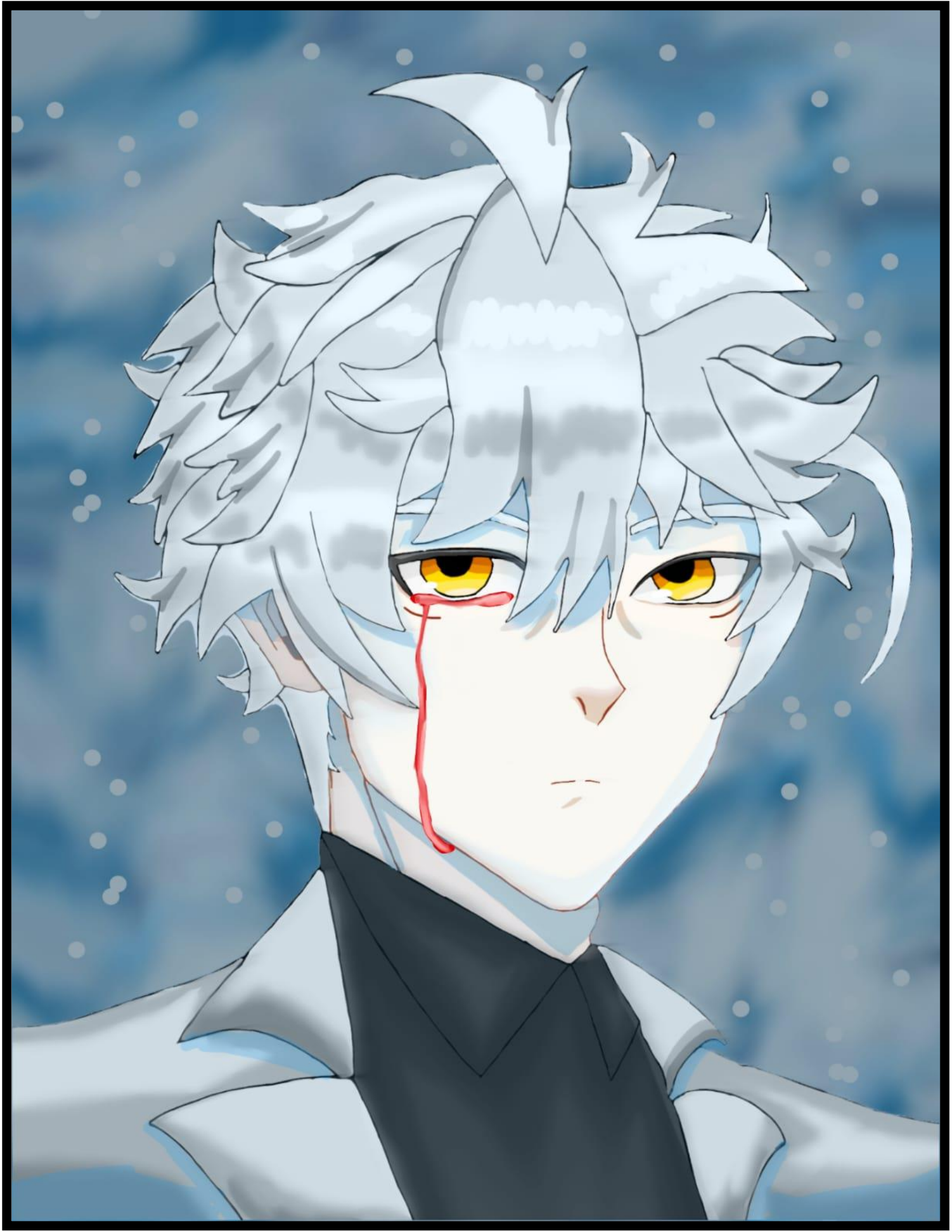

The White Demon



September 30, 3052.

White Lady Central Hospital.

Snow covered the area surrounding the hospital.

After fourteen hours, the screams finally stopped. Four-year-old Saiko had been waiting outside the room the entire time.

The doctors came out after checking on Claire and the newborn, leaving the family alone.

The delivery had been complicated.

Exhausted, Claire held the child in her arms.

Kaito did not cry.

He only watched.

For a few seconds, mother and son held each other's gaze.

—Hello... —Claire whispered.

Kaito remained silent.

—Aren't you going to cry?

The child continued watching her.

Claire let out a small laugh.

—I suppose you've already decided how you're going to do things.

Abaoa approached the bed.

—How do you feel?

—Tired.

—I already imagined that.

—Then don't ask.

Abaoa smiled.

—Fourteen hours of labor and you still have the strength to argue.

—I'm not arguing.

—Of course.

Claire adjusted Kaito in her arms.

Abaoa extended his hands.

—Can you give him to me?

—Not yet.

—Can't I even hold him?

—Five minutes.

—Five?

—Five.

Abaoa pretended to think about it.

—Deal.

Claire smiled.

Abaoa headed toward the door.

—I'm going to register him.

—Don't take long.

—I won't.

Before leaving, he looked at the child again.

Kaito continued watching silently.

—See you in a little while, son.

Abaoa left.

Shortly afterward, at the hospital registry, he wrote:

Kaito Volkov.

Another child for the Volkov family.

Outside, the snow continued to fall.

Two years later, Abaoa began teaching his children. Before imposing a method on them, he observed what captured their attention, how they solved problems, and what kind of explanations they understood best. Based on this, he adapted the teaching to each one.

With Kaito, he started with reading.

Abaoa placed a sheet of paper in front of him.

—Tell me what it says.

Kaito read:

—The black dog ran quickly toward the garden because it heard a noise.

—Now don't tell me what it means. Tell me how it is constructed.

Kaito observed the sentence.

—The subject is «the black dog». «Dog» is the head, «the» the determiner, and «black» the modifier. The predicate is «ran quickly toward the garden because it heard a noise».

«Ran» is the head, «quickly» indicates manner, «toward the garden» the direction, and «because it heard a noise» is a causal subordinate clause.

Abaoa nodded.

—Now destroy it.

Kaito mentally separated each element.

—Determiner, head, modifier, predicate head, manner complement, direction, causal subordinate clause, and direct object.

—You already did it.

—What?

—You destroyed it. You didn't memorize the sentence. You found what constructs it.

Abaoa took a pencil and wrote:

Structure → components → relationships → result.

—Words can change and a sentence can express something completely different. But if you understand its structure, you can analyze others.

Kaito observed the diagram.

—So I don't have to memorize every sentence. I have to understand how they are formed.

—Exactly.

Kaito remained thoughtful.

—And does that work with everything?

—Try it.

—If I wanted to learn mathematics, I would look for the structures that repeat.

Abaoa remained silent.

—And if I wanted to understand a person, I would look for what lies behind their decisions.

—Continue.

—If I wanted to solve a problem, I would break it down until I discovered what causes it.

Abaoa nodded.

—Now you understand why I don't want you to memorize answers.

—Because an answer only works for one problem.

—And a structure?

—It can work for many.

Kaito looked at the sheet again. He no longer saw a collection of words, but a system.

Abaoa understood that this way of thinking could extend far beyond language.

Later he would give it a name:

the Theory of Reduction.

With Saiko, Abaoa employed a different method: the Theory of Connection.

Unlike Kaito, Saiko was not supposed to reduce an idea down to its components. She started from a premise and looked for what could be related to it.

One characteristic could lead to another, that relationship to a third, and that one could open up a completely different connection.

Abaoa wanted Saiko to build a network of relationships, instead of following a single logical path.

Idea → connection → new connection → network.

While Kaito learned to reduce systems, Saiko learned to connect them, creating relationships whose trajectory could be difficult for someone external to anticipate.

During the following two years, both methods became part of their daily lives. Abaoa applied them in exercises, games, and conversations, turning learning into a constant practice.

Kaito analyzed.

Saiko connected.

And when they weren't studying, they spent their time fighting with each other.

At four years old, Riko was born.

Like her siblings, she did not cry. Her parents were already accustomed to it.

Exhausted, Claire held the newborn while Abaoa remained by her side. Kaito watched his sister from the other side of the room.

—Do you want to meet her? —Claire asked.

Kaito nodded.

Claire handed her to him. Kaito held her for a few seconds and then looked at Abaoa.

—Can I hold her?

—You're already holding her.

Kaito lowered his gaze and tried to adjust her, but ended up holding her by one foot.

—Kaito... —Claire warned.

Abaoa intervened.

—Careful.

He took Riko and showed him how to hold her, placing one hand beneath her neck and the other beneath her back.

—She still can't hold her head up by herself.

Kaito watched attentively and, when Abaoa handed her back, he imitated the position exactly.

—Like this?

—Like that.

Kaito looked at Riko.

—Now she's safe.

—Yes.

After a few seconds, he smiled.

—I'll be your protector from now on, little sister.

Claire and Abaoa smiled.

But Saiko immediately appeared in front of him.

—You've already had a lot of time with her.

—I just met her.

—Exactly. Now it's my turn.

—No.

Saiko tried to take Riko, but Kaito pulled her closer to his chest.

—I said I'm her protector.

—Yeah, right. And pigs fly.

—Pigs don't fly.

—Then give her to me.

—No.

—Kaito.

—Saiko.

Claire burst out laughing while Abaoa shook his head.

—She was just born and you're already fighting over her.

Finally, Saiko managed to take Riko.

—I told you it was my turn.

Kaito watched her for a few seconds.

—Okay.

Saiko looked at him suspiciously.

—What?

—You can hold her. But be careful.

—I know.

Kaito looked at Riko. She remained calm, completely unaware of the argument.

He still did not understand what it meant to protect someone. He did not know what could happen to her or how much he would have to learn to fulfill that promise.

He only knew one thing:

She was his sister.

And for Kaito, that was enough.

Outside, a few drops began to fall over the city.

Three years passed.

During that time, Kaito had progressed to the point where Abaoa's tasks began to change. He was no longer simply supposed to learn something, but decide how to learn it.

Riko was beginning her own learning, while Saiko had become the most advanced of the three. Abaoa needed to devote more time to Riko, so before beginning the next lesson, he left Kaito a task.

—In one year, I want you to learn six languages.

Kaito looked up.

—Which ones?

—You'll have to decide that yourself.

—Can I choose any?

—Any.

—And do I have to learn them to the same level?

—Almost native.

Kaito nodded and went to the living room.

The problem wasn't how to learn six languages.

It was which ones to choose.

He sat in front of a table and wrote:

What makes a language useful?

He quickly discarded a single metric. The language with the most speakers did not necessarily offer greater access to knowledge; the most widespread one could have little scientific relevance, and the economically dominant one did not necessarily maximize linguistic transfer.

He divided the problem into seven variables:

Number of speakers: 20%

Geographical distribution: 15%

Economic influence: 20%

Scientific influence: 20%

Cultural influence: 10%

Available information: 10%

Transfer between linguistic systems: 5%

Then he established a scale:

Top 1 = 5 points

Top 2 = 4

Top 3 = 3

Top 4 = 2

Top 5 = 1

Kaito researched each category, recorded the five highest-ranking languages, and calculated the weighted score of each one.

He was not looking for the most important language in a single dimension.

He was looking for the greatest cumulative usefulness.

When he finished, six languages stood above the rest.

He wrote them on a sheet:

Volnyr

Zhavorin

Orlovek

Azhevorsk

Velyransk

Zerimov

Kaito put down the pencil.

It had taken longer than expected, but he finally had a selection based on multiple variables, weights, and relationships.

Then he heard footsteps.

Claire appeared with a plate.

—Kaito.

—Yes?

—Do you want chocolate cookies and milk?

Kaito looked at the table and then at his mother.

—Yes, Mommy.

Claire placed the plate on the table.

—They're still hot. Eat carefully.

—Thank you, Mommy.

Claire left.

Kaito took a cookie, bit into it, and looked at the sheet again.

The six languages were still there.

Now came the complicated part.

Kaito had to learn Volnyr, Zhavorin, Orlovek, Azhevorsk, Velyransk, and Zerimov to C1 within a year.

He looked at the six names.

He did not intend to learn them as six independent lists. If he wanted to reduce the problem, he first had to discover how they were constructed.

He took a sheet and wrote:

Phonology → Grammar → Vocabulary → Order → Function → Relationship.

He began by listening to native speakers to identify phonological patterns, permitted combinations, and their restrictions.

Then he studied grammar, prioritizing structures capable of producing the majority of sentences instead of memorizing every possibility.

He did the same with vocabulary. He selected the most frequent words and related them to their function within the sentence.

He did not want to memorize:

word → meaning.

He wanted to understand:

sound → function → structure → meaning.

But there were still six languages.

Kaito placed their structures side by side and began looking for shared patterns, differences, and functional equivalences.

He classified:

What remains.

What changes.

What is replaced.

What can be reused.

If a structure fulfilled a certain function in Volnyr, he looked for how Zhavorin expressed that same function. If there was no direct equivalent, he identified what mechanism served a similar purpose.

He was not trying to make the languages identical.

He was trying to discover how each one solved the same problems.

Thus, instead of studying six isolated systems, he studied six related systems.

During the following months, he read texts and articles by natives, listened to conversations, wrote, debated, and expressed ideas in all six languages.

Each error was classified:

What rule did I break? Why? What information was missing? What do I need to modify?

The error became information about the system.

Four months later, Kaito closed his book and walked over to Abaoa.

—What's wrong?

—I did it already.

Abaoa looked up.

—What did you do?

—I learned the languages.

—I gave you a year.

—I know.

—Four months have passed.

—Yes.

Abaoa observed him.

—At the level I asked for?

—Yes.

—Can you converse, write, explain complex ideas, and debate?

—Yes.

—Prove it.

Kaito began speaking in Volnyr. Then he switched to Zhavorin, Orlovek, Azhevorsk, Velyransk, and finally Zerimov, maintaining the same line of reasoning for five minutes and adapting the structures of each language.

When he finished, Abaoa remained silent.

—I noticed that you thought for a second before some words.

—Yes.

—Why?

—Because I don't know all the languages.

Abaoa raised an eyebrow.

—Then you didn't learn them.

Kaito shook his head.

—I did learn them. I didn't memorize every word. I learned the rules.

—And when you're missing a word?

—I can infer it. I identify the possible phonemes, the restrictions of the language, and the function it should fulfill in the sentence. Then I reduce the possibilities until I find what it should be.

Abaoa reviewed his answers.

Kaito's structural understanding and command had surpassed the expected C1 and were approaching C2 in grammar. However, he still lacked part of the cultural intuition of a native speaker.

He could reconstruct structures, infer words, and transfer patterns, but an expression could be grammatically correct and still sound strange. The social, emotional, or cultural meaning of certain constructions could not always be deduced through rules.

Kaito understood how languages worked.

He was still learning how people used them.

Abaoa closed the papers.

—Well done, Kaito.

—What's next?

Abaoa looked at him.

He had understood something important.

He was not simply teaching Kaito to learn languages.

He was teaching him to find the systems that produced whatever he wanted to learn.

The same idea kept appearing:

structure → components → relationships → result.

Kaito had learned six languages, but the most important lesson was another:

when he did not know an answer, he could try to reconstruct it.

Abaoa took a chocolate bar and threw it at him.

Kaito caught it.

He looked at it. Then he looked at his father.

—Don't try to use operant conditioning on me, Dad.

Abaoa smiled.

—Oh, really? Then you don't want it.

He extended his hand to take it back.

Kaito looked at the chocolate.

—...

Abaoa waited.

—You're trying to generate an association between completing a behavior and receiving a reward.

—Correct.

—And if I accept, I reinforce the behavior.

—Also.

Abaoa began to withdraw his hand.

—Then I suppose I can put it away.

—...Give it to me.

Abaoa stopped.

—Weren't you avoiding conditioning?

Kaito extended his hand.

—I can know exactly what you're doing and still want the chocolate.

—Heh. All right.

He handed him the bar.

Kaito began opening it.

—But it didn't work.

—Didn't it?

—No. I just wanted chocolate.

Abaoa looked at him.

—Sure.

Kaito narrowed his eyes.

—You don't believe me.

—Not particularly.

Kaito ignored the comment and ate the chocolate.

Three more years passed.

During that time, something began to change.

Claire stopped accompanying them in some activities. Abaoa began to be absent for increasingly long periods. Conversations became shorter and his explanations more vague.

Until one afternoon, their parents asked them to sit with them.

Claire placed a cup of tea on the table.

—Kids... we're going to disappear.

Riko frowned.

—Disappear?

—Yes.

Kaito looked at both of them.

—Where are you going?

Claire exchanged a look with Abaoa.

—We can't tell you.

—Why?

—Because knowing too much can also put you in danger —Abaoa replied.

Kaito was not satisfied.

—That doesn't answer the question.

—I know.

Abaoa took out several letters and handed them to Saiko.

—I want you to keep them. Use them when you don't know what to do.

Saiko looked at them.

—What for?

Abaoa held his gaze.

—When the time comes, protect your siblings. At all costs.

Saiko understood that it was not a simple request.

—Okay.

Claire smiled slightly.

—It's not your fault. We'll come back when we can.

Kaito continued observing them.

There was something that didn't fit.

Not only because of what they were saying, but because of what they were avoiding saying.

Then he saw it.

A small crack ran across Abaoa's arm.

The skin began to fragment and small pieces fell to the floor.

Kaito opened his eyes.

—Dad...

Abaoa lowered his gaze.

—It's nothing.

—Your arm is breaking.

—I know.

Another fragment fell.

Kaito understood that it had already begun.

Abaoa placed a letter on the table.

—When we disappear, agents will come looking for you. Make sure at least one of them sees this.

Saiko nodded.

—Understood.

Claire picked up her cup again.

Her hands were trembling slightly.

—Before it happens... why don't we talk for a while?

For the next few minutes, they talked about anything.

What they had done that day. Who had won at cards. What they had eaten.

Saiko and Riko even began arguing over a game.

Claire and Abaoa laughed.

For a few moments, everything seemed normal.

Until another fragment fell to the floor.

Kaito remained silent.

He watched.

There was less and less of his parents left.

Then Claire added:

—Someday, a white-haired lady will find you.

—Who? —Kaito asked.

—We don't know.

Abaoa intervened.

—When you find her, stay with her.

The three nodded.

—Understood.

Claire's body began to fragment as well.

First her arms. Then her shoulders and finally her face.

Riko understood what was happening.

—Mom...

Claire extended her hand.

—Take care of each other. No matter what happens.

Abaoa looked at the three.

—Swear it.

Saiko pressed the letters against his chest.

—I swear.

—Me too —said Riko.

Kaito remained motionless.

He did not know how to react to a farewell he still did not understand.

But he understood the promise.

—I swear.

Claire smiled.

The last fragments began to detach.

Saiko began to cry. Riko took refuge against him.

Kaito did not cry.

He only watched.

As if as long as he could still see his parents, they had not yet disappeared.

Abaoa looked at him one last time.

—Be strong.

Claire added:

—And remember that we will always be watching over you.

The last fragment fell.

His parents disappeared.

The cup of tea remained on the table, still giving off some steam.

No one spoke.

Kaito continued looking at the place where they had been.

For the first time, he found himself facing something he could not reduce to variables.

There was no structure to analyze.

No rule to discover.

No answer to reconstruct.

Only an absence.

And Kaito did not know what to do with it.

A few minutes later, the agents arrived.

Saiko was still crying. Riko remained hugging Kaito, while he continued looking at the door.

—Calm down. They said they'll come back.

He pointed to the place where his parents had been.

—And if they said it, then they'll come back... right?

Neither answered.

Kaito waited a few seconds.

—Right?

The agents exchanged a look.

The silence worried him more than the disappearance.

One of them began searching the room until he stopped in front of a letter.

There was a name on the envelope:

Governor Kim Geodor.

The agent opened it.

It was not a farewell.

It was a threat.

Dear Governor Kim Geodor:

Claire and I have disappeared. The three children have been left alone.

I want you to adopt them.

I know you have hidden your relationship with the Bio Mafia for years and that you are one of its main financiers.

I have gathered evidence.

You have two weeks.

If you do not protect them, all the information will be made public.

Take care of them, Kim.

Even though you can no longer see me, believe me.

I can still see you.

The agent finished reading and slowly raised his gaze.

Kaito was watching him.

—What does it say?

The man closed the letter.

—Nothing you need to know.

Kaito did not insist.

But he had seen his expression.

Fear.

Someone had managed to frighten an adult even after disappearing.

That meant Abaoa had left something prepared.

Later, the three were transferred to a special room.

Riko fell asleep near Kaito. Saiko remained by the door.

—What is the Bio Mafia? —Kaito asked.

—I don't know.

—But Dad used it to blackmail the governor.

Saiko remained silent.

Kaito continued:

—Then Dad knew this was going to happen.

—This isn't the time to investigate.

Saiko stood up.

—We need to rest.

—And you?

—I'm going to find out what's going on.

Riko opened her eyes and extended a hand.

—Stay.

Saiko stopped.

Then he returned to them.

Kaito watched him.

He still did not understand everything, but he was beginning to recognize the pattern.

His parents had not simply disappeared.

They had prepared a chain of decisions.

And they were inside it.

During the following months, Governor Kim tried to adopt the three.

Once.

Twice.

Then he lost count.

Every attempt encountered new opposition.

The authorities considered the children a threat. They had detected an energy since their birth that did not correspond to what they considered natural.

They did not need to wait for them to prove they were dangerous.

For them, simply existing was enough.

The proposal began circulating among the rulers:

immediate execution.

Kim opposed it.

Kaito understood that he was not doing it solely for them. If he adopted them, he would fulfill Abaoa's condition and protect his own secret.

Kim did not pretend very well.

Kaito knew it.

Even so, he decided to believe that perhaps he wanted them to survive.

Not because he cared about them.

Simply because, for Kaito, that was better than nothing.

Eventually, Kim lost the battle.

But the rulers did not get what they wanted either.

The children would not be adopted.

Nor would they be executed.

They would be sent to a place that officially did not exist.

A secret orphanage.
The orphanage was exclusively intended for children considered extraordinary.

Geniuses.

There were no reports, photographs, or announcements.

To the world, the three had simply ceased to exist.

One morning, a car arrived.

The agents made them get in. Riko held Saiko's hand while he looked at the house one last time.

Kaito remained looking out the window.

He did not cry.

He was still trying to solve a question:

Why had his parents prepared all of that if they really intended to come back?

The answer was not in the car, nor in the agents, nor even in Kim.

It was somewhere along the path Abaoa had built before disappearing.

And Kaito still did not know how to find it.

The car continued moving forward.

Behind them was their home.

Ahead, the orphanage.

For the first time, the three siblings were completely alone.

From the outside, the building looked normal.

Too normal.

There were no imposing walls or signs revealing its true function. It could have gone unnoticed among any other building in the city.

But inside there were six floors, 200 cameras, and 90 guards.

The windows could not be opened from inside and all the lighting was artificial.

Some guards were strict.

Others even seemed kind.

The place did not need to look like a prison.

It only needed to function like one.

The siblings were led to room 43.

A caretaker opened the door.

—You can leave your things wherever you want. Take a moment to get settled.

Saiko, Kaito, and Riko entered.

They observed the walls, ceiling, and corners before arranging their belongings.

When they finished, the caretaker returned.

—Good. Now let's introduce you.

She led them to a common area, where several children were reading, playing, or simply ignoring their presence.

—Say hello.

Saiko stepped forward.

—Hello. I'm Saiko Volkov.

He paused.

—If you think about hurting my siblings, I'll break your legs.

Silence.

The caretaker froze.

Kaito looked at him.

—You didn't need to say it like that.

—Yes, I did.

Riko let out a small laugh.

Then it was Kaito's turn.

—Hello. I'm Kaito Volkov.

Riko raised her hand.

—Hi. I'm Riko.

Nothing more.

The others barely reacted.

Or so it seemed.

Kaito had observed something.

When Saiko mentioned that he would break the legs of anyone who hurt them, two children stopped paying attention to their games.

When Riko introduced herself, another slightly raised his head.

And when Kaito said his name, a caretaker showed a brief pupil dilation.

It lasted barely an instant.

Kaito said nothing.

He simply remembered it.

The following days passed with a strange normality.

The siblings began to get to know the place.

There were children with extraordinary abilities: exceptional memory, accelerated learning, mathematical abilities, mastery of languages, strategy, music, and analysis.

But there was something they all had in common.

None of them seemed to be there by choice.

They had not simply been abandoned.

They had been separated.

Kaito began to understand that the difference mattered.

A normal orphanage sought to find them a family.

That place seemed to seek something else.

Saiko adapted the worst.

He argued, provoked, got into fights, and received punishments.

But there was something that never changed.

When another child had problems, Saiko intervened.

It did not matter if he ended up being punished afterward.

He never explained why.

He simply did it.

Riko took another path.

For weeks she observed in silence.

Who talked to whom. Who lied. Who obeyed. Who avoided whom. Who was alone.

Little by little, she began to reconstruct the relationships within the orphanage.

Kaito, on the other hand, discovered board games.

At first he simply played.

Then he began analyzing the rules, probabilities, patterns, and decisions of his opponents.

First he won some games.

Then most of them.

Finally, he began defeating even children who had been playing for years.

For Kaito, games had ceased to be games.

They were systems.

And Abaoa had taught him to look for what was beneath them.

That was why every defeat became information:

defeat → variable → modification → new test.

Until victory came.

The children began talking about him.

The caretakers also began observing him.

Kaito did not just learn quickly.

He learned how to learn.

Then it happened.

One day, while Kaito was playing a game, the others began looking toward the entrance.

Saiko stopped arguing.

Riko interrupted her observation.

Even some of the caretakers fell silent.

Kaito slowly raised his gaze.

Someone was entering.

At first glance, he did not seem particularly special.

But everyone's reaction said otherwise.

Kaito placed a piece on the board.

For the first time since he had arrived at the orphanage, he stopped studying the game.

He began studying the player.

Until he arrived.

—You must be Kaito.

Kaito raised his gaze.

In front of him was a boy who did not seem particularly impressed by the board.

—Hum? Yes. And you are...?

—Kamil.

He pointed at the pieces.

—I challenge you to a bet.

—What are we betting?

Kamil smiled.

—The winner takes whatever they want from the loser.

Kaito observed the board.

—That doesn't seem fair.

—Are you afraid?

Kaito picked up a piece.

—No.

The game began.

Kaito was accustomed to winning. He observed patterns, anticipated moves, and reduced his opponents' possibilities.

But Kamil played differently.

He sacrificed pieces, changed the pace, and made moves that seemed bad until several turns later.

Kaito began to frown.

When he understood the plan, it was already too late.

—Checkmate.

Kaito looked at the board.

He had lost.

Kamil smiled.

—I thought you'd be better.

Kaito remained silent for a few seconds.

He was not upset.

He was analyzing the game.

—I need to practice more.

Kamil blinked.

He had probably expected an excuse.

He did not receive one.

—Can I teach you?

Kaito narrowed his eyes.

—Really?

—Yes.

—Will you risk being humiliated?

Kamil burst out laughing.

—That won't happen.

The following games also ended in defeat.

But Kaito began to detect patterns.

Then he began to anticipate them.

Finally, he began forcing Kamil to modify his strategies.

The games became longer.

And so did the conversations.

At first they only talked about chess. Then they began playing even without a board.

Until they no longer needed one.

—King to g3.

—Queen to g5. Check.

—King to f2.

—Queen to d2. Check.

The position continued developing solely in their minds.

Kaito visualized every piece, every square, and every possible move without having anything in front of him.

Kamil made his next move.

Kaito closed his eyes for an instant.

He mentally reconstructed the position.

—Queen to g2.

Silence.

Kamil stopped speaking.

He was trying to reconstruct the board in the same way.

Finally, Kaito smiled.

—Checkmate.

Kamil opened his eyes.

He had lost.

By very little.

—Wow... not bad.

Kaito raised an eyebrow.

—Is that all?

—You realized it in time.

Kaito looked toward the nonexistent board.

—I can barely see it.

—But you saw it.

Kaito smiled.

—Heh.

Kamil laughed.

—Then let's play again.

And they both continued.

Over time, the bets stopped mattering.

Kaito and Kamil no longer played to win something. Chess became their way of communicating.

Kaito analyzed positions for hours; Kamil tried to create situations he could not anticipate. When one discovered something, the other searched for an answer.

The competition remained, but it stopped separating them.

Kaito had learned that games were systems that could be understood. Kamil taught him that they could also become a way of understanding another person.

Without realizing it, they stopped being rivals.

They had become friends.

All the children in the orphanage received education in areas such as mathematics, science, history, languages, psychology, and technology.

Among the teachers, Bening stood out.

He did not limit himself to teaching classes. He adapted the difficulty to each student, detected recurring errors, and sought to understand why someone was not learning.

Riko began observing him.

At first she asked him questions about the lessons. Soon she began doing so even when she already knew the answers.

—Professor Bening, I don't understand this part.

Bening would approach and explain it to her again.

Riko listened attentively.

But she was not studying the problem.

She was studying him.

She observed how he reacted under pressure, what questions sparked his interest, when he lost patience, which students concerned him, and what he needed to feel useful.

Over time, Riko understood something:

people also had patterns.

The difference was that they could hide them.

That was why she began to take an interest in psychology.

And she did not start with books.

She started by studying Bening.

While Riko began studying people, Kaito would take a different path.

While the others used their free time to play or rest, Kaito began researching on his own.

His subjects seemed to have no connection to one another.

First he studied mythologies about karma, trying to understand why different civilizations had developed similar ideas about the relationship between actions and consequences.

Then he investigated killers from different eras: their methods, motivations, circumstances, and mistakes. Not out of admiration, but to understand how a person could come to commit acts that others considered inconceivable.

Then he moved on to technology, studying devices, emerging systems, obsolete technologies, and their possible applications.

He also investigated an abandoned mine and kept its location without explaining why.

His curiosity extended to his own body and power.

He experimented with his abilities, modifying variables and recording results to establish limits instead of relying on intuition.

To better understand those phenomena, he studied physics and chemistry: forces, motion, energy, matter, composition, and interactions.

He also investigated more practical things.

He compared used cars, their prices, failures, fuel consumption, and availability of parts. He studied clothing to understand how certain combinations could alter the perception of age, profession, status, or identity.

At the same time, he trained physically, measuring strength, endurance, speed, coordination, recovery, and adaptation.

Then he focused his attention on the wrist chips that all the children wore.

He studied what they recorded, what they transmitted, what they could detect, and what restrictions they had. Eventually he began experimenting with their mechanisms to understand how far they could be modified.

In Bening's classes, he continued studying psychology, behavior, perception, biases, memory, and decision-making. He then compared that knowledge with his own observations.

He also began reading newspapers, although he paid particular attention to events: robberies, disappearances, fraud, murders, accidents, and unsolved cases.

He tried to reconstruct each case.

What did the criminal know?

What did the victim know?

What had the police ignored?

What decision had caused the next event?

And what would he have done with the same information?

When he found an answer, he recorded it.

When he could not solve something, he kept that too.

Over time, Kaito was building something much broader than a collection of knowledge.

He was building mental models.

Psychology to understand people.

Physics and chemistry to understand phenomena.

Technology to understand tools.

Criminology to understand behavior.

Laws to understand restrictions.

Training to understand his own body.

Clothing to understand perception.

Practical economics to understand resources.

Surveillance systems to understand control.

And mythology to understand how different societies had attempted to explain human behavior.

From the outside, he seemed to constantly jump from one subject to another.

But almost all of his research answered the same question:

What can a person do with the information, tools, and restrictions they have?

Kaito still did not have a complete answer.

That was why he kept studying.

While he built models to understand systems, Riko began building her own to understand the people within them.

And Bening, without knowing it, had found his first student of applied psychology focused on a particularly close subject: himself.

Riko approached Kaito.

—Kaito.

—Hum?

—I want that stuffed animal.

Kaito handed it to her without giving it much importance.

Riko approached another child.

—What can you trade me for this stuffed animal?

—This toy car.

—Okay.

Riko accepted.

Shortly afterward, she traded it for other objects. Then she repeated the process again and again.

The children began to watch her.

—She's already made five trades.

—Is she looking for something?

—Or experimenting.

A guard also began recording her movements.

Initial object: stuffed animal.

Number of trades: 5.

Pattern: unknown.

Riko continued trading objects, but soon began doing something different.

She dismantled them.

She had obtained small tools through her trades and used the components separately.

A piece that was worth little inside a toy could have greater value to someone who needed only that piece.

—Why are you selling it separately? —a child asked.

Riko held up the piece.

—Because someone wants it more than the complete toy.

Over the following days, she began accepting, dismantling, storing, and selling components according to their demand.

The guards began recording every transaction.

Entry → dismantling → storage → sale → time between transactions.

Other children tried to copy her.

Then they tried to manipulate her.

Some pretended that certain components were extremely rare. Others pretended to despise them to reduce their value. Some even created artificial demand.

Riko observed for several days.

She did not always react the same way.

Sometimes she paid a lot.

Other times she offered little.

On occasion she rejected the object or pretended not to know it.

The children could not determine what information she used to value each trade.

Riko did not need to discover exactly who was lying either.

She had discovered something more important:

someone was trying to manipulate her valuation.

And that was also information.

A week later, she stopped limiting herself to trading.

She began transforming the components.

A set of pieces ended up becoming a mechanism. Other materials formed toys more complex than the originals.

Demand increased.

The children began surrounding her.

—Can you sell me one?

—Yes.

Competition appeared immediately.

Some copied her products. Others tried to discover her materials. Some bought the pieces before she could to raise her costs.

Riko observed the change.

And understood that she could no longer do everything personally.

For the first time, she stopped acting as an individual merchant.

She chose eight children.

She would make them part of her operation.

Riko distributed functions among the eight children.

—You will buy cheaply.

She pointed to the next one.

—You will look for opportunities.

Another received a different function.

—You will buy valuable things.

Each one received a specific task, but Riko changed the instructions frequently. She was not trying to confuse them, but to prevent anyone from being able to reconstruct the entire system by observing a single function.

The guards began drawing a map:

Eight children → unknown source → separate functions → incomplete information.

Soon new candidates appeared.

—I want to work for Riko.

Riko accepted both the sincere ones and those who intended to infiltrate.

To one she provided true information.

To another, false information.

To another, true but incomplete information.

Then she observed what information came back.

She did not need to directly identify the informant. It was enough for her to track what information had traveled along which route.

An information war began.

Guards and children placed observers, tried to discover what the other knew, and used false information to provoke reactions.

Riko divided her data even further.

—You will buy these components.

To another:

—The components are no longer necessary.

And to another:

—The next operation will be tomorrow.

If someone acted based exclusively on one of those versions, Riko could narrow down the possible source of the leak.

The others began doing the same.

They no longer accepted information automatically.

They asked:

Who provides it?

What do they gain by lying?

Is it consistent?

Can it be corroborated?

Is there another explanation?

Even the guards began deliberately fabricating information.

Riko received some of that data and did not react immediately.

Instead, she asked:

—Who would benefit if I believed this?

She had stopped analyzing only truth versus lies.

Now she analyzed incentives.

From trading to the system

Riko began paying salaries.

Employees received rewards based on their results, but soon some discovered that they could manipulate the system by deliberately producing losses.

Riko modified the model.

Now she evaluated:

Gross profit.

Efficiency.

Losses.

Consistency.

Quality.

Reliability.

An employee could produce a lot and still receive little if their results were unstable.

Then she built a machine to record transactions, calculate payments, control debts, and organize inventories.

She added one final rule:

—If someone detects sabotage and proves they were not responsible, they will receive double.

It seemed like a perfect incentive.

Until the machine was found destroyed.

Riko arrived and did not ask who had done it.

She observed the remains.

The pieces.

The marks.

The position of the objects.

The direction and force of the damage.

What was missing.

The location of the sabotage.

And who had had access.

Then she raised her gaze toward one of the children.

—It was you.

The child turned pale.

—What?

Riko pointed to the remains of the machine.

—You tried to make it look like impulsive sabotage.

She paused.

—But you moved two pieces before breaking it. You wanted to hide something.

The child remained silent.

—Out.

He was expelled.

The others observed the machine.

—Does it have a detector?

—No.

Riko did not need to explain further.

She had not detected the sabotage. She had reconstructed it.

Then she began approaching the leaders of different groups.

She did not offer them power.

She offered them profit margins.

Extremely cheap products that they could resell at much higher prices.

When others tried to compete, Riko lowered her prices again.

—Aren't you losing money? —one asked.

—I'm not looking for money.

—Then what are you looking for?

Riko observed the groups.

—For them to need to come back.

The leaders began depending on her products. Then some members began working for her.

The system grew.

The guards began detecting it: similar schedules, repeated transactions, shared products, and related movements.

However, Riko introduced false connections mixed with the real ones.

Thus, an incorrect hypothesis could contain part of the true structure, making it much more difficult to reconstruct the complete system.

Over time, Riko stopped intervening constantly.

The employees carried out their tasks.

The leaders managed their groups.

The children traded.

The guards investigated.

Riko observed.

The system no longer depended on a single person or a single operation. It was made up of multiple small relationships, so that eliminating one would not destroy the others.

Then Riko began putting pressure on the organization itself.

In one sector, several employees adopted different behaviors but with the same result: noise, interruptions, arguments, complaints, and constant problems.

The head guard eventually lost patience.

—I can make them stop —Riko said.

—And what do you want?

—Products from outside.

—No.

—Then they will continue.

—Are you threatening me?

—I'm showing you a relationship between two variables.

The guard understood the mechanism.

Over the following days, the incidents increased until he finally accepted.

Riko did not need to convince him.

She had turned the children's behavior into institutional pressure.

Then she divided the operations again.

Same objectives.

Different schedules.

Different behaviors.

Different requests.

When the actions were too similar, she modified them.

When they were too different, she brought them closer together again.

The rule was simple:

similar enough to reproduce the system, but different enough to prevent them from being easily grouped together.

The network began expanding without easily revealing its origin.

And then increasingly complex products appeared.

Consoles.

Controllers.

Technological toys.

Small machines.

The orphanage's visible resources no longer seemed sufficient to explain what Riko was producing.

The children began wondering what they had actually built.

A business?

A laboratory?

An organization?

Riko did not seem to have a simple answer either.

Because, by then, she was all three at once.

Riko returned to the leaders.

—I have a new offer.

—What is it?

—Keep your groups calm for a certain amount of time.

—And what do we get?

Riko placed a product on the table.

—Exclusive.

They accepted.

The sabotage attempts quickly decreased. The leaders themselves now had an incentive to keep the system stable.

Riko no longer needed to impose discipline directly.

She had turned economic profit into a mechanism of control.

One day, Kaito appeared in front of her.

—I want a tablet.

—What for?

—I need it.

—Why?

Kaito thought for a few seconds.

—Because I want one.

Riko observed him.

—Okay.

Kaito paid and left with the tablet.

Riko remained watching him.

For the first time, a decision within her system did not seem to respond to an obvious economic need.

It was simply Kaito.

Four years later

What had begun as trading had become a much larger structure.

Trading → components → production → employees → information → incentives → leaders → expansion.

Finally, a new rule appeared:

A guard who manages to recruit two others will receive double the time of peace.

The incentive caused a natural expansion of the network.

The children began investigating the connections, but Riko had already anticipated the problem.

She kept records and limited the information each participant received.

Each person knew only the connections necessary to fulfill their function.

An employee knew their superior.

A leader knew their employees.

A guard knew their benefits.

Another knew a route.

Another only knew what they had to transport.

No one needed to know the complete structure.

Except Riko.

Six months after the first trade, all 200 children and 90 guards were directly or indirectly integrated into her system.

There was no visible organization, central office, or list of members.

The structure functioned through individual agreements and distributed incentives.

During the following four years, it continued expanding and adapting.

Riko did not personally control every participant.

She had built something more efficient:

a system capable of controlling and expanding itself.

Not because everyone obeyed Riko.

But because each person had their own reason to keep the system functioning.

Until, after four years, a variable appeared that Riko had not created.

The room was silent.

The three siblings were asleep when the door opened.

A shadow entered and lunged at Saiko.

He woke in time to block the first attack and began defending himself. Kaito and Riko woke up at the noise.

Saiko managed to grab a knife and plunge it into the attacker's abdomen.

But the man retaliated.

Saiko fell to his knees, clutching his throat.

—Saiko!

Kaito ran toward him and pressed the wound.

—Hang on.

—Kaito... I don't think I'll make it.

—Don't say that! I'll call someone.

Saiko slowly shook his head.

—It's too late...

He breathed with difficulty.

—In the bag... Dad's letters...

Kaito looked at him.

—What about them?

—Check... the third one.

His body went limp.

—Saiko.

Silence.

—Saiko.

Nothing.

Kaito remained motionless for a few seconds.

Then he heard movement.

The attacker had recovered and was moving toward Riko.

Kaito reacted.

He grabbed the toilet tank lid and struck the man repeatedly until he stopped moving.

Riko ran toward him and hugged him.

Kaito did not respond.

He only remembered Saiko's last words.

The third letter.

He opened the bag and found Abaoa's letters.

The third was not a farewell.

It was a protocol.

Instructions for acting after a death, hiding evidence, transporting a corpse, and avoiding drawing attention.

Kaito read it twice.

—Dad knew this could happen...

The letters, the warnings, and Abaoa's insistence that Saiko protect his siblings suddenly acquired a different meaning.

Abaoa had prepared instructions for a scenario the children had never imagined.

And now Kaito had to follow them.

During the following hours, he carried out every step in the letter.

He cleaned the room, reduced the visible evidence, and dealt with the attacker's body while avoiding the monitored areas.

He did not improvise.

One instruction.

One action.

Another instruction.

Another action.

He was not calm.

He had simply stopped thinking about what had happened so he could function.

Finally, he went outside with an excuse that would not attract attention.

The snow was beginning to fall.

Kaito stopped and watched the snowflakes for a few seconds.

Everything remained exactly the same.

The snow.

The wind.

The lights.

The building.

But Kaito was no longer the same.

He had lost Saiko.

And, for the first time, he had discovered that the answers Abaoa had taught him to reconstruct were not always enough.

Some answers had to be survived first.

He returned to the room.

Riko was still there.

She did not ask anything.

She simply hugged him.

Kaito lay down beside her and closed his eyes.

For several minutes he remained motionless.

Then tears began to fall.

He did not scream.

He did not ask for help.

He did not even make a sound.

He simply let the tears run down his face while Riko remained holding him.

That night he understood something that no lesson from Abaoa could teach him:

protecting someone could also mean being left alone after losing them.

Outside, the snow continued to fall.

Inside, Kaito cried in silence.

The police arrived shortly afterward.

They found traces of blood and a container with the remains of a corrosive substance.

The atmosphere of the orphanage changed immediately.

The children were questioned one by one.

This time, the agents used a polygraph that recorded multiple physiological and vocal variables: heart rate, breathing, skin conductance, temperature, muscle tension, involuntary movements, pauses, response latency, speech rate, and alterations in the voice.

In addition, they had previously established an individual baseline for each child.

They were not simply looking for a reaction.

They were looking for deviations from each interrogated child's usual physiological behavior.

Finally, they reached Kaito and Riko.

Kaito answered the questions.

—Did you know the attacker?

—No.

Without deviations.

—Did you see who came in?

—No.

Nothing.

—Were you awake during the attack?

—Yes.

Again, nothing.

The agent changed the order of the questions, introduced controls, and repeated the relevant ones.

The result remained identical.

The same thing happened with Riko.

The screen displayed:

Estimated probability of deception: 0%.

The agent frowned.

—Zero?

His partner reviewed the records.

—The system found no distinguishable pattern.

—Then are they telling the truth?

—Not exactly.

He pointed to the data.

—I can't distinguish their truthful answers from their false answers.

The agents exchanged a glance.

—It's suspicious.

—Yes.

—Can we do anything?

—We have no interpretable physiological response or evidence linking them to the murder.

He looked at the siblings again.

—Besides, they're children with exceptional abilities. Pretending that we can perfectly interpret every unconscious reaction would be absurd.

The first agent sighed.

—Then we're leaving.

The police left the orphanage.

Kaito remained silent.

But he had learned something important:

there were parts of himself that could not be revealed simply because someone asked the right questions.

Kaito remained seated.

He showed no reaction.

But he had learned something.

There were parts of himself that he could not afford to reveal.

Not because someone had discovered them.

Precisely because no one had discovered them.

He had managed to hide them too well.

That night, he stood in front of a mirror.

He observed his face and began working with several materials.

He did not simply want to hide his identity.

He wanted to build a separation.

One face for others.

And another for himself.

Shortly afterward, he finished a skull-shaped mask.

Riko observed him.

—Why are you doing that?

Kaito took a few seconds to answer.

—Because some things shouldn't be able to be seen.

Riko did not insist.

When they were alone, Kaito spoke.

—It was Kim.

Riko raised her gaze.

—Are you sure?

—No.

—Then why do you say that?

Kaito began to list them:

—They specifically attacked us. The orphanage is isolated and controlled, but someone managed to get inside and knew who to look for.

Riko nodded.

—Then it could have been someone from inside.

—Yes. Or someone external with access.

—Are you ruling out the children?

—Not completely.

Kaito shook his head.

—But the attacker didn't seem to know the place well enough. I was able to kill him.

Riko understood.

—Then it probably wasn't a specialist.

—Exactly.

Kaito continued:

—If it was someone external, they needed access, influence, or internal assistance. And they also had to know who we were.

—That narrows the possibilities quite a bit.

Both remembered the letter.

Kim.

The governor Abaoa had forced to protect them through a threat.

Riko spoke slowly.

—If the rulers consider us dangerous, anyone could want to eliminate us.

—But not everyone had a reason to do it.

Kaito pointed at the letter.

—Kim did.

He didn't need to hate them.

He only needed to want to eliminate the problem Abaoa had left in his hands.

Kaito closed his eyes.

—I can't prove it.

—But it's the hypothesis that explains the most things.

—Yes.

Riko smiled slightly.

—Then we'll investigate as if it's true.

Kaito looked at her.

—Without assuming it is.

—Exactly.

Shortly afterward, Kamil was taken out of the orphanage by his family. Before leaving, he looked for Kaito to say goodbye.

—I'm sorry about what happened to Saiko.

Kaito watched him silently.

Kamil hesitated for a few seconds.

—I know things weren't exactly as they said.

Kaito did not respond.

—But I'm not going to say anything.

Kamil lowered his gaze slightly.

—Not because I don't care. I simply think there are things that are better left untold.

Kaito understood then that Kamil had discovered the truth, or at least enough of it to understand what had happened.

He did not ask how he had deduced it.

Nor did Kamil explain anything.

They both knew it wasn't necessary.

—Take care, Kaito.

—You too.

Kamil left.

Kaito remained watching him until he disappeared from sight.

He did not know exactly how much Kamil had discovered.

But he did know one thing:

there was someone else who knew the truth and had decided to remain silent.

Shortly afterward, Riko received some unexpected news.

A family interested in adopting her had appeared.

Kaito did not protest. For the first time since Saiko's death, he thought that perhaps separating was better.

If Riko could get out of there, she would be safe.

—Go.

Riko looked at him.

—And you?

—I'll be fine.

She did not respond.

They took her away.

But she did not reach her destination.

Hours later, Riko returned.

Kaito opened the door and stared at her.

—What are you doing here!?

Riko put a finger to her lips.

—Shhh.

Kaito closed the door.

—How?

—I'll tell you later.

—Did you escape?

—Yes.

—Riko...

—I needed to come back.

Kaito watched her for a few seconds.

Then he understood.

She didn't want to abandon him.

They did not try to escape immediately.

First they needed to understand the place.

That same day, Kaito and Riko began studying the orphanage.

They could not take notes.

They could not draw maps.

They could not record the positions of the cameras, sensors, or guards on any device.

Everything they discovered would have to remain in their heads.

The building had six floors, two hundred cameras, one hundred forty-four microphones, seventy-two motion sensors, thirty-six temperature detectors, and ninety guards. There were also restricted areas, shift changes, surveillance routines, and periodic modifications to the security patterns.

The numbers alone were useless.

They had to understand the relationships between all those variables and then remember them.

Kaito began mentally reconstructing the building.

Every room.

Every hallway.

Every staircase.

Every entrance.

Every camera.

Every microphone.

Every sensor.

Every restricted area.

Every coverage point.

Every blind spot.

He did not memorize isolated positions alone.

He related them to one another.

A camera could cover a hallway but be partially blocked from a certain direction.

A microphone could record an area that a camera could not observe.

A sensor could activate from a specific position.

A surveillance window could appear only when certain guard positions coincided.

Kaito turned all that information into a spatial representation that he could mentally navigate.

Riko did exactly the same.

She did not limit herself to studying the parts Kaito had not observed.

She independently reconstructed the complete functioning of the building.

While carrying out her normal tasks, she mentally stored positions, distances, times, routes, and relationships between the systems.

She could not write a single word.

Therefore, every observation had to be encoded, related to previous ones, and retained immediately.

In approximately twenty minutes, both had mentally reconstructed the building in detail.

They did not need to see it again to navigate it.

They could imagine its six floors, remember the location of the cameras and sensors, and reconstruct the main surveillance routes.

The remaining forty minutes of that session were not used to continue studying the building.

Both had to finish their usual chores.

However, the real problem had still not been solved.

The ninety guards.

They could not be treated as simple moving points on a map.

Each one was a different person.

Each one had a personality, habits, priorities, risk tolerance, initiative, and particular way of reacting to unexpected situations.

Kaito and Riko began studying them individually.

They were not merely trying to determine where each guard would be.

They were trying to determine why they would be there and what they might do if circumstances changed.

They observed their expressions.

Their levels of attention.

Their reactions to orders.

The way they responded to anomalies.

What seemed to irritate them.

What sparked their curiosity.

When they showed initiative.

When they preferred to obey.

How they reacted when something did not match their expectations.

They even analyzed how their decisions could change depending on their emotional state.

It was not enough to recognize:

Guard 17 → north hallway.

The model had to be much deeper.

Guard 17 → habitual behavior.

Guard 17 in the face of an anomaly → probable response.

Guard 17 in the face of an unexpected order → probable response.

Guard 17 in the face of an intrusion → possible priorities.

Guard 17 upon suspecting that someone is observing his movements → possible responses.

Guard 17 under pressure → probable behavioral modification.

Each guard became an independent psychological problem.

Kaito and Riko did not need to literally read the mind of any of them.

They tried to reconstruct it through their observable behavior.

The question was no longer:

«What will this guard do?»

And became:

«What does this guard believe is happening, what does he consider important, and what decision would he make based on that interpretation?»

That allowed them to anticipate strategies.

If a guard valued following orders above investigating anomalies, he was more likely to remain in his position.

If another had a greater tendency to investigate any irregularity, he might abandon his route.

If another distrusted overly perfect patterns, they could expect him to deliberately alter his behavior.

If another sought to demonstrate initiative, they could anticipate that he would try to discover what was causing the anomalies.

They were not predicting only movements.

They were predicting human decision-making processes.

And they had to do it for all ninety.

Each guard could react differently to the same situation.

Therefore, Kaito and Riko mentally constructed an individual profile for each one.

They remembered:

their routes;

their schedules;

their speeds;

their pauses;

their reactions;

their priorities;

their attention patterns;

their emotional tendencies;

their behavior under pressure;

their obedience;

their initiative;

and the strategies they would probably use when they suspected that something was happening.

Additionally, they had to remember how those people could interact with the security system.

A guard was not merely a variable.

He was a variable capable of interpreting other variables and modifying his behavior in response to them.

Then the first anomaly appeared.

One of the guards abandoned his usual route.

Kaito observed him.

Riko did too.

The route they had considered safe was no longer safe.

—He changed —Riko said.

Kaito observed for a few seconds.

—It doesn't seem random.

The guard remained in an area longer than usual and then returned.

Kaito mentally reconstructed his profile.

—He's checking whether someone reacts.

Riko nodded.

—Then we shouldn't assume his next move will be the same as the previous one.

That possibility was incorporated into their model.

But the anomalies continued.

Another guard changed his route after receiving an order.

Another used a route he normally avoided.

Another modified his behavior after noticing that one of the children was watching him.

Another began deliberately varying his timing.

And another did exactly the opposite of what he had done during the previous days.

Each deviation could invalidate a previous prediction.

But neither of them needed to write down the correction.

They made it directly in their mental model.

Observation.

Interpretation.

Update.

New prediction.

New observation.

New update.

Everything remained stored in their heads.

Kaito then understood the real problem.

—We're not predicting ninety routes.

Riko looked at him.

—We're predicting ninety people.

—And each one can change strategies.

Riko smiled slightly.

—Then we have to predict what they would do if they discovered that we're trying to predict them.

The problem acquired another layer.

The guards could react to Kaito and Riko's actions.

They could deliberately maintain their routines to create a false sense of security.

They could change their routes to cause mistakes.

They could behave in seemingly random ways.

They could follow an order literally or interpret it according to their own judgment.

They could even try to figure out what they were looking for.

Kaito and Riko began modeling those possibilities.

They did not assume their predictions were certainties.

They worked with probabilities.

A guard could do A.

If A happened, there was a response.

If he did B, there was another.

If C appeared, the route had to be abandoned.

And if something happened that neither of them had anticipated, they would have to improvise.

The difficulty was not only the quantity.

It was the psychological diversity.

Ninety people meant ninety different models.

The same anomaly could produce ninety different responses.

Therefore, Kaito and Riko had to continually distinguish between:

what was happening,

what each guard believed was happening,

what each guard wanted to achieve,

and the action he would probably take as a consequence.

That process required simultaneously understanding behavior, emotions, motivations, priorities, and interpretation of the situation.

They could not afford to reduce the guards to mechanical patterns.

They had to treat them as agents capable of thinking and adapting.

They did not construct a physical map they could consult.

They constructed the map inside their own heads.

They did not construct a list of ninety guards.

They memorized their individual patterns and the psychological models necessary to anticipate their decisions.

They did not write down twenty-five escape routes.

They learned the conditions that allowed them to generate new routes.

After finishing their chores and completing the remaining time of that session, they met.

Each verbally reconstructed their own model and compared their conclusions with the other's.

If a position matched, it was confirmed.

If a route differed, they mentally reanalyzed the observations that had led to that conclusion.

If one had interpreted a guard's behavior differently, they examined the variables that could explain the discrepancy.

Finally, they arrived at a common representation.

The entire building.

The surveillance systems.

The positions and patterns of the cameras.

The sensors.

The routes.

The temporal changes.

The ninety guards.

Their individual behaviors.

Their relevant psychological characteristics.

Their possible responses.

And the conditions that could cause any of those variables to change.

All stored without a single sheet of paper.

When they finally began moving, they did not blindly trust their predictions.

They tested them against reality.

Every guard change required comparing the observed behavior with the model stored in their heads.

If it matched, they continued.

If it did not match, they mentally modified the route.

One prediction failed.

Riko stopped.

Kaito looked at her.

She pointed in another direction.

There was no time to argue.

Kaito quickly reconstructed the relevant variables.

Guard.

Camera.

Time window.

Alternative route.

Risk.

He chose.

It worked.

Later, another deviation occurred.

This time Kaito reacted first.

Then another appeared.

Riko corrected.

Another one.

Kaito changed the trajectory again.

The guards continued behaving in ways that did not always match their predictions.

And they continued adapting.

The escape stopped depending on a perfect prediction.

It depended on their ability to quickly detect when a prediction had failed and reconstruct the next decision using the available information.

They finally reached the outer area.

Riko had previously memorized how the supply vehicles operated, their schedules, and the opportunities they could use.

They waited.

A window compatible with the model appeared.

They hid among the usual movement of the staff and managed to leave the building.

When they were outside, Kaito looked back.

The orphanage was still there.

Six floors.

Two hundred cameras.

One hundred forty-four microphones.

Seventy-two sensors.

Thirty-six temperature detectors.

Ninety guards.

And everything they had discovered still existed only in their memories.

Riko took him by the arm.

—We have to go.

Kaito nodded.

But before leaving, he went back for something.

Saiko's body.

He couldn't leave her there.

The two continued walking, not knowing exactly where to go.

Until they heard a voice.

—Are you boys okay?

Both stopped.

Kaito raised his gaze.

A white-haired woman stood before them.

She did not look like an agent.

Nor did she seem surprised to find them.

Kaito positioned himself in front of Riko.

—Who are you?

The woman looked at them.

—I suppose you don't know me yet.

She paused.

—I'm an envoy of your father.

Kaito did not respond.

Neither did Riko.

The woman looked toward the path they had just traveled.

—It's time to go home.

Silence.

Kaito lightly squeezed Riko's hand.

For four years, he had thought that his parents had disappeared.

Now someone had just told them that there was still a place they could call home.

And, for the first time since that night, Kaito did not know what conclusion to draw.

End of the orphanage arc.