



ROBOTICS;NOTES SIDE PHASE

地図と雨とマカロン

MAPS, THE RAIN, AND MACARONS

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PRESENTED BY NS2C



January 22, 2020. 7:23 p.m.

A single step out of the company entrance bathed Sawada Toshiyuki in the chill of the winter Tokyo air. If one looked off into the distance, they would have seen bright lights shimmering off of Shibuya, blurred by the falling rain as it poured from the night sky.

Sawada carried no fondness for the rain. Every time it fell, he felt the distinct ache of the wound that rested upon his back—a scar born of hatred that was engraved upon his flesh. On days marked by clear skies, he would oft put it out of mind; on rainy days such as this one, however, it would make its presence known and evoke in him a terrible despondency. The rain's sole redemption was that it allowed him to not gaze at that detestable aurora for a time, hiding it behind a thick layer of clouds.

As it had already been well over an hour since work had come to a close that day, the number of people exiting the Exoskeleton Company building was fairly limited.

Sawada opened his umbrella and stepped out onto the wet pavement. The streets of Roppongi, which ran right in front of the Exoskeleton Company's head office, were filled with vehicles. Numerous red taillights dotted the streets for miles, with the line of cars reaching as far as Shibuya.

Right as Sawada's shoes first touched the sidewalk, a black sedan came to a stop at the shoulder of the road, almost as if it had been waiting for him. The door on the driver's side of the car opened, and a woman stepped out.

"I do hope I didn't keep you waiting for too long, Section Chief."

It was a woman that Sawada knew well. In response, he gave a slight, wordless wave of his hand and slipped into the backseat. As soon as he closed the door, the sound of the rain

grew distant, and in its place came the soft, almost inaudible purr of the car's engine as the vehicle smoothly departed.

"You have my sincerest apologies," the woman said. "There was some trouble with the test at the Kawasaki plant."

As she met Sawada's gaze in the rearview mirror, the woman—Senomiya Misaki—bowed her head slightly as she clasped the steering wheel. For some reason, a small scratch mark colored her left cheek; it hadn't been there when the two of them had met at work earlier that morning.

Senomiya was a member of the HUG—Helpful Unlimited Gear—Testing Department, led by Sawada. But that wasn't all; she was also his partner, working to help him achieve his secret objective.

"There is no need to apologize. You are right on time," Sawada responded.

"Is that so?" Senomiya tilted her head slightly in puzzlement. "Then perhaps my clock is running a little fast." She lightly tapped the display of the dashboard's digital clock with her fingertip. When compared to the time displayed on Sawada's PokeCom, it appeared to be about ten minutes off.

"The company proves reluctant to buy us a company car equipped with protection against the solar storm," Senomiya remarked. "It appears they would not be concerned if an employee were to die in the unlikely event of an accident."

Sawada sank down further into his seat and let out a slight snort. "On the other hand, perhaps it's that they don't intend to gift one to me alone."

"..."

"That aside, where did that scratch mark come from? Was it Itotsuna's doing?"

"Yes."

Much like Senomiya, Itotsuna Yukari was a test pilot. Sawada felt no need to ask if the trouble Senomiya had mentioned was related to Itotsuna, for he already knew the answer.

"You are not very good with children, are you?"

"..."

The HUG Testing Department was nothing more than what the name implied—it was an area in which prototypes of Exoskeleton Company's flagship product, HUGs, were tested.

It had been nearly ten years since the first HUG had been released to the public. Although they were initially marketed as power-assisted suits for medical care and rehabilitation, HUGs had recently been adopted by the police departments of various countries, and a military-use HUG model was currently being developed in absolute secrecy. Naturally, the recipients of such a model would be the militaries of various countries.

A mere ten test pilots were used for HUG development, and nearly everyone who learned of that fact was taken aback by it. Moreover, seven of the pilots were women, and two were elementary-school-aged children. Because of that, there were some who questioned whether

or not the department was performing sufficient testing.

However, despite the strange ranks of their testing department, Exoskeleton Company did not have the slightest intention of forming an idol group or anything of the sort. The reason why they had gone to such lengths to form a group with such a composition was because HUGs were being developed for medical care and rehabilitation. The majority of the HUGs' install base was composed not of healthy men, but of children and the elderly. Given that, test pilots had to be limited to those with far smaller figures.

Itotsuna was the typical 10-year-old girl one might have seen skipping to school, their colorful backpack bouncing up and down all the while. She had, of course, already passed Exoskeleton Company's rigorous examinations, and she had been inducted into the team of test pilots. She had performed admirably in spite of the fact that she was just a child.

That was all well and good, but the problem did not lie there. Rather, the trouble arose when the girl donned a HUG—upon doing so, her personality would immediately shift into one of incredible arrogance, an attitude that was far and away from her normal behavior. Her skills were excellent, but her personality was very problematic. Sawada had been on the receiving end of countless kicks to the shin from the child over the years.

To put it frankly, she was a spoiled brat. So much so, in fact, that she even managed to overwhelm a woman like Senomiya Misaki, which was an incredible feat in and of itself.

As it was a job he was only able to service in his spare time, it was unexpectedly difficult for Sawada to organize a group of test subjects with compatible personalities. Nevertheless, he couldn't just abandon his position; the reason why Sawada dared to lead the department in the first place was that his role allowed him to monitor the upper echelons of Exoskeleton Company. That allowed him the means to prevent them from doing anything reckless.

Monitoring...

The word struck Sawada particularly as he looked out the window at the passing cityscape. The car, meanwhile, turned right at the Roppongi intersection and headed toward the bay area.

There was a secret meeting planned on that day with a certain person, which was the reason why Sawada had asked Senomiya to come all the way back to the company building after the test in Kawasaki. It was a mission that was to be carried out by Sawada and Senomiya alone, and kept secret from all, the company included.

Sawada's life's work—or, perhaps, if one were to use language more mocking in spirit, his fight to save the world—involved thwarting the "Human Domestification Project."

"I am far from being a superhero..."

Sawada chuckled wryly at the melancholic face reflected in his window. In that moment, he was reminded of something a female classmate had once said to him.

"*You look like a snake, y'know.*"



At the time, Sawada had believed she was trying to pick a fight with him, but perhaps the analogy was more appropriate than he had initially thought.

As that memory floated through his mind, the scenery that was flowing along with it outside the window suddenly came to a halt. The red light of the traffic signal reflected off of the car's windshield.

The intersection was under construction, and a life-sized doll-esque service robot was hard at work under the rain as the storm soaked its frame. From the inside of the car, it didn't look like the robot had any human supervision.

Scenes like that were commonplace in present-day Tokyo. Despite the large-scale incident that had occurred two months prior where robots had gone berserk, the number of life-sized service robots currently in operation showed no signs of decreasing.

"Tokyo: The City of Robots." That tagline represented the concept the Tokyo Metropolitan Government had proposed to be presented alongside the 2020 Expo. The idea appeared to be one where the entire city of Tokyo would be reborn as a new, futuristic city that one might see in the late twenty-first century. As a result, robots were not only being incorporated into construction sites, but also in areas one might have encountered in their daily life—they were hard at work in fast food, behind the register at convenience stores, driving taxis, and so on.

This is truly vexing... Sawada thought to himself.

"Section Chief, forgive me for saying this, but do you really believe we can trust them?"

Senomiya suddenly asked, her voice a murmur. Her gaze was not directed at Sawada; it was instead pointed directly ahead of herself.

As soon as the traffic signal turned blue, the car once again began to move. As it continued onward, the construction robot slowly faded into the distant scenery.

"The damage incurred at last November's Fire Festival would have been far worse without their involvement," Sawada responded. "Despite that, do you still feel you cannot trust them?"

The "Fire Festival." That was the nickname the media frequently used for the incident involving out-of-control robots that Sawada had mentioned. Two months prior in November, all service robots manufactured by RI—Roboratory Industry—suddenly went berserk, bringing about a large number of casualties in the process.

Although it was never mentioned in the press releases that followed, it was rumored that over five hundred robots had advanced toward Japanese government facilities during the incident, almost as if they had intended on attacking the offices of their own volition. Fortunately, the out-of-control robots came to a halt right before disaster could strike, rendering that specific attack unsuccessful.

"The Committee has an influence on all public institutions," Senomiya said, her tone of voice stiff. "That may also be the case with CIRO... No, it would be far stranger for an institute as large as CIRO to *not* be affiliated with the Committee."

"I have good faith that I have chosen our negotiator properly." Sawada looked out the window once again before continuing. "It is unclear to what extent CIRO has been corroded, but at the very least, I am confident that Kawarasaki is a man worthy of our trust."

Upon saying that, Sawada's lips twisted in a self-derisive manner before he added...

"Although I despise him as a human being."

"..."

Senomiya didn't so much as chuckle.

She had been like that ever since the two of them had met. As the PR spokesperson for the company, she had a charming smile she wore for media appearances to increase sales numbers. On normal occasions like this, however, she was calm and collected, not so much as cracking a smile. Even Sawada, who considered himself quite brusque, had thought her to be quite like a robot before.

"On an unrelated note, have you talked to any of the high school students on Tanegashima as of late?"

"..."

Senomiya did not answer Sawada verbally, nor did she do so through a change in her facial expression. The face reflected in the rearview mirror remained ever stoic.

Tanegashima was Senomiya's hometown; whenever it became the topic of a conversation, however, her responses grew short and curt. It seemed as though she had no

desire to speak about it.

“I believe I heard that the Robotics Research Club is going to be hosting an exhibition at the Expo. They are the only high schoolers who plan to do so. That is quite the accomplishment.”

“Is it, now.”

“That's quite harsh of you. Your sister may be there as well.”

Sawada retrieved a cigarette from his suit pocket. Upon placing it in his mouth, he began to search his pockets for his lighter, but it was nowhere to be found.

“...As for the matter of Tanegashima, the rocket—”

“If this is about the investigation report, I submitted it to you last week.”

“You did. However, not a speck of relevant information could be gleaned from it, which I only discovered further to be the case after my own investigations.”

“Perhaps it was a miscalculation, then.”

“I certainly hope so. However, there is still a worry on my mind: why Tanegashima, and not Uchinoura? That question still weighs heavily on me.”

“...”

After rummaging through his suit for a short while, Sawada finally located his lighter. He attempted to light his cigarette, but...

“Section Chief. According to company regulations, smoking is unallowed within company vehicles.”

“...”

Senomiya was always strict in that way. There was no such thing as “letting it slide” when it came to her. In that sense, she was a very appropriate subordinate for Sawada.

“There is also the matter regarding Yukifune Airi. I do wish I could step foot onto Tanegashima myself,” Sawada said. He obediently put his cigarette away and let out a small sigh. “However, I doubt that I would escape the island unharmed.”

“If the Committee were to learn of our activities, we would meet a swift end. We cannot allow ourselves to be careless.”

“...I am well aware.”

Sawada hadn't had the slightest idea how truly difficult it would be to investigate the Committee while also acting as if he was at their beck and call.

What an awfully troublesome position I have been born into... he thought to himself. If I had just a little more freedom, how far ahead of the Committee would I be able to venture?

However, Sawada swiftly reconsidered that line of thought. It was only because he had been born into his position that he had been able to gain advance notice of the Committee's deplorable project, and subsequently, begin his own sabotage efforts.

January 22, 2020. 7:23 p.m.

The Tokyo Bay Continental was a luxurious hotel located right next to the Hamazakibashi junction of the Shuto Expressway. It had been popular for many years with men and women of all ages, with rooms that featured a panoramic view of the bay area and the Rainbow Bridge.

Yamaki Jorui, one of the HUG test pilots, had spent a long time lamenting the fact that the hotel was booked during the Christmas season for multiple years in advance.

After parking in the underground parking lot, Sawada and Senomiya exited the car and boarded the elevator to the first floor. A number of middle-aged guests dressed in formal attire were also riding the elevator; it appeared that there was a large party occurring somewhere in the hotel. The intense scent of perfume permeated the slender elevator, causing Sawada to nearly choke on the fumes.

The room Sawada and Senomiya were heading for was on the eleventh floor, though they had yet to receive details regarding which specific room they would be visiting.

Upon exiting the elevator, the two saw nary a single soul in the corridor, which left the hallway bathed in silence. Sawada kept his gaze straight as he walked toward the end of the corridor.

As he walked, Sawada passed by a garbage collector pushing a cart. He and the man exchanged glances, and the man took a key out of his pocket before handing it to Sawada. Perhaps that was the man Sawada had arranged the meeting with. He had scheduled to obtain the key in such a manner so as to avoid going through the check-in process.

The room number on the key he had received read “1104.”

Sawada walked further down the corridor until he arrived at the designated room. Upon unlocking the door, Senomiya made her way inside ahead of Sawada and carefully examined the room. When she determined that it was clear, she nodded, urging Sawada inside.

“It’s quite nice to be able check in without any qualms every once in a while. Of course, that rings further true in the case of a hotel as nice as this one, doesn’t it?”

The room they had entered was one of the far more affordable ones at the hotel. It only had two beds, a small table, a sofa, and a bathroom. Despite the low cost of the room, if the two looked out the window, they would still be able to see the lights of the Rainbow Bridge shining brilliantly through the rain.

Sawada sat down on the couch, relaxed his body, and checked the time. There was still less than half an hour until their appointment was slated to begin. As he reached for a cigarette, Senomiya, who was still standing at the entrance, frowned slightly but remained silent.

“Smoking is not prohibited here, yes?”

Sawada had no interest in worrying about his subordinate's objections in a place like this. However, just as he retrieved his lighter, there was a knock on the door, once again stopping him before he could light his cigarette.

As Senomiya went to answer the door...

"It's Nishina!"

A woman's voice came from behind it. When Senomiya opened the door, the figure of a petite woman in a black pantsuit appeared in the doorway. She seemed to only be about 150 centimeters tall—barely reaching Senomiya's shoulders in height. Her stature made her look young, but she was 30 years old. Sawada made it a point to avoid touching upon her age whenever they spoke, for doing so tended to make her quite upset.

"Good evening!" Nishina Ema smiled in a friendly manner and shoved a small paper bag with a fancy pattern on it toward Sawada.

"I bought 'em at a store called 'Bijoux Chloé' over in Ginza. Make sure to eat some with Senomiya-san when you get a chance later."

"...That's quite the greeting you've developed there."

"Hehe, Sawada-kun, you're looking as gloomy as ever! Just like a snake."

Sawada found himself at a loss for words—every sense of tension that the room had possessed had immediately dissipated.

"You look like a snake, y'know." That was exactly what the woman that stood before him had told him many years back, when he was a student. It was, however, highly unlikely that Nishina remembered such an innocuous thing.

Sawada and Nishina had been classmates during their high school days. They hadn't been dating or anything of the sort, but they had been close enough to chat after school from time to time.

Nishina was currently assigned to the Cabinet Satellite Intelligence Center's Analysis Department of the Cabinet Intelligence and Research Office—often abbreviated as "CIRO." If one attempted to inspect her via 'IRUO.', however, such information would not be available to them.

The Cabinet Satellite Intelligence Center was a relatively new department that had been established within CIRO in 2001. Its job, to put it simply, was to monitor and analyze Japan using information-gathering satellites that remained at a height of about 500 kilometers above the Earth's surface.

For a very long time, Nishina had been a woman with a very unusual hobby: she enjoyed studying maps. She had said that to Sawada back when they had met two months ago; she explained that the reason why she had to start wearing glasses back when they were students, despite the fact that she didn't want to, was because she had spent far too much time looking at maps. That was precisely why the place she worked at was incredibly fulfilling to her.

That could also have been said to be the very reason why Sawada had chosen someone from CIRO as his partner to meet with.

Such a meeting had been a clever twist of fate, but it had also been a fortuitous one. It was best for them to use such positive happenstance to their advantage.

Sawada and Nishina had gotten reacquainted two months prior, just before the Fire Festival. They had not seen each other since they had graduated from high school, and while their positions had changed along with the passage of time, Nishina's attitude toward Sawada was exactly the same as it had been years ago. To Sawada, a man who had rejected all others and possessed very few memories of his youth, their reunion had actually been quite refreshing.

"Where's Mr. Kawarazaki?" Nishina asked.

"He is not here yet," replied Sawada.

Nishina sat down on the sofa in front of Sawada. She urged Senomiya to sit down as well, but Sawada's fairly appropriate subordinate gave her a gentle refusal with a forced smile.

"We were informed not to come near the hotel until we had finished up the security checks from the underground parking lot to the top floor."

Considering she said "we," that must have meant that CIRO had recruited more men than just Nishina to set up the meeting. That had also applied to Sawada's first time meeting Kawarazaki two months ago.

Kawarazaki was the chief analyst at the Cabinet Satellite Intelligence Center. Sawada had been introduced to him via Nishina, and in time, Sawada leaked the information he had obtained prior to the Fire Festival to him.

Kawarazaki was initially suspicious of the information Sawada had provided him, but in the end, he did provide sufficient assistance. Thanks to his help, the incident did not turn into a catastrophe. If it hadn't been for Kawarazaki's assistance, the pages of human history would have been stained with the first ever assassination of a prominent figure by a robot.

"And what is this?" Sawada asked. He had refocused his attention on the paper bag that Nishina had given him, which he was still dutifully holding on to. He then moved to unseal it.

"Macarons. Don'tcha like 'em, Sawada-kun?"

Just as Nishina had said, there were about ten macarons of varied colors inside the bag.

It was then that Sawada realized that "Bijoux Chloé," which Nishina had mentioned earlier, was a store that had opened a few months prior. It was one that specialized in macarons, and it was also well known in France. Sawada didn't hold an overwhelming desire to visit it, however.

"Section Chief, I had no idea you liked macarons..." Senomiya put her hand over her mouth in surprise.

Sawada had been hiding that fact about himself for quite some time, but it seemed his subordinate had finally discovered his secret.

"Ah, well, yes, I suppose I have seen you eating them a number of times... but I never would've thought you actually enjoyed them..."

"Are you surprised?"

Attempting to maintain his composure to the best of his ability, Sawada placed the paper bag of macarons on the table.

"I am not surprised, no. From this point forward, I'll make arrangements to have macarons placed on your desk at all times," Senomiya joked, in a manner quite uncharacteristic of her. Her face appeared quite serious, however, so perhaps it wasn't a joke.

"Back when we were students, Sawada and I'd go out once a week to buy macarons. I remember calling them 'Macaron Dates' back then."

"...You may stop there."

"We conquered basically all the macaron joints in Tokyo. We even went all the way to Yokohama once, I think."

"Forgive me if this sounds impolite, but did the Section Chief ask you to bring those?"

Senomiya, why are you asking that of all things? We did not come here today to talk about macarons.

Such thoughts ran through Sawada's mind as he held his forehead, but before he could break his silence to voice them, Nishina replied to Senomiya.

"Nah. Sawada-kun wouldn't do that."

Nishina had a faraway look in her eyes, and was seemingly feeling nostalgic. "The first time I gave him a macaron was as one of those obligatory gifts you're supposed to give to guys on Valentine's Day," she recounted. "I remember exactly what he said: 'I had no idea something so delicious even existed on this planet!' And he was even shaking like crazy as he said it! That's why I said, 'All right, let's go buy one together next time!' And the rest was history."

"That's quite shocking... I would have been in high school back then," Senomiya remarked.

"Yeah, isn't it crazy? I couldn't believe he'd come from Italy but'd never had a macaron before."

"Yes, for France was so close, yet so far away..." Sawada remarked. In truth, he had been to France before, but his childhood had not been peaceful enough to allow him to enjoy macarons there.

That was all thanks to his father, Miguel Sant'Ambroggio.

Sawada's father was often referred to as one of the golden children of the era. He was a rare breed of contractor that had managed to bring an extremely successful corporation back from the brink of bankruptcy. He was also a man with a seat among the "Invisible Rulers" — the Committee of 300. His influence on the world's economy was immeasurable.

Sawada existed as the illegitimate child of such a man, and was either viewed as a

precious bargaining chip or as an explosive depending on the eye of the beholder; he had almost been killed on more than one occasion as a result of that.

Sawada had relocated from place to place every few months in order to escape both those who wanted to use him and those who wanted to kill him, which had left him unable to do as much as even attend school properly.

Much like a criminal, he had spent his days constantly on the run.

At the end of his long journey roaming the world, 6-year-old Sawada had found his way to Japanese soil, the birthplace of his mother. By the time he had first stepped into the country, however, his mother was no longer by his side.

Even now, Sawada had no idea where she had gone. Perhaps she was no longer of this world. Nevertheless, he had had no choice but to keep on living, even though he was all alone.

That was why he stopped running.

He had dared to contact his father, whom he had never so much as met before. Not long after he had placed the call, his father sent an assassin to kill him, the son born of his own blood.

“In other words...”

Senomiya nodded in understanding as Nishina told the story.

“The Section Chief’s love of macarons stems from your influence.”

“Hmm, could be,” Nishina mused. She pushed her glasses up with her finger and turned to Sawada with another friendly smile. “A woman who’s able to influence Sawada-kun? Don’t think there’s too many people who can do that, yeah?”

“Perhaps,” Sawada responded.

“Living proof right here.” As if she had expected Sawada’s response, Nishina gave a small shrug of the shoulders. “As usual, I don’t have a clue what you’re thinking. Zilch.”

“...”

“Oh yeah, fun fact, I’ve been influenced a bit by Sawada-kun, too.”

Upon saying that, Nishina took out her PokeCom. Senomiya, clearly quite invested, peered at the screen.

Nishina’s home screen had a wallpaper designed to look like deluoode map.

“Sawada-kun’s lived all over the world, right? The whole reason why I love reading maps is because of all the places he showed me on them. It was always really fun, so I just kept asking him to show me more.”

The prejudice that often claimed that women weren’t good with directions—and by extension, weren’t good at reading maps—certainly didn’t apply to Nishina.

“And nowadays, I even get to work with Sawada-kun. I’m really grateful that I met him.”

“Then I shall receive these macarons in full as a token of your gratitude,” Sawada remarked.

“Sure, go right on ahead. But, hmm... does this count as a Macaron Date? I really miss those... I kinda wanna go on one again sometime. Senomiya-san, would you wanna come with?”

“No, I—”

“Don’t like sweets?”

“No, it’s not that...”

“Then it’s settled. The three of us’ll go together!”

Nishina’s overbearing personality allowed her to decide everything. That was just another thing that had never changed about her.

“You don’t mind, do ya, Sawada-kun?” Nishina probed.

“I am not of the age where I would do such things, I would surmise,” he replied.

“Now, now. You’re really gonna be like that, even though I’m being so kind as to give you a lifeline?”

“What exactly do you mean by ‘lifeline’?”

“I thought it might be reeeeal difficult for a 30-year-old man to go to a specialty macaron shop all by himself. That applies all the more to you, Sawada-kun.”

Though he did seem to be worried about such a thing, Sawada frowned as if to say it was none of her concern.

“But if we went out together, you’d be able to buy as many as you’d like, don’tcha think?”

“I suppose...”

It is true that I have yet to visit Bijoux Chloé... Sawada thought. As his mind began to wander, Nishina suddenly put a hand to her ear. Upon closer inspection, one could see that she was wearing an earpiece.

Sawada began to wonder if one of her colleagues had contacted her, but his thoughts were interrupted when Nishina lightly struck her knee with her hand and stood up from the sofa.

“Kawarazaki has arrived. The meeting place has been changed to a different room. I will guide you to the new location,” she declared.

Sawada checked the time display on his PokeCom. 8:30 p.m. They were right on time. He entrusted the paper bag of macarons to Senomiya and followed Nishina out into the corridor.

“Sawada-kun.”

While they waited for the elevator in the hallway, Nishina spoke to Sawada. Her smile had disappeared and her expression had stiffened. “Sawada-kun, are you still living alone?” she murmured.

“...”

Nishina’s interrogation was presented at a volume that Senomiya likely couldn’t hear—no louder than a whisper. “Even though it might get you killed, and even though you might end up covered in blood because of it, do you still wear that single expression and refuse to

ask for anyone's help, even now?"

"If you die, even if there'll only be one person sad about it, that person's right here! You think you have no friends, but who are you kidding?! Don't go and die so irresponsibly, you idiot!"

The words that had been spoken to him on that day, accompanied by a pair of teary eyes, had long been engraved deep inside his heart. On that day, both a wound of hatred and words of salvation had been carved upon his body at the same time.

Much like today, it had been raining on that day as well. Although it had been the midst of spring, it had been extremely cold.

A boy was on the way home from school. His father had sent an assassin to stab him from behind with a Swiss Army knife. A large amount of blood was pouring from his body, and as it flowed onto the asphalt, it mixed with the rainwater.

As he stared ahead of himself in a daze, the boy, merely 16 years old, prepared himself for death. He had been running ever since he was a child, and he had even lost his mother in the process.

The boy had been stabbed right after he had contacted his father for the first time in his life. Miguel Sant'Ambroggio was not a naïve man. The boy had been weak and careless; the resulting injury was what he deserved for it. It was inevitable that the boy would die there, not a single soul watching over him as he did.

With those thoughts running through his mind, the boy closed his eyes—and suddenly, he could hear the sound of footsteps approaching, splashing against the wet surface of the road.

A warm, soft touch upon his hand.

When the boy opened his eyes, he saw Nishina Ema, the girl he had parted with at the school gate only a few minutes prior. She was squatting down beside him, her figure soaked by the rain, and she was desperately pleading with the boy: "Don't die!"

Over Nishina's shoulder, the boy could see the assassin returning for him. It didn't take a large amount of strength for the boy to swiftly pull a gun out from his pocket and shoot the man squarely between the eyes.

Why did Nishina, the girl who was supposed to have parted from Sawada at the school gate, come back for him?

"Because I suddenly felt the urge to go on a Macaron Date."

That was the explanation that Nishina had given Sawada afterward. Whether or not it was true was something that, to this very day, Sawada didn't know.

In any event, Sawada's father finally acknowledged his son after he had killed one of his

assassins. It was because Nishina had been there that day that Sawada was still alive today. Despite that, Sawada had never once expressed his feelings of gratitude to Nishina.

During their remaining two years of high school, Nishina never asked Sawada about the assassination attempt, nor the gun, nor the man who had been killed.

“Even now, I’m sure you could get away with shooting an illegal handgun just fine,” she told him.

“...”

“I’m sure you wouldn’t hesitate to kill someone who was trying to kill you.”

“...”

“I don’t know if you remember what I said to you back then or not, but...”

The elevator arrived at their floor. The doors slowly opened.

“Don’t go and die irresponsibly.”

Rather than respond, Sawada tapped Nishina on the shoulder, urging her to board the elevator.

“We are not here today for a high school reunion,” Sawada said. “Your excessive prying will not be needed here. You are merely to act as an intermediary between Mr. Kawarazaki and me.”

“...”

Nishina pressed the button for the twenty-third floor. With her finger still on the button, she nodded.

An isolated mumble escaped from her lips. “That’s just like you, Sawada-kun...”

This time, she did not look back at him.

Sawada always moved to coldly shut out anyone who tried to pry into his life. Was it to keep them from getting closer to him? Was it to avoid getting involved with others?

Perhaps those were parts of it. However, in the end, his primary reason was to protect himself. There were only two breeds of people that approached Sawada: those who intended to kill him, and those who intended to use him.

Even Sawada’s own blood-related father followed that model.

I am quite the lonely man, aren’t I... Sawada thought to himself. As he stared at the back of Nishina’s head, he let out a self-derisive chuckle.

January 22, 2020. 8:36 p.m.

The suite on the twenty-third floor was not a room that faced the Tokyo Bay. Perhaps if the weather were clear, one would have been able to see the buildings at the center of Tokyo from the window. However, the beautiful scenery was obscured by a screen of rain, and the view of the city was buried in a thick layer of fog.

“You would have to be quite a powerful civil servant to be able to obtain a suite like this, wouldn’t you say?” Sawada called out, addressing the tall man who was standing by the window and gazing out of it.

He must have been over 190 centimeters tall—compared to Sawada’s height, 177 centimeters, he was the taller man.

“Well, yes, but I did ask for a room on a lower floor.”

Kawarazaki turned around and trained his large eyes on Sawada.

He was a man whose eyes were even more distinctive than his height. His gaze nervously darted around the room, never choosing to relax on a specific location. The shining glint present in his eyes made it hard to believe he was a man who was well beyond his forties in age.

Those eyes of his monitored every nook and cranny of Japan, day in and day out, via satellites.

Kawarazaki Hiroshi. Chief Analyst at the Cabinet Satellite Intelligence Center of the Cabinet Intelligence and Research Office.

“Nishina-kun said that this room was more suitable for security purposes, so I listened to her. Nothing more, nothing less,” Kawarazaki said.

Nishina stood waiting at the entrance to the spacious room.

“Want something to drink?” Kawarazaki gestured toward the table. A bottle of wine sat atop it.

“I am not one to drink alcohol.”

There was no ulterior motive present in Sawada’s refusal—what he had said was simply an indisputable fact. A mere can of beer would have been enough to dye his cheeks red and blur his vision entirely. That was the reason why Sawada made it a point to avoid drinking, no matter the occasion.

“What a dull man you are...” Kawarazaki retorted.

“My apologies,” Sawada responded.

Sawada never cared for such social customs. He was the kind of man to report only what he appeared at the meeting for, and he often asked his subordinate to do the same. In that sense, Senomiya, who was the same kind of person as Sawada, was very much an appropriate subordinate for him. However, depending on who they met with, the two of them

might have earned resentment for their attitudes, especially in Japanese society.

"I appreciate your assistance with the incident in November." Keeping his head raised, Sawada gave the man his thanks. "In regards to Senomiya and I, I had carried a hypothesis that often left me feeling worried: that you may not have trusted us."

"I certainly didn't trust you completely. Ah, and I still don't at the moment," Kawarazaki replied. He turned once again to face the window. "However, I made personal efforts to make sure the information you gave me was true, and indeed, it was. I confirmed it with my own eyes. Because of that, I've trusted the warnings you've given me as well."

"A man who believes in maps and nothing else." That was Sawada's evaluation of Kawarazaki. In some ways, he was actually quite similar to Sawada. Those similarities were precisely the reason why he placed his faith in Kawarazaki.

Despite that, Sawada despised him as a human being. Perhaps the sentiment was mutual on Kawarazaki's part.

"Setting that aside, how do you feel about releasing a response from within CIRO?" Sawada inquired.

"It's very likely that I can't act freely, so something like that wouldn't be feasible," Kawarazaki responded.

Kawarazaki's gaze pierced through Sawada. As he was being stared at, Sawada was overcome by the feeling that being stared at by the man was far from pleasant, which he mainly attributed to the sharpness of his eyes.

"In truth, I do sense the shadow of the Committee within CIRO," Kawarazaki continued.

"I can imagine," Sawada said.

"Though, it isn't like I've trusted my coworkers since the beginning or anything of the sort. People in the government and the people at CIRO don't exactly agree on everything, after all. Yet, ever since I met you, I've been suspicious of every person I've come across. It gets tiresome."

"In other words, you have not yet been able to find out who among your ranks is working for the Committee."

"If we were to investigate aggressively, that would be exactly what would give us away. We'd never find anything if that happened, would we?"

Such caution was something Sawada appreciated as well. If Kawarazaki were to make any wrong moves, he would not only be putting himself in danger, but Sawada as well.

"It seems we were right to choose Kawarazaki-san as our negotiation partner," Sawada remarked.

Kawarazaki snorted and shifted his gaze away, as if to show that he didn't care for how Sawada spoke.

"Oh, right. I heard that Exoskeleton Company is going to host an exhibition at the Expo, is that right?" Kawarazaki inquired. "I've heard things like how there's going to be a military HUG

there and whatnot. It was all over the news. It seems like they're at the point where they don't care about keeping appearances up anymore."

"...In regards to that, we are currently evaluating whether or not we should withdraw from the Expo," Sawada said.

"Withdraw? But there's only a month until it opens," Kawarazaki said, bewildered.

"It is because of the high risk of terrorism," Sawada explained.

"You're saying something like November's going to happen again? Are you being serious?"

"The world's most cutting-edge robots will be gathered there. It will be a prime opportunity for the Committee."

Kawarazaki folded his arms and grumbled. "As you would imagine, it's going to be difficult to stop the Expo."

"In regards to that restriction, perhaps requesting increased security would suffice. That would at least provide a diversion. The crisis we have to be careful not to incur is not some paltry robotic uprising."

As Sawada spoke, he retrieved his PokeCom from his pocket. He brought up a certain image on the display and turned it toward Kawarazaki.

The object pictured was something that looked like an offshore oil platform.

"And this is?" Kawarazaki inquired.

"A ship," Sawada answered.

"A ship? It has a very odd shape to it, then..."

"Are you familiar with the Ocean Launch company?"

"Is that the one that launches rockets from the ocean?"

"This is a launch ship of theirs."

Ocean Launch was a private Canadian company. It had been frequently discussed on the news recently due to its activities in launching rockets from giant ships.

It was common knowledge that the most ideal place to launch a rocket from was near the equator, but there were many restrictions involved in actually building a launch complex near it. However, if a rocket could have been launched from a ship, there would have been no need to build a base, and it would have become possible to perform a launch from the middle of the ocean. In addition, the cost of doing so would have been quite inexpensive.

However, on top of the fact that Ocean Launch company's rockets weren't very reliable, there also weren't many companies that were willing to launch rockets into space—as a result, the company had been forced to file for bankruptcy about a year prior.

"This image was taken in Vancouver about a week ago. And this one was taken..." Sawada slid his fingertip across the surface of the screen and displayed the next image. "...five days ago."

It was a picture of the same ship sailing through the ocean.

Then, he showed Kawarazaki the next picture, one taken from a satellite. Sawada did not fail to notice the shift in his eyes as he showed him the third image. It seemed to have had an effect.

When Sawada and Nishina had first met up in November, he had received some advice from her: “*If you want to get Kawarazaki to hear you out, you gotta prepare a picture beforehand. He’s way more likely to bite if you do, especially if the one you whip out comes from a satellite.*”

In that moment, Sawada’s evaluation of the man—that he believed in maps and nothing else—was proven true.

Sawada quickly glanced in Nishina’s direction. However, she was exchanging words with Senomiya near the entrance and did not notice his gaze.

“I’ve seen this before. Back when I came to Japan several years ago,” Kawarazaki said.

“After they declared bankruptcy,” Sawada began, “the launch ship was to be impounded, and as such, its operations are currently being halted. In spite of that, five days ago, the ship abruptly left port from Vancouver, where it had been anchored. It was heading toward Hawaii, but soon went off course.”

“CIRO already has that information, though we haven’t received any surveillance orders as of yet,” Kawarazaki responded.

“We have obtained intelligence stating that the launch ship is carrying a pre-assembled rocket.”

“That’s... not something you’d normally see in their business ventures...”

“Yes, because their operations are being halted. Incidentally...”

Sawada looked out the window at that moment. The Tokyo Tower, which was currently being dismantled, could be vaguely seen through the thick veil of fog.

“...rockets are not particularly different when compared to ICBMs,” he continued.

“And how has the U.S. military responded?”

“They have not made any moves as of yet.”

“Didn’t the U.S. take this picture?”

“I am fairly certain it was found in the CIA’s database.”

“The CIA? Good lord, you’ve certainly got some impressive connections.”

“Someone I know just happened to be working for the CIA. That is also how I came to know you—through Nishina’s intermediation. It is merely the same case here.”

“Nishina-kun, hmm? I’ve had my suspicions that she was possibly someone sent by you, and I still don’t feel like that’s necessarily incorrect.”

“She is not exactly a subordinate of mine.”

“Hmph.”

Coolly brushing aside Kawarazaki’s cynicism, Sawada continued. “It is unlikely that this ship will attack Japan. Additionally...”

Sawada checked the time display on his PokeCom. 20:50.

“...it won’t be long before the Royal Australian Navy storms the ship.”

The fact that the Australian military was stepping in—as opposed to the U.S. military doing so—was a sign of how truly peculiar the situation was. The U.S. military, for unknown reasons, had yet to take any actions against Ocean Launch.

“At present, a rocket is being assembled on the island of Tanegashima. That rocket was funded by Ocean Launch,” Sawada stated.



“On Tanegashima, eh? If that’s the case, then I’ve ‘seen’ it today as well,” Kawarazaki said.

“From far up in the sky” was what he was likely trying to say.

“Are you implying that the Tanegashima rocket’s suspicious?” Kawarazaki asked.

“It is merely a possibility,” Sawada answered. “While we are on the subject, are you certain that the freight being carried on the ship is not just another one of your information-gathering satellites?”

“Thanks to the influence of the solar storm, there’s talk about launching a spare craft, but that’s all. I haven’t heard anything about a satellite launch happening this year,” Kawarazaki replied.

“I see.”

“There’s no way to move forward on anything you’ve mentioned with such little evidence.

I can't even call this a leak—it's nothing but a delusion of yours."

"You are quite right. I've made many varied investigations into the Tanegashima rocket, but I could find nothing suspicious through them in the slightest. In fact, the absolute absence of anything suspicious is, conversely, all the more eerie."

"No, there are things to be suspicious of. The launch plan this time was so incredibly unusual that the government officials seemed to be in an absolute uproar about it. Normally, the legal procedures alone would take three years, but it seemed like the launch was greenlit extremely quickly."

When he viewed it that way, the circumstances did indeed seem quite suspicious to Sawada; in fact, at that point, it began to feel far too obvious.

"In addition to Tanegashima's launch, the launch sites at Cape Canaveral, Baikonur, Guiana, and Jiuquan will all be holding rocket launches at around the same time. Do you think that, perhaps, one of those rockets will not just be a mere rocket?" Sawada inquired.

"Are you trying to say one's an ICBM?" Kawarazaki prodded.

"An ICBM... Our situation would be far nicer if we were only dealing with a mere missile..."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

Just as Kawarazaki started glaring at Sawada again, Senomiya walked up to him.

"Section Chief, pardon me for interrupting, but it seems the Australian military has taken control," she said.

It had occurred at precisely the time they were expecting it to. Whoever had contacted Senomiya was most likely Sawada's "good friend" at the CIA.

"Did something happen?" Sawada asked.

"No. On the contrary... there's nothing," Senomiya answered in a tone of confusion.

"Pardon?"

"Um..."

Senomiya was unusually bewildered.

"According to what they said over the transmission, there are no rockets on board," she explained.

"None...?" Sawada responded, similarly baffled. He had not expected that result at all. He immediately retreated into his thoughts in order to ponder what exactly was going on.

Kawarazaki, while reaching for the wine bottle sitting on the table, answered in place of Sawada. "It could be a false report, or maybe even a fake one. If you'd seen the photo we were looking at earlier that was taken by the satellite, you'd have come to the same conclusion."

"But I absolutely confirmed that it had been loaded when it departed from the harbor..." Kawarazaki uncorked the wine bottle and poured the transparent liquid into a glass. Naturally, he did not pour any for Sawada.

"Has the U.S. military been monitoring it since it left Vancouver?" he asked.

"Yes. By satellite. That can't be disputed. There were no opportunities to unload any freight," Sawada responded.

"Then that means one of two things. Either the U.S. military's information was wrong from the start, or—"

"The U.S. military's satellites were deceived."

For a brief period, a thick silence enveloped the air between the two. Kawarazaki let out a seemingly bothered sigh as he sipped the white wine swirling in his glass.

"I'll investigate the Tanegashima case further," he said. "But I'm pretty sure that if you didn't find anything during your investigation, I'll likely end up with the same results."

"The launch is nearly a month away. Even if there is nothing as of now, there exists a sufficient possibility that something may appear in the future. We will have to take particular caution near the waters of Tanegashima."

"That area is the number one priority for what needs to be monitored. With my eyes, I could even track down a single piece of driftwood in one square meter of the sea," Kawarazaki boasted.

"That is precisely why we are asking you to do this, Kawarazaki-san," Sawada said.

"The possibility that something will be transported to Tanegashima in the near future... What, like something nuclear? That sounds like complete and utter fiction, but if the U.S. Army had a secret base underneath Mageshima, then perhaps that would make a lot of sense..." Kawarazaki mused.

"At the very least, five rockets are slated to launch around the world at the same time, and it's highly likely that any of them could be the Committee's handiwork. Whether the one being launched from Tanegashima is the correct rocket or not, if we can abort the launch, we can reduce the number of rockets from five to four. That will make it easier to hone in on the correct one."

Of course, Sawada was already in the process of trying to approach the other four launch sites through his own channels in order to see if he could abort those launches.

"If a nuclear missile were disguised as a rocket, couldn't it be intercepted through MD?" Kawarazaki posed.

"The Committee may not intend to drop the rocket back onto Earth," Sawada responded.

"Wait, wait, aren't rockets devices that are absolutely fated to come back down post-launch? What, do they plan on incinerating it in the atmosphere?"

"Allow me to present you with some far more grave information."

Sawada slid his finger across the screen of his PokeCom and brought up a new image. Displayed on the screen was an artificial sphere, with multiple thick cords protruding from it at several locations. While it seemed to be even larger in diameter than an average person's height, it was difficult to make that judgment, as there was nothing present to compare it to.

"And this is?" Kawarazaki asked.



“A BHB. An object known as a ‘Black Hole Bomb,’” Sawada answered.

“Incredible... They actually exist...?”

Kawarazaki leaned closer to Sawada’s PokeCom and studied the image carefully. His eyes darted restlessly across the image. “Not only can we not talk about this in public, we won’t be able to talk about it within CIRO, either...” he marveled.

“In November, at around the same time that the Fire Festival was occurring, this dangerous object, which was being secretly developed at SERN in France, was stolen by someone,” Sawada stated.

“Any idea as to who?” Kawarazaki inquired. Sawada silently shook his head side to side.

“I have already provided you with an overview of Project Atum in the past, correct?” Sawada asked.

“The mass genocide of humanity via a magnetospheric substorm brought on by solar storm... right?”

“There is a possibility that the BHB will be used for that purpose. Upon examining the timing, there can be no doubt about it.”

“You think it’s loaded onto one of the five rockets?”

“If the BHB were to be detonated on Earth’s surface, the number of casualties would not even reach a hundred million. That alone would not be enough to fulfill the Committee’s goal for their Human Domestication Project.”

Naturally, Sawada was aware of the fact that his words were unrelentingly cruel.

However, that was the way of the Committee, and consequently, his father.

“If you know this much, why don’t you make a move already?” Kawarazaki probed. “You’ve got connections strong enough to get you images from the U.S. military’s surveillance satellites, so why don’t you do something yourself?”

Kawarazaki’s doubts were to be expected, but Sawada was currently faced with circumstances that prevented him from taking action himself.

“Now wait just a second... Don’t tell me you just don’t wanna get your own hands dirty,” Kawarazaki spat out in disgust.

“On the contrary, it would likely be far easier to dirty them.”

Sawada laughed in self-derision and took a cigarette from his breast pocket.

“You can’t smoke in this room,” Kawarazaki stated.

“...Pardon me, then.” Lamenting how abominable the society he lived in was, Sawada put the cigarette back into his pocket.

“I am in a position where I can receive information from the Committee of 300. That is exactly why I am able to leak information to you, Kawarazaki-san. However, if I were to take any sort of action based on that information, I would no longer be able to receive it. I would be forced to go into hiding, doing my best to remove all traces of my existence,” Sawada explained.

“So you’re a double agent, then. Be that as it may, depending on how you look at it, it might sound as though you’re just out for yourself and nothing else,” Kawarazaki responded.

“If I were to die, that would be one more person with the ability to obstruct the Committee’s project extinguished. When I think of the hundreds of millions of lives that would be lost, I cannot allow myself to die. In that sense, I believe it is not necessarily of bad faith to think of oneself as important.”

Sawada was coolly taking full advantage of the position he was born into in order to not let the Committee do as they pleased. He would cling to that position, even if it meant occasionally doing the bidding of the Committee, and subsequently, his father.

That was something only he could do.

“Apologies for placing such a burden on you, Kawarazaki-san.”

“I don’t believe, in the slightest, a single word of what you’ve said. Until I see it with my own eyes, I’ll just assume that everything you’ve told me is just more of your megalomaniac delusions,” Kawarazaki said in derision.

“That is a wise decision. It would be quite troubling if you were to take my words at face value.”

“You’re not exactly the most agreeable person in the world, you know that?”

“I appreciate the fair assessment.”

Sawada, remaining expressionless, extended his hand. Kawarazaki’s bony hand met with and gripped it.

"I'll do my best, but don't expect me to be able to handle everything," Kawarazaki said.

"You have my gratitude," Sawada said. "Please keep everything you have heard today confidential."

Kawarazaki shook off Sawada's hand and finished off his wine with a sullen expression on his face.

The meeting ended there. The only thing left to do was to wait for Kawarazaki to collect evidence—if he deemed it truthful, CIRO would begin to take countermeasures.

Sawada let out a short sigh and loosened the knot in his necktie slightly.

January 22, 2020. 9:17 p.m.

Together with Kawarazaki, Nishina, and Senomiya, Sawada took the elevator down to the underground parking lot. Several men, who appeared to be Nishina's colleagues, were already standing by in the surrounding area.

"So, tell me, what the hell kind of a man are you?"

As they headed toward where they had parked, Kawarazaki suddenly posed that question to Sawada. When they had first met back in November, the man had never asked about Sawada's background. That was, however, exactly the reason why Sawada held a favorable impression of him.

"As one might expect, the leaks from the Fire Festival are incomparable to the ones we have now."

The content of the leaks was something that even Sawada found difficult to believe. It would have been natural for anyone to want to know more about the source of the information, assuming it wasn't just another one of Sawada's delusions.

"I am nothing but a humble businessman working for Exoskeleton Company," Sawada stated.

"...You're a guy that's real hard to trust, and that really pisses me off."

Kawarazaki spat those words out and headed for his car. As Sawada saw him off, Nishina lightly tapped him on the shoulder.

"Could'ja not make him so angry? I'll be the one he whines to later, y'know," she complained.

"I suppose I was not considerate of that," he responded.

Nishina chuckled and followed after Kawarazaki. As she walked away, she turned around and pointed at Sawada.

"Macaron Date for the three of us real soon! Don't forget!"

Apparently, she had been serious about that; Sawada had thought for sure that it had merely been a social custom.

Sawada watched as Kawarazaki climbed into the backseat of a black sedan, and Nishina into the driver's seat.

And as he took a step toward his own car...

...without warning, the deafening sound of an explosion rang throughout the parking lot.

"—?!"

Flames erupted forth, and the blast violently shook Sawada's body.

"Chief, get down!"

Ignoring Senomiya's warning, Sawada merely stared at the scene, dumbfounded.

What had just exploded was...

...the car that Kawarazaki and Nishina had boarded just moments prior.

There was not a chance that anyone in that car could be saved.

Sawada's mind went completely blank. One second passed. Two seconds.

And immediately after, he calmly began to run a simulation of the events within his mind.

Why had the car exploded? Who had set the explosive?

The underground parking lot had been under constant surveillance by CIRO members prior to when Kawarazaki came back down to it. Moreover, before Kawarazaki had even arrived at the hotel, Nishina and the others had already performed a meticulous check of the entire building, from the basement to the roof. Naturally, they must have checked to make sure there were no explosives numerous times.

And yet, with all of those countermeasures in place, how was it possible for the car to have exploded with such perfect timing?

The flames continued to grow in intensity, the heat of them nearly burning Sawada's skin. Even so, Sawada quickly surveyed the underground parking lot, protecting his face with his arms.

Was there an insider from the Committee present?

Or... had they been discovered?

Had they already known everything before the meeting had even started...?!

Surrounding Sawada were several members of CIRO—they had collapsed after the explosion. How many were alive? How many had died due to the explosion?

Sawada forcefully bit his lip.

"Chief!"

With a jerk, Sawada's arm was pulled from behind.

"It's not safe here! We need to get out of here, now!" Raising her voice, Senomiya pulled on Sawada's hand once again, attempting to move toward the car. However, rather than go along with her, Sawada pulled back on Senomiya's arm.

"The car's dangerous! Stay away from it!" he shouted. In response to his words, a confused look rose to Senomiya's face.

As Sawada was about to dart toward the elevator hall, he heard the sound of the wind blasting past his ear.

"...?!"

His own arm, which was currently being gripped by Senomiya, suddenly jerked by itself. Red droplets splashed across his field of vision. Before he could even recognize the fact that the blood had come from his own arm, an intense pain assaulted his body—it felt as if his arm was being torn to pieces.

Senomiya made the instant decision to push Sawada away. As he collapsed into the shadow of the car, Senomiya crouched down beside him as they both attempted to make themselves smaller.

“A sniper...!”

“Did the Committee find us?!”

The assassins not only planned to clean up Kawarasaki and Nishina, but Sawada and Senomiya as well.

Sawada looked at his skin. It was as if it had been seared with a butane torch. A burning pain spread from his arm to his entire body. But the level of pain was nothing compared to the pain of being stabbed in the back and left to die on the street of that cold, rainy day back in high school.

He had been shot near the wrist. It was not a fatal wound. The Committee seemed to have sent a third-rate sniper as their assassin. It was thanks to that oversight that Sawada was allowed an escape from certain death. However, it was his dominant arm that was in pain. Sawada was carrying a gun, but it wasn't of much use to him anymore.

Having said that, the two of them couldn't stay where they were. There was no reason to believe that the assassin was acting alone. In fact, the awful shriek of a car's wheels spinning on asphalt could be heard climbing the ramp leading into the parking lot. Armed men could come storming into the parking lot at any moment.

“Section Chief, you need to escape. I'll cover for you.”

Senomiya seemed to have come to the same conclusion as Sawada. He nodded at her words before taking out his PokeCom and sending an email. He was using a function customized on his PokeCom that allowed him to send a message to a certain email address in case of an emergency.

The email was slated to be received by Sawada's trusted hacker, who went by the alias “DaSH.” At the very moment it arrived, he was supposed to search for Sawada's whereabouts immediately and send him a rescue squad without delay. It was an emergency measure that could only be used at a time like this.

Meanwhile, Senomiya had opened the trunk while she remained concealed behind the car. In truth, however, what she had opened was not a trunk—it was a special space that had been remodeled in order to store a single HUG. It was a HUG that not even the Exoskeleton Company headquarters knew of: a HUG customized solely for Senomiya Misaki's use. It was a prototype based on the HUGP series of HUGs that were supplied to the police departments of various countries, and its power output was increased in order to match Senomiya's high physical ability. If an ordinary person were to use it, their body would not be able to withstand the high power output. Merely attempting to run in it for a moment would be enough to shatter their bones.

Senomiya promptly put the HUG on while she remained in a crouched position.

Sawada's PokeCom then received a message. The sender was DaSH, and the text was blunt.

“Go to the roof.”

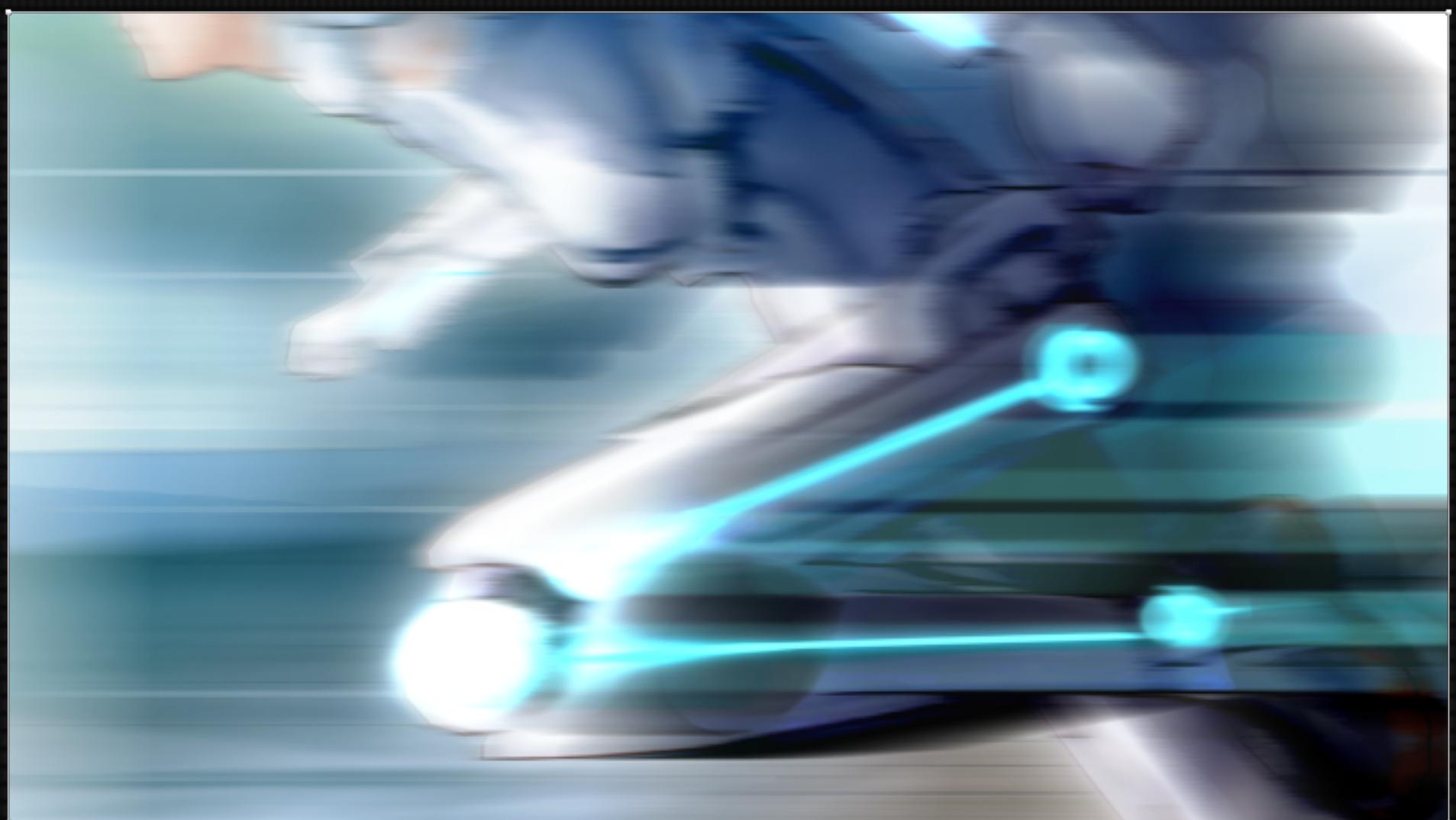
That was all it said.

There wasn't a single sign of the sniper anymore. Much like the sniper, Sawada and Senomiya were remaining perfectly still, holding their respective breath as they waited for the perfect opportunity to strike. Senomiya, who had finished equipping the HUG, looked to Sawada and gave him a small nod.

"Do you need a handgun?" she asked.

"No. No need."

"Then please... be safe, Section Chief." Upon delivering her request, Senomiya jumped nearly two meters forward without any form of preparation.



After jumping straight over two cars and landing on the ground, she kicked off the ground, accelerating once again, and landed behind the shadow of another car. She didn't stop there—instead, she lowered her body toward the ground as she sped from car to car. Her speed wasn't one achievable by any normal person. Senomiya's skills as a HUG test pilot had been steadily cultivated over the course of two years, and she had pushed the performance of HUGs to the very edge of their theoretical limits.

The sniper immediately locked onto Senomiya's diversion, but no bullets came remotely close to hitting Senomiya.

Senomiya's distraction of the enemy provided Sawada with a proper opportunity to

escape. He was aiming for the elevator hall located about thirty meters away—if he could reach it, he would be in one of the blind spots of the parking lot.

Just as Sawada let out a single, deep breath and got ready to sprint, he suddenly noticed something.

Lying at his feet... was a small paper bag.

Its design was one of fancy patterns and colors. The Bijoux Chloé logo was printed on it.

“...”

Sawada took one look at the car that was still on fire. Then, with a small click of his tongue, he picked up the paper bag and violently jumped out from behind the car.

A bullet grazed the side of his body. It appeared that the sniper had given up on disposing of Senomiya and had narrowed his sights on Sawada. Certainly not a bad decision, Sawada calmly evaluated as he ran.

Perhaps because he was sprinting with all his might, or perhaps because of the fear of death looming over him, his heart rate was skyrocketing.

I'm an unbelievable coward....!

Sawada gritted his teeth, but he refused to stop running. He nearly tumbled into the elevator hall as he burst into it. He struck the elevator call button and stopped to catch his breath. The hem of his suit was disheveled, but, of course, he had no time to fix it. The elevator was currently stopped on the fifth floor. The pause before its arrival grew increasingly frustrating.

A far more intense screech could be heard from the parking lot. Enemy reinforcements had arrived.

Soon after, the sounds of multiple gunshots rung throughout the area. The sounds were so loud that, even though he was resting in a blind spot, Sawada ducked his head. In Japan, a storm of bullets was not something that one would normally even think about. All Sawada could determine was that the enemy was firing without even aiming.

Was Senomiya still alone, fighting against all those people...?

“Don’t die.”

Stopping to concern himself about her would put her powerful resolve, to be ready to die in order to create a diversion for him, to waste.

When the elevator finally arrived, Sawada got in without hesitation and pushed the button for the top floor. Other guests attempted to board the elevator when it stopped at the first floor, but once they saw Sawada, fresh blood staining his hands, they stopped themselves.

Sawada exited onto the helipad on the rooftop. The rain had stopped before he had the chance to notice. The fog had disappeared along with it, allowing him to gaze clearly upon the city of Tokyo, known by many as the “Sleepless Town.” Below him, the dazzling red lights of numerous police vehicles shone bright, forcing him to blink.

No gunfire could be heard from the rooftop—rather, the strong wind drowned out any and all sound. In the basement of this very hotel, only a few minutes ago, two people had been killed by an explosion, and even now, the gun battle was continuing. And yet, just a short distance away from the building, there were people in Odaiba and the heart of the city that were enjoying their daily lives as usual, completely unaffected by the chaos.

Sawada looked up at the red aurora in the night sky.

Well then, they have made a move on me. What shall my next move be...?

As he pondered that, he could faintly hear the approaching sound of a helicopter's rotors, mixed in with the sound of the wind.

January 23, 2020. 4:51 a.m.

The safe house was located in the mountains of the Izu Peninsula. It was surrounded by forests, and not even the locals approached it. There were no roads to begin with, so it wasn't even possible to visit it by car.

Deep within the mountains, a large villa with a helipad suddenly came into view. After escaping from the bay area by helicopter, Sawada was transferred to a car in Yokohama, and then he personally piloted a private helicopter from Chofu Airport to the safe house. By the time he had treated his wounds and was allowed a chance to catch his breath, it was already 5 a.m.

News on both the television and the internet reported the events at the Tokyo Bay Continental's underground parking lot as nothing more than an accidental explosion. In other words, the mass media was already sufficiently compromised. That fact alone was enough to convince Sawada that the attack had indeed been of the Committee's will.

The bottle of mineral water that had been waiting for him did not need refrigeration thanks to the chill of the winter season. As he opened the bottle and wetted his throat, his PokeCom began to ring. The name "Senomiya" was displayed on the monitor.

"Receive call."

In response to his voice command, the PokeCom screen displayed Senomiya's face. The injuries that could be seen on her were not scratch marks from Itotsuna, but likely gunshot wounds instead. Her face was dirtied, and her hair was disheveled.

"Where are you now?" Sawada asked.

"I'm taking refuge in the Kawasaki plant," Senomiya responded.

"I am glad you're safe. Are you injured?"

"I'm all right."

"What became of the situation?"

"As enemy reinforcements arrived, I switched tactics from returning fire to fleeing from the hotel. It took some time to truly escape from them."

"Any information about the assailants?"

"...No. My sincerest apologies."

"No, not an issue. I would not be alive today if it hadn't been for you. Thank you."

"What happened to Nishina-san was truly unfortunate."

"...Yes."

Neither Senomiya nor Sawada, who gave a slight nod in response, changed their expressions. Without losing their composure, they accepted the death of a woman; a woman who had once been a good friend of Sawada's.

"Considering they were making attempts on our lives, I believe this incident implies that

the Committee is onto us. I am sure my father has already been made aware of this," Sawada said.

The Committee had taken notice of Sawada's actions as a double agent and had tried to erase him. That much could not be denied. It would not have been an exaggeration to say that with that day's leak having been shut down, the efforts to halt Project Atum had seen a fierce setback. That was how vigilant the Committee had become.

In other words, the enactment of Project Atum had only grown ever closer.

"I cannot return to the company. I will go into hiding for a while."

Exoskeleton Company was an institution that worked beneath both the Committee and Tavistock Institute. Because Sawada's espionage had been detected, he would naturally be stripped of his position at the company. Not only would he lose his protection and all benefits from the Committee, he would never be able to walk out and see the light of day ever again.

Even a visit to Tanegashima may be possible now, Sawada thought to himself.

That island was the location where Kimijima Kou had died. And now, a rocket, ordered by the Ocean Launch company, was being assembled on it. Sawada believed it would not be foolish to visit the island in order to confirm, with his own eyes, if such actions were being taken.

"Senomiya, what do you intend to do?" he asked.

Senomiya pondered Sawada's question for a short while, and eventually, she returned an answer with a straight gaze. "I will remain at the company."

"You may die," Sawada warned.

"I will take up the story that I was simply your subordinate, and that I was never informed of your scheming activities. Then, I will attempt to gather as much information as possible under that pretense."

What an unbelievably courageous woman Senomiya was. Both utterly fearless, while also simply reckless.

"I am not your superior anymore. Therefore, I have no jurisdiction over you, and you do not have to listen to my orders. If that is to be your decision, do as you wish. Just..."

Sawada was about to continue...

...but suddenly, he remembered something.

The words he had received as he had lay dying, in solitude, on that rainy day.

"If you die, even if there'll only be one person sad about it, that person's right here! You think you have no friends, but who are you kidding?! Don't go and die so irresponsibly, you idiot!"

The woman who had told him that had died mere hours ago. She had been killed because she had gotten involved with Sawada. Disregarding her own request, she had disappeared from the world. Yet, Sawada could not will himself to acknowledge her death as irresponsible.

He was about to speak the same words that he had been told a long time ago to Senomiya, but he reconsidered.

“...Do not rush to your death, Senomiya,” he said.

“Thank you.”

Senomiya delivered that reply without smiling. Soon after, the monitor cut to black.

With a soft sigh, Sawada abandoned his PokeCom and sunk down into the sofa in complete exhaustion.

If it had been daytime, he would have been able to see the majestic mountains from inside his room, which was an indoor terrace built with glass walls. But the sun had not yet risen, and the surrounding area was cloaked in darkness.

In its place, Sawada’s own face was dimly reflected in the window panes. It was drained of blood, leaving his appearance akin to that of a ghost.

He fumbled around in his pocket for a cigarette. Upon producing one, he placed it in his mouth, only to suddenly look up at the glass table.

There stood a lone, bloodstained paper bag.

“*Macarons. Don’tcha like ‘em, Sawada-kun?*”

After returning the cigarette to his pocket, Sawada slowly extended his hand toward the paper bag. It was wrinkled and covered in creases, leading Sawada to believe the contents were similarly damaged. However, a few of them remained intact, preserved in their pretty shape. The ice pack had remained in the bag as well, and it was still faintly cold.

Sawada selected a bright pink macaron, tore open the wrapping paper, and took a single bite.

“Cassis, huh...”

A crispiness on the surface, followed by the moist texture inside. A modest sweetness spread throughout his mouth.

It wasn’t a bad taste.

“Delicious...”

Sawada truly did love macarons.

“...Bijoux Chloé, huh. I suppose I will be going there myself next time.”

Sawada couldn’t expect to receive a “lifeline” anymore. While that might have been unfortunate, it was nothing more than a trivial matter in the end. There was no reason to be troubled by it. He had stealthily gone on ventures to buy macarons by himself on past occasions.

While he enjoyed the sweet aftertaste floating around in his mouth, Sawada decided to sleep for a little while and closed his eyes.

And within the darkness...

A student named Nishina, who hadn’t yet started wearing glasses, tightly squeezed Sawada’s cold hand.

The girl was crying as she tried to tell him something.
But, no matter how hard he listened, that voice would never become audible.
The warmth of her hand...
The sensation of her hand...
They had become nothing more than illusions borne of the past, devoid of all substance.

>The science itself may prove cynical.
However, one mustn't forget that there is a scientific element in all things.
The important truth is this:
I am the master of my fate, I am the captain of my soul.



NS2C

(Name Subject to Change)

- > Translator: ChrisGLink
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