LIM SEOK JIN

At fifty-one, despite his importance, he can still afford to stand in a neighborhood on the outskirts of the city at the uncertain hour of dusk, outside the front door of a filthy two-room apartment. It is a luxury he savors with full awareness, one he allows himself only once a month.

With three armed guards standing behind him, he waits for two inspection guards to come out with their report. An aircraft carrying ten trained men circles above the building. They can breach the fifth-floor apartment in less than fifteen seconds. He doesn't know their names, yet he could say exactly how many times he has seen each of them.

Mnemosyan's Fourth Level considers the operation high-risk. But Lim Seok Jin—Lim to the few human associates he speaks to—can afford it. He remains the highest-ranking executive.

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As always, the woman starts with the display case on the left. She notes the time. Six cases, six hours. The tolerance margin is eight percent. She doesn't even know what eight percent of six hours comes to, and she doesn't want to. By the three hundred and thirty-second time, she knows every object in the cases perfectly. It's a good job, and she wants to do it well. You don't find an employer like Mr. Seok Jin every day.

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The two men in military skins leave, and Lim steps inside, closing the door behind him. The inspection report scrolls across his on-retina.

The room is no more than eight square meters. A microwave, an old refrigerator, a few small pieces of furniture. Clothes and objects scattered everywhere.

He sets his steel briefcase on a plastic table with one wobbly leg. To keep it from tipping, he has to move a few greasy drinking glasses.

He takes off his soft black leather gloves, folds them, and places them beside the briefcase.

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On a poorly made full-size bed, a girl props herself up on her elbows and stares at him. She wears a stained white T-shirt and very short light-blue shorts with white stripes along the edges. Her skin is amber-toned, her dark eyes enormous beneath an Afro, and her toenails are painted the inevitable lizard green, freshly applied.

The girl's compliance percentage appears on his on-retina. It isn't even a spot check. More of an indulgence. He knows perfectly well that the algorithm that finds and selects the girls doesn't fail at simple details like these. After all, he trained it himself.

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She knows the owner of the house personally. She doesn't know exactly what he does, but he was the one who explained the job to her. A well-mannered middle-aged man, a man of few words, polite and courteous. She wasn't to touch anything else, he had told her. She was to deal only with the objects in the display cases. She wasn't to clean them; someone else took care of that. She was simply to pick them up one at a time and examine them.

Just look at them?

Exactly. Take them one at a time and examine them carefully. Focus on the details, the little peculiarities. Is that clear?

She hadn't understood, and she didn't want to risk losing the job, so she remembers keeping quiet, staying in her place.

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Only now, with the surroundings meeting his expectations, can Lim turn his attention to suspending the monitoring of his bodily parameters. This takes him about forty seconds, owing to the neural credentials and the corresponding verification checks involving temporary passwords. It's the step the Fourth Level has the hardest time swallowing, but it's a matter of privacy. Even if privacy and security don't get along.

He opens the briefcase.

Get undressed, he tells the girl.

He knows everything about her. Her name is Samia Shoid. She's twenty-six, her mother is dead, and her father disappeared years ago. She scrapes by cleaning houses; now and then she works as a runner, but she isn't fast enough.

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The girl pulls off her T-shirt, revealing a lilac bra that contrasts with her skin. She slips off her shorts. There's nothing underneath. Her pubic hair is poorly groomed, a low-priority requirement for the algorithm.

Lim removes his jacket and slowly hangs it over the back of a chair, centered, perfectly balanced. His manicured fingers stop at the first button of his iridescent eggplant-purple shirt. He looks up at Samia. She has started crying.

I'm sorry, she says through her sobs. It's nothing. I'll be okay in a sec. Just give me a sec.

Lim moves away from the table and into the center of the room. To his left, a peeling door leads to the tiny bathroom. He calls up the apartment's floor plan on his on-retina.

It's nothing, she keeps saying.

An unforeseen event. Never happened before. An assessment is needed. Perhaps the algorithm made a mistake. Or perhaps not. The important thing is not to let it ruin his day or compromise his month.

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The owner, Lim Seok, hadn't lost his patience. He had opened a case and taken out a small, brightly colored doll. He had approached her without imposing his presence. A citrus scent of lemons accompanied him.

See how her head looks slightly out of proportion? It's really just the effect of those enormous eyes. Here, look. I'll move her back a little so you can see it better.

Yes, actually, that looks better. She looks a little sad, too.

And look here: the color of her arms isn't the original color. It looks like dark skin, but it's really dirt, dirt that's impossible to remove now. Can you see it without your glasses?

Yes, I can see.

Look here, right down here. 1988. A real rarity.

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Lim approaches a small cabinet overflowing with things. Cheap pins, makeup in improbable colors, jars of off-brand creams, a doll with a broken hand and a torn formal dress. A plastic mirror that looks like a toy.

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His ringless hand instinctively shifts a multicolored heap of hairbands, then suddenly stops, motionless, suspended a few inches from an orange plastic object.

Samia's voice fades into the background as his hand pulls out a utility knife.

Oh my God, that's not mine. I've never seen it. Never seen it before.

Samia jumps to her feet. Lim stops her with a gesture and orders her to sit back down.

It's not mine, she insists before sitting on the edge of the bed.

Lim scans the utility knife, and the Fourth Level's response is predictable. The object is inconsistent with the girl's profile, generating an exception. The operation must be canceled.

In fact, the danger level displayed in his field of vision is eighty-five percent. Enough to trigger the immediate dismissal of the two guards who searched the apartment, but not enough to ruin his day or his month.

He requests a reassessment of the actual danger level, given that the utility knife's blade measures less than a centimeter. A worn-out utility knife, used up. Again, the first part of the response is predictable. The second, less so. The Fourth Level raises the danger to maximum because Lim's mental predisposition, when faced with an exception, is to ignore it. This would confirm the analyses repeatedly brought to Lim's attention, all of them stating that Lim Seok Jin is the weakest security point in the entire system.

The man smiles. The system he wanted and built is telling him he has been surpassed. He can afford that, too. Especially now that it's too late.

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Every object has its peculiarities. And the homeowner is right: whenever she examines one, even if she's examined it countless times before, she always discovers new details. At first she'd thought about writing them down and telling her employer. Luckily, she thought better of it. He's such a precise, intelligent person that if he'd wanted her opinion, he certainly would have asked. She must stick to what she's been told to do. And do it well. Every individual is called upon to fulfill their duty to the very end. That's exactly what he'd told her. And there must be some kind of gadget watching her. More than one, surely.

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It's harmless. There's no blade left, Lim tells the girl. If it isn't yours, whose is it?

She looks at him, her eyes still slightly red.

Probably my boyfriend's.

You have a boyfriend?

Not exactly. I'm seeing somebody. And he's got nothing to do with this.

The girl gets up again and fixes her eyes on him, her sculpted arms, defined stomach, legs spread apart.

I'm ready. Come here.

Lim puts down the utility knife, returns to the table, and resumes unbuttoning his shirt. One button after another, top to bottom.

He lays the folded shirt on the chair. Then he slips off his shiny black loafers and lines them up beside it.

Take off your bra, too, and sit on the bed.

Samia obeys, dropping the lilac bra at the edge of the bed, on top of her shorts and T-shirt.

I don't want you thinking I'm some kind of freak.

I don't think badly of you, Lim says. I don't think anything of you.

Samia keeps looking up at him, her hands gripping the mattress on either side of her thighs.

Lim finishes undressing. He folds all his clothes on the chair and for a moment studies his naked body in a fragment of mirror to the left of the bed. He knows every single parameter of that thinness; every imperfection is measured and monitored. Yet in that mirror he looks like nothing more than a naked, scrawny, pale-skinned man.

The girl's gaze on his body is a pleasure that no longer touches him.

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When she reaches the fourth display case, she always has to make an effort not to pick up the doll in the blue lace dress right away. The fear of losing track of the objects and skipping one holds her back. Silently, only in her mind, because there might be microphones, she has named the doll Sandra. After that friend of hers from Brazil. It's a plastic doll with jointed limbs and black hair. The color of the plastic contrasts with the dress. There's a strange pale-green polish

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on its nails. Maybe someone colored them with a marker. She knows it isn't a wedding dress, but she likes to think it is.

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Lim takes one of the two modified nodes from the briefcase.

Then he stops. It isn't so much the exception that stops him. Exceptions are breaches in the system, possible glitches, bugs to investigate.

What stops him is the coincidence. Coincidences, by contrast, are bridges the mind builds between two or more configurations of reality. Every system presents itself in one of its many possible configurations, and coincidences are connecting lines that cross them. They are maps. Something the Fourth Level will never be able to conceive.

The girl comes over to him in the middle of the room and grabs his wrist. Her other hand rests on his slender shoulder.

Come on. Right now. It's okay.

Lim resists. In front of that mirror he sees the reflection of a child playing in a courtyard on the outskirts of the city. The child sits on the ground, building things with stones and shards of brick. Men cross the courtyard and go through a half-peeled door. They come out. Others arrive. Some look at him, greet him. The child remains absorbed in his constructions of stone. A man passes with his head down, walking with purpose. He doesn't spare the child a glance. A large utility knife sticks out of the side pocket of his work pants.

Lim asks the Fourth Level to kill that memory.

He approaches the girl, seated on the left edge of the bed, and fits the node onto her.

Did they explain how it works?

He already knows she's been instructed. It's part of the protocol.

Yeah, sure. I've done it before. Obviously.

Then why were you crying? What scares you?

Nothing, seriously. I'm good now. It's over. I'm good.

These are enhanced nodes. Does the depth of emotional penetration worry you?

Samia nods, her gaze fixed on his.

Lim connects her neural interface.

There's nothing to be afraid of. This is the most advanced technology on the market, with a few special customizations I had made.

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She nods again. A draft crosses the apartment and raises goosebumps on her skin.

Lim puts on his own node, connects it, and sits beside her. His hairless thigh brushes against hers. Her large dark eyes follow his every movement.

Our bodies will touch, you know that. They will penetrate each other while our minds examine each other from sensory depths never experienced before. All I want is for you to look at me from those depths. Nothing more. Your past doesn't interest me. I already know it. What you feel doesn't interest me either, because, you see, we will still be two individuals separated by an astronomical distance. That is our limit and our fate as human beings. Do you understand?

Samia lies down and slowly pulls him beside her. The size of the bed forces them into immediate physical contact.

Her skin is soft velvet. Separated by an astronomical distance. A gap Mnemosyan has never had, wholly and constantly connected like a digital monad.

They brush against each other. She's skilled; she has to be. It's a top-priority requirement. Her earlier hesitation gives way to bursts of little bites and kisses.

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On the shelf beneath the bride doll are two stones and a piece of broken brick. They look like rubble. Those always look the same to her. The owner won't be offended by the thought. She can't see anything interesting about them, though she studies them as carefully as everything else.

Farther along is the sheet torn from a notepad with that drawing. It looks like a man walking, but it's very messy. Beside him is a red arrow pointing at something that seems to stick out of a kind of large pocket, though it's hard to tell what it is. At the other end of the arrow is an indecipherable inscription. When she feels inspired, she plays a game: she looks away, then suddenly looks back at the writing to see if a flash of insight comes to her. To figure out what it says. But she still hasn't figured it out.

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It takes him less than a minute to catch her gaze. A return current runs through him, flooding his entire being. Samia's leg is a dense light in a spectrum between red and violet that smells of lemons. Yellow lemons behind him at

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twenty-six, in his first elegant suit, as he climbs toward the summit with no one able to stop him. He crosses the courtyard. Enters a cluttered room, a sink full of dirty dishes. Filth everywhere. Cobwebs. His breathing quickens. Breath that reeks of death and decay.

He crosses it and enters another room with two bunk beds and two mattresses on the floor. All dirty and unmade. On the floor, beneath one of the mattresses, he finds a small stack of papers. He pauses over a child's drawing, its lines uncertain. It shows a man in work clothes with a large utility knife in his back pocket. A red arrow points to the knife and connects it to a nearly illegible inscription: Exception!

Then interference begins. The smell of a color outside his palette.

Get me disconnected! I told you, unplug me! I'm not frying my fucking brain for this!

A voice streaks through him like a meteor. A beam of tart pear mustard.

Lim turns and sees two spotlights aimed at him. Silhouettes of people in the background. A courtyard.

I did what you told me to do! Get me the fuck out!

Samia's image fractures in several places, slips out of phase, then comes back together.

The message SYSTEM COMPROMISED flashes on his on-retina. A log shows multiple failed attempts to access Mnemosyan's Fourth Level. At the bottom, a system comment: Lim Seok Jin is a weak access point.

Don't tell me to calm the fuck down! I wanna get out of here! How the hell am I supposed to leave? There are fucking guards everywhere! If you don't get me out, I swear to God, if I make it out of here... oh, fuck.

Lim tries to access the Fourth Level, without success. His cerebral functions are insufficient to get past the authentication systems. System compromised. Probable neural injection.

It was one of the possible scenarios. One of the possible configurations of events. The direction indicated by the coincidences.

At the cerebral level he can no longer defend himself. But he isn't beaten. He hasn't lost yet.

His body still responds, just enough to bring his right hand into his mouth. He struggles to find his mouth. He must reach his second right molar and execute the sequence of button presses his fingers learned through hours of training to develop tactile memory. Another thing the Fourth Level cannot have.

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One last advantage in his favor, as his smile spreads and makes the operation easier for his fingers.

He closes his eyes.

His sensory perceptions dissolve into faintly salty water, where the river empties into the sea.

Soon the system will be at its highest level of security, without a single vulnerability left.

Because every human being always has a second choice.