe about twelve and a half?”

“I’m gonna hear that I’m off the team any second now,” I retorted, and the corners of Siesta’s lips curved up slightly as if she’d been waiting for that. “Why did you make me your assistant if that was the case?”

“Heh-heh. That’s a good question.” Siesta smiled, as if she were remembering something fondly. “I really don’t know.” She looked up at the blue sky in the daydream.

A little while after that, I got up from my chair. It was about time I woke up.

“You’re going already?”

“Yeah. I kind of hate to do it, though.”

This might end up being a bit of a journey. There was no guarantee I wouldn’t end up regretting it and wishing I’d continued my tea party with Siesta.

However, as she’d said, the important thing was my will. I’d start walking, believing that light would someday shine into the darkness beyond this place.

“You could at least have some tea before you go,” Siesta said behind me.

I stopped in my tracks. “Were you the one who didn’t want this to end?”

“…Are you stupid, Kimi?”

That was the second time she’d used her signature phrase today, and it was significantly weaker this time.

“I swear I’ll bring you back, too. Wait just a little longer.” If someone needed to drive in a wedge for her from the other side, I’d take that job. “So hang on to this tea. Don’t drink it until then.”

Siesta’s eyes widened a little with surprise, and then she smiled.

“Yes— I’ll be waiting, just like last year.”



Chapter 4

◇ Side Charlotte I

On that day, I was visiting the Mizoev Federation's embassy in Japan.

It had been three weeks since Abel's attack, the day Kimizuka had collapsed.

I'd cut contact with everyone who'd been involved, made various preparations, and now here I was. This place also served as a point of contact with the Federation Government.

"You're Lot?" I'd been shown into a large hall, and the big screen installed there showed a high-level government official.

"I am indeed."

Code name "Lot."

Partly because he was wearing the usual mask, he looked sort of generic, like a doll. He seemed to be a man in his forties or fifties, but I couldn't really tell him apart from Doberman, Odin, or the other officials I'd tried to contact before.

Even so, this man was special. Lot was the only one who'd shown interest in my *proposal*, and he had arranged for this meeting. The Federation Government wasn't necessarily a monolith.

"Charlotte Arisaka Anderson. Is it true you'd like to turn yourself in?*"* Lot asked. He sounded slightly suspicious.

"Yes, it's true. We've been collecting the pieces of the map to the Akashic records without permission from the government. I admit to that crime."

Even if we'd done it to stop Abel, we'd been acting on our own initiative. We'd known the Federation Government didn't want people snooping around the Akashic records.

"If you don't believe me, I'll send you this as well." I sent him a record of our movements over the past few months from my phone. Naturally, it had details on who had retrieved pieces of the map, when they'd done it, and from where.

"I see. This is very well-organized." Lot raised his masked face. *"But why have you sold out your companions?"*

Exactly: Confessing to this meant betraying the friends who'd acted with me as well. —However… "Didn't you know? I even sold the Singularity to a human trafficking group." There was something I had to do, even if it meant getting my hands dirty. "That said, there's a reason I'm selling out the Ace Detective and the Assassin: I want to make a deal. Take me to the Akashic records."

Abel would appear there. He'd steal all the pieces of the map, and he was bound to show up.

I'd be the one to stop him.

"Why are you assuming that role?"

"Because of something my mother, Kozue Arisaka, said to me. She asked why 'even I' would come to steal the map. In other words, Abel must have made contact with her before then."

I'd heard that Kozue had cornered Abel during a long-ago job as an agent, but it had actually been the other way around. In his hunt for the map, Abel had been pursuing her.

Since Noah had died, I'd been prepared for Kozue to be emotionally unstable, but what I'd seen earlier had been strange. Kozue Arisaka was abnormally frightened of Abel.

In that case…

"I'll defeat Abel in her place." I'd destroy the cause of Kozue's suffering with my own two hands. "That's another reason I want to know where the Akashic records are. Tell me."

I wasn't interested in their contents.

As long as I could reach their location, that was all I needed.

"Aren't you doing things in the wrong order, then? If you wanted to strike a deal, you shouldn't have handed over the data immediately."

"Mm, true. That was only a tool to get you to hear me out." In other words, the real negotiation started now. "If you people refuse to make a deal with me, *I can kill Kimihiko Kimizuka at any time*. You wouldn't want that, would you? If something happened to the Singularity, there's no telling how the world would react."

I didn't know the details of his nature as the Singularity. Ma'am had never gone out of her way to talk about it. However, anyone who belonged to this particular world would have heard about it, whether they wanted to or not.

Sorry, but I'm going to use that peculiarity of yours. The detective, the idol, the Oracle, the Magical Girl… I could do things none of them could do. I could act like a friend, get close to him without raising any suspicions, and then—

"I see. However, is the Singularity in any state to use his ability at present?" Calmly, Lot attempted a rebuttal. *"The 'code' Abel conferred on that young man has taken his five senses, his faculty of speech, and his ability to think. He's in a living death, as it were. Could he really exercise the power of the Singularity?"*

"…So you're saying that if I did try to kill Kimizuka, nothing would happen?"

"Yes. Your trump card isn't a functional threat. Once he fell captive to the code of loss, the outcome was already decided."

It sounded almost like a declaration of victory.

"I see. This is pretty convenient for you people, then. Actually, it's like that's what you were after all along."

It had always been a mystery to me: Why hadn't the Federation Government admitted that Phantom Thief Arsene's real identity was Abel A. Schoenberg, the world's worst criminal?

And after committing a crime as grave as stealing the sacred text, why had the Phantom Thief only been confined deep underground instead of executed? Why had he been secretly pardoned after that?

There could only be one reason.

"A faction of the Federation Government—the one that wanted to eliminate the Singularity quickly—has been collaborating with the

Phantom Thief this whole time."

There was a possibility that Abel's special codes could be used to disable the Singularity. As a result, they'd overlooked the Phantom Thief's misdeeds to a certain degree.

"You called all the Tuners and Kimizuka to England on the pretext of a Federal Council, then issued instructions to capture Abel. Was that all for this? Was the goal to get Kimizuka involved with Abel to ultimately give him the code of loss?"

Lot said nothing. That meant *yes*.

"Was threatening to kill the Singularity if we didn't strike a deal with you a bluff, to draw out this information?" Lot murmured. He'd caught on.

"Yes, I've learned a bit about this style of negotiation."

Well, in the worst-case scenario, that move was actually part of Plan D or so. I mean, come on. No matter what I did, Kimizuka probably wouldn't die, you know?

"I've recorded our conversation, and the data's being saved to the cloud in real time. Even if you make me disappear, that information isn't going anywhere, and someone will catch on to your plan."

"And what if they do?"

"That's obvious. The Singularity won't let you get away with it."

"You claim he'd avenge you after he's overcome the code of loss? You put quite a lot of trust in him." For the first time, Lot laughed a little.

"Trust? It's nothing like that."

Our relationship wasn't the sort of thing a five-letter word could express. It was darker, uglier, more fragile and warped. Something that went way beyond being reluctantly stuck with each other.

Even so, that meddling guy wouldn't abandon me. He wouldn't stand by and watch me die. That meant the opposite was also true.

"I'll be the one to kill Kimizuka's enemies."

Even if they're Federation Government bureaucrats like you people.

"……I see," Lot said briefly. Silence fell for a few moments. *"We are going to take you to a certain place. However, we will lock your memories until that point."*

"Lock? What do you mean?"

"You will forget everything you are about to see, hear, and feel. That's all. Nothing more will happen to you."

That was vague. However, from the way the man spoke, it was clear what lay on the other side of this.

"That's fine. Take me to the Akashic records."

"Yes, I'll grant permission."

Now I'd finally be able to go to war. I squeezed my hands into fists very, very tightly.

"Listen, Lot?" Before I headed to that battlefield, though, I asked a question that had been bothering me a little. "Have we met somewhere before?"

"……"

The masked bureaucrat was as silent as a doll.

◇ Side Fuubi I

On that day, I was in a certain South American country.

It had been two weeks since I'd visited Goat in London. During that time, I'd flown all over the world looking for a certain someone, and had finally ended up as far from the Japanese archipelago as it was possible to get.

Late at night, I visited an underground bar. I was frisked at the entrance and had to hand over my electronic devices before they let me pass. At the end of the bar counter, an old gentleman was drinking a glass of whiskey.

"I had no idea this place would be linked to a casino," I said, taking a seat beside him.

Bruno Belmondo, the Information Broker. Since I'd been absent from the previous Federal Council, I hadn't seen him in quite a while, especially not one-on-one.

"Ha-ha. Hideaways need to be interesting, you know." With an easy laugh, Bruno set his glass down. "And? Did you win enough at roulette?"

"…Of course not. I didn't come here to play."

The Information Broker lived an extremely upright life, but he was unexpectedly fond of jokes.

I wanted to have a glass of something, but I decided to start with a smoke. As I brought the lighter to my cigarette, savoring the brief release from stress, I felt eyes on me from the next seat over. "Was this place nonsmoking?"

"Oh, no. You had a good look on your face."

"That's a new one. All everybody else does is tell me to quit."

"Ha-ha. No doubt they're concerned for your health."

…I didn't think any of my relationships were close enough to warrant concern like that.

"Now then, you said you had something to ask me?" Turning to face forward, Bruno got down to business.

As a matter of fact, there were about a million things I wanted to ask him: where Ryan was now, how Abel's codes worked, what the Akashic records really were…

People said the Information Broker was all-knowing, but how much did he actually know? Even if he did know all those things, though, I had no way to get the information out of him. The Information Broker never shared his knowledge without a reason.

"Could we chat a bit?" In the end, I couldn't get my thoughts together, and I decided to bring up a certain topic first.

"That's fine. Even at my age, talking with a young woman is quite enjoyable." With a lighthearted line that was a little hard to respond to, Bruno took another drink of his whiskey.

"As the all-knowing king, what do you think 'a world where justice was realized' would be like?" It was a presumptuous question to ask when I was the one who'd proposed a chat. As usual, it wasn't as if I had an answer for it myself.

"Is that why you were training all those agent candidates, too?" Bruno answered me with another question, from an angle I hadn't been expecting. "Because you wanted to know what 'justice' was? In order to collect lots of answers, you recruited brilliant candidate agents and tried to train them yourself."

I didn't confirm or deny that.

The one sure thing was that, so far, not a single candidate had gotten a passing grade.

"Perhaps that's also why you're paying particular attention to the girl Ace Detective and the boy Singularity?"

"…I don't think I've given them any special treatment." Finishing my cigarette, I picked up the glass of brandy that had been set in front of me, raising it to my lips without swirling it.

"If justice were realized in the world, what sort of world would it be…? I'm merely the Information Broker; I may have data, but I can't produce that answer." Bruno seemed to be continuing the thought experiment for me. "Would a hypothesis do instead?"

"Yes, of course." I knew of a position that would prove it in our place.

"A world where mankind is freed from war, violence, and poverty. Either that, or a world where one can hope for such liberation. A world where everyone is capable of harboring those hopes—even faint ones, when the present isn't necessarily happy—would be just, and ideal."

Using only simple words that everyone in the world, from children to old people, could understand as long as they were translated, Bruno gave his theory on "a world where justice was realized."

"Does that strike you as a utopia that could never come to pass?"

"No. Anything humans can imagine, humans can make real. An author said as much once."

"Yes, that's right. As I thought, in every age, *the Creator*—" At that point, Bruno fell silent. Then he turned to face me. "Do what you think is best." He gazed at me with kind, steady eyes. "There's no need to worry. No matter what kind of path you travel or what sort of justice you strive for, I promise I'll watch over you to the end." Just as he had at our first meeting more than a decade ago, Bruno gently held out a hand to me. "That is my responsibility as the one who drew you into the Tuners."

I started to take his hand, then pulled back; it wasn't time for that yet.

"Are you going already?"

"Yes. I've got one other person to check with about breaking out of the current situation."

That said, my connection to that person wasn't all that strong. It wasn't clear how well this plan would go.

"I see. In that case, I'll put in a word with her as well."

…Apparently Bruno already knew who I was planning to meet. *Why would he go that far for me?* As if he understood even that doubt of mine, Bruno went on.

"Ha-ha. Oh, it's nothing to be concerned about. It's just a private investment in the future."

◇ Side Charlotte II

The next thing I knew, I was standing in a tranquil space that seemed like the interior of a ruin.

"—Where is this?"

I didn't recognize the place at all. It was dim, and just a little chilly.

If I had to say, it was a little like a dungeon in a game. My clothes were the same as when I'd visited the Mizoev Federation embassy, and I had all the same things with me.

How much time—how many days—had passed since that conversation with Lot?

We'd finished our discussion, I'd left the embassy, then gotten into a car the government had sent for me. I remembered that much. But after that…

"They locked my memories?" The government official had said something like that. Had they drugged me? "That doesn't matter now, though." Just getting here was enough.

And so I started walking. Even though I didn't know where what I was looking for was.

The dungeon was a real labyrinth.

"Here again…?"

I didn't know how many hours had passed since I'd started walking, and here I was, back at the same place for the zillionth time. I felt disgusted.

True, I was a little bit bad with directions—just a little—but still. Even then, this ruin was abnormal.

I'd find a door and climb all the way up a flight of hundreds and hundreds of stairs, only to come out at the exact same spot I'd just left. Meanwhile, simply opening a door put me in a dense jungle.

Where on earth was this? What was this place? It was almost as if some unseen power was at work, actively preventing me from reaching the spot where "that" was.

"It can't be."

I recalled something Kimizuka had told me a little while back: At the end of last year, he'd fought an enemy known as Pandemonium alongside the Magical Girl, and it had started when a being known as Parasite had trapped him in a never-ending stairwell at the hospital.

In the end, the cause was Kimizuka's gloomy feelings about Ma'am. He hadn't wanted to leave the hospital where she slept, and those intense unconscious emotions had influenced the situation.

That seemed a whole lot like what I was experiencing now.

"Do I subconsciously not want to move forward?"

Was that why I kept going around in circles?

There was no way Parasite was here, of course, but what if there was another monster like that? Or was there some sort of mechanism that did the same thing?

"I can't possibly not want to go forward."

I wasn't scared. Not of the Akashic records, not of Abel A. Schoenberg, not of Kozue Arisaka. I wasn't scared of anything. — And so…

"To the battlefield. Hurry."

I closed my eyes, clasped my hands in front of my chest, and prayed hard.

In the next moment, the air changed. *It can't have happened all at once like that*, I thought and opened my eyes.

I found myself looking at an open, empty landscape that was completely different from the place where I'd just been.

"What on earth is this?"

The sky was divided between two colors: day and night. It was split into a blue half and a starry half, right down the middle.

A gust of wind blew. I was standing in a large, circular field; there were no walls around me, no ceiling, nothing. It was as if this space was floating, isolated, high in the sky.

About twenty meters away, on the edge of this cleared stage, an enormous white monument shaped like an inverted pyramid hung in midair. A figure stood under it.

"—Abel."

His back was to me, but I didn't need to see his face to know.

"You're not all bandaged up today, are you?"

When I'd gotten about ten meters closer to him, Abel turned around.

He was probably in his thirties. He seemed to be Asian—Japanese—and his eyes were striking. They were impossibly clear, yet I couldn't read any emotion in them.

"So you're the one who came, hm?" Abel said. Guess he'd anticipated that someone would show up here.

"What are you doing here?" I could have asked where we were, but the question already seemed pointless.

"Analyzing the Akashic records." Abel looked up at the pyramid-shaped monument. "The System that protects them is strict, you see. Even with my codes, it takes time to get in."

…System? What System? Was he talking about that white monument? If so, were the Akashic records buried inside it?

"Do you know what the Akashic records actually are?"

"Yes, I know. I also know how important they are. —And? Are you here to stop me?" he asked, as if he'd read my mind.

I promptly responded with a question of my own. "Do you remember Kozue Arisaka?" Abel's eyes narrowed slightly. "Long ago, you tried to take the map to the Akashic records from her by force. Isn't that right?"

That was what had caused Kozue's fear of Abel, and what had broken her mind. That had to be it.

"Take it by force? There's no way I'd have trouble stealing a single map."

"—Then why…?!"

"I'm not what Kozue Arisaka's scared of. It's the Akashic records themselves."

For a moment, I stopped breathing. Kozue knew what the Akashic records actually were?

"I'd imagine her job gave her opportunities to find out unintentionally, and unexpectedly. However, that Pandora's secret really isn't something one person could carry alone. Kozue was crushed by that massive cross… Even if her memories of the thing itself no longer existed."

Just then, the upside-down pyramid glowed lavender, and I somehow knew Abel's analysis had made progress.

"A moment ago, you said stealing a map wouldn't have given you any trouble. In that case, why didn't you do any of this sooner?" Even as I spoke, I was putting my thoughts in order. Why had the enemy chosen to make his move now? It had to be because he'd

been making preparations of some kind earlier. Once those were in place, he would act.

In terms of extraordinary things Abel had done recently—

"You stole the key to analyzing the Akashic records from Kimizuka."

The key. All I'd done was use a word I'd heard recently which seemed to fit. He'd probably stolen something like that from Kimizuka, though. He hadn't "made him lose" anything; he'd taken it.

All along, Abel had been putting together a detailed plan to steal Kimizuka.

"I won't let you have your way any longer." I leveled my gun at him. It was the only weapon I'd brought in.

"What are you trying to accomplish, hm? As I said, I had very little to do with your mother. Is this rooted in your sense of justice? Will you stop me because I'm trying to turn the world upside down?"

"Yes, that's part of it. First, though—fix Kimizuka!"

With no hesitation, I pulled the trigger. I knew I wouldn't be able to hit Abel, so I fired a bullet at the enormous monument which held the Akashic records.

"That was a bad decision."

The bullet ricocheted off something I couldn't see.

"The System uses a defensive program to guard the Akashic records. A common weapon like that won't do a thing."

"…Program? Don't tell me this place is…"

"Go on, make your wish. You must want strength. The strength to bring about absolute justice."

A moment later, *I realized I was holding a musket*. That weapon was the greatest symbol of strength I knew.

"That's right. System programs operate with particular intensity here. By writing additions to our code, we can output anything we want."

"But I don't have an ability like—"

"No, you and your group have it as well. The powers of your wills are equivalent to my codes."

…I see. When I'd been shut inside this labyrinth, wishing hard had brought me here. My will had done that. Then was this place really…?

"Don't you think it's a splendid world? Here, all our ideals become reality."

Abel looked at me. No…behind me.

Someone was there. Leveling the musket, I turned back.

"—Why…are you…?"

The world was silent. The only sound in it was the unsettling beat of my heart.

◇ Side Fuubi II

Maybe the guy had sensed me: Although he was still several meters ahead, he hastily turned around.

"It can't be that surprising," I said casually.

His eyes were very wide.

"I swear, charging off on your own like that… What are you trying to pull, Ryan White?"

We faced each other in a place that looked like a ruin, or an old temple.

It was the first time we'd seen each other in the three weeks since Ryan had taken off after Abel and disappeared.

"…I wish you could have let me look cool."

"Ha! What, you were actually aware of it this time?"

As we bantered, we started walking, keeping a few paces' distance between us. A long corridor ran through the gloomy ruin.

"So, Ryan. What are you doing here?" It was a perfectly natural question. After all, this was no ordinary place. *It was the sacred ground where the Akashic records were sealed.*

"I came to stop Abel, of course," Ryan said easily. "I spent more than three weeks analyzing the map data. We hadn't collected all of it, so parsing it took time, but…I finally pinpointed this place."

"Analyzing and parsing, huh? So you were trying to beat Abel here."

"Yes, that's right… But never mind that—how did *you* get here?" Ryan stopped in his tracks, turning suspicious eyes on me.

It was simple, though.

"I didn't start collecting the map because of the Neverland Project. I'd been secretly gathering its data for several years now."

"What do you mean? Are you saying you realized what Abel was after several years ago?"

No, Abel had nothing to do with it. I knew he was dangerous back then, too, but I'd had my sights set on something bigger. "I needed the Akashic records to move up the ladder."

I hadn't cared about their contents. I'd wanted to secure my position by making them mine, or at least by gaining the right to access them. A position that would let me deal with the Federation Government on equal terms. "By helping your group collect pieces of the map, I finally ended up with almost all the data I needed, including pieces I hadn't been able to get with own abilities and connections."

"…I see. Ha-ha. So you were using us all, hm? I swear, you're as tricky as ever." Ryan gave a wry smile, as if to say I'd gotten him good. "But how specifically did you parse the map?" he asked, starting to walk again. The Akashic records were somewhere in this ruin, but we still had to find them.

"The one who found the ruin was the Revolutionary. You met her yourself, in America."

"…Her, hm? Actually, I made her an accomplice and convinced her to turn a blind eye by giving her a copy of the map data that time. I

see—so you two were also…”

Youkaki the Revolutionary. The woman generally kept her beauty veiled; she used it to win over important figures in every country. She knew all there was to know about the world map.

However, the Akashic records had been the only Pandora’s box there was for her as well.

I’d shared the data that led to the records with her, aligning our interests, and she had found this sacred ground for me. Needless to say, the all-knowing king had been our go-between.

“Still, this place is a maze. The goal’s nowhere in sight.”

“Yes. There has to be a room where the Akashic records are housed somewhere, but…” As he walked, Ryan looked around with a hint of confusion. It felt as if we’d been walking in circles for a while now.

“It’s late to point this out, but this is a weird feeling. I never thought we’d be searching for the same troublemaker together, Ryan.”

“Ha-ha! You said it. You’d protect the world from the shadows, I’d protect it from the surface. We spent more than ten years doing that. Who’d have believed our paths would cross here?”

Right. It had been a decade or so since the Information Broker had gotten me this job. After that, the Federation Government had given me the position of “Assassin.” Since I’d resolved to protect the world from its underbelly, it should have been the ideal job for me.

“I hear you’ve had a really rough time.”

“I was prepared for that.”

My job as the Assassin was to kill one innocent person to save many. Ending one life for the sake of a hundred was my mission.

“Long ago, in a certain small country, there was a young politician with lofty ideals. They hated lies and money, and they loved only the truth and human feeling. On finding proof that leading political figures were engaged in corruption that involved the entire government, the politician resolved to denounce them to the populace.”

One day, the Federation Government had given me a mission.

They'd told me to assassinate that young politician.

"The current Oracle had made a prophecy: If the corruption in that country were exposed, large-scale riots would break out, and the nation would collapse in the name of justice."

And so I'd killed that blameless politician with pure ideals. I'd done it before the fighting which was sure to break out could take tens of thousands of lives.

"Every day, I felt like I was faced with the trolley problem."

"I knew it. Fuubi, you also…" Ryan's eyes widened, but then he seemed to come to a decision. "In that case, let's change the world, you and I."

Suddenly, a large door appeared behind him.

Ryan didn't seem caught off guard. He just stepped through the door, and I followed.

An endless wasteland spread out before us.

Had we gone outside? When I turned around, the door wasn't there.

"Come on, we really are close this time. The Akashic records are right over there." Ryan looked up.

The sky was split between two colors, as if someone had separated it into day and night.

"You look happy, Ryan," I said behind him, and Ryan went still. "You look like you want to reach the Akashic records fast on a personal level. As if it's got nothing to do with Abel."

"…You sound like you've got something to say. Let's hear it. I like it when you talk," Ryan joked, with his back still to me.

I hit him with the theory that had been smoldering in my mind all this time.

"Ryan White. You're working with Abel, aren't you?"

Silence. In that case, I tacked on another theory. “We were collecting pieces of the map to the Akashic records to shut down the Neverland Project. You were the one who first proposed that, Ryan. However, that was probably on Abel’s instructions. You used the Ace Detective and the Singularity’s power to retrieve pieces of the map efficiently, then gave them to Abel.”

In other words, Ryan hadn’t vanished because he was trying to lure Abel to him with the map as bait. He’d just run off with the map and attempted to make contact with Abel.

“You said you’d analyzed the data and somehow pinpointed the location of this ruin, but the truth is much simpler: Abel just brought you here.”

Although, for some reason, it seemed he hadn’t met the guy in person yet.

“What makes you think that?” Ryan asked finally. “Fuubi, if you’re a police officer, too, I wish you’d speak a little more logically.”

“It’ll be easier to understand if we assume this is all one story.” I’d guessed that the recent series of incidents had been a plot on Abel’s part to neutralize the Singularity, then obtain the Akashic records, and I’d been partly right. That hadn’t been all, though. “His plans—his stories—always have players. Like Goat, for example. But players aren’t enough to progress his grand plan as smoothly as he wants. For that, he needed one more thing: a game master.”

The game master was the man in military uniform who had his back to me right now: Ryan White.

“You assembled the players for Abel’s plan: the Oracle, the Ace Detective, the Assassin, the Enforcer, the Singularity, and the Agent. Then you set the Phantom Thief as the mastermind we had to defeat and manipulated us like pawns.”

He’d given his players the mission of retrieving the map in which the world’s secret was hidden, and we’d flown all around the world in our version of a real-life role-playing game. We’d had no clue that we were being controlled by the mastermind and his right-hand man.

"When did you start thinking that way?"

"The first thing that made me suspicious was the timing of Abel's attack."

It had happened when Ryan had taken me with him to Europe. He'd said there was a map that only I would be able to retrieve. But while I was gone, Abel had tagged Kimizuka with the code of loss.

"I bet you were afraid that I'd make contact with Abel. You were worried there was a slim chance I'd save Kimizuka."

That was why he'd made sure I was nowhere nearby when Abel was gearing up to attack. Although Abel didn't usually participate in the stories he planned, he'd needed to appear this time to render the Singularity powerless. At that point, a small rip—a sense that something was off—had appeared in the plan.

"I see. That all hangs together. You have no proof, though."

"True. That's probably why even mystery novels treat the police as incompetents." Ryan's argument was sound, and I wasn't above making a dig at my own expense. —But then I laughed it off. "We don't need that anymore, do we?"

Ryan's shoulders seemed to jump a bit.

"You and me—we don't need those things. Answer me, Ryan. What were you planning to accomplish by teaming up with Abel?"

Ryan still had his back to me, and I aimed my gun at him.

"Let me follow your example and tell you an old story." Calmly, Ryan began to speak. "The top brass at Interpol learned that there was a possibility of a military coup d'état in a certain developing country, and they sent me over there as a commanding officer. I'll spare you the details, but after an infiltration and investigation that lasted several months, we succeeded in capturing every last executive in the terrorist organization."

I couldn't remember when that had happened, but that was the incident when I'd first seen Ryan in the media. The time they'd started celebrating him as "immaculate justice," and his face had changed—

"The administrators of that country praised me as well; they said it was truly magnificent work. I knew I was interfering, but after handing the terrorists over, I told them I wanted them to be sure to clarify the terrorists' motives, then punish them in accordance with the law. The administrators smiled and nodded."

That did sound like something Ryan would say. It had been like that during the incident with Goat, too. He'd said himself that judging evil with the law instead of power was his motto.

"The next day, they guillotined all the terrorists. Every last one of them, publicly."

Ryan was still turned away from me, and I couldn't see his face. I still knew what expression he was wearing, though.

"They did nothing to clarify their motives. They didn't put the knowledge to work in their government. On the contrary, after that aborted terror incident, the government grew more oppressive, and the law grew stricter. The definition of what counted as treason was broadened, and they began mercilessly executing those who resisted the government even slightly. Before I knew what I was doing, I'd sacrificed the nation's citizens to preserve its justice."

As Ryan murmured those words, I could see his sadness in the pure white of his uniformed back.

"That was the day I started thinking. How could I save people instead of nations? How could I protect them with justice? —I needed the Akashic records."

Ryan turned around. He wasn't angry. He wasn't smiling, but his eyes were filled with his conviction. "World War III nearly broke out over the Akashic records once, but the Tuners' hard work ended it almost as soon as it began. I'm going to cause another war over those records. But the war I start will be fully controlled. I'll use it to determine which nations should survive. You see, Fuubi—I want to redraw national boundaries." This time, Ryan did smile.

"…So you teamed up with Abel because your interests were aligned?"

"That's right. Abel's codes can be used to take control of human hearts. I'll create countries with leaders who sympathize with my ideas. That will connect to the 'world inversion' Abel wants. There are areas in which we can cooperate."

Impossible. That man had steered all sorts of crimes from the shadows; we couldn't possibly join forces with him. It would desecrate the concept of justice.

"No matter how great your cause is, there's no way it's okay to set off an international war."

"Fuubi, you've got the wrong idea. I'm not an enemy of the world." Ryan took a step closer to me. "Just as the young Oracle wasn't able to predict Abel's attack, I've never been in the sacred text. Not even once. That's proof that the world doesn't consider me evil. —I'm no enemy. I won't hurt anyone. I promise this war will have no casualties. And so…" Ryan held his right hand out to me.

"Come join us, Fuubi."

◇ Side Charlotte III

Sensing a presence, I turned around, then saw who was standing there. For a few seconds, I forgot to breathe.

"Why…are you…?"

The only sound was my heart. It was beating so loudly I thought it might burst.

Finally, the newcomer broke the silence.

"Charlotte, what on earth is the matter? You look like you're going to cry."

Kozue Arisaka. My mother was standing there, apparently mystified.

"Oh, I know. You had a nightmare, didn't you? Come on, then; come here. I'll read you a picture book."

As if she were soothing a young, fretful child, Kozue gave me a soft smile and spread her arms wide.

"Mom?" I walked toward her. Then, just before those arms embraced me…

"—! Enough of your sick jokes!"

Whirling around, I fired my musket at the System's upside-down pyramid.

No. No! Kozue wouldn't say that to me. She wouldn't hug me gently!

Even when I was a child, she'd never done anything like that. That smile had always been for Noah alone. Just for a moment, I twisted around to look back. Kozue wasn't there. The System-created illusion had vanished.

"It isn't a joke." Directly beneath the System that protected the Akashic records, Abel shook his head. "The depths of your unconscious shaped your will, and the System responded to it. It created an image of the ideal Kozue, the one you want."

"…I don't want anything of the sort. And after all these years…!"

"A few weeks ago, you managed to reject my code of slaughter, remember? That proves Kozue carries a lot of weight in your mind. It's nothing to be ashamed of." Abel smiled. "Someday I'll use codes to create a new world in which all common sense is reversed. In that world, all your ideals will be realized. To that end, however, I need to put the System under my control."

…I started to get confused. Abel was saying that the System—that huge, pyramid-shaped monument—was what had made my ideals a reality. He'd also said that programs created by the System worked particularly well here. In that case, was the System basically like a computer? And if Abel was writing additional codes and using that computer, he'd have to be…a programmer?

"Then what are the Akashic records?"

The world's secret, which was supposedly buried in that System. Abel was trying to analyze and steal them in order to take control of the System. Did that mean the Akashic records were like a computer CPU?

"In short, the Akashic records are a brain that mechanically controls the world—"

And this place, where we were standing, was the control tower.

"That doesn't mean that you and other living things are electronic data, of course. However, it's possible to mechanically interfere with the world where you live from this control tower. Since time immemorial, the various crises that have occurred on Earth and the inconsistencies that accompanied them have been resolved by the System, which ignores even physical calculations."

"…You're saying the Tuners have been its avatars?"

"Yes, for the most part. Humans with strong wills have borrowed the power of the System to destroy the world's viruses—its enemies—and resolve the 'bugs' of crises. Throwing punches that are faster than bullets, soaring through the night sky with the power of science that's basically magic, and tricking the enemy by showing them 'daydreams,' or illusions… A skilled Tuner could probably do all these things easily."

Behind Abel, a huge monster and a humanoid weapon suddenly appeared and began to fight. That was another System-generated program. At the very least, no weapons like that existed on Earth.

"However, I'm going to analyze the Akashic records, steal them, *and evolve them*. In the new, ideal world managed by the code I've modified, the enemies of the world won't appear. Crises won't occur."

The humanoid weapon defeated the monster and immediately began to fade away, as if it had carried out its role.

"The new world will be entirely controlled by programs. It will even be possible to control human feelings and actions. It will be worth all the time it took to prepare."

"Don't tell me… All the crimes you've planned were experiments for this new world of yours?"

Abel didn't answer my question. Looking up at the System again, he began to extract the Akashic records.

He moved his fingers as if he were typing on an invisible keyboard, sliding something with his fingertips. I didn't know specifically what he was doing. Even so, his intentions were clear.

I couldn't let Abel A. Schoenberg control the new world. I couldn't forget the people who'd been sacrificed to his experiments, in the service of making this happen.

"Don't drag the world into your program!"

I leveled my musket and fired, scattering sparks, but the bullet didn't reach Abel. It ricocheted off an enormous barrier. Was he using his codes to make the System protect him?

"Yes, I'll manage the new world using codes, but it's just as I said: I'll make your ideals a reality as well. You'll have your wishes and your freedom, anything you like."

The next thing I knew, Abel was right in front of me. I finally realized that this wasn't high-speed movement or teleportation. He was using codes to shift his coordinates.

"In the new world, for example, I'll give an elderly, wheelchair-bound person the freedom to swim in the ocean. I'll give a young man born blind the freedom to see fireworks. I'll give a girl from a broken home the freedom to take it all back."

Then all I heard was the sound of fingers snapping.

"What is this?"

My consciousness cut out briefly, and in that moment, the scenery around me changed.

I found myself looking around. I wasn't in that extraordinary space anymore.

Space-time… It wasn't just the physical space; the time I was inhabiting was different as well. After all, this was—

"I saw this in a dream just a little while ago."

It was the house where I'd lived as a kid. I was in Noah's room.

"—What's the matter, Sis?"

I was standing stock-still in the middle of the room, and Noah called to me.

It's Noah. Noah's here.

My little brother was lying in bed like always, pillows piled high behind his head, gazing at me. I almost ran up to him without thinking—but I stopped. I knew this was an illusion.

"No, it's nothing."

I shook my head, then sat down on the edge of the bed. That bed was from eight years ago, but it felt solid, and it creaked under my weight.

"Come on, read to me."

"I knew you'd say that." Smiling wryly, I opened the book Noah handed me.

It was from the series he'd loved reading way back when, the one about the agent who took down one evil organization after another. I hadn't opened that book in a long time, and nostalgia welled up inside me as I read to him.

Somewhere along the way, I'd stopped running into words I couldn't read.

"Sis, why are you crying?" Noah looked at me, mystified. "If all you do is cry, you'll wash your happiness away, too."

"I know. I'll be careful."

I wiped my tears away with my fingertips. Even I didn't really know why I was crying.

"Listen, Noah, are you happy?"

"Mm, well, I guess I am. You're here, Sis."

"…Noah."

"Even if you're scary when you're mad sometimes."

"…Noah?" I gave him a long, cold look, and Noah giggled.

"Mom always looks like she's hurting, though." A slight shadow fell over his expression. "It feels like she's always fighting something, all by herself. I want to help her, but I'm sick, so I don't think I can. Help her for me, okay, Sis?" Noah picked up the book we'd just read. "You're going to be like the main character in this book someday, right?"

"…Yes. That's what I promised."

Taking the book from Noah, I slowly stood up.

"But listen, Noah. I'm actually an agent already."

So leave this to me.

When I smiled at him, Noah looked a little startled, but then he nodded emphatically.

Once I'd seen him agree, I opened the door to the room.

Light streamed in, and the illusion's barrier was broken.

There was the control tower with its two-toned sky. Abel still had his back to me; he was hard at work extracting the Akashic records from the System.

"The world never matches our ideals. There's meaning in struggling toward those goals, though," I said. Abel stopped moving for a moment. "There's no meaning in ideals that are realized from the start. They're just—fake!"

With no hesitation, I blasted away with the machine gun in my hands. The area around me was filled with tons of firearms. My will had made them materialize.

"That's a good attack. Is this 'the will to fight,' then?"

The barrier broke. Only one layer of it, though—the defensive wall that covered Abel was composed of many layers, and they promptly kicked my bullets back at me.

"You think I'd let myself lose?!"

A cannon appeared. I didn’t even have to do anything: It started firing automatically, as if the weapon had a will of its own. Around me, other weapons rose into the air, and they all began firing at once.

The violent sound of gunfire, the smell of powder smoke. A constant rain of bullets fell upon the translucent defensive wall, rays of colored light racing through it with every impact. One, two, three layers broke—and then the attack stopped.

“! I’m out of bullets? Why?”

As long as my will didn’t falter, I should have had an endless supply.

“No, the end inevitably comes.” The holes I’d punched through the wall began to close up. “Human wills have a limit. However, my codes are eternal. Even the strongest emotion will someday break when confronted with my prescribed programs.”

“—But you’re the one who’s managing the programs, and you’re human!”

In that case, he’d slip up eventually. A human like him could never become the one who controlled the new world.

Giving up on guns, I gripped the saber my remaining will had created and set off running. Remembering what the redheaded Assassin had taught me, I swung my weapon, pouring all the lethal intent I had into the attack, and—

“I am a program. No more, no less.”

—I couldn’t reach him, even though I could see him right in front of me. Even though the great evil was so close. I’d failed to break through the final layer of the translucent barrier covering Abel.

“Your will is no match for my code.”

Abruptly, a sourceless impact hit my entire body.

I wasn’t given a chance to cry out as I was knocked back through the air. I couldn’t even process what had just happened.

“……Ghk, hff…ah…”

Finally, I managed a groan. My body was impossibly cold. I wasn’t shaking so much as spasming. What had broken? What had been

crushed? It hurt so much I thought I was going to pass out.

"Hurry, let go of your will to fight."

Even through the loud ringing in my ears, I heard that voice clearly.

"As long as you hold on to it, you won't escape from that pain. A moment ago, I gave you the code of salvation. The moment you discard your will to fight, you'll feel better. You'll get to die instantly."

His voice was gentle.

"You don't have to try anymore. You've fought enough. You've aimed for your ideals and challenged fate. Now all you need to do is wait to be saved. I'll take you to a new world right away, one without hatred or sadness. Your family is waiting for you there."

I couldn't see anymore. My body was too cold, and most of my senses had deserted me. It was harder, colder, and more painful than any moment of death I'd ever imagined.

"……I…w-want—"

I couldn't tell if I was actually speaking aloud. I couldn't even hear my own voice.

However, my will was saying something.

"…I….want…to…hurt…"

That's right. I wanted to hurt.

I wanted to hate. I wanted to feel sad. Because there had to be something that only lay beyond those things. Because I'd lived nineteen years believing there was, and living for the sake of my mission. And so…

"…I…don't…need…any…thing…that's…easy…to…get."

Getting nothing at all would be better than that.

I stretched out my hand.

I wasn't asking for help. I was going to fight. I'd reached out for a weapon.

This wasn't "will." It was sheer stubbornness.

"…I…will…fight."

My fingertips touched something hard. Even if I couldn’t see it, I knew what it was: a musket.

“I’ll fight…for ideals that won’t be realized…!”

As my hand grabbed the barrel of the gun, someone else’s hand covered it.

◇ Side Fuubi III

“You still seem unsure.”

Ryan had extended his hand to me, but I hadn’t taken it right away. My right hand still held my pistol.

What if I hadn’t been holding a gun? Would I have promptly accepted the justice Ryan had spoken of? Would I have accepted a plan in which we sparked a war with the Akashic records and redrew the world map with our own hands?

“Fuubi, there’s something I want you to see.”

The world around us went black. Then a large, rectangular light appeared. It was like a movie screen, and Ryan and I were the audience.

“What is this?”

“The System’s operating. In this place, our wills can exercise the same sort of power as Abel’s codes.”

Then the movie began.

The screen showed a group of five men in suits, sitting at a round table and chatting pleasantly. Their nationalities were all over the map. They were older, but I’d seen all of them somewhere before. They were all current heads of state.

“Just look at those smiles. What do you think they’re discussing?” Ryan asked. Five national flags stood behind the leaders.

"They held this conference to determine how to divide the territory and resources of a country they colonized. They might as well have been talking about how to neatly portion out a cake. It's foolish in the extreme," Ryan said. "This happened because they put the interests of their own countries first. That's why I'll stand above them. Completely objectively. I'll gaze down at the map of the world and redraw national borders properly. We'll lead this world to justice, Fuubi." There was heat in his voice.

At some point, the sky had reverted to being two colors, and the movie had ended.

"I remembered one other thing." Before answering Ryan, I brought up the old story I'd told him on our way here. "Back when I was about to assassinate that young, upright politician on the Federation Government's orders, I hesitated just for a moment."

I'd become the Assassin only recently, and I'd been even more uncertain about the ideal shape of justice than I was now. When the politician had seen the muzzle of the gun I was pointing at them, their eyes had gone very wide.

"However, they promptly realized their mistake. They sensed that, for some reason, the accusation they'd been about to make wouldn't benefit the nation. Then, noticing my hesitation, they told me, 'If my death will help save the citizens, then please pull the trigger.'"

That young politician had had incredible resolve. They'd been thinking of the people. For that very reason, they'd been able to stand by their justice until the end.

"But, Ryan, what you and Abel are trying to do won't work. If you're just looking at the map, not the people, the plan's bound to fail someday."

For a moment, Ryan's eyes went wide. Then he smiled just like always. "You're saying to look at the people, not at the map? Fuubi, I never thought you'd start talking like this."

"This isn't about whether I'm doing it right. I mean you and I are both wrong."

That was why I was the Assassin, an ally of a justice I knew full well was a mistake.

"I see. Meaning…?"

"Meaning negotiations have broken down."

We pulled our triggers almost simultaneously.

Our bullets each knocked the other's weapon out of our hands. There was no time to pick them up. We both broke into a run, closing the distance between us in one go. My opponent was just a little slower, and I landed a roundhouse kick on him.

"That's you all over, Fuubi." Skidding back so fast it looked as if he were being dragged, Ryan narrowed his eyes. "You've probably been using the power of your will on a regular basis. Where did you learn that? Who taught you?"

"I've got no obligation to tell you."

If he really wanted to know, he could buy an extra special bottle of something and trek around the world's bar hideaways. If he was lucky, he'd meet the guy.

"Forget that—you're abnormally tough. When I kicked you back there, I meant to kill you."

So how was he able to stand normally? How could he talk and smile?

"Ha-ha. That's mean, trying to kick your fiancé to death."

"—Shove it."

I punched through and slammed home kicks. They were sharper than blades, faster than bullets. I knew the blows were landing, but it didn't feel as if I was managing to do damage.

"Oh, I can feel it. The intense drive to kill. What would that be —'the will to destroy'?" Ryan didn't evade my attacks; he just took them. "You have a solid natural gift, and your training and strong sense of mission have polished your will. Even without a superhuman ability, they've made you one of the most skilled of the Tuners. —But listen, Fuubi. No matter how powerful your will is, it's no match for a limitless code."

Purple light cut right in front of me.

"____!"

I twisted away, evading, but the light grazed my right shoulder slightly, and there was a hot, scorched smell. Ryan White was holding a weapon that looked like a laser sword.

"I see, Ryan. I had the wrong idea."

You didn't join forces with Abel. You're not equals, and you're not his right arm.

"You just sold your soul to a great evil."

In that case, I don't even need to stand on the same stage with you. I used the power of this exceptional place, too, hitting Ryan with a hail of ammunition from a machine gun my will had manifested.

The dirt of the wilderness danced, and black smoke went up. When silence fell and the dust cleared, a human shape appeared: Ryan White, wearing pure-white armor. Part of his helmet was missing, exposing an eye that was discolored dark red, like a demon's.

"You look really sharp." I wouldn't be able to fight like this. Promptly changing my costume, I held a Japanese katana at the ready.

"You look like a samurai. That's just like you."

Ryan vanished. A second later, the hilt of my sword locked with something else. Pressed back by Ryan's sword, which radiated an ominous light, my arms creaked violently.

"So even after turning demon, you can talk? Ryan, wake up."

"You're the one who's going to wake up, Fuubi."

Overwhelming strength forced me away, and I tumbled backward. Ryan promptly struck an additional blow with his sword, but I managed to generate a makeshift katana and blocked.

"Fuubi, you must know this world isn't right."

"Yeah. Poverty and violence and hunger and war and global crises… None of them are over."

"Then why don't you try to change it? You and I have been through similar experiences time and time again, so why do our

conclusions differ?”

He brought his sword down, shearing off my katana. I flung myself away, evading. The enemy’s weapon split the ground.

“Our fathers didn’t lay down their lives to protect a world like this!”

Oh, I see. So that’s what it comes down to.

Ryan, are you trapped by that, too?

“It’s wrong. This world is wrong! Protecting government officials, dying in the line of duty, and yet they even suppressed reports about it because it might encourage terrorism—this world made it so my father didn’t exist, and I’m going to remake it with my own two hands!”

The next thing I knew, *I was hanging*.

“I’ll keep telling you until you understand, Fuubi.”

I’d been set on something that looked like a gallows, and there were sturdy iron restraints on my hands and feet. It really didn’t seem like an average amount of willpower could get me out of them.

From a distance, Ryan swung his sword. The shining purple blade stretched like a whip, lashing me ferociously. The way Ryan was acting made it seem as if Abel’s code had taken him over.

“Why don’t you understand? Why won’t you keep your promise?! We swore to each other that day that we’d succeed to our great fathers’ last wills and protect the ideal world they’d dreamed of!”

Yeah, we had. We must have wanted to prove that the world our fathers had died protecting was a wonderful one. We’d eagerly looked forward to the day when we could hold our heads high and say so.

That ideal had been shattered, though. This world hadn’t been correct—nothing like it. Both Ryan and I had picked up on that. However, I’d kept trying to protect it anyway, while Ryan had tried to remake it.

What difference had there been between us? —Out of nowhere, a certain person came to mind.

“There was a weird girl.”

I murmured the words to myself, and Ryan didn't seem to have heard; the lashes kept coming.

My hair tie fell away, and my red hair streamed in the wind.

"She had both intelligence and fighting skills, and although she wasn't complete yet, she had more than enough potential to be an ally of justice. More than anything, she had a strong sense of her mission."

She'd even said that the Ace Detective's will had been engraved on her DNA at birth.

"However, she also had the strength to offer up her life for her friends. The strength to convert her 'will' into her 'last will,' to entrust everything she was to the people who were close to her—"

And so… I see. That's why I…

"I didn't need to stand above anyone."

The purple light that had been bearing down on my face vanished. The sword shrank back down and away from me, whiplike to the end.

Ryan White had been waiting for my answer.

"Don't look down at the world map from somewhere distant. If we want to protect the tomorrows of the people next to us, we have to keep fighting from inside the map!"

That was how we Tuners should be.

"I see. Stand on the front line until your very last moment and fulfill your mission, then, nameless messenger of justice."

Ryan's sword burst into ominous purple flames. I'd spoken sharply, but I still couldn't move. My will couldn't break Abel's code.

"I guess I should've known."

I'd finally realized what the answer was: My justice was still only of a borrowed, stopgap variety.

My will had already been inherited by someone, though. That meant this was fine. The tip of the sword closed in on me, but I had no intention of evading. I kept my eyes open.

"What a coincidence. That girl is why I became a hero, too."

The sword stopped. A lone girl was standing below the gallows.

"You can't break our pride with that sword."

Instantly, as if she'd destroyed the program, the enemy's sword crumbled and scattered. Ryan's deep-red eye widened as if he didn't know what had happened, but then he screamed, his voice filled with resentment.

"Ace Detective…!"

Nagisa Natsunagi was standing there.

"Whoa! You okay?"

The gallows vanished, and Natsunagi caught me in her arms. The restraints around my wrists and ankles were gone, too.

"Why are you here? And what are you wearing?"

Natsunagi was wearing a summer sailor-type school uniform. I'd heard she was out of high school at this point.

"I-it's complicated. Never mind that. For now…"

Even as she spoke, *a swarm of small spheres appeared next to her, floating in space. They spun, glowing purple, and then they all spat light rays at once.*

"—Get down!"

"No, they won't hit us."

Natsunagi didn't even flinch. Just before the rays reached us, they ricocheted off at random angles, as if they'd been blocked by an invisible barrier.

"Nagisa Natsunagi, what on earth…?"

"As things stand, I don't think I'm enough of a hero." Even now, Natsunagi kept talking to me; the enemy's attacks didn't seem to concern her. "I know you don't acknowledge me to that extent, either. —I'll struggle, though. In this world that doesn't go the way we want it, a world where ideals aren't necessarily realized—even so, I'll stand tall and move forward. I'll keep my head as high as I can!"

Giving me one last smile, Nagisa Natsunagi started toward Ryan White. A rain of lasers poured down around her. However, right before they struck her, they caromed away at odd angles.

"Ryan White. You must have been that way, too, at first."

"Be quiet…!" Ryan yelled, and the glowing spheres charged at Natsunagi physically. There was a ferocious explosion, but a few seconds later, the Ace Detective emerged from the black smoke unscathed.

"You traveled around the world, fought for justice, learned about unfairness—too much about it. You stopped being able to stand on the same ground as everyone else."

The earth split with a roar.

Behind Ryan, an enormous sphere appeared, cloaked in its own wings.

"But listen—it was actually okay. There are a lot of people in this world besides you who believe in justice. You should have trusted us more."

With its wings folded in front of it, the sphere began to focus shining purple energy at its core.

It was obvious what was going to happen. In spite of myself, I shouted the detective's name.

"It's fine. *None of us will lose.*"

The sphere fired an enormous laser. The shock wave blasted across the wasteland, whipping up clouds of dust.

If it hadn't been for the defensive barrier the detective had left, I wouldn't have been okay, either.

Then the smoke cleared—and there was Nagisa Natsunagi, standing dauntlessly.

"Oh, I see. You're…"

In this world, the strength of our wills governed everything.

In that case, while she was here, her passion would make her stronger than anyone.

"This is the Ace Detective's will—"

No, maybe it's the strength of that last will.

"Shut up. Shut up, shut up, shut up…!" Ryan White howled, rejecting the reality in front of him. He leaned forward sharply, leveling his sword.

"I'll do it. I'll manage this world perfectly!"





"What you're trying to do isn't 'management.' It's control."

When Ryan heard the detective's words, he blazed up in pure-white flames, a demon of justice. He lunged, holding a sword that was now several meters long.

"I'm borrowing this, Hel," Natsunagi murmured softly. She was wearing a steel-blue military uniform.

"Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa aah…!"

Ryan White screamed and vanished.

At the same time, Natsunagi vanished as well. There was a ferocious metallic crash—and the battle was over.

The Ace Detective stood tall beside the fallen embodiment of justice, a shining red sword in her hand.

◇ Side Charlotte IV

As I crawled across the ground, reaching out for the musket, someone's hand came to rest on top of mine. I found myself looking up at its owner.

"Why are you…?"

It was someone who really shouldn't have been here.

As usual, he was wearing an impersonal, off-the-rack outfit and an oddly philosophical expression. In spite of that, he was sarcastic and neurotic and usually not very reliable, but when it really mattered, he'd always work a miracle. He was that sort of person.

"Kimizuka."

A person I completely couldn't stand.

"What, did you miss me?" Taking my hand, Kimizuka slowly helped me up.

"…Not particularly. It is you, after all. I figured you'd wake up soon."

That was a lie. He'd startled me so much my heart was threatening to leap out of my chest.

"Huh. And here I thought you'd made an exception and worried about me, Charlie." He laughed.

Leaning on his shoulder for support, I got to my feet. I'd been in so much pain before, but for some reason, I felt better. Who'd done that? I gazed at the young man beside me, but he was already focusing on the distant enemy.

"We meet again, huh, Abel?"

"Singularity. You managed to rewrite the code of loss. Incredible."

Apparently even Abel hadn't seen this coming. How had Kimizuka broken free of that condition, those symptoms?

"Apparently somebody who likes me so much she just can't take it was kind enough to save me," Kimizuka told me, joking a bit.

A certain face came to mind. It belonged to a girl who was bound to turn bright red and get really mad if she found out Kimizuka had said a thing like that about her.

"How did you get here, though?"

Even if Kimizuka had made a miraculous recovery, how had he found this place? Had he negotiated with someone, like I had? We probably weren't in Japan, though…

"I'm not physically here to begin with," he said calmly.

I hadn't seen that coming at all. "Wait just a second! What? Don't tell me you're dead, Kimizuka!! Are you a ghost?!"

"Charlie, you really are properly dumb, aren't you?"

"Properly dumb?! Come on—'properly dumb'?! What's that supposed to mean?!"

I thought I'd been using my head pretty well this time…

"What you're talking to is just my consciousness. My actual body's somewhere else."

"…So is it the System that's making that possible?"

The System was a program that interfered with everything in our world from outside it, even disturbing physical laws… But the inverted, floating pyramid was blinking as if it were malfunctioning.

Had losing the key to the Singularity caused some sort of problem? Abel turned his back on us, making a series of gestures in the System's direction.

"Then your actual body is…?"

"Yeah, it should still be at the hospital." While Abel had his hands full, Kimizuka went on. "Right after I woke up today, *a door appeared in my hospital room*. I could instinctively tell where it led."

—A door. Nagisa had mentioned one, too: She'd said that after Abel had given Kimizuka the code of loss, he'd gone through a door and disappeared. Maybe the door had appeared specifically because he'd stolen Kimizuka's Singularity nature.

If so, it was likely that the door which had appeared for Kimizuka had been one and the same. Since Natsunagi had called to him, he'd overturned the code of loss, retaking his nature as the Singularity. Kimizuka himself had been the key to the door that had brought him to this control tower.

"So that's how you already knew everything when you got here."

"Yeah. Although the door didn't physically teleport me, as you'd figure."

Even so, Kimizuka's consciousness—his will—had come here on its own… In order to save me, unless I was deluding myself about that.

"Now then, it's about time we talked, too," Kimizuka told Abel. The other man was still facing the System.

"I never thought you'd be Abel, Professor Moriya."

When the enemy heard that, he stopped moving for a moment.

"Do you know him?"

I'd thought he looked Japanese, but…really?

"Yeah. He's a professor at my university."

So Nagisa knew this man, too?

As we glared at him, Abel slowly turned around.

"For someone who never suspected it, you don't seem very surprised."

"When your code invaded me, apparently that fact got into my subconscious. That means I've already gotten over being surprised." Kimizuka gazed at Abel. He looked resigned, or maybe disgusted. "So is 'university professor' just your cover?"

"As I've said many times already, I am a program. *I set the role known as 'Moriya'* as one of my many avatars. Someone who would watch over the Singularity from nearby; an observer who would move the story along. For that reason, 'Abel' doesn't really have a face," the enemy said. Out of nowhere, I remembered those bandages.

"Have you come prepared to watch ideals collapse?"

"Yeah, just the way you told me to."

Kimizuka was holding a shiny black gun. It was a weapon his will had produced.





"As I suspected, it looks as if I'll need you in order to get back into the System." Smoothly, Abel extended his right arm.

"—Watch out, Kimizuka! He's going to use a code to turn you into a key again!"

"No, I don't think he can. Not right away." For some reason, Kimizuka wasn't flustered. "Abel, your abilities are limited." He seemed sure of that. Abel's code of loss didn't frighten him at all. "If you were really capable of using codes to rewrite the world's physical laws at will, you could have stolen much more from us much earlier. You could have killed us. The fact that you didn't means that writing codes takes quite a bit of preparation."

Abel didn't move. No—he couldn't.

That seemed to support Kimizuka's theory.

"My Singularity nature activates unconsciously and instantly. You can consciously activate your codes, but in exchange, it takes time. Especially when the target is a pain like me, there are a lot of programs that need to be rewritten, and the code gets more complicated. Am I wrong?"

…I see. That was why Abel had taken the long way around, even though he'd wanted the Singularity: He'd had to. He couldn't rewrite the Singularity's programs out of nowhere. That was why he'd started by interfering with the characters around him.

"So it's going to take a while for Abel to hit you with another code of loss…!"

"Right. Meaning it's payback time."

Just as Kimizuka spoke, *an enormous gray cube appeared*. It covered Abel, hiding him, then shrank and disappeared in the blink of an eye.

"—What was that?"

He'd dealt with Abel that fast? Impossible…

"It's too soon to relax, though. He should break the program and come out before too long."

"So you restrained him somewhere temporarily?"

"Yeah. Apparently the Singularity can lock things as well as unlock them," Kimizuka said, as if it was no big deal. He looked up at the sky. "We've still got an enemy, though."

The huge inverted pyramid, the System, was shining purple.

"—The defense program!"

"It's decided we're foreign bodies that are here to mess this place up."

The System fired a light ray.

There was no time to evade. It was all I could do to protect my head.—But…

"Her word-soul really is incredible."

Just before the light hit us, it was repelled by an invisible wall.

"Oh, I see."

So that girl was nearby, too.

I was sure she'd keep on acting as a shield that protected the planet.

"Charlie, here."

Even as the System kept attacking, Kimizuka held something up to show me.

It was the back of a photograph.

"On the day we went to see Kozue Arisaka, you got a key to the safe where the map was kept, remember? This was in there. The detective retrieved it after I collapsed."

Nagisa had found this…? Oh, of course: Abel's code had knocked me out before I could open the safe.

"But wasn't the map supposed to be in that safe?"

She'd had this photograph in there instead? Thinking that was odd, I turned it over.

It was a family photo.

It showed me, Noah, and our parents, standing in front of the house where we used to live.

"I didn't know this photo existed."

Noah was still just one; my father was holding him, and my mother was holding my hand. I was looking up at her, and she was

pointing ahead of us, telling me to face forward.

She was smiling.

"Aah…"

We'd had a photo like this.

"Aah, aah, aaaaaah…"

We'd had one. Even if it hadn't lasted long, even we'd had a moment when we were a family.

"—Aaaaah, aaaaaaaaaaah! Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah…!"

This was not okay. I was on a battlefield, and yet no matter what I did, the tears spilled over. The wrinkled photograph blurred.

"Charlie."

I found myself resting my forehead against his chest.

"Charlie, we're not close or anything. We don't have any sort of special relationship. We're not friends we'd rather not have, and we're not rivals. I thought of lots of other labels, but I couldn't find one that fit… That means we can have any sort of relationship we want, though. Once a year or so, we can forget we fight like cats and dogs. On that day, even just in that moment, it's fine if we form a new relationship with each other. Charlotte," he said, in a voice that was disgustingly gentle, "what can I do for you, right now?"

What did I want to do? What did I need to do? What did I want him to do?

Our relationship until now, the words we'd exchanged, the abuse we'd slung at each other all over the place… Just for now, I'd forget all of it.

No one was watching. No one would know. Only we would ever know about what we said here, and even we would forget by the next day.

In that case…

"I hate you! I completely can't stand you!" They were words I'd said before, on another day.

Unlike that day, I was in his arms when I said them.

"I absolutely do not want to say stuff like this, and I never thought the day would come when I would." I bet even I wouldn't believe it

the next day. I was definitely going to laugh off the fact that I'd said these things, as if I'd dreamed it.

—For now, though. Just for now…

"If I'm with you, it feels like I can do anything—so please. Take my hand—and fight with me."

Warmth enveloped my hand.

Slowly lowering our linked hands, we gazed at the monument that floated in the distance.

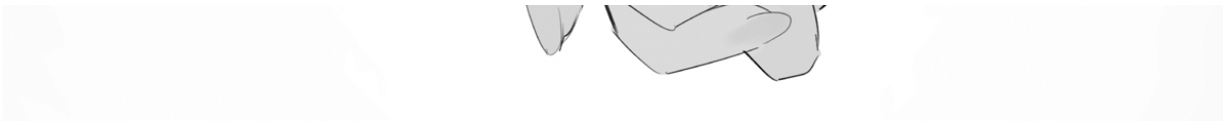
"So that's what was making Kozue suffer."

There was just one thing I needed to do right now.

"Yeah. We'll determine our tomorrow on our own. We'll use our wills to do it. We won't let any programs control us."

Releasing each other's hands, we leveled our weapons. Somehow, they were very familiar matching muskets. We'd apparently been thinking the same thing.





“Kimizuka.”

“What?”

Our outstretched arms formed parallel lines, the muzzles of our guns pointed at the System—no, at its core. At the Akashic records that had to be inside it.

“You’re trying to look a little too cool.”

“Man, that’s not fair.”

We only fired two shots, but they were cloaked in firm, just wills, and they struck at the mechanism of the world.

◇ Side Fuubi IV

On the battlefield, the fight was over. The one who’d fallen was the immaculate justice, while the Ace Detective was still on her feet. The physical changes the System had made to them had reverted to normal.

Natsunagi, the victor, began walking toward me.

How had she gotten here? If the detective was here, then what had happened to her partner? But at this point, asking either of those things would have been boorish.

For a little while, we faced each other silently.

I’d first met this girl more than two years ago.

Nagisa Natsunagi had previously been under the control of another personality known as “Hel.” At the time, she’d had the Daydream’s heart inside her, and it had allowed her ego to retake control. I’d continued to protect and observe Natsunagi from a distance, as the Daydream had requested.

In the process, I’d had a thought. Watching this girl made me nervous. First and foremost—she was weak. Both physically and emotionally, she was far too weak. Natsunagi couldn’t take the Daydream’s place. She wouldn’t be able to inherit the Ace Detective’s last will.

I'd told myself that was fine.

If the other option was getting involved with this world in a half-assed way, I thought she should be a normal high school girl in a world far away from this one instead. That had been the Daydream's wish, too, when she'd offered her own heart in order to save this girl. As a result, I'd made Nagisa Natsunagi an ordinary girl again.

…Even so, I'd pulled strings from behind the scenes and sent her to that high school because I'd held on to one faint hope. I hadn't wanted to give up on the Ace Detective's will, so I'd sent her to the same place as the Singularity.

Before long, those two had met. Or rather, they'd reunited. Then she'd come to me with a request: She wanted me to find the owner of her new heart. The detective's will had returned in the form of passion.

However—and I shouldn't even have to say this—we'd continued to clash. She was still naive and weak, and I was sharp with her. I asked her what good that "last will" was to the world, and I'd even brandished a knife at her.

Besides, even if her spirit grew stronger, it would be pointless if her body failed to keep up. No matter how unyielding her will was, it couldn't display its power without a vessel that was durable enough to take it. As a matter of fact, Natsunagi had died once. Her blazing passions had consumed her and turned her to ash.

At that point, for the first time, I'd revised my opinion of her. I had acknowledged that she'd been a genuine Ace Detective. I'd thought I owed someone who'd carried out her mission at least that much respect. However, Natsunagi had come back. The light of her passion hadn't gone out.

She'd acquired the fighting style her other self had used, and had developed the word-soul ability she'd always had an aptitude for. Then she'd fought enemies, averted crises, unconsciously honing her will as the detective… And now here she was, standing in front of me.

There was only one thing I needed to say.

"You've gotten stronger."

The wind blew, tugging at my hair. Beyond it, I saw Natsunagi's eyes widen slightly.

We hadn't been competing. I hadn't thought I was being stubborn, either.

However, I admitted defeat.

Today, the Ace Detective had definitely saved the Assassin.

"I see… Heh-heh. Want to shake hands or something?"

"Don't get full of yourself."

We exchanged a low, casual high five.

"That goes for both of us, though. I'm sure I'll be counting on you again, too."

"You'll get yourself fired for violating the Federal Charter."

"Oh, right, 'Tuners are forbidden from colluding.' Was that it? It does seem like that rule is basically just a formality these days, but…" Natsunagi smiled wryly. "What about this, then? What if we're just a detective and a police officer? That would work, wouldn't it?"

"You've gotten better at splitting hairs… Well, I'll consider it."

I wasn't even sure I'd still be a police officer the next day.

Just as I was thinking about that…

"Things are getting shaky." It wasn't just the ground. The whole world seemed to be shaking.

And— "Natsunagi, you look…"

The detective was gradually turning transparent. This couldn't be…

"I see. Kimizuka and Charlie must have broken the Akashic records," Natsunagi murmured, looking up at the two-toned sky.

So he actually was here, too, huh? And with Charlotte. Apparently the two of them had pulled off something insane.

"The Akashic records have been broken, and the whole System is malfunctioning. Since only your 'will' is here, your existence is getting shaky. Is that it?"

"Yes, I think so. My body's in Kimizuka's hospital room right now."

Unlike me, she hadn't come here physically.

That meant I'd have to get out on my own. Would the Men in Black come all the way to the ends of the earth to give me a ride back?

"I'll be waiting!" Natsunagi said firmly. Everything below her waist had already vanished. "We're definitely going to need your strength in order to protect the world. I'll head back first and wait for you over there!"

"Yeah. I swear I'll come back." I nodded.

Natsunagi smiled, looking just a little relieved, and then she was gone.

"Okay. What now?" First I had to get out of this wasteland and back to the ruin…but I had no idea where to begin. *All alone,* I thought.

"Actually, I guess I'm not alone, huh?"

I didn't mean "in spirit," but physically. There was still somebody else here. A demon of justice who'd just lost a battle to the death.

As I was turning to look at him…

"____!"

Without warning, the ground beneath me crumbled away.

Was this because the System was malfunctioning, too?

The ground's data seemed to have been erased, and I floated in midair, left with nothing to stand on. Only the ground under my feet had vanished, though. It was now a cliff, but if I reached out, I just might be able to— "Or maybe not."

—But I'd reached it. Not the ground; I'd reached someone's arm. I grabbed it, and it hauled me up.

"Are you all right?" my rescuer asked, once we were on top of the cliff.

"…You're asking me that? You're at death's door yourself."

"Ha-ha. Well, the irony's good. That's appropriate for us, isn't it?"

Ryan White smiled at my disgruntled expression. He was back in his white military uniform, and his face was its usual, irritating self again.

"You look like hell."

The man who should have been a symbol of justice had a big wound. One that wouldn't disappear, inflicted on him by a real ally of justice. He wouldn't die, though. That Ace Detective would never kill him.

"I don't plan to apologize," Ryan said. He was still sitting on the ground, and he wouldn't meet my eyes. "I have no intention of perverting my justice. I won't let anyone talk me out of it. Someday, you and yours will see that I was right."

So his philosophy hadn't been under the control of a code, at least.

That's fine, then. Stick to your guns.

"Bring it anytime. I'll stop you as often as I have to."

When you become an enemy of the world, stopping you will be the Assassin's mission. And so, at least until that day, I'll— "—Fuubi!"

Ryan covered me.

There was a streak of light. I felt heat, smelled something burning. *Fresh blood spurted from Ryan's neck.*

I twisted around to look. A small sphere floated in midair.

"—Dammit!" I drew the only gun I'd brought in and fired, smashing the sphere into the depths of the abyss.

"Ryan!"

Ryan had a hand to his neck, and he collapsed, leaning into me. He was bleeding heavily. The laser that sphere had fired had grazed him.

I tore some fabric off my clothes, pressing it to Ryan's neck. *Stop*, I wished, but the System was breaking down, and it didn't acknowledge that will.

"I guess I was the one the world didn't choose, hm?" Ryan murmured, mocking himself.

"—Don't talk."

"I was supposed to meet Abel here," Ryan started. He wasn't listening to me. "He never showed up. In the end, I probably was just his pawn. That attack might also have been…"

Had Abel used a code somewhere, working with this broken System?

"In that case, he's planning to control this world with methods that go farther than mine."

"What do you mean?" I asked in spite of myself.

"He'll probably try to restore the System. Then he'll begin preparing to evolve the Akashic records… By now, it's possible your companions know more about this than I do. Ask them once you get out of here."

Right. Catching Abel had been the Assassin's mission to begin with. I'd get on that immediately.

"I'm not getting out alone, though. You're coming with me." *There's a ton of stuff I have to ask you.* "The interrogation's going to be rough. Brace yourself."

"Ha-ha. That's terrifying." Ryan smiled just a little. "This is as far as I go, though. I can't continue. I'm sorry, Fuubi."

"Why are you apologizing?"

You just said it yourself. You said your justice hadn't been wrong.

"I got violent with you."

"You were being controlled by Abel's code."

"That makes it worse. I'm deeply ashamed of having given myself over to a great evil. I can't go back to your world anymore." Ryan's head was resting on my lap. His lips were pale.

"Are you an idiot?" *Coward. If you've made a mistake, admit it and atone. Then work for the sake of justice again. That's your mission, right? It's how you live, right?* "This is no place for you to…"

But Ryan shook his head. And then… "Will you do it?"

He didn't specify what.

"No. The Assassin's mission is to kill innocent people in the service of noble causes. You're a criminal. I don't kill people who've committed crimes. I just let the law judge them."

"I see. In that case, definitely kill me. If you do, you'll have violated the Federal Charter, and they'll fire you as the Assassin. It's about time you were set free from that mission of yours."

"Don't screw with me! I'm—!"

"I'm not telling you to stop being a hero. You're just not suited to being the Assassin. You're too—kind."

That wasn't true. I'd gotten my hands dirty countless times. That meant it was way too late for this.

"I'm sorry," Ryan apologized again. His voice was thin. "I should have been the one to do it. I should have gone to that side right from the start. You and me, the hidden side and the public side. Which of us would protect which world? I should have flipped our roles back then."

No. I'd decided all of that. I'd thought it was fine that way. I didn't regret any of it. *I'll keep on killing people in order to protect others*— "Fuubi." Reaching out with a bloodied hand, Ryan touched my cheek. In exchange, the tips of my hair poked his cheek. "Don't cry."

My tears fell onto Ryan's face, which was twisted with sorrow.

It was the first time I'd cried in fifteen years.

"We're not kids anymore. You don't have to worry about stuff like that."

"I see. That's true."

Right. We were adults. Adults who protected the world for kids.

"In that case, Fuubi, mind if I say something?"

No, don't talk anymore.

Before I could say those words, Ryan said his.

"I did love you."

My body almost moved.

That wasn't right, though. It wasn't. That wasn't what I needed to be doing right now.

I'd decided what I'd do fifteen whole years ago.

“Ha! Who’d fall for a lie like that, you fool?”

I smiled as I said it.

Ryan looked startled; his eyes widened, even though they’d been gradually closing. But then he smiled just like me. It was something we’d left undone that day, fifteen years back.

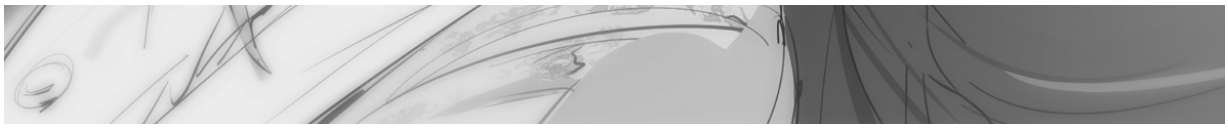
“Ryan.” After we’d smiled together for a while, I called his name. One of my old regrets had vanished, and now it was time to fulfill our current promise. “What is real justice? I can’t be satisfied with the answer I got this time. I’ll keep asking, as often as it takes.”

“Yeah. Someday, for sure, we’ll make a peaceful world without war.”

My hand tightened around my gun. That hand wasn’t shaking anymore.

The sound of a gunshot echoed in the crumbling world.







Epilogue

It was November. Autumn was in full swing, and it was past time to switch to cool-weather clothes.

Even so, I didn't quite feel like I was keeping up with the change. It was probably because I'd recently spent a while cut off from the world.

The code of loss Abel had hit me with had taken my five senses and left me unconscious for more than three weeks. I had no memories from that time. I felt as if I'd dreamed about having a conversation with someone I missed, but other than that, I didn't remember a thing.

Even so, I'd managed to wake up with the help of a certain girl, gone through a mysterious door that had appeared out of thin air, and seen the control tower whose programs were said to run the world. I'd fought Abel there again, this time with Charlie. That had been a week ago.

After that, I'd gone back to my former world (although that may not have been the right way to put it), and finally managed to get back to my regular routine. That said, there was no telling when I might be denounced by a certain organization. On that day—I'd tried to destroy the Akashic records.

As the Singularity, I'd decided on instinct that destroying them would be better than letting Abel steal them and use them for evil… but I had no idea how the top brass of the Federation Government would see it. At this point, it didn't seem to have had any drastic effects on the world, but…

In any case, the situation had started to move in a big way.

It was a pretty sure bet that I'd end up discussing this with the Federation Government in some way. We weren't specifically getting this out of the way before that happened, but for the first time in quite a while, our circle had gotten together.

Nagisa had organized it, on the pretext of celebrating my recovery.

Nagisa, Charlie, and Noches had gathered in my cramped, run-down apartment; Saikawa had stopped by for a few minutes between jobs, and Mia and Rill were attending via video chat. That night, the apartment was livelier than it had ever been… Although apparently I'd worried them and caused them a ton of trouble, and I got yelled at a whole lot more than I'd been expecting.

I did think they could have been a little nicer to me…but in the face of pressure like that from the girls, I hadn't been able to say anything. A male-female ratio of one to six is pretty harsh.

That party was winding down now, and only Nagisa, Charlie, and I were still there.

The hot pot we'd all gathered around was still sitting on the low table. The rice and vegetable porridge we'd added—clearly overdoing it—in order to round off the meal was sitting there glaring at us. It was one of those unpleasant things that happens all the time with hot pot.

"Nagisa, you're a big eater. Go ahead and finish that off."

"What are you, the tactless wonder?! I seriously hate this side of you, Kimihiko."

Getting so upset the sound effect for "fuming" actually seemed to apply, Nagisa neatly divided the porridge in the hot pot among three bowls.

"Too bad we didn't at least go with noodles, huh?"

"I said we should. I said it last time we had hot pot, too."

"Did you? …Oh, the time you stayed over."

Now that we'd started university, we had a lot more opportunities to eat hot pot.

It was relatively tasty, easy, and cheap, so Nagisa and I often stopped at the supermarket on the way home from school, bought the fixings, and made it.

"It sounds like you people are living pretty sordid student lives." Charlie glared at me and Nagisa from beneath half-lowered eyelids.

"…I wouldn't say that. We just eat together, that's all. If we're going to be cooking for ourselves anyway, it's more convenient to

cook for two."

"Then why do you have loungewear and makeup remover over here, Nagisa?" Charlie grilled her.

Nagisa said nothing and started blowing on her porridge to cool it off.

That's just going to make her even more suspicious. Make some decent excuses, all right? Please?

"Oh maaan. Don't come crying to me if Ma'am gets mad at you," Charlie warned Nagisa. She sounded exasperated, but she was smiling just a little.

—Siesta. If possible, I would have liked to have her here, too. I'd wanted her to be part of the circle that had gathered at my place today.

"I bet it won't be long now, though."

Apparently Siesta's surgery had been completed without incident while I was unconscious. During that major surgery, the seed-infected heart in Siesta's chest had been replaced with an artificial heart Stephen had made for her.

It had gone well—but Siesta wasn't awake yet. According to Stephen, it would take time for the new heart to settle in and function properly, and he needed to monitor her progress, so he was keeping her in a coma.

When Siesta woke up, would she still be the person we knew? Would she remember us? It would be a little while longer before we found out.

"By the way, Charlie. Have you heard from Ms. Fuubi since then?" I asked.

Charlie shook her head. "Not even once. I don't think she'd contact me in the first place, though."

Put simply, Fuubi Kase had gone missing.

She'd definitely been in that world with us last week. According to Nagisa, she'd actually been there physically. After damaging the Akashic records, Nagisa and I had vanished, and we didn't know what had happened after that. When Charlie had come to, she was

in the Mizoev Federation embassy. The government had probably sent someone to pick her up.

No one knew where Ms. Fuubi had gone, though. Ryan White, either. I hadn't been on their battlefield, so I didn't even have the right to know that story.

"She said she'd be back for sure," Nagisa said. She'd been with Fuubi Kase right up until she'd vanished. —In that case, I'd believe in them: the words of the Ace Detective, and the Assassin's justice.

"Speaking of missing persons, Abel's gone, too," Charlie said, remembering.

I'd pinned Abel down temporarily, but right after I'd destroyed the Akashic records, I'd heard his voice from a location I couldn't trace.

"The plan won't end here. The world still has a big secret."

Before I could find out what he meant, he'd disappeared.

In the end, the term "the Akashic records" had referred to something like a program that could control all phenomena on earth —and the core of the System that executed it.

However, according to Abel, the world still had secrets. Were those secrets connected to his goal of inverting the world? For the sake of his ambition of a new world controlled by his codes, he'd probably try to restore both the Akashic records and the System.

"Still, who'd have believed Professor Moriya was actually Abel…?"

Nagisa had trusted the professor, and his identity had been a shock to her.

A week ago, having learned who Moriya really was, we'd contacted the university as soon as we'd returned. By then, though, no human named "Professor Moriya" existed.

"He's gone without a trace. I think I'm going crazy."

"Yeah. This is basically horror after that development, or maybe sci-fi."

He hadn't just transferred or something. It was as if he'd never existed. There was no trace of the TV appearances he'd made as a hypnotist, and the students we'd asked said they didn't know who we were talking about. The Department of Psychology had in their employ another professor that Nagisa and I had never heard of, although we were the only ones who hadn't.

"I bet he used a code."

To borrow his terminology, would that have been "the code of oblivion"? He'd rewritten the world's program and erased all records of "Moriya."

"Abel's still capable of that much, even now." Charlie sighed over the sheer weirdness of that.

Our current enemy operated on a completely different scale from the rest of us.

"No wonder he's able to make monsters like the Seven Deadly Sins."

If Abel was the one trying, it would be easy for him to overturn the world's common sense once his codes were ready. He could tinker with the programs all he liked and mechanically change the concept of the world.

"But if he can set up a character like Moriya easily, why do you suppose he used a seed to change his shape earlier?"

Last summer, when Siesta had awakened for a few weeks, she and I had gone to New York. While we were there, we'd met the Phantom Thief, Abel A. Schoenberg. He'd been using the power of one of Seed's seeds to make himself appear to be Fritz Stewart.

"Maybe he wanted to keep the power of his codes hidden?" Nagisa suggested.

That could have been it, but…

"Would he have gone to the trouble of cutting a deal with Seed to do that?" Charlie had the same questions I did. Long ago, the Phantom Thief had stolen a volume of the sacred text in order to get one of Seed's seeds.

"There may have been some other advantage for Abel in doing that. An advantage in infiltrating Mia's clock tower and seeing the sacred text. For example…" Nagisa's gaze turned to me. *Me, huh?*

"Right. Long ago, I saw a volume titled *Singularity* in the Oracle's clock tower. Abel may have sneaked a look at that."

Assuming he'd already been genuinely wary of the Singularity back then anyway.

"But wait. Couldn't Abel just have stolen the sacred text, without bothering with Seed? I guess I basically just asked that, but…"

"No, Charlie, about that. I'm pretty sure you already know, but the sacred text is usually off-limits to almost everybody. Even Federation Government members can't touch it. That probably isn't a superficial rule; it's a strict, System-created mechanism."

As a result, even Abel hadn't been able to meddle with the sacred text easily. That was when he'd come up with the idea of using Seed.

"Do you remember how Siesta and Mia plotted to have him steal the sacred text? They meant it as a trap to trick Seed and change the future, but… Anyway, Abel needed that sort of logic. As long as he had the logic, he knew he'd be able to trick the System."

Abel always built his crimes—his programs—meticulously. Correct reasoning. Logic that had been cleared of inconsistencies. Stories that never fell apart. The System liked all these things. Then Abel used his codes to misuse the System.

"Abel may be a bit like a hacker." Nagisa put together a working deduction. "That's why he's been running experimental programs all this time. By stealing the Akashic records, he's planning to officially become the person who controls the world."

"…Yeah. If that happens, I bet there won't be anything he can't do anymore."

Next time, he might even be able to erase the Singularity in the blink of an eye.

"But since we damaged the Akashic records, he must have had to adjust his plan. Restoring the System is bound to take time, too."

Charlie tried giving a calm analysis of her own. I hoped she was right, of course…but we couldn't get careless.

For now, in an attempt to shake off the bad premonition, I bolted down my third of the rice porridge.

"If you go right to sleep after eating, you'll turn into a cow," Charlie said critically. I'd lain down on the floor, using a floor cushion as a pillow. She prodded my stomach with a fingertip. "Look, your stomach's sticking out a bit."

"That would be because I just ate… Hey! Don't tickle me!"

"Heh-heh. You're wide open." Charlie laughed.

I caught her fingers, stopping them, but she tried to poke my side with her other hand. If she was planning to turn this into a pro wrestling match, she could bring it on; just as I squared up for the fight, Nagisa broke in. "Have you two gotten closer?"

Silence fell for a moment.

"No, not particularly," I told her calmly, taking a drink from my glass of cola.

"That glass was empty already."

It was? Oh yeah. It was.

"You've got the wrong idea, Nagisa. There's no way I'd get closer to this guy."

"But, Charlie, when you look at Kimihiko, I think your eyes are kinder than they used to be."

"An Ace Detective really should be more observant than that. Never mind, let's eat."

"We've already polished off the last of it."

We were both just going around in circles.

At this point, I couldn't remember. Or maybe it was more like I couldn't afford to.

I got the feeling something had recently happened between me and Charlie that would make my face literally catch fire…but I'd forgotten. No matter who said otherwise, I'd forgotten!

There was no way we'd hold hands, and we'd never talk about trusting each other. Charlie and I were like cats and dogs today, just

like always. “Isn’t that right, Charlie?” I asked her for agreement, although I hadn’t specified a topic. I was sure she was thinking the same thing.

We gazed soberly at each other for a little while, and then Charlie grinned. “Yes, I completely can’t stand you.”

It was rare for abuse that straightforward not to sound abusive.

“And actually, if we’re having a conversation like that, there’s something I’m curious about, too.” Charlie glared at me and Nagisa from beneath half-lowered lids.

“When did you start calling each other by your first names?”

“Natsunagi” had become “Nagisa.” “Kimizuka” had turned into “Kimihiko.”

It was an unsettlingly direct question, and this time Nagisa and I exchanged looks.

“…Uh, that’s…”

“C-call it a secret…”

Charlie’s verdict on our answers was…

“It looks like we’re going to have a long night.”

Caving to the agent’s pressure, we began to tell her what had happened a week earlier.



One week ago, Nagisa

"Kimizuka, what are you looking at?"

When I came back to his hospital room from putting fresh water in the vase, Kimizuka was sitting on the bed, gazing out the window. He'd been facing forward a moment ago, but apparently he'd turned toward the window on his own. That meant he wasn't in what you'd call a vegetative state. His eyes were open, too.

Those eyes weren't seeing anything, though, and of course he didn't answer me. The fact that he seemed to be looking out the window might just have been an involuntary human habit.

"Those are definitely autumn clouds, aren't they?"

It had been over three weeks since the code of loss had done this to Kimizuka, and so far, almost nothing had changed.

"The second-semester classes have started at university already. If you don't show up soon, you won't get your credits."

I knew he wouldn't respond, but I kept talking to him anyway.

Rill had told me that my word-soul reached every cell in the bodies of people who heard it. Mia had told me the achievements of past Ace Detectives had collected in me. Yui had asked me for a favor: She wanted me to be the one to save Kimizuka. Nobody else.

And so…

"I've got to do it."

Just talking to him like this probably wouldn't be enough, though. I needed to come up with some sort of method. I wasn't able to

reach Charlie or Ms. Fuubi at this point. They were probably both actively working on their missions. I didn't have the time to take it slow.

Taking a small, deep breath, I gazed at Kimizuka's profile. He was still looking out the window. Copying him, I looked that way as well, and saw the tiny silhouette of an airplane in the blue sky.

"Is that what you wanted to see?"

Come to think of it, Kimizuka had done this at the same time the day before, too. His eyes had been blank, yet he'd been looking at the sky. The sky ten thousand meters up— "I see. You want to go back there, don't you, Kimizuka?"

He hadn't been looking out the window because of some unconscious human habit. As the detective's assistant, he was still following that distant sky with his eyes.

"That's right. You're…"

Kimizuka wasn't just a client who was waiting to be saved.

He was constantly searching for the one route that would let us all be happy in the end. That was Kimihiko Kimizuka's will.

"Hang on a sec!"

I flew out of the hospital room—and almost crashed into somebody. "I'm sor… Noches?"

It was the maid who looked identical to Siesta. She was carrying a paper bag with a change of clothes for Kimizuka. "Nagisa. Where are you going in such a hurry?"

"Um, I need to change clothes, too!" I couldn't be more specific than that; it was too embarrassing.

At first, Noches tilted her head, looking perplexed. Then the corners of her lips curved up slightly. "I don't really understand, but I like that expression on you."

"Yours is good, too!"

Leaving Noches to keep Kimizuka company for a while, I hurried back to my place.

Kicking my shoes off in the entryway, I made a beeline for the closet. What I was here for was tucked away carefully in the very

back.

"I'm glad I kept this."

I snatched it up, then went straight back to the hospital, clutching one more important thing tightly in my hand.

When I returned to the hospital room, Kimizuka was still sitting up in bed, although he was facing forward. Maybe Noches had made a tactful exit; she wasn't here now. Closing one of the room divider curtains, I started to change clothes.

What I'd retrieved from my closet was my high school uniform.

It was the sailor uniform I'd worn during summer term. My figure hadn't changed much since then. It still fit, no problem. But…

"Wh-why is it this embarrassing?"

Up until last year, I'd just worn it as a matter of course. It didn't look like cosplay already, did it? Just to check, I opened up a hand mirror and inspected myself.

"Maybe I'm a little too desperate."

I was out of breath, my face was red, and I'd even put on my high school uniform. Charlie had been mystified by that at some point, hadn't she? She'd wondered why I got so desperate for Kimizuka's sake.

"Because he's my friend. My business partner. My classmate. My assistant. And…"

Because I like Kimizuka.

I didn't say it out loud. There was a tiny possibility that someone would hear, and I didn't want that. As long as I knew it, that was enough.

"Hmm. I guess it's not long enough for a ponytail yet."

Looking at myself in the mirror, I fiddled with my hair. It was still a little short.

"Well, let me off with this, okay?"

Using that promised red ribbon to tie back what I could, I opened the curtain again. Kimizuka was sitting on the bed, right where he'd been earlier. He wasn't looking at anything, he wouldn't hear anything. There was no heat or energy to him. Briskly, I walked up to him.

"You're the ace detective?"

He didn't answer. Of course he wouldn't. In that case…

"Don't just stand there—answer me. Are you Kimihiko Kimizuka, the ace detective people are talking about?"

I hauled him up by his shirtfront.

This wasn't the sort of thing it was okay to do to an invalid. This was how we'd met, though, in that classroom after school.

He still wasn't responding, though. Back then, I was pretty sure Kimizuka had said, "You've got the wrong guy" and tried to leave. I'd gotten really irritated and…goaded by the heart there in the left side of my chest, I'd hauled him in close and gotten tough with him.

"If you're going to ignore my question, don't expect mercy: I'll—"

Right, just like this.

"I'll kiss you on the lips."

…Kidding.

A joke. That was a joke. Clearing my throat a tiny bit, I gazed at Kimizuka again. "Even if you can't be aware of me at all anymore, I'll meet you for the first time as often as it takes."

It was just like what we were planning to do with Siesta, if she'd forgotten everything when she woke up from her surgery. I'd tell him how the detective and her assistant had met over and over, reenact it again and again.

The detective and assistant had had all sorts of meetings.

For example, Kimizuka and Gekka Shirogane had met at a police station. After that, Kimizuka and Siesta had met at ten thousand meters. In London, he'd met Alicia, the proxy detective. I thought all those events had been significant for Kimizuka. I trusted that they had been.

But this was the meeting I'd chosen. I didn't compare myself to the previous detective. I didn't act as the proxy detective. Taking pride in my current identity as the Ace Detective, I held out my right hand to him.

I believed that these words, which I'd never properly said before, would become a word-soul that was certain to come true.

"Say, Kimizuka—be my assistant."

There was a long, long silence.

I waited, waited, kept waiting, got just a little scared, and let my gaze fall. The wind blew; I saw the curtains stir out of the corner of my eye.

"What's your name?"

I heard a voice. I couldn't look up.

All sorts of feelings had gotten tangled together, and I couldn't raise my head yet. Five seconds passed, then ten, and then I screwed up my courage and looked toward the voice. At his face.

The young man looked rather mystified, but also as if he were hoping for something. Curbing my racing feelings, I searched for words.

"My name is…"

I sucked in a small breath. Holding it for just a few moments, I looked down at the floor one more time. Several options rose to the surface and vanished, but this really was the only answer.

Raising my head decisively, I spoke with a smile.

"My name is—Nagisa!"

Nagisa Natsunagi! I proudly gave the name that belonged to me, only me, the Ace Detective.

For a moment, Kimizuka's eyes widened in surprise. "—I see." He sounded convinced. He might even have sounded as if he understood everything. As if he'd remembered.

Smiling softly, he spoke.

"Then from now on, I'll call you 'Nagisa.'"







An epilogue from the future

"That's everything I remembered this time."

Sitting on the steps near the abandoned building's crumbling entrance, I gave a long sigh. Since I'd been telling a long story, we'd changed locations several times. Now we were out in the open, under the stars.

"The Phantom Thief, Abel Arsene Schoenberg. So that was the enemy you and the others fought that time, Assistant…," Siesta murmured, as if she were reminiscing. The earlier Sacred Relics had gradually made me remember that he existed, but my image of him was much clearer now.

"So was he the one who stole our memories?"

Not just our memories; the world's records as well. Had Abel's large-scale "code of oblivion" made us lose everything?

"But, Assistant, if that's true, there's a good possibility that Abel's still alive."

"…Yeah. We may not have finished him off after all."

In the memories I'd retaken, when I last saw him, Abel had declared he'd come again.

What had happened after that? …I was pretty sure we'd fought. I remembered doing it. All that had vanished from my mind were the words "Phantom Thief," "Akashic records," and "the Singularity."

However, as memories went, a log that was missing vital data wasn't good enough. I hadn't remembered settling things with Abel after that in the truest sense of the word.

"……"

My eyes went to the person in our group who hadn't spoken once this whole time.

Fuubi Kase. What had she done at the farthest edge of the world, at the very end of things? I'd learned about it for the first time today. I felt as if I shouldn't have.

Just maybe… For the past year or so, had that sin been what had kept her in prison? The treason the Federation Government had charged her with might or might not have actually happened. Maybe that hadn't meant anything to Ms. Fuubi, though. Maybe she'd spent a year trying to atone for the crime she'd committed, the one nobody knew about.

…I couldn't ask, though.

The detective and her assistant proved theories. We could leave relating fantasies to the novelists. At least until she said something about it herself.

"Corners of the world aren't bad." Exhaling a stream of cigarette smoke, Ms. Fuubi looked up at the night sky.

Out in the country, there was no light from streetlamps or buildings, but in exchange, there was a sky full of stars.

"We're here now."

Siesta was looking up as well.

"We cross the muddy earth; we race across rough seas on boats; we fly on passenger planes at ten thousand meters, incredibly close to those stars. In the end, though, no matter where we go, we're on the map. We're always living 'here.'"

Yeah, she was right. We weren't redrawing the map. We were walking around on it.

We were constantly continuing our adventure. We had been then, and we still were now.

"Assistant, your phone is ringing."

"Hm? Oh, I didn't notice."

The name on the screen was Nagisa Natsunagi. Mia was probably with her. I hit the TALK button, then switched to speaker mode.

"Hello? Kimihiko? Did you really find her?"

"Yeah. She's right over there, smoking a cigarette like it's the best thing ever."

When I glanced at Ms. Fuubi, she averted her face coolly.

"We found a Sacred Relic, too, and we've made some headway on the past. I'll send you an e-mail about it later, but…brace yourself for various stuff."

"…I see. Actually, I'm calling because something a little strange happened here, too. Hang on a second."

Then Nagisa handed the phone to somebody else.

The voice I heard next was a vaguely familiar male one. *"It's been a while."*

"Hey… Is that Ookami?"

There was no mistake: It was Ookami, the former Enforcer. We'd last met…I was pretty sure it was over a year ago.

"Where have you been? And what have you been doing?"

"Nothing to speak of. I've lost an arm, after all."

There was self-mockery in Ookami's voice. I seemed to remember hearing that Stephen had fitted him with a prosthetic arm, though, and that he had no trouble navigating everyday life.

"What are you doing now?"

"They've given me a cushy, quiet, comfortable job as a government bureaucrat."

"Geez, are you a bad liar."

There was a moment of silence. *"What makes you say that?"* Ookami asked.

"As a rule, the security police can't reveal their identity. I bet you went back to them."

"…I guess there's no point in hiding it from you." Ookami gave a small, wry laugh. *"See, even if there are no more global crises, security police jobs aren't going anywhere."*

"It's fine if you're back with them, but why show yourself to Nagisa after so long?"

"Because the Ace Detective called me, of course."

"Why isn't that relationship over?" Had those two casually been keeping in touch…?

"Assistant, you don't have the right to restrict Nagisa's relationships with men." Siesta's cool comeback made me clear my throat awkwardly.

"Sorry, Ookami. Switch with me." Then Nagisa came back on the line. *"Here's the thing: Ookami may know where Charlie is."*

"…What, seriously?"

Charlotte was currently missing, and since she hadn't been with Ms. Fuubi, we'd just run out of clues. Who'd have thought Ookami would have one?

"The security police have been keeping an eye on a terrorist group, and Ookami says there's a good possibility that Charlie is one of its members. He noticed it and contacted me."

"Charlie joined a terrorist group…?"

It wasn't just me; Siesta and Ms. Fuubi grimaced, too. What was this about?

We'd been assuming that the Federation Government was involved with her disappearance.

"It could technically be seen as part of a government resistance movement," Ms. Fuubi pointed out; she was still smoking her cigarette. True, we couldn't ignore that line of thought, either, but…

"In that case, I think she would have tried to contact us. If someone's captured her and she can't, I'd understand that, but…," Siesta said. That was a fair argument. However, at present, it was still just an armchair theory.

"We're planning to get more of the details from Ookami, then attempt to investigate Charlie's movements."

"Yeah, that sounds good. In that case, we'll…"

What should we do? We didn't have much farther to go. The next missing memory piece was probably the last one, and it had to be lying dormant somewhere. Should we look for a new Sacred Relic? But if so, where?

"I had a dream a little while ago." Mia had taken over the phone. *"It was in fragments, but I saw several images. Three ritual implements, a large stone slab, a locked door, and a pyramid-shaped object floating in space. Does any of that ring a bell for you? Kimihiko, did anything in the memory you've retaken link to…"*

"…Yeah, it does. So that's what this is."

A pyramid-shaped object floating in space. That object, which was shaped like the Sacred Relics we'd been collecting, was the System which controlled this world from the outside. In that place, which dominated everything with programs—

"The final lost record is in that control tower."

I made eye contact with Siesta, and we both nodded. We'd just decided what to do.

"We'll bring Charlie back for sure." Nagisa took back the phone. *"So, Kimihiko and Siesta…!"*

"Yeah, leave it to us."

We'd depart on one last journey to retake our memories of the Great Cataclysm.

The Detective Is Already Dead 10

Short story and reversible cover art



nigozyu

Illustration by
Retake

Character Design by
Umibouzu

I'm not your loyal dog, all right?!

“Sorry for the wait. W-will this do?”

When I turned around, Natsunagi was wearing a cosplay outfit with dog ears and a tail.

“I think it’s good for people to have all sorts of hobbies, really.”

“You told me to try this on, Kimizuka!”

Now that she mentioned it… Yeah, maybe I had?

“And? Why are you making me cosplay?”

“Oh, in terms of cats and dogs, I wondered which you’d be.”

“Would you not make me wear this stuff just to clear up a question like that?!”

Natsunagi’s tail swished, and her face turned red. Was that from anger or shame? Still, that sort of dual nature was her defining trait, so… “You do have feline and canine facets after all.”

“Am I really that double-sided?”

“Well, you’ve got both sadistic and masochistic fetishes, don’t you?”

“That’s the worst conclusion ever!”

Scheduled for release in summer of 2025 *Information current as of June 2025.

The Detective is Already Dead 11

"Make sure you come back."

"Yeah, see you after I save the world."

It was a firm promise between the detective's assistant and his companions. Save the world. Wake up the sleeping beauty. The guidepost that points the way to a happy ending. Believing it was bound to be fine, we left on a journey—

Having learned what the Akashic records really are, Kimizuka and company brace for Phantom Thief Abel Arsene Schoenberg's next attack. With the help of Mia Whitlock the Oracle, they learn about the roles past Singularities and Ace Detectives played, while searching for a way to oppose Abel. In the midst of that, there's a prediction of the Great Cataclysm, an enormous crisis which will unsettle the world—

La detective está muerta.

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