



TRIGGER LOCKED

A SILENT KILLER

Sekina Mayu

SAMPLE CHAPTER

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PROLOGUE

“This is a goodbye, then,” Shiori smiled at me as she was about to pull the trigger. A loud bang filled the atmosphere as she shot herself in the head. She was still smiling even after her death, with her finger still coiling at the trigger. People who were around in the area wouldn’t hear the loud bang because of the silencer attached to the gun. On top of that, Shibuya during the nighttime was packed with people. The hustle and bustle of Shibuya was enough to conceal the sound of the gun.

I snap myself out of the dark memory as I stand idle in front of Shiori’s grave. I can’t help but keep on recalling the same scene over and over again whenever I come here. Shiori is my best friend. We knew each other since we were in the middle school. Shiori aspired to be a popular idol. She worked hard so then she could be standing on the same stage with her favorite idol, Momoko Sugita. She managed to land a major debut when we began high school.

Things became worst when I found out that she had a microchip implant. The microchip implant served as a mind control device within her. The mind control device would then activate the alter ego within her. As a result, she turned into someone with an opposite personality. That was how she became a skilled assassin. And she was ordered to kill me on that day.

The program would trigger a suicide mode when she failed her mission. Since she failed in her attempt to kill me, it prompted the program to activate the suicide mode. That was the reason why she shot herself in the head. It was the program which forced her to commit suicide. She didn't do it out of her own volition. I was there at that time. I felt frustrated that I failed to stop her from shooting herself in the head. I failed to save my best friend from the suicide clutch.

I clench my fist whenever I recall the person behind her suicide. The mind control device became possible because of a man named Satoru Yuuya. Public Security Intelligence Agency is currently pursuing him. It's known as PSIA for short. Not only that, but he was also behind the death of the test subjects and also the researchers for the government's top-secret project. The project was known as Transhuman Development Project.

The project was using gifted children to develop a special microchip implant. They believed that the microchip implant would benefit the aging population. My twin brother, Yuuto and I were this close to becoming the test subject for this project. Unlike the other gifted children, they considered both of us to be the outlier. So, we were far more valuable than these children. Since our parents were against it, they hunted us all the way to a small town in Tochigi prefecture. It was because of the skilled assassins that these researchers hired that got mom killed. Dad was almost died too because of them.

Satoru Yuuya was there when Shiori and I had to fight to the death. He was the one who activated the suicide program in Shiori. He only whispered something in her ear. And she began to shoot herself in the head after that. He also turned Momoko Sugita into a skilled assassin as well because of her similar

past like Shiori. Momoko Sugita also failed her mission when she fought us back then. She faced a similar demise like Shiori as a result of her failure.

Yuuto and I have been joining PSIA ever since we began high school. It was dad who recommended us to join PSIA. We didn't even know that dad was the head of the Special Activities Division in PSIA. We also didn't know that mom was one of the researchers who was a part of the Transhuman Development Project. We only knew about our parents' real job when Mr. Sakakibara told us.

Mr. Azuma Sakakibara is the second-in-command in the Special Activities Division. He's also one of the members of Kimizuki squad and dad's longtime friend. There are five squads in the Special Activities Division. From what I know, only a few PSIA officers made it to the Special Activities Division. And these officers are considered to be the elite among the elite. We're fortunate to join dad's squad, which is the highest rank in the Special Activities Division.

Mr. Sakakibara came to Tochigi prefecture when the skilled assassins began to make a move. He was also there to protect us from being captured by them. It was thanks to him that both Yuuto and I managed to kill the pursuers on our own. It's because of our abilities to kill the pursuers that landed us to become PSIA agents and joins dad's squad.

I clench my fist as I look at Shiori's grave. A deep regret surrounds me whenever I come here. It seems like the regret will never go away every time I visit her grave. "As expected, you really are here," dad says to me as he approaches me. Dad and I offer a silent prayer to Shiori after we light up the incense. I'm surprised that dad is here to visit Shiori's grave. He never visited her grave since her passing. But I don't mind about that.

Dad and I walk together as we leave the graveyard. "Dad, I can't help but feel a deep sense of regret whenever I come to visit Shiori. I can't seem to shake off the fact that I couldn't save her. How did you deal with a situation like this?" I say to him. Dad also faced the same situation as I was when mom died right in front of him. They also killed her because she betrayed everyone who got involved in the project.

Dad only sighs when I ask him. “To be honest, I don’t know how to do it either. I still have this sense of regret even until today. It was hard for me to forget how Sayuri died right in front of me. It’s pointless for me to be the head of the Special Activities Division if I can’t even protect the one I love. But still, I realize that the sense of regret will never go away no matter what I do. So, I have to live with it whether I like it or not. There was no point for me to beat myself over the things that I had no control.”

He then turns to me. “I’m sorry that I don’t have any practical advice on how to deal with that kind of situation. All I can say to you is you have to live with it. It’s normal for you to hold grudges for what Satoru Yuuya did to Shiori and Sayuri. After all, it was the same man who killed them. But you have to be careful, though. You shouldn’t let the grudge consumes you. You’ll make a rash decision if you let it be. It will cost your life if you’re not careful. You’ll also never live in peace because your life is filled with vengeance.”

A faint smile curves on my face after listening to dad’s advice. I’m relieved that I’m not the only one who feels this way. I’m also glad that dad is willing to share with me the feeling that he has all this time. It’s hard to know how he feels about the regret since he doesn’t show it to us. But it looks to me that he won’t let the regret rules his life. And I should be doing the same if I don’t want the regret to rule over me. I also need to be careful not to let vengeance controls me. It can cost me life and jeopardize other people around me if I’m not careful.

We head back to the coffee shop after we leave the graveyard. We use the coffee shop as a home base for us to gather information related to Satoru Yuuya. It will be much easier for us to operate this way since no one will suspect that we’re from PSIA. Besides, there’s nothing wrong with generating extra income during our mission. Yuuto and I enjoy working in the coffee shop. It reminds us of those days when we helped dad in the organic farm back in Tochigi prefecture.

Hayato already begins with the preparation as we come back. The smell of the freshly brewed coffee fills the air as we step into the coffee shop. Today is the first day of our summer break. We expect many people will come to our coffee shop, especially during the scorching heat. We bet that they’re here for the iced

coffee to quench their thirst. Many people love our coffee. They always bring their friends along too so then they can taste how tasty our coffee is for themselves.

Hayato serves us with a cup of freshly brewed coffee as we take a seat. “Where’s Yuuto?” I ask him. “He’s out for an errand. He feels that it’s better for him to buy the things we need before the influx of customers starts pouring in. We’ll be in shorthand even if he leaves the coffee shop for a brief moment. He should be back soon,” Hayato replies.

Hayato Kusanagi. On the surface, he’s just like a typical twenty-year-old guy who works as a barista in the coffee shop. And his good look seems to attract tons of our female customers to try to talk to him. Whenever they do that, Hayato only smiles at them and continue with his work. He has a lot of things to do behind the counter. So, he doesn’t have the leisure to entertain them. Besides, Hayato isn’t the kind of person who talks a lot.

Despite his demeanor, no one knows that he’s the last descendant of the ninja clan, the Kusanagi clan. It was unfortunate that the rest of the people in the clan were killed when they captured Hayato. Just like us, Hayato was also one of the test subjects who happened to be an outlier too. But his stats were way higher than us, making him even more desirable as a test subject. Hayato has been staying with us since the day he escaped from the research facility. He also helps us a lot during our mission too.

Our coffee shop is open for business as soon as Yuuto comes back from his errand. Many people start to flock in as soon as we open the door. It looks like they’ve been craving to get the iced coffee when the summer break begins. That’s the only orders we receive since the opening. Of course, they also order a light snack as a complement to their iced coffee. And judging from their conversation, it looks to me that they’re in the middle of a business negotiation.

It’s nothing unusual for me to see people come and have a coffee here while doing a business negotiation. It’s easier to strike a deal in a relaxed environment compared to doing the same in the office environment. It makes sense why a

million dollar deals are made in the golf course. It's a relaxing way to strike a deal without putting pressure on the other side of the table.

Keep in mind that I don't mean to pry into their conversation. Dad did emphasize to us that we can't stop ourselves from prying into other people's conversation. We'll never know that doing so may lead us to Satoru Yuuya. At least we're not putting them under the surveillance as soon as they enter our premise. It will be more difficult for us to extract the information if we do that to all customers who come here.

Our coffee shop becomes packed during the lunchtime. Apart from the light snacks such as sandwiches, we also offer healthy lunch too. It's just that we don't prepare these lunches and the light meals ourselves. We source them from other restaurants. And we do this every single day to ensure that the food will remain fresh by the time we serve it to our customers. Apart from our freshly brewed coffee, we also follow the same mantra for our food as well.

Akie Nakayoshi and Manabe Hoshitani come to the coffee shop during the lunchtime. Akie and I have known each other since the middle school. We were in the same class back then. Akie is in a different class when we enter the high school. She's also close to Shiori. She cried when she found out that Shiori committed suicide. I wish that I can tell her the truth about Shiori's death. But I will have to reveal the culprit as well if I want to explain to her. The general public doesn't even know about Satoru Yuuya's existence. So, she shouldn't know about him either.

Both Yuuto and I also knew Manabe Hoshitani since we were in the same middle school. Manabe is Yuuto's best friend. He's currently in the same class as me whereas Yuuto is in the same class as Akie. They did tell us before that they'll be coming here to see us when the summer break starts. But we don't expect that they'll be here during the first day of summer break. Maybe they plan to go somewhere after that.

I bring their order to the table after they submit their order through the tablet. Both of them seem happy that Yuuto and I are doing our best to serve the customers. "You're not going anywhere this summer?" Akie asks me. I pause for a

moment as I try to recall if dad ever says anything about going somewhere during the summer break. “No, I guess,” I reply, “I guess that we’ll be spending our whole summer break working in the coffee shop.”

Akie only laughs when she hears my reply. “It looks like we’re in the same boat. Manabe and I aren’t going anywhere too during the summer. At least you have something to do during the summer break. I guess that I should get a part-time job too.” She then looks at Manabe for a response. But it seems like Manabe is being occupied with something else. Akie doesn’t look too happy when she sees that Manabe isn’t paying attention to what she says.

“Manabe, put your tablet down! I can’t believe it that you’re so occupied with your tablet even if we’re about to eat,” Akie scolds him. Manabe shrugs at her. “Can’t you just be quiet? I’m about to watch Incognito’s new video on their official channel in PicoPico Channel.” Akie seems bewildered by Manabe’s reply. She doesn’t get it why Manabe has to watch the video right now. She has no idea who in the world is Incognito and why it matters so much to him.

“Incognito? Are you referring to the hacker group, Incognito?” I ask Manabe for clarification. I don’t know much about Incognito other than them being a hacker group. But they don’t use their hacking abilities to take advantage of the innocent people. Instead, they use their abilities to punish everyone who is in the wrong. They’re more like representing the voice of the general masses.

I find it impressive that a hacker group like them has an official video channel on PicoPico Channel. I always assume that they prefer to keep their identity low-key. After all, they’ve been in the news headline for quite sometimes already for the past few years. They even go all the way to the dark and deep web to take down the criminal activities there. They know that the law enforcement is unable to crack down on the illegal activities there.

Manabe nods his head while grinning at me. “Yup, it’s the same hacker group. It’s impressive that you know about them too unlike your friend over there.” Akie looks frustrated that Manabe is making fun of her. Well, it’s not surprising that only a handful of people know about Incognito’s existence. Manabe is a huge fan

of conspiracy theories. So, it doesn't surprise me at all that he knows about Incognito.

“Do you want to watch the video together?” Manabe asks me. I wish that I can join him to watch the video together with him. But I don't think dad will allow me to join them. There are so many customers in the coffee shop since it's the peak hour right now. But a part of me feels curious about the video. After all, I've never watched any videos by Incognito. I only know about their official PicoPico Channel today.

Maybe I will watch the video if it sounds interesting to me. “What's the video about?” I ask him. Manabe then opens the PicoPico Channel app on his tablet to view the title of the video. He seems giddy when he sees the video, though. “It says the top-secret project by Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare debunked.” He begins to read the description of the video after that.

My eyes widen when I find out about the video. The video also catches Yuuto's and dad's attention as well. They also find it hard to believe when they hear the title of the video. Isn't the video referring to the Transhuman Development Project? What else do they refer to? I may not know how many top-secret projects that the ministry had in the past. But I won't be surprised at all if Transhuman Development Project will be included in their video.

Dad gives me a subtle signal, ordering me to watch the video with Manabe. “That seems interesting. I guess that I should watch the video right now. It's more fun to watch with other people instead of watching it alone,” I reply. Manabe seems happy when I agree to watch the video with him.

Luckily, most of the customers already leave the coffee shop by that time. So, it will be much easier for me to watch the video without any disruption. Akie is also watching the video together with us. She seems curious about Incognito as well despite hearing it for the first time. She seems to wonder why Incognito is such a big deal to Manabe.

When the video starts playing, I notice that the person who is in the video is wearing a Namahage mask. Namahage mask is Incognito's trademark. All members of Incognito will wear the Namahage mask when they make a public

appearance. Same goes with their appearance on their official videos as well. Akie seems uncomfortable when she sees the video, though. Maybe it's because of the Namahage mask. Namahage isn't just terrifying to kids. It can also be terrifying to some adults too.

There's a reason why Incognito picks Namahage as their trademark. After all, Namahage itself holds a significant meaning. According to the traditional Japanese folklore, Namahage is a demon-like creature. They will go door-to-door, coming after kids who are lazy or have bad behavior. So, the image of Namahage fits well with what Incognito is doing. They're punishing anyone who does terrible things to other people. They're like the modern warrior of justice.

Apart from the Namahage mask, the video itself isn't that pleasant to watch. The visual aspect of the video reminds me of the video footage that comes from the security camera. At least the audio aspect of the video is top notch. I don't think anyone will ever watch the video if the audio quality is horrible.

"Greetings everyone," the man greets the viewer. It's hard to tell the gender of the person who appears in the video. So, I'm assuming that the person who appears in the video is a man. "Does the same person is the one who always gives the announcement on the video?" I ask Manabe. I want to know how consistent they are when it comes to maintaining their identity.

Manabe rubs his chin. He seems unsure about the identity of the person who appears in the video. "Maybe," he replies, "It sounds the same on every video I've watched. So, I was assuming that it must be the same person. But anyone can appear in the video since they always distort the voice to make it unrecognizable. Who knows that the person behind the mask is a female, right?" Well, I have to agree with Manabe. It's hard to tell by the voice alone. But it looks like the person behind the mask is a man judging by his physique.

The man starts speaking after he greets the viewer. "It was true that the Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare was conducting a top-secret project. It was called Transhuman Development Project. They used gifted children to produce a microchip implant for the aging population. But the project failed with some of

the test subjects died during the project. They decided to hide this project from the public to avoid being under the scrutiny.”

The man then holds a document in his hand. It must be one of the documents related to Transhuman Development Project. “The one that I have right here with me is one of the official documents. We have no idea who sent the complete document to us. But we do know that these documents are legit after we did a thorough investigation of these documents. We wish that the top-secret project is a hoax. But these official documents prove it all.”

I clench my fist as I watch the video. Everything this man says about the top-secret project is true after all. Both Akie and Manabe look surprised when they find out about it. They find it hard to believe that the ministry was hiding something sinister from the public.

The man pauses for a moment. It looks like he has something more to say. “Our warning to the current minister, Toshio Kawakami is simple. We only want him to hold a press conference and admit that the top-secret project did exist. We also demand that the ministry won’t punish the victims for opening up about this issue. If he denies about the project, then we’ll give him a special surprise that he will never forget. The first phase of our plan is already in motion. So, the ministry can’t get away this time.”

The video then shows us a screen that Incognito already hacked the ministry’s official website. They already posted the ministry’s confession about the top-secret project there. They also hacked their social media accounts to amplify the confession even further. The post becomes viral in such a short time thanks to many people keep on sharing the post all over the Internet.

The video ends not long after that. It doesn’t take that long for the comments to start flooding after Incognito posted the video online. As expected, most people find it hard to believe with what the ministry did behind our back. They also condemn the government for hiding the truth. They praise Incognito for exposing the top-secret project to the general public.

Manabe smiles after the video ended. “Wow, it’s hard to believe that the ministry would conduct something shady. We’re thankful that Incognito exposes

the top-secret project to the public.” Akie doesn’t say anything after watching the video. She still feels unpleasant even after the video already ends. I bet that she’s not going to watch any videos from Incognito from now onwards.

I can’t say for sure if what Incognito did will get Kawakami to admit about the project’s existence. But I feel uneasy when Incognito mentions about their special surprise for Kawakami. I have a feeling that something bad is bound to happen because of their special surprise. I can only hope that I’m wrong, though.

CHAPTER ONE

We didn't do anything much other than spending most of our summer break working in the coffee shop. It was only during the Obon holiday that we decided to take a break. We headed to Tochigi prefecture to clean up mom's grave. It was a must-thing to do during the Obon holiday. We didn't do it because mom's spirit would come here to revisit her altar. It was more like our way to express how much we missed her. So, cleaning up her grave was the least we could do to her.

Everyone began to offer a silent prayer after we were done with the cleanup. Hayato also offered a silent prayer to mom's grave as well. He could do the same to his own family grave if he wanted to. But he told us before that he didn't feel like doing it. He didn't want anyone to know that he was the only descendant of Kusanagi clan. And it didn't help that his silver hair stood out. It was a physical trait to indicate that his strength and intelligence was equal to the demon. That was according to the legend that was passed down from one generation to another.

To be honest, heading back to Tochigi was the most relaxing period I ever had. Sure, it was tiring since we had to clean up mom's grave. But it was still far better

than spending most of our time working in the coffee shop. Well, it wasn't anything new to me that the coffee shop would have more customers than usual. It wasn't the workload that drained me. It was the Incognito video that drained me instead.

Due to the uproar, it became a hot topic everywhere. Throughout our summer break, that was the only conversation we heard in the coffee shop all the time. I wished that I could do something to tune out their conversation. I already made peace with what the top-secret project did to me and people around me. But I felt annoyed whenever I heard about it being mentioned for countless time.

The uproar also put the pressure on the ministry to issue a public confession about it. At this point, it would be hard for the ministry to deny the top-secret project's existence. After all, one of the Incognito's members did hold a physical copy of the document. Even the ministry's spokesperson admitted that the document they had was the actual one.

The only thing that the ministry wasn't so sure was how Incognito managed to get a hold of the complete document. Not only that, it was a physical document too. He believed that Incognito might get a hold of the document from someone from the ministry. He also suspected that this person did it to make Kawakami looked bad to the public. Because of that, he urged the Public Security Bureau to investigate this case.

To be honest, I wasn't so sure if the claim was true or not. None of us had seen the document. "I've seen the document once before," dad told us, "Azuma and I infiltrated the ministry to steal the document. We did it under Kagami's direct order. We already suspected the ministry way before your mother admitted to me about it." Yuuto and I looked at dad. "Are you sure about that?" I asked him. He nodded his head. He was sure that the document Incognito had was indeed the same one he stole under the PSIA director's order.

Due to the public pressure, Kawakami had no choice but to issue a public confession. Judging from his expression, I could tell that he had to do it. If he didn't comply, Incognito would reveal a dark secret about him. He knew well enough that his dark secret would jeopardize his political career. I had no idea

what Incognito discovered about him. It could be secrets like a sex scandal or political donation scandal. Any of these scandals could cause him to resign if they leaked Kawakami's secret to the public.

It took a while for the issue to die down. I thought that it would take a few months or so for the people to stop talking about it. I felt relieved that the issue died down when the summer break was about to end. I don't want this issue to ruin my mood. It's not that the issue will affect my study. And I'm not the kind of person who is easy to slip into a foul mood either. But it's still not easy for me to move on if this issue keeps popping out over and over again.

As we're inside the school building, I notice that some of the students look refreshed. But there's also a handful of them who dreaded coming back to school. I bet that most of them were having a good time during the summer break. Despite my ordinary summer break, I do enjoy every single moment I have. That is if I put the Transhuman Development Project leak aside.

"Morning, Touka," Ayumi greets me when we're inside. Ayumi Miyazaki is another close friend of mine. And she's also my classmate too. She smiles as I greet her back. "How's your summer break? Were you having fun?" She asks me. I can only chuckle when she asks me that question. "I doubt that you want to hear about how I spend my summer break. We didn't do anything fun during the summer break other than tending to the coffee shop. Summer tends to be the busiest in our business."

Ayumi only smiles when she hears my answer. "Well, at least you were spending your summer break with your father and Yuuto. It's much better that way." For some reason, I can sense her sorrow deep beneath her word. "You sound like you weren't enjoying your summer break. You feel that what we've been doing during the summer break seems more fun than what you did," Yuuto says to Ayumi. He doesn't seem to mince his words when it comes to expressing his thought.

Ayumi nods slightly. It looks like Yuuto is right. I always assume that someone like Ayumi will go somewhere exotic during the summer break. After all, her father, Akito Miyazaki is a Diet member. And he's also a Minister of Foreign

Affairs. Many people love him because of how much he cares about Japan. Unlike most politicians, he proves his sincerity through his action instead of words. It's because of that reason that gets a lot of people to support him.

When I think about it, I doubt that Akito Miyazaki will bring Ayumi with him when he has an overseas trip. But I'm pretty sure that he may have brought her along once in a while. Even until now, I still find it a miracle that someone like her is in a school like ours. I always assume that someone like her will rather go to the prestigious school.

"Well, I spent my whole summer break in our vacation home in Karuizawa. You may think that it's not as bad as it seems. But it feels lonely when you have to spend your whole summer all by yourself. Sure, I was able to reconnect with my other friends who were there. But it was suffocating to be with people like them. All they've been talking about was their lavish lifestyle. It was hard to be on the same page when it wasn't even my thing," says Ayumi.

Ayumi isn't like those rich, snobbish kids who think they're all high and mighty only because their family holds an important position in the Japanese government. Judging from her upbringing, it looks to me that her father wants her to be humble despite her status. Ayumi doesn't like to boast about her father. So, only the school and a few of us know that she's the daughter of Akito Miyazaki.

Yuuto then heads to his class after our brief conversation. Ayumi's gaze is fixated on Yuuto as he's heading to his class next door. I can tell that Ayumi is having a huge crush on Yuuto. But I can't tell whether Yuuto has a feeling for her or not. Even if he does, he may feel that he can't be together with her. He doubts that Ayumi's dad will allow them to be together. It's a different story if Yuuto is officially joining PSIA as an officer. At least her father doesn't have to worry about Ayumi's safety since she's in Yuuto's good hand.

"Ayumi, the class is about to start. We'd better go inside before the teacher comes," I say to her. Ayumi blushes as she heads inside and takes her seat not far from where I am. She probably realizes that I caught her red-handed by staring at Yuuto. "Ayumi, just admit it that you have a huge crush on Yuuto. Don't worry,

I won't tell him about how you feel," I whisper to her. Ayumi ends up burying her face in her bag, trying to cover her embarrassment.

I can't help but chuckle at her reaction. Not long after that, Akie and Manabe come to our seat. They're also close to Ayumi as well. Akie decides to drop by before she heads to her class. Manabe sighs when he sees what I did to Ayumi. "You seem to be as energetic as ever. I thought that you were so exhausted because you have to serve a lot of customers during the summer break. If you're this energetic, I bet that Yuuto is the same as well."

Ayumi doesn't even lift her head. She still feels embarrassed by what I say to her. Akie only laughs when she sees that Ayumi refuses to look at her. "Ayumi, we already know that you have a huge crush on Yuuto. Even the idiot Manabe already knew about it too," Akie says to her. It looks like Ayumi doesn't even have any choice but to admit her feeling. "It's true that I like Yuuto," she says as she lifts her head, "But please don't tell him about it. Just let it be the secret between us, okay?"

We nod at her, agreeing not to tell Yuuto about it. I feel bad that I can't tell Yuuto about Ayumi's feeling towards him. But at the same time, I don't want to butt into their relationship. Just because Yuuto is my twin brother, it doesn't mean that I have the right to meddle in their relationship. I guess that I should let the time decides when is the right time for Yuuto to know Ayumi's true feeling.

The rest of us head back to our seat as our homeroom teacher comes in. Akie returns to her class after that. To be honest, I'm not in the mood to get back to school yet. But somehow, my brief interaction with Ayumi, Akie, and Manabe seems to lift up my mood. Now I can't wait for the break to come. I want to catch up with what the others have been doing during their summer break. I'm pretty sure that Akie and Manabe have a good time too despite not knowing what to do during the summer break.

During the break, Yuuto and Akie will come to our class and eat together with us. Ayumi can't seem to see Yuuto straight to his face. I try to decode if Yuuto notices anything. But he doesn't seem to realize anything at all. Is Yuuto that

dense when it comes to love? I have a feeling that dad will put him on a love crash course if he finds out that Yuuto is clueless about love.

As we're eating our bento, we begin to share about what we do during the summer break. Akie is the first one to share her summer break story with us. "Since I didn't go anywhere, my dad signed me up for the cryptocurrencies investing online course. So, I spent the whole summer learning about investing in cryptocurrencies with him."

Everyone seems in awe when Akie tells us about what she did during the summer break. "Wow, that's amazing. There's nothing new about investing in cryptocurrencies. But you can strike gold in cryptocurrencies if you do your due diligence," Manabe says to us. Akie agrees with him. "That's right. I was hesitating at first. I thought that it was difficult. But after doing a few trades, I realized that it wasn't as hard as I thought. I admit that there will always be a price dip. But I didn't lose my shirt since I only allocated a small amount of money in it."

Ayumi seems in awe when she hears about Akie's experience. She then turns to Manabe. "What about you, Manabe? Did you go somewhere during the summer break?" Manabe seems high and mighty when Ayumi is asking him about his summer activity. It looks to me that Manabe did go somewhere during the summer break. And I bet that it must be far better than where Ayumi spends most of her summer break.

Manabe begins to pull something from his bag and puts it on the table. It's a hardcover photobook of a gravure idol. And not to mention, it's thick too. There's also a signature on the book cover. I bet that this book is Manabe's prized possession because it's a signed copy. "I got this book a few days ago before the summer break was over. I had to get up early in the morning to get it. I wanted to be the first few lucky people to get Marisa Kuroki to sign the book," he says to us.

Ayumi's expression changes when Manabe mentions Marisa Kuroki. Does she know Marisa Kuroki? I assume that someone like her may not know who Marisa Kuroki is. Well, it's not that I know who she is either. I only know about her from Manabe. He was a huge fan of her since the middle school. Apart from being a big

fan of conspiracy theories, he's also a big fan of gravure idols. His current favorite is Marisa Kuroki.

Akie seems annoyed when she finds out what Manabe did during summer. "So, you've been spending your summer trying to get this book? Should you be doing something better with your time instead of getting a photobook of a woman in a skimpy outfit?" Manabe becomes enraged when Akie is criticizing him. "What is wrong with me liking women in a skimpy outfit? What is your problem with that?"

Ayumi pats Akie's shoulder as she tries to calm her down. The last thing she wants is the fight between them will escalate to no end. Yuuto then takes the photobook and starts to flip through the pages. I also take a look at the photobook as well. I bet that Yuuto is doing this just to find a way to divert the conversation elsewhere. I doubt that he has a keen interest in Marisa Kuroki. But it's not surprising if he does.

Marisa Kuroki's photobook is just like the other gravure idol photobooks out there. The concept of the gravure idol photobook is the same. After all, gravure idols are models for magazines that are marketed to men. So, we rarely see them wearing anything other than swimsuits. Some of the swimsuits are skimpy too; with some of them barely cover the nipples. Most gravure idols have big boobs and a slender figure. But I doubt that those boobs are natural. Marisa Kuroki has a slender figure with big boobs. She's the same as the other gravure idols.

In her latest photobook, Marisa Kuroki wears mostly swimsuits and lingerie. Not to mention, she also does tons of poses that can drive men wild. There are quite a few shots where she doesn't wear anything other than covering her boobs with her arms or her hands. She's either wearing a towel or a pair of panty to cover the lower parts of her body. But the rest of the shots are mostly her wearing swimsuits. The shots also focus on her cleavage at a different angle.

Manabe stops from arguing with Akie when he notices that Yuuto and I have been looking at the photobook. "Isn't she gorgeous?" He asks Yuuto. Yuuto only nods at him. "I thought that she's only wearing swimsuits. So, I didn't expect to

see her not wearing anything other than a pair of panty or a towel. It's too bad that she covers her boobs with her hands or her arms," he says to him.

Yuuto looks stoic when he's commenting Marisa Kuroki. He doesn't seem to have any interest in her at all. But he sure knows how to make people feel excited about their passion. Manabe's eyes are gleaming when he hears Yuuto's comment. He seems happy that Yuuto also appreciates Marisa Kuroki's beauty just like him. He then takes out a photo set from his bag and starts to show them to us. It looks like it's a photo set of Marisa Kuroki.

"This is indeed my prized possession. It was only available to the first one hundred people who bought the photobook," he says to us. Ayumi and Akie are in shock when they find out that it's a bunch of Marisa Kuroki's nude photographs. Well, it's not that we can see her boobs or her genitals. She's still covering her boobs with her arms. But her derriere is on full display, though. And she also does many nude poses too. She sure knows how to rock her asset.

"Manabe, I can't believe it that you're daring enough to bring something like this to school," Akie scolds him. She then hits him in the back with Marisa Kuroki's photobook. Manabe yells in pain because of what Akie does to him. "Why the hell you hit me? Shouldn't you hit Yuuto as well? He also flips through the photobook. Don't you think you should hit him too?" Akie ignores Manabe's plea and keeps on hitting him. She looks more frustrated than annoyed with Manabe's behavior.

Ayumi remains silent after seeing Marisa Kuroki's photograph. She doesn't even attempt to stop Akie from hitting Manabe. Rather than feeling disgusted, she looks more like she's feeling worried. Do Marisa Kuroki and her are related? It must be shocking to find out that they're related. I'm sure that Manabe won't miss this opportunity to meet Marisa Kuroki in the flesh.

"Ayumi, you don't look well. Are you alright?" I ask her. She only shakes her head. "No, I'm fine. Maybe I'm too surprised after seeing Marisa Kuroki's photographs. Well, I should expect that she'll be wearing skimpy swimsuits and will go nude in some of her shots. I thought that I might have an idea about her

personality if I take a look at the photographs. I guess that it's hard for me to see her beyond the scanty outfits and the nude pose."

Akie and Yuuto head back to their class once the break is over. I feel sorry for Manabe. It must be painful being hit countless times by Akie. Thank goodness that Akie is in a different class. I bet that she will keep hitting Manabe if Akie is in the same class as we are. Putting Manabe aside, I'm more concerned about Ayumi. Her behavior changes after seeing Marisa Kuroki's photos.

I can't help but still think about it throughout the class. Why does Ayumi's behavior bother me so much? I understand that it must be hard for her to fathom seeing a woman dressing in a skimpy outfit and dares to pose nude. But her expression is saying otherwise. She looks more like she's trying to decode Marisa Kuroki's personality. Why does she have to do that if Marisa Kuroki has nothing to do with her?

I keep on thinking about it until the school is over. I never thought that this issue does bother me this much. Ayumi, Yuuto and I walk together as we leave the school ground. Akie and Manabe live in a different area. So, we don't go home together with them. Ayumi's driver will pick her up as soon as the school is over. But he won't pick her up in front of the school gate, though. She has to walk a little further and wait for him there.

Ayumi currently lives all by herself in a posh apartment in Shinjuku. Her family lives in Denenchofu. It's an upscale neighborhood in the central Tokyo. She can always go to the school in that area. But her dad wants her to go to the school in Shinjuku instead. It seems like her dad wants her to be independent. And it's not such a bad idea since she grew up on a silver platter. Besides, it's much nearer to go to school if she lives in Shinjuku compared to going to school from Denenchofu.

We finally reach the spot where Ayumi will wait for the driver to come and fetch her. She remains silent even after we leave the school ground. She starts to break the silence after a while. "Touka, how would you feel if any of your family members is a gravure idol? Will you be proud of their achievement? Or will you

shun them because of the nature of their work? What will you do if you're in that situation?"

Yuuto and I seem surprised with Ayumi's question. It seems that Marisa Kuroki does impact her in some ways. It's just that we're not even sure if Ayumi and Marisa Kuroki are related by blood. I don't think she'll ask me that sort of question out of the blue. But then again, it's nothing unusual if she's only curious. I tend to do the same too. But I still find it weird since Ayumi isn't the curious type.

Before any of us can answer the question, Ayumi's driver is already here to pick her up. "I'll see you guys tomorrow," she says to us as she heads inside. The car speeds up after that, leaving Yuuto and me behind. Both of us find it odd with Ayumi's question. We begin to wonder why she's asking us that kind of question as we head home.

"Do you think that Marisa Kuroki and Ayumi are related by blood? I doubt that she will ask us that kind of question if there's nothing between them," I say to Yuuto. Yuuto pauses for a moment as he tries to think for an answer. "Maybe," he replies, "We don't know much about Marisa Kuroki. So, we'll never know that the name Marisa Kuroki is just a stage name. It's not that the gravure idols must use their real name."

Well, Yuuto has a point there. Maybe the name Marisa Kuroki isn't even her real name. She may have to use a stage name to hide the fact that she's from Miyazaki family. It can be a disgrace to the family if the media finds out that one of the family members is a gravure idol. But shouldn't the media already expose her identity a long time ago if it's true? When I think about it again, I don't think Marisa Kuroki and Ayumi are related by blood.

Suddenly, Yuuto stops walking. He begins to signal me to look at the guy who walks not far from us. "I notice that the guy who is not far from us has been pursuing us since we left the school. I thought that he was keeping an eye on Ayumi. But he's been following us even after Ayumi left us. So, he could be after us," Yuuto whispers to me.

I nod at him. I also think the same as Yuuto. I already notice his presence since we left the school ground. At first, I ignore him, thinking that he happens to head in the same direction as us. But he's been trying to match our pace since we left the school ground. So, there's no doubt that he's here to pursue us. I also thought that he's trying to kidnap Ayumi. So, we stay behind with her until her driver comes to pick her up. But his gaze is still fixated on us even after Ayumi already leaves us. That will only confirm our suspicion even further.

I'd like to think that this guy is only here to observe us. And he doesn't mean any harm. Maybe he's here because of Akito Miyazaki's order. But it still doesn't make sense to me. If he's only here to ensure Ayumi's safety, why he only starts to keep an eye on her now? Is it because there's a potential threat that will get Ayumi entangled by accident? Well, it's a possibility. But his behavior proves that this guy is after us.

"Do you think that this guy is here to stalk you?" Yuuto asks me again. I almost yell at him when he says that to me. I can't believe it that Yuuto is joking with me even in this situation. But it can be a possibility too. "Why does he want to stalk me? I don't remember I'm doing something that makes his heart swoons," I whisper to Yuuto.

The man still follows us despite knowing that we're already aware of him. We have yet to find out why he's pursuing us. But it still doesn't change the fact that we can't let him follow us all the way home. "I guess that we should go on a separate way then. That will make him lose his track on us," I say to Yuuto.

"No, that's dangerous," he replies, "I can't let you be all by yourself. Besides, we don't have any weapon to defend ourselves. We don't know if he's armed or not. So, it's dangerous for me to leave you on your own. It's not that I doubt your ability. But I still don't think we should go separate ways just to shake him off. We should stick together and make him lose our track until we reach home safely."

Yuuto is right about that. Going on separate ways is indeed risky. And I don't have anything that I can use to defend myself. Sure, my fist is deadly too. But I have a feeling that this guy may not be an ordinary person. Otherwise, he won't be here to pursue us without bringing any weapon with him. If the history is

repeating itself, then it's best for me to be prepared. It's better for us to be safe than sorry.

I feel frustrated since our current situation reminds me of our dark past. But unlike the last time, we don't even know why this guy is pursuing us and who's ordering him to do that. We can choose to confront him right away. But since we don't have any weapon with us, it's better for us not to do anything hasty. We feel that it's the best choice judging from our current situation.

CHAPTER TWO

“You’re later than usual. What’s up?” Dad asks us when we enter the coffee shop. There aren’t that many customers by the time we come home. So, I doubt that dad is having trouble with managing the customers on his own. “Something unexpected happened to us. I’ll tell you in details after we close the coffee shop,” I reply. Dad nods his head. We feel relieved that dad doesn’t press us to tell him about what happened to us on our way home.

We then head upstairs to get ready. We still need to go down and help dad with serving the customers. We expect that there will be more customers coming until the closing time. But those who come when the closing time is near usually order coffee as a takeaway. They don’t have any intention to drink here. Besides, they don’t want to trouble us for serving them beyond the closing time. We’re grateful for having such considerate customers.

As the closing time is getting nearer, Mr. Sakakibara comes into the coffee shop. “How do you do, Mr. Uehara?” One of the customers greets Mr. Sakakibara. Both dad and Mr. Sakakibara are using a fake name in this mission. Dad’s name will become Akira Kimizuki while Mr. Sakakibara’s name will become Azuma

Uehara. The kanji used in his fake name is different than the one used in his real name, though.

Mr. Sakakibara is known to be a bar owner in this neighborhood. Like us, he's using his bar to gather intelligence for this mission. His bar is only next to our coffee shop. So, he always comes here before he opens his bar. "I'm doing great," Mr. Sakakibara replies, "We have a brand new cocktail in our bar. Please drop by if you have the time. I'm sure that you'll love the taste of our brand new cocktail."

The man's eyes are gleaming with excitement when Mr. Sakakibara tells him about it. "Sure, I'm planning to drop by with my friend today, anyway. I can't wait to try your new cocktail." The man leaves the coffee shop after that. He must be one of Mr. Sakakibara's frequent customers. Otherwise, he won't greet him when he sees Mr. Sakakibara in the coffee shop.

Besides Mr. Sakakibara, we also have Ms. Chiyo Shibasaki. Ms. Chiyo is the operator of our squad. She's also an analyst for our squad as well. She lives together with Mr. Sakakibara. Like us, they also live above the bar. We will always send the information that we gather to her so then she can analyze them for us. Ms. Chiyo doesn't have a fake name since she doesn't need to come in contact with anyone. She also comes here once in a while too. But she spends most of her time upstairs, though.

Once we flip the closed sign, we begin with the cleanup process. Yuuto tilts his head, signaling me to go ahead and tells dad about what happened to us on our way back home. He'll do the cleaning on my behalf when I'm talking to dad. As for Hayato, he's busy with making another round of freshly brewed coffee. He always serves us after we finish with cleaning up the whole coffee shop. He begins to serve me as I take my seat at the counter.

"Dad, we noticed that someone was pursuing us on our way home. We believed that he knew about us from the leaked document. It looks like someone else also gets a hold of the document other than Incognito," I say to him. Dad doesn't look surprised at all when I tell him about it. Does he already guess what happened to us? Dad only sighs when I tell him. "I knew it," he replies, "I already

guess the reason why you came home late. It's just that I never thought that it would happen so soon."

Mr. Sakakibara looks at dad as he lights up the cigarette. "So, what are we going to do? We're back to square one again," he asks dad. Dad taps his finger on the counter as he thinks of the best solution to our problem. "There's nothing much we can do for now other than to keep an eye on this pursuer. It's hard to know about his intention since we don't have a clue on the person who issues the order to pursue Touka and Yuuto. Besides, anyone can be a culprit because of the leak," he says to us.

Mr. Sakakibara takes a puff before he continues. "It looks like we should give them a gun to defend themselves. Sure, they can use a bare hand to fight the pursuer. But I don't think it will be enough. If the history is repeating itself, there's a high chance that the pursuer isn't an ordinary person. Otherwise, he won't be pursuing them all by himself. He must be confident enough that he can handle both of them with his strength alone."

Dad nods his head, agreeing with what Mr. Sakakibara says to him. "Well, I also think the same way. We don't know much about the pursuer. So, it's dangerous for them not to bring any weapon to defend themselves. I don't have any problem with them carrying a gun to school since they already did that in the past. And I trust them that they won't cause a ruckus only because they have a gun with them."

Dad then turns to me. "I'll let you carry a gun with you to school starting tomorrow. If you happen to encounter the pursuer, I want you to get as much information as you can from him." I nod my head. "What about Yuuto? Is he going to carry a gun with him as well?" I ask dad. In Yuuto's case, he's better off carrying a gun with him instead of a sniper rifle. It's not easy to conceal a sniper rifle because of its large size, even if it's in the sniper case.

"You don't have to worry about that, sis," Yuuto replies, "I can still shoot people from afar by using a gun alone. We only need to be strategic about where we're going to confront the pursuer." I feel relieved when Yuuto is okay with only using a gun to assassinate the pursuer. Sure, Yuuto did use the same gun to kill

the pursuers back then. But I thought that he might not want to do something like that again since he has to be near the target to make it work. It can also put him in a vulnerable position if it backfires.

During our conversation, Ms. Shoko comes inside the coffee shop. Ms. Shoko Nakamura is a police officer from Public Security Bureau. Her squad is currently helping us with Satoru Yuuya's investigation. Not only that, but she's also mom's childhood friend. So, she already knew dad a long time ago. She usually comes here whenever she has information that can help our investigation.

"Someone is pursuing you again?" Ms. Shoko asks me as she takes a seat at the counter. I nod my head without saying anything much to her. "It looks like my hunch was right, after all. Someone will begin to pursue both of you the moment this problem comes to the surface. I must be so naïve to think that none of the problems would pop up because of what Incognito did," she sighs as she says to us.

"Your hands must be full with Incognito's investigation for the past few weeks," Mr. Sakakibara says to her. Ms. Shoko only sighs as she grabs the freshly brewed coffee that dad serves her. "Well, that's true. Hacking isn't a normal crime. Any crime that is involving hacking will take such a long time to investigate. And it's even more complicated when the one who got involved was Incognito. They're much harder to crack down compared to the typical hacker group."

Dad only chuckles when he hears Ms. Shoko's response. "But didn't you guys manage to arrest one of them a few years back? It's not that you don't have any chance at all to arrest the next one," he says to her. My eyes spark with excitement when I find out that Ms. Shoko managed to arrest one of Incognito's members in the past. I always assume that the police will never be able to arrest any of them.

"Well, it was only a stroke of luck, though," Ms. Shoko replies, "So, it's not going to be the same this time. Besides, the person who was in charge of the current hack seemed to have a lot more experience. So, I doubt that it'll be easy for us to arrest one of them again. The reason why we were able to arrest one of

them back then was because one of them made a mistake. It was hard for me to fathom that the member I arrested was a minor. And she was a female hacker too.”

I become even more excited when I find out that the member of Incognito that Ms. Shoko arrested back then was a minor. It never crosses my mind that anyone, even the minor can join Incognito. I bet that she must be one hell of a talented hacker. Otherwise, Incognito wouldn't let someone like her to join them. Sure, she screwed up and put the rest of the members of Incognito in jeopardy. But she's still a talented hacker for someone as young as her.

“Do you think that it could be the same person who hacked into Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare this time? She was arrested a few years back. So, I'm pretty sure that she's no longer a minor after a few years are passing by. Maybe Incognito gives her a chance to redeem herself as a way to atone her past mistake,” Yuuto says to Ms. Shoko as he takes a seat next to me.

Ms. Shoko sighs as she puts down the coffee cup. “Did your dad tell you anything about what happened to her after that?” She asks us. Both Yuuto and I become puzzled with Ms. Shoko's question. What does this minor have anything to do with dad? Does he know who she is? Ms. Shoko glances at dad, wondering if she should tell us about the minor. Dad doesn't seem to give her any response back to her. So, Ms. Shoko seems unsure if she should tell us about her or not.

“I'm sorry. I wish that I can tell you about her. But I don't think it's the right time for me to tell you,” she says to us as she takes another sip. She then turns to our direction as she answers Yuuto's question. “Going back to your question, I doubt that it's the same person who was in charge of the current hack. Sure, she's no longer a minor anymore. But I don't think that Incognito would let her return to the group. They may think that she's a spy sent by the police to crack them down. So, it's possible that they won't accept her back no matter how good she is.”

Dad then turns to Ms. Shoko with a curious look on his face. “Shoko, how did Incognito get their hands on the document? We know that the ministry keeps the confidential documents in a blockchain. And we already know how safe and

reliable the blockchain technology is. Sure, they're a skilled hacker. But it's still hard to hack the blockchain even for someone like them," dad says to her.

Blockchain technology. It's also another name for distributed ledger technology. It's known as DLT for short. It's common for businesses today to use this technology to store personal and sensitive data. They also use it for smart contracts implementation as well. It's thanks to these tech companies that make the implementation affordable and faster. Even the government is using the same technology to secure our data. Unlike businesses, the government harness more data than anyone could imagine. So, they need to depend on the blockchain technology more than everyone else to secure the data.

I agree with dad about that. I won't say that it's impossible to hack a blockchain. But blockchain technology is a different beast altogether. After all, blockchain is a decentralized system. It means that the data we store in a block will be distributed across the network. And the data will have a timestamp and a link to the previous block. The block will form a chronological chain that is being reinforced through cryptography.

Cryptography will ensure that other people won't be able to alter the records. They need to have many parties' authorization if they want to alter anything in the block. It's because of this reason that makes blockchain to have a high degree of trust. It may sound complicated. But the whole process happens in a split second.

To be honest, I have no idea what kind of computer power that the members of Incognito have. But it's possible for them to hack any part of the network if they combine their computing power. Doing so will lead to the creation of the quantum computer. Sure, that will work from the theoretical perspective. But it's still difficult and expensive to do even for a prolific hacker group like Incognito. And I doubt that it's worth doing it. I bet that Incognito will opt for a simpler route instead of hacking the blockchain.

Ms. Shoko sighs when she hears dad's question. "You're right about that, Minoru. It's impossible for them to hack the blockchain even for a prolific hacker group like Incognito. But we do keep that possibility in mind. We already take a

look at the blockchain in the ministry if there's any sign of it being tampered. But we didn't see any abnormalities in the ministry's blockchain. So, we conclude that they didn't hack the blockchain to get a hold of the document."

Mr. Sakakibara takes another puff as he listens to what Ms. Shoko says. "So, you're saying that someone breaks into the document storage room and steal the document?" He asks her. Ms. Shoko nods her head. "We also think that one of the staffs in the ministry stole the document and handed them to Incognito. But the record showed that none of them accessed the document storage room for the past few months. And that includes the people from the top brass."

Ms. Shoko takes another sip before she continues. "Not only that, the name of the file itself is vague. It doesn't give you any clue that the files are documents for Transhuman Development Project. Only the top brass in the ministry knows the actual name of the file. We also did ask people around if they were aware of the project. All staffs, including the new hire, knew about it. But they couldn't talk about it because of its covert nature. And it was also Saburo Matsuda's order not to discuss it in public."

It makes sense why the former minister, Saburo Matsuda wouldn't let them talk about it. He wanted to ensure that the top-secret project wouldn't leak to the public. It would only put him under the scrutiny if the public knew about it. But in the end, he had to step down when the project failed. Nobody knew about it because of the government's intervention. It was only thanks to Incognito that the public knows about the project's existence.

"Do you think that the person who gave the document to Incognito was one of the people from the project?" Yuuto asks Ms. Shoko. She shakes her head before she answers Yuuto's question. "That's impossible too. You already know that everyone who got involved in the project was already dead. And that includes the skilled assassins that they hired to capture you. Same goes for the officers who oversaw the project. They were killed by Hayato when he escaped from the research facility," Ms. Shoko replies.

Ms. Shoko then transfers the file to us. The file contains a list of people who were involved in the project. As I scroll through the document, I spot mom's

name and her profile in the document. I didn't know that she was the second-in-command for this project after Dr. Hayama. It makes sense why they accused mom of betraying them. I doubt that mom's punishment would be this severe if she were only a regular researcher like the others.

Dad then shows the list of officers for this project to Hayato. Hayato doesn't have a smartwatch. So, he can't view the file that Ms. Shoko sends to us. I find it funny that Hayato doesn't own any electronic device. I know that seems funny when I say this. But it looks to me that Hayato prefers the primitive way of living. Does it have anything to do with him coming from a ninja clan? Maybe, I guess.

But on the flip side, not having one is the best for him. No one will be able to keep track of what he does since he doesn't have any electronic device with him. And it will be much easier for him to do his job since no one knows his identity. As much as I love using electronic devices, they tend to expose too many of our personal information. And it can be dangerous if it falls into the wrong hand.

Hayato only nods his head when he sees the list of the officers that he killed. "The incident may be a long time ago. But I remember everyone that I killed. Some of them even begged me to spare their life after witnessing how I killed some of their colleagues." It amazes me that Hayato has such a good memory. He remembers the people that he killed in the research facility even though it was a long time ago.

Hayato frowns as he scrolls through the list once again. "I think I didn't see him around at that time," he says to us as he points at one of the people who are on the list. "Junpei Ishiwaki? Are you sure that you didn't see him at that time?" Ms. Shoko asks him as she confirms the information.

Hayato nods his head. "I already double checked the list once again. I was sure that I didn't see him around at that time. Maybe he was taking a day off on that day. Same goes for the other researchers that Satoru Yuuya killed later on. I didn't see any of them when I was trying to escape the research facility."

Ms. Shoko pauses for a moment and starts to search for something in her smartwatch. She finally found the file not long after that. It's a file that has a list of people who are currently working in Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare.

“Junpei Ishiwaki is one of the high-ranking officers in the ministry. He continued to work with the ministry after the government issued an order to halt the project. Back then, he was only a low-level staff. It was only recently that he entered the top brass in the ministry.”

It seems that Junpei Ishiwaki is the only person who survived the massacre. It looks like Hayato is spot on about the people that he recognized. I bet that Mr. Ishiwaki must be so fortunate that he took a leave on that day. He would be joining the rest of his colleagues if he was there.

“Do you think that he could be the one who leaked the document to Incognito? He might only be a low-level staff at that time. But I was pretty sure that he knew a lot of things about the project,” I say to Ms. Shoko. I feel that the possibility is high for someone like him to leak the document to Incognito. I can’t say for sure why he did that. Maybe he did it in the name of justice. But I don’t get it why he wants to do it now. Shouldn’t he do that a few years ago?

Ms. Shoko sighs after that. “That was what I thought at first,” she says, “But it was already too late. He committed suicide a few weeks before Incognito exposed the project online. Even his family members were appalled with his sudden death. He didn’t show any symptom that he wanted to end his life. They lodged a police report when they couldn’t contact him and labeled him as missing without a trace for a few days. His dead body was found a week after they lodged the report.”

Our eyes widen when we find out about Mr. Ishiwaki’s sudden death. Ms. Shoko continues to tell us about Mr. Ishiwaki. “Since we still listed him as a suspect, we’ve decided to visit his house. We went there to search for any clue about him leaking the document to Incognito. We also asked his wife if she noticed anything different about him. That was when she told us that her husband was a lot more energetic than before. She said it was thanks to the audio track that he received in the mail despite coming from an unknown sender.”

Ms. Shoko takes a sip again before she continues. “The mail contained an audio track and a short note. It has a brief explanation of the audio track. And it also included instructions on how to listen to the audio track for the best result.

At first, he was skeptical about the claim. And he was also suspicious about it since it was from an unknown sender. But he needed that boost so much because of how demanding his current job was. Because of that, he had been listening to the audio track every day. I managed to get a hold of the audio track after receiving permission from his wife.”

Ms. Shoko grips her coffee cup after that. She seems terrified by what she found from the audio track. “So, the audio track that he got wasn’t an ordinary audio track, huh?” Dad says to her. Ms. Shoko nods her head. “You’re right,” she replies, “The audio track contained a subliminal message. We managed to uncover a hidden message in the audio track with a backmasking technique. The hidden message instructed him to commit suicide in Aokigahara after he completed his task. What was terrifying to me was the person who recorded the subliminal message.”

Backmasking technique is a recording technique that records sound or messages that are being played in backward. It will then record this backward sound or messages onto the track that should be played forward. This technique will usually expose the hidden message included in the track. Many rock bands used this technique to record satanic subliminal messages. As a result, this technique caused a massive backlash among the public.

Subliminal messages are so powerful because it can impact the way we perceive things. It can also affect our behavior in a good or a bad way through altering our subconscious mind. Subliminal messages usually contain calming music and voice affirmation recorded in it. People have been using subliminal messages for so many years because they’re effective. They used it to become confident, overcoming addiction and bad habits. There are many research prove that the subliminal messages do work to alter the way we think or behave.

Ms. Shoko transfers another file to us. It’s the audio track that she mentioned just now. But the one that she transfers to us is a different version, though. This version allows us to listen to the subliminal message when we listen to it in reverse. As we begin playing the track, we realize that the voice in this track

sounds familiar to us. It looks like the person who recorded the subliminal message is indeed Satoru Yuuya.

I clench my fist when I find out that Satoru Yuuya was behind Junpei Ishiwaki's suicide. The message recorded in this track is loud and clear. He ordered Junpei Ishiwaki to commit suicide in Aokigahara after he gave the document to Incognito. It's nothing strange to tell Junpei Ishiwaki to hang himself in Aokigahara. After all, another name for Aokigahara is suicide forest. People will head to Aokigahara if they want to commit suicide.

Ms. Shoko takes a sip before she continues. "After we discover the subliminal message, we went to his office to find out if he still has the document with him. To our surprise, he has a few copies of the original document with him. No one knows how many copies he holds all this time. So, no one will find it strange if one of the documents were missing from his office. It was possible that one of the members from Incognito stole the document from there. But there was no sign of anyone breaking into his office even after he went missing."

"Why Satoru Yuuya wants to kill someone like him?" I ask dad. He only sighs when he hears my question. "It's simple," dad replies, "He's sending us a message that Junpei Ishiwaki's death is only the beginning. He's warning us that there will be more people dying the same way as Junpei Ishiwaki from now onwards. He wants to show us his new capability to kill people from afar and without leaving a trace."

"Does it mean that he already predicted our action from the beginning?" Yuuto asks dad. He nods his head. "Yup," he replies, "He knew that we would discover him through the hidden message in the audio track. The only thing we have yet to find out is if someone else helped him to achieve this goal. I bet that this person must be someone influential and knows a lot about him and what he did in the past. I doubt that Satoru Yuuya was able to do it on his own. He must have an accomplice just like the last time."

Dad then turns to Yuuto and me. "You're right about that, Touka. Incognito isn't the only one who gets a hold of the document. Someone else also has the same document as well. But I don't think that this person wanted to pursue you

right after Incognito leaked the project online. It's possible that he already knew about you and your involvement with the project way before the leak. Since we don't know our enemy's true identity, I want you to be careful."

Yuuto and I nod our head, understanding dad's order. I clench my fist when I realize that the Transhuman Development Project is haunting us again. But unlike the last time, we don't even know about our enemy's true identity and what he's after. It doesn't matter what the enemy wants to accomplish at the end of the day. I'm pretty sure that his plan is a lot more sinister than the last time.

CHAPTER THREE

I only stare at the gun that is lying on the table as I'm getting ready for school. I never thought that I have to bring the gun with me again after so long. I wish that I don't have to bring it with me. It only reminds me of the day where I have to kill someone just to defend myself. I don't regret the decision I made on that day. But I prefer not to bring any form of weapon with me to school. It gives me the feeling that I live in such an unsafe environment.

Despite the feeling, I still put the gun inside my bag. I'm worried that I'll forget to bring it with me especially when I'm rushing to leave the house. I also have to bring the earpiece with me since Ms. Chiyo can help us with identifying the pursuer. It's much easier for us to come up with a plan to confront him based on the information that Ms. Chiyo provides to us.

Suddenly, I hear a loud knock on the door. Yuuto is standing right in front of my room as I open the door. He looks somewhat antsy to me. Did I spend such a long time reminiscing the past? I don't think I did. Am I late for school? Well, my smartwatch is telling me that it's still early. Now I don't get why Yuuto looks antsy early in the morning. All I can think of is he has bad news for me.

“There’s a news reporting saying that Kawakami was already dead,” Yuuto says to me in a hurry. My jaw drops when I hear the news. I never expect to receive such news early in the morning. Yuuto and I rush to the living room to find out more about the news. Dad is already at the kitchen table by the time we’re already there. He looks calm and collected as if the news doesn’t surprise him at all. Hayato is also there as well. He’s busy with preparing breakfast for us in the kitchen.

According to the news, Kawakami was found dead in Hotel Rendezvous last night. It’s one of the love hotels in Shibuya. The person who found him dead was one of the hotel’s staff. At that time, the hotel staff received notification from Kawakami’s room at 11. He called the staff because he wanted to pay the room rate using cash. The staff went to his room, only to find out that Kawakami wasn’t responsive at all. He decided to break into the room after that. At the same time, he also felt suspicious with the notification that he received. That was how he discovered that Kawakami was already dead.

Based on the hotel’s staff testimony, Kawakami was no longer breathing by the time he broke into the room. He noticed that Kawakami’s wrist was bleeding, staining the room’s carpet. He also noticed that Kawakami was holding a piece of broken glass in his right hand. He believed that Kawakami must be using that piece of glass to slit his wrist. There was also a broken wine glass which wasn’t far from where he fell. So, the piece of glass that he got could be from the broken wine glass.

The hotel staff began to lodge a police report not long after that. Here’s where it gets somewhat fuzzy. According to the police investigation, Kawakami was already dead at 10 p.m. So, it was impossible for him to send a notification to the front desk at 11 p.m. What was even more surprising, the message that he sent to the front desk didn’t even exist in his message log. Because of that, many people believed that the hotel room itself was a haunted room.

The police investigation rules out that Kawakami’s death is a murder case. It’s because the police also found blood that didn’t belong to Kawakami. The police believed that the blood could belong to the culprit. So, they began to check the

security footage if they could identify the suspect from there. For some strange reason, the security camera suddenly turned off during the time of his death. And the footage that was recorded before the sudden turn off was deleted from the recorder. So, the police weren't able to identify the suspect because of that.

My eyebrows furrow as I watch the news. It looks to me that the way Kawakami died is the same as how Junpei Ishiwaki was found dead. Sure, they classified his death as a murder case only because of the presence of another blood in the crime scene. But the blood can be anyone. It doesn't have to belong to the culprit. The blood was only there just to confuse the investigation. But I already guess the cause of Kawakami's death.

"Does it mean that Satoru Yuuya already makes his move?" I ask dad. Dad only stares at the TV screen when I ask him. "It looks that way to me," he replies, "He could die using the same method as well. But I doubt that the subliminal message can send a notification to the front desk and can also turn off the security camera. So, I'm pretty sure that there must be an underlying mechanism that we don't know. I don't think that the subliminal message can do that on its own."

The news continues with the reporters storming Ms. Shoko. At that time, she's right in front of Public Security Bureau building. Ms. Shoko looks so beaten up in front of the camera, though. I bet that she must be feeling tired when she has to stay up for the whole night to investigate Kawakami's death. "Do you believe that Kawakami's death was caused by Incognito? Didn't they say before that they have a special surprise for Kawakami if he didn't do what they said?" One of the reporters asks Ms. Shoko.

Ms. Shoko only sighs when she hears the reporter's question. She still answers the reporter's question despite feeling tired. "No, Incognito has nothing to do with his death," Ms. Shoko replies. Her response is causing the uproar, though. They're accusing Ms. Shoko of siding with Incognito. To be honest, I don't get why they believe that Incognito can do such thing. Is it because of the automated notification to the front desk and the security camera's sudden turn off? It looks to me that they must be reading too many science fiction books.

Ms. Shoko looks annoyed when the reporters are accusing her of siding with Incognito. Despite the accusation, she answers their question in a calm and professional manner. “Don’t get us wrong. We’re not siding with them. It’s just that the special surprise that they were referring to wasn’t about Kawakami’s death. I’m sorry that I can’t disclose the threat that they sent to him. All I can say is they never threatened to kill Kawakami if he refused to comply.”

Ms. Shoko walks off in a huff after she answers the reporter’s query. I find it amazing that Ms. Shoko can answer their questions under the intense situation. The reporters begin to chase after her despite her colleagues’ warning not to follow them. But somehow, Ms. Shoko is able to escape from their tight grip as she heads elsewhere with the rest of her colleagues.

The news doesn’t mention anything about Kawakami leaving a suicide note before he died. So, it’s even harder to conclude that he committed suicide. And it doesn’t help that the presence of another blood makes things even more complicated. I won’t be surprised at all that many people will begin to speculate the actual culprit behind his death. And I’m pretty sure that the name Incognito will get mentioned most of the time in the speculation.

Dad crosses his arms on his chest after he sees the news. He must be thinking about our next course of action. “I can’t say for sure if Satoru Yuuya is also aiming to taint Incognito’s reputation or not. But there’s a high chance that he will use this opportunity to shift the blame to Incognito again in the future. So, Satoru Yuuya’s next target will also be the same as Incognito’s target if that’s his true intention,” dad says to us.

Dad is right about that. It seems that almost everybody is suspecting Incognito for killing Kawakami. They believe that Incognito is capable of doing something like that. Well, I won’t blame them for thinking like that. It’s true that it shouldn’t be a problem for someone like Incognito to do something like that. But they seem to forget that it takes skill to kill people. And Incognito doesn’t have such capability.

“So, you’re saying that we should be alert whenever Incognito announces their next target? Is it because Satoru Yuuya’s target is the same as theirs?” Yuuto

asks dad. He nods his head. “That’s right,” dad replies, “It’s hard to say whether Satoru Yuuya is aiming for the same target as Incognito or not. But we can use Incognito’s target to come up with our next course of action to track down Satoru Yuuya.”

Dad then turns to Hayato. “I have a mission for you. I want you to spy on Akito Miyazaki. He may not be Incognito’s next target. But the probability is high for Satoru Yuuya to target him because of his popularity among the public. So, I want you to do what you can to stop him from killing Akito Miyazaki. We’ll never know that we can get a lead on the person who works together with him from there.”

Hayato nods his head, understanding what he needs to do. He then heads to his room to get ready for his mission. Both Yuuto and I can guess why dad is assigning Hayato to protect Akito Miyazaki. There’s a high chance that Kawakami’s death is only a decoy for Satoru Yuuya. Perhaps his primary target is Akito Miyazaki. It’s possible that the person who is working together with Satoru Yuuya wants Akito Miyazaki to die. He may see Akito Miyazaki as a hindrance to his plan. It’s unfortunate that we don’t know what it is.

Yuuto and I head to school after that. Somehow, we find it strange that the pursuer isn’t pursuing us on our way to school. Now I begin to wonder if we were too suspicious of that guy yesterday. I’d like to think that we must be way too paranoid when we found out that someone was following us. But I still think that this man was aiming us from the beginning. It’s just that we don’t understand why he’s not around today. And we still don’t see him around even in the area that is close to the school.

Is it because this pursuer isn’t a morning person? Well, maybe he is. Despite not seeing him in the morning, we still can’t let our guard down yet. Maybe he’ll come and pursue us after the school is over. We loosen ourselves a bit when we’re nearby the school area. I doubt that the pursuer will try to do anything risky when there are so many people around here. The last thing he wants is his action will bring attention to himself.

Ayumi comes inside the school building not long after that. She seems like her usual self when she greets us. As we're heading to our class, I can't help but notice other students talking about Kawakami's death. Just like these reporters, they also believe that Incognito is the cause of his death. I bet that Manabe will yell at them if he finds out about it.

Ayumi seems uncomfortable when she hears their conversation, though. Does Kawakami's death impact her in some ways? She remains silent even after she takes her seat. I can't help but wonder if the conversation is bothering her. "Are you worried that your dad will become Incognito's next target?" I ask her. I can't say for sure if Akito Miyazaki will become Incognito's next target. But it doesn't hurt for me to assume such possibility.

Ayumi seems surprised by my question. I hate to say this, but she's easy to read. The only thing that I don't get is the question that she asked us yesterday. Ayumi nods her head. It looks to me that I already hit the jackpot. She does worry about her dad becoming Incognito's next target. "Well, I don't know if your dad will become Incognito's next target or not. But he won't be their target if he doesn't do anything shady behind his public image. Does he do anything of that sort?" I ask her.

Ayumi pauses for a moment, trying to think if she notices anything. "Well, I don't know about that. But if he does do anything immoral, people around me would already tell me about it." I sigh when I hear Ayumi's response. I doubt that Akito Miyazaki will tell her about what he does behind her back. He doesn't want Ayumi to get involved. It's what any father would do. No matter what he does, I'm pretty sure that Akito Miyazaki has the fatherly instinct within him.

"I don't know much about Akito Miyazaki," I say to her, "So, why don't you ask Manabe about your dad? He knows a lot about the scandals involving politicians besides the conspiracy theories. I don't mean to doubt people around you. But they must have a reason why they don't want to tell you. Manabe may do the same too. But I don't think he can refuse if you nudge him a bit."

Ayumi seems hesitated when I'm suggesting her to ask Manabe. I understand why she doesn't feel like asking him. She doesn't want to feel disappointed when

she finds out about what Akito Miyazaki did behind her back. She's afraid that she will lose her respect for him. At this moment, I don't feel like saying anything to her anymore. I doubt that it will make her feel any better.

The class begins as soon as the teacher comes in. So, I didn't have the chance to talk to Manabe about Akito Miyazaki before our class begins. It looks like I can only discuss it with Manabe during the break. During the break, I'm lucky that Akie is the one who begins the discussion. "I don't get why these commenters keep on blaming Incognito despite not having concrete proof. Even the police already said that it wasn't Incognito who killed Kawakami," she says to us.

I find it impressive that Akie is siding with Incognito even though she doesn't support them. But I have to agree with what she says. It's easy to say that they were behind Kawakami's death only because they threatened Kawakami in the past. But it doesn't make sense for them to kill Kawakami since he already did what they wanted him to do. I don't know much about Incognito. But they don't seem to be the sort of people who will backtrack on their promise.

Manabe slams his fist on the table. He grits his teeth when he hears people blaming Incognito for Kawakami's death. "I don't get it either. Their reason was only because of the automated message to the front desk that they received at 11 and the security camera's immediate turn-off. They felt that only people like Incognito were able to pull off this sort of trick. They seem to forget that there's someone else who can do the same. And they have a lot more reasons to kill Kawakami than Incognito."

Everyone starts to pay attention when Manabe points out that someone else can do the same thing. "Let's take a look at what we deem strange in Kawakami's murder case. The first one is the automated message that the front desk received from him at 11. It was strange that the message that he sent to the front desk wasn't available in his message log. One possibility is that it was someone else who notified the front desk on his behalf."

Manabe continues with his explanation about Kawakami's death. "The second one was the security camera didn't have any footage around the time Kawakami was found dead. The security camera would turn off so then the

culprit could escape from the love hotel. And not to mention, the footage before the security cameras' sudden turn off was deleted. This person didn't want his or her image being recorded by the security camera. I bet that this person must be someone who is close to Kawakami. And she must be female, assuming that he's into a normal relationship. I bet that she must be close enough for him to let his guard down or letting his pants down in this case."

Everyone starts to giggle because of Manabe's explanation. Well, Manabe is right about that. If the person who was with him was indeed the culprit, she must be someone who is close to him. I have to salute this woman for having to sacrifice her virginity in the name of assassination. But then again, she doesn't have to sleep with him if she wants to kill him. The news didn't say anything about Kawakami was naked when he was found dead. So, I believe that she killed him before their hot and steamy moment even started.

"So, your assumption is the culprit is a woman who is close to him, correct?" Yuuto asks Manabe. He nods his head. "That's right," he replies, "Assuming that Kawakami is only into women, it's possible that the culprit was a woman. There was a rumor about Kawakami having a love affair with one of his female staffs. I bet that the female staff must be the one who killed him. The rumor said that they've been seeing each other for so long. So, it shouldn't be surprising at all if the culprit was the same person."

Akie places her hand on her chin, trying to grasp Manabe's opinion. "In other words, the woman who used to be his staff turns out to be an assassin?" She asks Manabe. He nods his head again. "It could be. But I believe that she's not an assassin. If it's true, then it's possible that she was teaming up with a hacker as well. I doubt that she could do it on her own. The hacker was the one who turned off the security camera during her escape. But I doubt that he was capable enough to automate sending the notification to the front desk."

I bite my lower lip when I realize where this conversation is heading to. "So, who's the culprit then if she's not an assassin?" I ask Manabe. I try to look as calm as I can when I ask him. I don't know Manabe's exact answer when it comes to

pinpointing the actual culprit. But I can guess his answer to the question. “There’s a high probability that she’s a spy. And she works for PSIA,” Manabe replies.

I clench my fist when I hear Manabe’s answer. My hunch is right, after all. Manabe is pointing out that PSIA is behind Kawakami’s death. I know that we have nothing to do with his death. If it’s true, then dad would already tell us about it. But I can’t say for sure since our mission has nothing to do with assassinating Kawakami. And dad doesn’t have any obligation to tell us about other covert missions since we’re only a PSIA agent.

Akie frowns when she hears Manabe’s explanation. “How can you be so sure that the woman is a spy from PSIA? Can they do things like sending an automated notification to the front desk? It seems possible that they can turn off the security camera remotely. But sending an automated notification to the front desk seems farfetched to me. Even if it’s true, why PSIA wants to assassinate Kawakami?” She asks Manabe.

Manabe takes a deep breath before he answers Akie’s questions. “Well, I can’t say for sure why PSIA wants to assassinate Kawakami. But it was possible that they did it just to cover up the Transhuman Development Project. It’s not surprising at all if they did that. Even CIA did the same thing in the past. They will kill anyone who they deem as a threat. So, I won’t be surprised at all if that was the reason behind Kawakami’s assassination. They wouldn’t make it clear that they did it. In this case, they made Kawakami look like he was committing suicide.”

Well, Manabe does have a point there. If PSIA is indeed behind Kawakami’s death, then they will make his death look like a suicide. The presence of someone else’s blood in the crime scene only served as a diversion. It’s only a decoy for preventing PSIA from becoming a prime suspect in this murder case. People already assumed that Incognito could do something like that. So, it’s not surprising that they would use Incognito as their scapegoat.

“How did PSIA able to send an automated notification, then?” Yuuto asks him. “Well, PSIA can hack his smartwatch and send the notification remotely. They can also hack the love hotel security system and turn it off for a moment. It’s hard

to tell that they were behind the murder. They would never leave any trace that would lead back to them,” Manabe replies.

That’s a good observation, Manabe! I can’t help but feel amazed after listening to his analysis. Sure, what he says is only speculation on his side. But I won’t deny that his analysis is far better than those talking heads on TV. I guess that his penchant for the conspiracy theories play a significant role in how he sees things.

Ayumi doesn’t say anything throughout the conversation. She only looks at me, signaling me to tell her what she should do. I only nudge my head, insisting her that she should ask Manabe about her dad’s wrongdoing herself. I understand how scary it is for someone like her to discover the truth about her dad. But she needs to do it if she wants to find the truth. No one will be able to help her if she doesn’t want to help herself.

“Manabe, you seem to know a lot about the scandals involving politicians. Since Incognito has been targeting politicians, will they target my father as well?” Ayumi asks him. I smile at Ayumi after seeing her finally musters her courage to ask Manabe about Akito Miyazaki.

Manabe and Akie look surprised with Ayumi’s question. Maybe they don’t expect that kind of question from Ayumi. Of course, she’ll be concerned about her dad. She doesn’t want her dad to end up like Kawakami. “About that, I never heard anything scandalous about Akito Miyazaki. I’m not saying it just to make you feel better. But I’ve never seen any tabloid magazines mention anything about him,” Manabe replies.

Ayumi seems relieved after hearing Manabe’s answer. Akie then places her hand on Ayumi’s hand. “I may not be into politic. But I do know that Akito Miyazaki is such a nice person. And his personality and behavior also reflected back to his daughter. I doubt that his daughter won’t be such a nice and kind person if he isn’t a nice and kind person to begin with.”

Ayumi smiles at Akie, making Akie’s cheeks to turn pink. “Don’t get me wrong,” she says to Ayumi, “I don’t mean to say it only because I want you to praise me or anything. I only want to make you feel better. Do you get that?”

Manabe only snickers at Akie's reaction. I have a feeling that Manabe is going to tease Akie about it for the whole day.

After the school is over, both Yuuto and I head to the toilet to put the gun back in our holster. We put the gun in our bag when we're in the class. It's much safer that way. We don't want anyone to cause a ruckus only because we have a gun with us. I remember that I used to do the same thing back then when I was in the middle school. With the scorching summer heat, it will be much harder for us to hide the gun under our school uniform.

We leave the school ground after we're done with the preparation. We assume that the pursuer is around this area. And the pursuer is ready to follow us as soon as we leave the school ground. But it looks like the pursuer is still not here even after the school is over. Don't tell me that a different person will be pursuing us this time? It doesn't matter who is pursuing us. We should never let our guard down no matter what.

"Touka, Yuuto. What took you so long? I've been waiting for you guys by the school gate for ages," Ayumi says to me when she sees us. "We're sorry. We thought that you already leave the school without us." She only smiles at us. As we're getting nearer to where her driver will pick her up, we notice that her driver is already there, waiting for her. It looks like our preparation takes much longer than we thought.

We begin to examine the area once again after Ayumi's car speeds up. We find it bizarre that no one is pursuing us today. What's going on here? Are we making the wrong judgment about the pursuer? I don't understand why the pursuer is being inconsistent with his pursue. But we're pretty sure that he'll come back to pursue us again the next day. But for now, we need to remain on guard until we're done with dealing with him.

CHAPTER FOUR

“Did the man pursue you again?” Dad asks me during the cleanup. I shake my head. “We didn’t see the man who was pursuing us today. We thought that a different person would be keeping an eye on us. But we didn’t sense anyone suspicious while we were there. Now I begin to wonder if we get it wrong this time,” I say to dad.

Dad rubs his chin, trying to figure out the pursuer’s intention. “I’m not sure what this guy has in mind,” he says, “But you still need to be careful no matter what. He only does it to let your guard down. He’ll start attacking you when you least expect. Besides, I’m sure that the same person will keep an eye on you. It’s possible that he already knows that you were aware of his presence. So, he won’t try to pursue you for now. Never let your guard down no matter what in any situation.”

What dad says to us makes sense. We fail to realize that the pursuer does it to let our guard down. It looks like he already knows that we’re aware of his presence. And that’s the reason why he’s not here to pursue us today. I also feel that he may not be pursuing us for the next couple of days. It’s easier for us to be

unaware of him if he's inconsistent with his effort to pursue us. I feel like kicking myself for not realizing it sooner.

Ms. Shoko comes inside the coffee shop not long after that. She looks a lot more rested compared to yesterday. "Good job, Shoko," dad says to her as he serves her a cup of freshly brewed coffee. She seems relaxed as she takes a deep breath, inhaling the smell of the coffee that lingers in the air. "Thanks," she replies, "It was such a nerve-wracking for me yesterday. So, the higher-ups told me to get some rest and resume the investigation tomorrow. I feel so refreshed thanks to the break."

Mr. Sakakibara comes inside the coffee shop after that and takes his seat at his usual spot. Dad also serves him a cup of freshly brewed coffee while he's taking his cigarette pack from his pocket. He begins to light up after that. Dad then turns to Ms. Shoko after he already serves the coffee to Mr. Sakakibara. "You seemed confident a while back that Kawakami's death has nothing to do with Incognito. How can you be so sure about that?"

Ms. Shoko takes a sip before she answers dad's question. "I'm saying it based on the threat video that Incognito sent him a while back. They would release private photos of him with the rumored female staff to the public if he refused to admit it. They didn't have any intention to kill Kawakami from the beginning if he didn't do as they said."

Mr. Sakakibara takes a puff as he listens to what Ms. Shoko is saying. "Do you still have the video with you? We'd like to see the video if you have one," Mr. Sakakibara says to her. "I do," she replies. Ms. Shoko then transfers the threat video to us. Everyone starts to watch the video as soon as the transfer is complete. Just like their other videos, the person who appears in the threat video is also wearing a Namahage mask. And he also disguised his voice as a way to make him unrecognizable.

"Good day to you, Mr. Kawakami," the man greets him. He then reaches out for the actual document of Transhuman Development Project. He also takes out a bunch of photos. "As you can see here, I have the original document of the ministry's top-secret project. And I also have a bunch of photos of you with the

female staff. We won't tell you how we got them, though. Back then, you managed to stop the tabloid magazines from leaking these photos to the public. But you won't be able to do it anymore since we have these photos with us."

The man continues with his talk. "After a thorough investigation, we concluded that these proofs were legit. I'm sure that you recognize that these photos and also the document are indeed the actual one from the get-go. At this point, it's futile for you to deny that we were lying. We already have concrete evidence in our hand right now."

The man pauses for a moment before he continues with his talk. "If you don't want these photos to go public, then all you need to do is to hold a press conference. You have to admit to the public during the press conference about this top-secret project. You also shouldn't punish the victims if they decide to be honest about what they've been through back then. If you do as what we say, we promise that we won't leak these photos to the public."

The video ends after that. I can't be so sure when Kawakami received this threat video. But it can be a few days before Incognito exposed the top-secret project online. "Does Incognito always send a threat video before they make a public announcement on their official PicoPico Channel?" Yuuto asks Ms. Shoko.

Ms. Shoko nods her head. "Yes, they also did the same when they hacked a website called Blissful Night." Yuuto and I look at each other, wondering about the website. "It's a website where married men and women can have a fling with each other. They also have an extensive database where the users can find a prostitute in a nearby area. As far as I know, the membership is free for women. But men can choose to pay whichever features of the website they want," Mr. Sakakibara says to us.

Now it makes sense why we don't even know anything about the website. Its target market isn't us. It's a different story if I'm a teen prostitute and I'd like to include myself in their database. It's not surprising at all that many Diet members will also use this website. After all, this website has everything they need. They can choose to find someone that they can have a fling with on Blissful Night. And

they can also use its extensive database to find a prostitute if they can't find anyone they like.

Out of curiosity, Yuuto and I begin to take a look at Blissful Night website after Ms. Shoko mentions it to us. Once we're on the website, we notice that the website doesn't have much explanation. It only has a bold, prominent call-to-action on the homepage. It seems like the only thing visitors can do is to sign up and see what the website has to offer. Since the explanation on the website seems vague to us, we decided to dig through their FAQ page. That's the only way for us to learn more about the website.

Based on the FAQ page, they offer a wide variety of packages for men who are interested in connecting with women. Heck, they even offer a prioritized profile if they pay more. But the prostitute database is the most expensive package they offer on the website. Just like what Mr. Sakakibara says, the membership is free for women.

"Did you manage to identify the identity of the woman in this photo? She could be the one who was with him at that time," dad says to Ms. Shoko. She nods her head. "Yup, we managed to identify the identity of the woman in this photo. Her name is Megumi Hayashibara. She used to work as Kawakami's secretary a while back. She resigned when the rumor about their affair was published in a tabloid magazine. At that time, it was already too late for him to stop the tabloid magazine from publishing the article about her. But he managed to stop the photos from being leaked to the public."

"Is she still single?" Yuuto asks Ms. Shoko. She shakes her head. "Nope, she's already married. People who knew her personally said that she was living in a pretentious marriage. Both Ms. Hayashibara and her husband were having an affair behind each other's back. But for some strange reason, they still choose to remain as a couple. Her husband didn't even care at all when Ms. Hayashibara's affair was published in the tabloid magazine."

To be honest, I don't get it either. Why does Ms. Hayashibara want to live in such pretentious marriage? Is she afraid that she'll lose a place to live if she decided to file a divorce? It's not surprising that many people choose to stay in

such marriage for many reasons. But I bet that Ms. Hayashibara chooses to remain in that kind of marriage only to keep up with their appearance. She's only fooling no one but herself if that's the reason why she stays in that kind of relationship.

Ms. Shoko takes a sip before she continues talking to us. "The blood that was present in the crime scene was indeed her blood. We managed to identify the origin of the blood through the blood sample that we got from her. At first, we thought that she could be an assassin who was there to assassinate Kawakami. But we discarded that possibility. I doubt that she would make a grave mistake by leaving blood that can be traced back to her."

I agree with what Ms. Shoko says. I don't think that any assassins will make a grave mistake by leaving anything that can be traced back to them. And it's even more dangerous to leave a trace such as blood. The police can still trace the presence of her blood even after she cleaned up the blood stain. Just like Manabe, Ms. Shoko also believes that Ms. Hayashibara could be an assassin. And she was there to assassinate Kawakami.

"What did she say during the interrogation?" Dad asks Ms. Shoko. "Well, she admitted that she was with him at that time. She realized that Kawakami was acting strange during the foreplay. He suddenly pushed her aside and started to break the wine glass in that room. At first, she thought that he wanted to kill her with the glass piece that he took from the broken wine glass. But he ended up slitting his wrist with it instead," Ms. Shoko answers.

I can guess what happened after that. Ms. Hayashibara tried to stop him from continuing to slit his wrist herself. As a result, she got herself injured. That explains the presence of her blood at the crime scene. Kawakami continued to slit his wrist until he fell on the floor with his blood staining the room's carpet. Ms. Hayashibara left the room not long after that. I bet that she must be feeling traumatized after seeing what was happening to Kawakami.

"How can you be so sure that she was telling the truth? Who knows that she lied to you," Mr. Sakakibara says to Ms. Shoko. "She seemed traumatized when I showed her a piece of a broken glass that had a blood stain on it. That was when

she began to tell me what happened to Kawakami at that time. Another one was the injury that she had on her right hand. The cut that she had was indeed a cut from the broken glass. The cut itself was deep too. I doubt that she had the courage to cut herself that deep only to look like she was the victim here,” Ms. Shoko says to us.

Ms. Shoko sighs after she tells us everything about Kawakami’s death. “Now I’m not even sure what I should tell Kawakami’s family about the culprit. Ms. Hayashibara wasn’t the culprit even though she was there with Kawakami in that room. And Incognito wasn’t the culprit either. They’re only a hacker group. They won’t do anything like killing people even if they despise that person so much.”

Yuuto rubs his chin as he thinks for a possible culprit. “Don’t you think that his death may have something to do with the subliminal message? That seems possible based on Ms. Hayashibara’s description. He also looked like he was committing suicide anyway. So, don’t you think that his death was almost the same as how Junpei Ishiwaki died?” Yuuto says to Ms. Shoko.

Ms. Shoko sighs again as she takes a sip. “I also like to rule out that the subliminal message was behind his odd behavior. But the problem is we couldn’t find any audio track in his smartwatch. So, it’s hard to say whether the subliminal message is the reason behind his death or not. Besides, I doubt that it can trigger an automated notification to the front desk. Same goes for turning off the security camera and deleted the recorded footage. I’m pretty sure that there must be a hidden mechanism that we have yet to find out.”

Ms. Shoko takes out something from her handbag and places it on the counter. The item happens to be a smartwatch in a ziplock bag. It must be Kawakami’s smartwatch. “What’s wrong with this smartwatch?” Dad asks Ms. Shoko as he examines the smartwatch which is still inside the ziplock bag.

“His smartwatch was flashing a blank red screen when he was found dead. But his smartwatch turned back to normal not long after that. We thought that it happened because of the operating system error due to the fall. But the smartwatch worked fine after the flashing blank red screen disappeared. I

already sent the smartwatch to the lab for the analysis. But they didn't find anything strange with the smartwatch," Ms. Shoko says to us.

Dad then passes the smartwatch to Mr. Sakakibara. "So, you want Chiyo to analyze the smartwatch instead?" He asks her. Ms. Shoko nods her head. "That's right," she replies, "It's possible that the flashing blank red screen is the key behind his death. Since our analyst couldn't find anything, I believe that Chiyo may be able to find something from it."

Mr. Sakakibara takes a puff as he takes the smartwatch and puts it in his pocket. "Alright, I'll pass it to Chiyo," he says to her. Ms. Shoko smiles when she sees that we're willing to help her. "Thank you. Let's hope that we may be able to find something from his smartwatch," she says to us.

Suddenly, Ms. Shoko's smartwatch is making a beeping sound. It seems that it's a notification from one of her apps. She begins to take a look at her smartwatch to see the incoming notification. "It looks like Incognito already uploads a new video on their PicoPico Channel," Ms. Shoko says to us. Everyone begins to watch Incognito's new video right away after that.

Everyone becomes silent as we watch the new video. It looks like Incognito already identifies their next target. Just like their previous video, the person who is appearing in the video is wearing a Namahage mask. And the voice also sounds the same too. Not to mention, the visual aspect of the video remains the same. It still gives me the unpleasant feeling whenever I watch their video.

"Good evening, ladies and gentlemen," the man in a Namahage mask greets the viewer. He coughs a little before he continues with his agenda of the day. "Before I begin with our usual video announcement, there's something we'd like to clarify here. As you already know, the current Minister of Health, Labor, and Welfare, Toshio Kawakami, was found dead in the love hotel in Shibuya. We wouldn't deny that we would give him a special surprise if he refused to do what we wanted him to do. But his death wasn't the surprise that we were referring to."

The man pauses for a moment before he continues. "We admit that we were putting pressure on him about Transhuman Development Project. But we wouldn't go as far as killing people. We're here to expose the people's

wrongdoings. We don't exist to prosecute people. We won't deny that we were capable of hacking into the hotel's security system and turned off the security cameras. But we weren't capable of killing someone with the coding alone. Same goes for sending a notification to the front desk. We needed a military technology to do that. And we didn't have access to that kind of technology in case you're wondering."

Well, Incognito is right about that. No matter how sophisticated the world that we live in, it's still impossible to use coding to kill people. It's easy for many people to blame them since it shouldn't be hard for someone like them to do such things. But from the logical perspective, it's still impossible to depend on the coding to do the killing alone. It's a different story if they're using military technology to do that.

"Now, I'd like to get back to our main topic," the man continues, "The practice of Amakudari has been around for so many years. And the government has been proactive in pursuing this practice for the last couple of years. Despite the government effort, Amakudari is still going strong among the government officials. And it becomes much more rampant than usual when the officials are close to the retirement."

I can't help but chuckle at the word Amakudari. Sure, the word may mean descent from heaven. But the actual practical meaning of the word isn't as holy as it seems. In reality, it means the government officials will land a cushy corporate job as soon as they retire. And the job that they get usually has a lot to do with the ministry that they used to work. The job that they will get is often a high-profile position. It's common to see the revolving door in pretty much in any country. But if we leave the practice as it is, it will only prevent economic and political reforms.

The man then continues with his explanation. "Since the government lacks the resources to crack down on this practice, we want to lend a hand to the government. We already have a few government officials that we're going to target. And the first one will be the current Minister of Finance, Izami Tajima. The rumor says that he'll be the new president for Japan Tobacco Inc. after he

retires from the ministry. As expected, he denied the rumor. Our plan is rather simple. We want him to admit that the rumor is indeed true and resign after he already confessed.”

I already have a brief idea of what they’re planning to do to Tajima if he refuses to admit the truth. I’m sure that they’re going to threaten him by giving him a special surprise. And that special surprise can be something like exposing Tajima’s scandals to the public. I don’t know what kind of scandals that Tajima is getting involved. But Tajima will be in hot water if the scandals are known to the public.

The comments for the video starts to pour in not long after Incognito made the announcement. Most of the commenters support their effort in cracking down the Amakudari practices. They also side with Incognito for issues related to Kawakami’s death. They feel that the talking heads on TV were delusional. Some of them even joke that these talking heads must be reading too many science fiction novels. These talking heads can’t seem to see what is achievable in the world that we live in.

We close down the PicoPico channel app after the video is over. “Do you think that Tajima will become Satoru Yuuya’s next target?” I ask dad. Dad only crosses his arms when I ask him. He seems skeptical that Satoru Yuuya’s next target will be Tajima. “If we’re basing on the past incident, then there’s a high probability that Tajima will be the next person to die. It doesn’t matter whether Tajima will be Satoru Yuuya’s next target or not. We still need to keep an eye on him,” dad says to me.

Suddenly, Ms. Shoko’s smartwatch starts ringing. She sighs when she notices the incoming phone call. I bet that it must be a call from one of her colleagues. Ms. Shoko answers the call since it looks like an urgent call to her. She seems somewhat exhausted after the call ends, though. I bet that the call must have something to do with Incognito’s announcement video. Otherwise, she won’t look this exhausted.

“It looks like my break is over. I have to head to Tajima’s office now. It seems that Tajima already received the threat video from Incognito. And he already had

it for a few days before Incognito posted the announcement video online,” she says to us. Ms. Shoko leaves the coffee shop in a hurry after that. Mr. Sakakibara also leaves the coffee shop as well. He needs to pass the smartwatch to Ms. Chiyo, so then we’ll be able to find out if Kawakami’s smartwatch is behind his death or not.

To be honest, it’s hard to say whether Tajima will be the next person to die. After all, he may not necessarily be Satoru Yuuya’s next target. But I’m sure that people will blame Incognito once again if something does happen to Tajima. That’s always the case when the murder has anything to do with a high-ranking government official.

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