
Story:
YUU KAMIYA
TSUBAKI HIMANA
Illustrations:
SINO
III
CLOCKWORK
PLANET
From the bestselling author of NO GAME, NO LIFE




Yuu Kamiya & Tsubaki Himana

Illustration: Sino



Hearing a loud rumble all of a sudden, the soldiers all turned towards the source. What they saw was a building that had been sliced into a jigsaw collapse into pieces. Amidst the roar of the collapse, a clear voice, like that of a music box, resounded.

*"—Your attention, please ♪."* Standing before the collapsing building, the girl in a black dress gave a single elegant bow. Crudely mimicking her big sister's gesture, the young girl clad in red and white armor bowed as well.

*"How are you all faring on this day? I am the First of the Initial-Y Series, RyuZU YourSlave."*

*"U, Umm... I'm the Fourth of the Initial-Y Series, AnchoR the Trishula , o-or the One Who Destroys. N, Nice to meet you."*

—It all began with the greetings from the two legendary automata.

That something—was the last incident in this chain of events. A grand conclusion that tied all of the preceding incidents that had occurred together under one neat name. It was also the very first of the incidents in a chain of numerous others to follow which would shake the very foundation of this world.

This grand incident was what would later be known as the Uprising of 2/8. But it had another name. And that other name was the Second Ypsilon.

In this year, on this day, at this hour, in this second... 5:59 a.m. Japanese Standard Time, on February 10th in the 1016th Year of the Wheel—

# contents


Interlude — 06 : 05 / Reviver

Chapter One — 07 : 20 / Explorer

Chapter Two — 05 : 17 / Disaster

Chapter Three — 07 : 15 / Liberator

Chapter Four — 07 : 35 / Progressor

Epilogue — 00 : 00 / Saver






She said it in the tone of an obituary that she had written for herself—her final farewell. The sound of her Perpetual Gear—the material manifestation of eternity coming apart sounded—and yet, at the same time it was still continuing to turn.

Reality repudiated the fantasy of an eternal girl, forcing her to awake from her dream. But what that awakening demonstrated was one simple fact. Namely, the absurd truth that, in exchange for her own demise—There was nothing in the entire universe that the Trishula could not destroy.

Then, inside the world that had turned still, the beautiful young woman declared a second set of apocalyptic words of which, of all the Initial-Y Series automata, only she could say:

**“—‘Still Weight’—”**

# Interlude / 06 : 05 / Reviver

Let there be no doubt about it.

**—The universe was askew from the very beginning.**

We were all born into this world before any one of us could even stand. While wailing desperately and floundering in our frail bodies, fearing both the unknown and the threats in front of us, we asserted our existence and managed to survive by racking our meager brains...

While all the while wondering,

*Where did we come from—*

*—And where are we going?*

In our process, we invented god out of anxious fear. We forged philosophy as a means to guide pure reason. We discovered mathematics as a tool to predict things. Timidly, fearfully, we began to write our own history.

**...While ending the world several times over along the way.**

The Earth, which had once been flat, became a sphere. We, who had once been at the center of the universe, were now a satellite to the sun. Upon mastering the laws of gravity, humanity took to the skies. Eventually, we used our humble reason to ascertain the five fundamental forces and managed to lay our hands on the throne of Truth at last.

By applying knowledge, language, and violence, by flooding the world with blood and tears—we repeated the cycle of joy, anger, and sadness—and through hurting an unfathomable num-

ber of people, leaving them writhing in desperation...

**We recreated our world time and time again.**

We rewrote our history time and time again. And by doing so, we managed to prolong the duration of humanity's existence time and time again.

**However—in the end it was all a futile effort.**

That day, that hour, that moment, everything vanished along with our ephemeral dreams. On that day, the Earth was destroyed, the world came to an end, and the universe was reconstructed differently. And so—humanity was taught a lesson. Our legacy had been erased. The path we had chosen was a foolish mistake; all our worries and suffering along the way had been for nothing. The knowledge that we had desperately accumulated was nothing but worthless trash.

Humanity, which had been at Truth's doorstep, was struck right back to its infancy. The fact that the universe was the model garden of a mad god was proven, and in its design, we were nothing but babbling babes.

**However—we must ask ourselves:** If this world in which everything is vague, uncertain, absurd, and filled with contradictions is just the whim of a god... **Then does this world in which we live—really exist at all?**

A thousand years later...

•

High in the skies above Akihabara Grid were twenty planes tearing through the dawning light. With their whirring rotators and loudly clanking gears, they seemed like predatory birds made of steel. The pilots of these seventh-generation tactical fighters were the seventh aerial squadron of Tokyo's military.

—Also known as the Sakamuro Squad.

They were the most powerful aerial force that Tokyo's military possessed. These twenty fighters had launched from base in Yokosuka Grid and were headed straight for Akihabara.

They had only one objective.

"—Destroy the enormous unknown weapon that appeared in Akihabara Grid."

"Eat shit and die." From inside an aircraft tearing through the morning at a supersonic speed, Captain Sakamuro spat that out upon hearing their orders through transmission.

He had been rudely awoken past midnight and ordered on standby. Then, when the order to sortie had *finally* come at dawn—he suddenly found out they were to take down an enormous unknown weapon, just like that. "Hey AWACS. Want me to stick a cruise missile up your ass to wake you up?" he threatened into his mic half-seriously. The captain was infamous for his short temper to begin with.

"Watch your mouth, captain. That was an official order."

"I'll make you shit yourself."

"I'll only say this once more, captain. This is an official order. The seventh aerial squad is to promptly destroy the enormous unknown weapon—which we're tentatively calling 'Yatsukahagi'—that appeared in Akihabara Grid."

"Hah—" Captain Sakamuro snorted. "Are you stupid? You've gotta be. Only an idiot would take me as a fool."

"Captain!"

"Hey stupid, listen up. I don't know what this Yatsukahagi is, but you're telling me that an enormous weapon suddenly sur-

faced right in the middle of Tokyo out of nowhere? What was our security force doing?! Jerking off while falling asleep on the job?!"

"The security force has already been decimated."

Upon hearing that, Sakamuro sank into silence. Next, visual data was sent to all pilots through the transmission line. What they saw—was the image of an enormous mechanical spider big enough to squash buildings with its feet in the middle of an Akihabara that was engulfed in flames.

"Everyone, it's as you can see. This is a very real threat. The destruction of Akihabara Grid would spell the end of Tokyo—which in turn would spell the end of Japan. Pilots, give your all for the nation!"

"....."

"Also, Captain Sakamuro— You'll be court-martialed for your behavior after the operation. You're excited, right?"

"—Hah, yeah. I'd be thrilled to go."

*If I can make it back alive, that is.* Captain Sakamuro nearly yelled out those words in rage before barely managing to swallow them at the last second. The captain couldn't afford to say such a thing in the resonant transmission where his subordinates could hear. Irked, Captain Sakamuro struck the canopy of his unit with his fist.

*An enormous unknown weapon that appeared at the heart of the capital out of nowhere, huh—what a joke.*

*No one knew of this thing's existence? If you expect anyone to believe that, then maybe try cleaning out your ears, because you've got shit where your brain's supposed to be.*

***Someone knew***— *at the very least, the top brass did. Both what this thing is and its objective.*

*If that isn't the case, then why the fancy name for an unidentified enemy object that can simply be called 'the target.' They came up with that gem pretty damn fast for a pack of numbnuts caught with their pants down…!*

—*It's obvious*. Captain Sakamuro grit his teeth so hard that it wouldn't be surprising if some of them cracked. *The target assaulted Akihabara Grid, and Tokyo's security force intercepted it — And they failed. Was their failure* ***a part of some plan?*** *Or did they* ***screw up*** *somehow?— In any case…*

*(So in short, our job is to clean up after some bedshitter's mess…!)* Captain Sakamuro howled internally. It was just a hunch —however, it was an analysis that proved exceedingly accurate.

*Tokyo's security force is no joke. They aren't a force that could be crushed so casually. They're among the strongest of the forces to be reckoned with in the nation. That generous budget and high-level training isn't for nothing.*

*And yet, as far as I could tell from that image earlier, they were annihilated—without even leaving a single scratch on the enemy at that.*

*(And so, at a loss, the politicians, the wretches that they are, decided to shove the responsibility onto the air force.)*

*—Their thinking was beyond childish. "Well, the security force couldn't do the job, so let's try throwing the air force at it next." How simpleminded. If they really think that we can do what the security force couldn't, then they're beyond help.*

*The security force had multiple resonance cannons at their disposal.*

*In theory, a resonance cannon should be the strongest fieldable anti-ground weapon—if even resonance cannons couldn't scratch the target, then that would mean that the target either has armor that can withstand the cannon shells or some kind of mechanism to neutralize them.*

Captain Sakamuro had no way of knowing what that mechanism could be—but there was one thing he *could* say, *Even if I slam all of my unit's cruise missiles into the target, the chance that they would have any effect is—*

"Everyone, you'll soon be arriving at the mission area—all units, prepare for battle!"

"……Roger," Captain Sakamuro replied with a disgruntled sigh. *—I'll follow orders. That's my duty as a soldier. However—* ***According to the brass,*** *the target's armaments, number of cannons, and firing range are all unclear— In that case,* Sakamuro sneered internally…

Adjusting the headset's mic by his mouth, he announced to his troops: "Storm One to all units. Switch to Formation Delta. We're going with a 'burst and run.'"

He had chosen Formation Delta because it was a triangle formation, it was a measure to avoid the worst-case scenario of having all his units caught in the target's line of fire at once.

"Blow your load from maximum range then skedaddle on out." Hearing that order, the AWACS operator barked, "Captain?! You haven't been given orders to use such a tactic. Don't decide things by your—"

"—Tactic? If you're gonna call, 'destroy the mysterious enormous weapon' a tactic, then how to execute that order is under my jurisdiction! Filthy armchair tacticians can go ahead and keep their mouths shut!!"

*I'll obey your damn orders. That's my duty as a soldier. However—above all—I have the responsibility of not letting my subordinates die for nothing in a futile engagement.* "All units, do you read me? Obey my orders. I'll take responsibility for this."

"Captain!" the AWACS operator yelled out in furious exasperation.

Ignoring the operator, the vice-captain of the squad replied, "Storm Two, roger. All units, switch to Formation Delta."

"""Roger."""" With that cue, Sakamuro Squad switched to formation delta.

"Seventh aerial squad...! You bastards—" the AWACS operator began to roar through the transmission line, however, all of a sudden— **His voice was cut off.**

At the same time, the seventh aerial squad heard the din of the AWACS aircraft that had been flying above them exploding.

"W, What was that?! Don't tell me—"

"Oy, you've gotta be kidding me... The target shot down AWACS?!"

Before trepidation could spread any further among the squad, Captain Sakamuro looked at his sonar—

Seeing the enormous response that came from way off in the distance, he clicked his tongue loudly before shouting harshly, "All units, adopt evasive maneuvers as you turn around and disperse! Ignite your afterburners and retreat at maximum speed — **We're in the enemy's firing range!!** "

"R, Roger—" Unable to conceal their disquiet, all squad members of the seventh obeyed their captain's orders and turned around, tracing a wide arc. However, Captain Sakamuro couldn't

conceal his own alarm either.

*(Shooting down AWACS first—? Cheeky bastards…)*

—The enemy had shot down their AWACS, which had been flying at an altitude that was twenty thousand meters above them, from outside the range of their cruise missiles. It was self-evident what that meant. It was a brazen **provocation,** as if to say, **"You've all been inside our firing range for a while now."**

Enduring the overwhelming strain of the G-force on his body, Captain Sakamuro turned his unit around like everyone else and ignited the fuel compressed by the rotors in the afterburner.

"—ngggh!" The shock of accelerating to his unit's maximum speed—Mach 5—slammed him forcefully against his seat. He grit his teeth and endured the overwhelming pressure on his body. However, just then—he saw a unit that had done the same in front of him explode into pieces.

Seeing that, the valiant men of the seventh aerial squad peeled their eyes wide open. "Storm Three has been shot down! I repeat, Storm Three has been shot down!!"

"What— What the hell is this!! What was he shot w—" someone cried out in the transmission line—however, he was cut short. Something flashed by. As the units of his retreating squad blew up one after another, Sakamuro howled, "—How would I know, you wanker!"

They were being fired upon from a distance far greater than 18,000 meters—the maximum range of a cruise missile. *Hitting our AWACS, an aircraft 20,000 meters above us, that can take evasive maneuvers at hypersonic speeds? For a single unit—no, even for several units working in conjunction, to have such absurd anti-air capabilities is* ***—impossible.***

However, the reality of the situation was that the units of his squad were being shot down one after another. Forget striking back, they couldn't even evade the enemy's attacks. They were being annihilated one-sidedly.

Just then, **his instincts told him to do something inexplicable.**

"—Dammit!!" Following his gut feeling without hesitation, Sakamuro released the limiter for the angle of the plane relative to the horizon and pushed the joystick all the way forward and took a nosedive.

The reason he had to release a limiter to do this was because Captain Sakamuro was engaging in something a pilot should never do—a forbidden maneuver. His vision stained red instantly as fierce "upward gravity" caused his blood to concentrate in his brain.

—A condition known as "redout." Those who experience it may end up dead. However— "Ngh— ...nggggghh!!" Immediately after —the intense impact that scraped the back end of the unit proved his instinct right. He had managed to avoid the attack of unknown nature that came from behind him by a paper-thin margin.

The moment he processed that, the captain returned his unit to level—and immediately shouted through the fierce, throbbing headache assaulting him, "Fuck off!! I'm flying at five times the speed of sound here! **—Why can't I see it coming?!"**

—An attack that came from behind as he was flying at Mach 5. Taking into consideration the *relative* speed between the two, from his frame of reference, an attack from behind that couldn't be seen even at Mach 5?

It wasn't a laser, nor was it a resonance cannon shell. If it had been one of those, there's no way he would have been able to

evade it. —*There's no doubt about it. This is artillery*. It was abnormal and hard to believe. It was **impossibly** fast and accurate —a magic bullet.

An artillery shell that couldn't be cognized even while moving at Mach 5—1,650 meters per second. *Against something like that, the entire squad will be shot down before we can leave its firing range... damn it!*

"Storm One to all units! Eject! Abandon your unit and bail out —right this second!!" Captain Sakamuro yelled into his mic.

"R—Roger!" the surviving squad members replied.

Captain Sakamuro waited to see them do as ordered before pulling the lever by his own feet. "...urggghhhh!!" As the canopy opened up, he was ejected with his seat.

—Because he had been flying at Mach 5, the still air that he ejected into hit him like a brick wall. Feeling like he really might lose consciousness this time, Captain Sakamuro twisted his face intensely as he stared across into the distance.

—Not at Akihabara Grid where the target was—but where the national diet building was—Kasumigaseki Grid. "You damn pigs! Just what kind of a monster did you bastards pick a fight with...!!"

Just then.

—Right on cue, as if it had been waiting for the seventh aerial squad the whole time...

Countless flashes of light arced through the dawning sky before landing in Akihabara Grid.

Seeing that, Captain Sakamuro sneered. —*Ahh, so if both Tokyo's security force and the air force are no good, then next*

*up would be—what a simple-minded idea.*

Those flashes of light had come from Tokyo's defensive cannon tower—which sat atop the peak of Mt. Fuji and was armed with a tremendous number of ultra-long-range artillery batteries. It was the anti-ground, anti-air trump card of Tokyo whose main purpose was to protect the Pillar of Heaven in Tokyo.

What Captain Sakamuro felt as he took in the scenery surpassed hatred— He sneered, "Feeble-minded pigs… You *better* have your next excuse prepared already." As he opened up his parachute in the midst of his fall, he got a hunch that felt more like a conviction…

—The countless falling stars lighting up the dawn sky in their descent toward Akihabara… most likely, even those—wouldn't be enough.

……

……

•

—Successive weak vibrations ran through a dimly lit, narrow room.

The broad, low-ceilinged room had countless monitors affixed along the walls where a thick glass tube was strung around the perimeter of the multi-tiered flooring—inside, blue-white lightning would flash now and then.

There were around thirty people standing in this room wearing military uniforms without a single crease. All of them had their eyes focused on the monitors and gauges before them.

"Enemy signals have ceased, we've shot them all down… I'm also receiving confirmation that we've been hit by Tokyo's defensive cannon tower—" one of them reported, upon which everyone

gulped. “We’ve been hit eight times— **but have suffered zero damage.** ”

The room filled with feverish enthusiasm. It felt like cheers might break out at any moment. Facing his subordinates, a large old man, the only one sitting, nodded. “—Good.”

“Phased array radar, radar lock, infrared sight, railgun, magnetic shields—all stable.”

“Remaining power at 12%. That’s still 2% over what we would need to finish recharging the railgun on schedule. Requesting permission to reduce the power being fed to the FCS by 30% to conserve energy.”

“Granted.” After giving that brief response, the old man—Gennai Hirayama sighed deeply. The young man standing beside him said in a slightly shrill voice, “What a magnificent showing, Your Excellency. To defeat the famous seventh aerial squad this easily...!”

“It was the obvious outcome,” Gennai replied briefly as he leaned back in his chair.

Really, the outcome of the engagement could not have been more obvious. Humanity had once wielded this power, the easiest form of energy to freely utilize in this universe. In current society, where everything has been replaced with gears, researching this technology was a crime in and of itself. It was **electromagnetism** , the scientific theory that united three of the five forces in the universe—the electric force, the magnetic force, and Coulomb’s force.

Before this weapon, which was the culmination of humanity’s lost knowledge of electromagnetism, all clockwork weapons were nothing but toys. Thirty years ago, Gennai had designed this weapon himself, convinced of that fact.

—The mobile composite electromagnetic assault weapon, Yatsukahagi. It was something that had its origins in a government project. As far as its name goes, the decision to keep its official name the same as its code name during development had been due to both Gennai's sentimentality as well as his sense of sarcasm.

"Foreign countries, too, will be forced to acknowledge the validity of our research upon seeing this result," an officer ventured.

"...I wonder. It's nothing more than the obliteration of a single squad in the end," Gennai muttered, before a different officer, also quite young, rejected Gennai's misgivings. "Hardly! Annihilating Tokyo's security force is an achievement that no country can ignore!"

"I agree, Your Excellency. I mean, even Tokyo's defensive cannon tower couldn't touch us!"

...*True,* Gennai thought. *I knew that the resonance cannons of the security force wouldn't work on us. After all, it's impossible to induce cracking in magnetic plating via sympathetic vibration.*

*However—Tokyo's defensive cannon tower is a traditional projectile weapon.* It was Japan's defensive trump card in the case of an enemy invasion reaching the capital—a battery of recoil-based semi-automatic cannons meant to exterminate any enemy.

Yes, their magnetic armor materialized through constantly coupling iron atoms was sturdy, but even so, on paper, it had been fifty-fifty whether their armor could've withstood the shelling from Tokyo's defensive cannon tower—Gennai had won that gamble as well. And on top of it all, just a little while ago, they had obliterated a veteran aerial squad that was fairly well known, even abroad.

“At this point, there’s nothing in Tokyo’s military arsenal that can stop us!”

“Ahh… yes, you’re right.” Gennai nodded as he surveyed the faces in the control room without a smile. Everyone was lost in the moment, thrilled.

***—I don’t care about that.***

*In the end, this is nothing but another case of “an eye for an eye.” We’re the same as the government— We’ve simply repeated something that humans have never ceased doing since antiquity.*

*Humanity never changes; it isn’t capable of changing.*

*However—*

*If that’s the case, then what about the one who remade our world, “Y”?*

*This planet continues to turn normally, properly, consistently —but also abnormally, improperly, and inconsistently at the same time.*

*Just what was the true identity of the one who created this ultimate contraption—the Clockwork Planet—with hands no different from yours or mine?*

*He tore down all the theory that humanity’s brightest had slowly managed to accumulate by dedicating an unfathomable amount of time to understanding the laws of nature. One day, out of nowhere, he shoved his incomprehensible, unbelievable truth right in the face of all humanity.*

*And the one who succeeded in that feat was a mere human—a humble clocksmith.*

*Don't make me laugh! —Who would believe such a story. Who could accept it? In declaring his ideas to be the one and only truth in this great, wide universe, he demonstrated an arrogance that would put even the gods in the heavens to shame, an insolence that would flabbergast even the demons of hell.*

*You're telling me that the one who pulled *that* off was human? A member of our species? We creatures who have been squirming about on the Earth's surface the same way for thousands of years now?*

***On that day,** I became convinced—that the answer to that question is a resounding "no."*

*Humanity never changes. It's something like karma at this point.*

*However, "Y" overturned all our human assumptions. Arrogantly, insolently, he twisted the universe askew.*

*—There's no way that that was the feat of a mere human. Calling what he did vile would not do it justice. If there *is* someone who could execute such boundless evil, that person must be a being that transcends the concepts of good and evil.*

*—Well, if that's the case, I can accept it.*

*I don't care whether he's a god or a demon. So long as he's a monster whose existence transcends human understanding, then there's no way for us to defy him. If he chooses to delude humanity in a dream for all eternity, in a new world he made himself when the old one had been on the verge of collapse, then that's all there is to it.*

*There's no way that we mediocre humans can oppose a transcendental being— As such, while I was disappointed by history and thrown into despair by the world, I thought that it would be*

*fine if I lived out the rest of my life in resignation.*

*—That is, until I saw that boy touting about one of "Y's" automata…*

As everyone in the room was zealously eying **the next target**, now convinced that they had nothing to fear—Gennai's moss-green eyes clouded as he muttered to himself, seeming to have gone mad:

**"Now then, 'Y'… just you try to stop me…"**

*The world that you created from beyond the boundaries of good and evil in your arrogant insolence—shall be crushed by mediocre humans amidst humanity's self-destruction—due to the weight of humanity's unchanging karma.*

*Swallow that fact as you answer me—wretched monster.*

*You who recreated the world— Just what are you?*

*A malevolent god? Some demonic transcendental being? Or nothing but a haughty human?*

*Show me your true self, with the world you created on the line…!*

•

—At the same time, in a workshop in Akihabara Grid, a blond-haired girl—Marie—was sitting against the wall with her feet outstretched, her mind wandering aimlessly. Her emerald eyes had lost their luster.

*This situation is just like—a wild fantasy, one that probably everyone has entertained in their mind at some point. Being left behind in a world that's been destroyed for one reason or another—the premise of a B-movie.*

*With neither food nor water and the tools of civilization all broken, the only things that one can rely on are one's own knowledge, body, and comrades.*

*...I see.*

*It's only natural that such a premise would be labeled B-class —it sounds totally unrealistic. No screenwriter has ever actually experienced the end of the world...* ***they don't have a clue how such a scenario would actually play out in reality.***

***Reality—*** *isn't so simple.*

***Reality—*** *always* ***far exceeds*** *the human imagination. Unreasonably, absurdly so.*

With Halter—whose entire body was giving off smoke—collapsed on the floor before her, Marie laughed scornfully, emptily. In her hand was a screwdriver that she was weakly holding onto. Dangling from that screwdriver, was another one clinging onto it where their metal ends touched. It was as if the two were glued together.

*The tools of civilization—are broken? The only things one can rely on are one's own knowledge, body, and comrades?*

*Don't make me laugh—* ***this*** *is the reality of a violent, non-negotiable, worst-case scenario calamity. The situation is completely hopeless.*

Just as Marie let out a sigh that seemed to expel her very soul, "—Uwah! —Why's it so hot—?!" a short boy yelped as he leapt up.

"The hell?! —What's going on here—wait, why are my headphones so loud?!" The boy that had boisterously woken up—Naoto Miura—tore off his headphones in a rush and threw them away from himself. Then, noticing Marie's listless gaze, he asked the obvious question while screwing up his face as if enduring

some intense pain: “W…What happened…?”

“—Good question.” Marie smiled. “If you’re okay with a conjecture, then my answer is—we were hit by an electromagnetic pulse.” Her voice sounded lifeless.

Perplexed, Naoto knit his brows all the more. “An elec-tro-magnetic— What’d you say?”

“……” Marie didn’t even have the strength to retort anymore. With a languid sigh, she held up the two screwdrivers that were stuck together for Naoto to see. “ **—Everything, absolutely everything, has been destroyed…** Do you get it now?”

Due to an exceedingly, unbelievably powerful EMP, **everything had been magnetized.** *No—if that was the end of it, things wouldn’t be so bad,* Marie thought. Most likely, the heat from the EMP’s electromagnetic induction **melted** the more delicate clockwork parts like nanogears, wires, and springs.

The only things left were some tools that had become useless due to becoming magnetized. Nothing—but broken clockwork remained.

Processors, cars, the lighting and the door-lock of the room—even these screwdrivers—were **broken.**

“Should I put it in simpler terms?” Marie said as she opened her hand. The screwdrivers fell and made a dull clang as they hit the floor. “Now that everything’s been magnetized, we can’t even do something as simple as leaving this room!”

—Clockwork technology being vulnerable to magnetism was something that had been pointed out long ago. That was why humanity abandoned electromagnetic technology— **they had no choice but to do so.**

However, even if the Planet Governors at the North and South

Poles intercepted the electromagnetic waves that poured in from space, fully eliminating electromagnetic waves from the planet was impossible. As such, anti-electromagnetic technology—how to protect clockwork devices from the influence of magnetic fields—has been continuously researched to this very day as a topic of extreme importance.

Indeed, in light of the current situation, one could surely see just why it was so important. In short, Marie—no, everyone living on this planet had just had— **All of their knowledge, their technology, sealed without exception.**



Forget fixing the broken clockwork, there wasn't even a tool that one could use. The people in Akihabara Grid were like birds who had had their wings plucked off—no, if that were the case, things still wouldn't be this bad. After all, even if you pluck a bird's wings off, it would still at least have its legs.

…Even if Marie was a genius, she was helpless if she couldn't apply what she knew. In a world where everything had been replaced with gears, **this** was the reality she was facing. It was the absolute worst-case scenario.

"What should I do?" —Even such a thought was too optimistic.

"What can I do?" —There was absolutely nothing left to suggest an answer.

Marie inadvertently recalled that she had once seen something that surpassed her current B-movie, disaster film, situation—an absurd, ridiculous movie from ancient times. Her lips formed a lifeless smile.

The premise of the film had been that the world that we live in was, in reality, just an illusion. That the true world had perished long ago. Humans were only permitted to live inside a dream, their brains connected to machines.

*It's ridiculous. I'm well aware of that—however, if that **were** true, I feel like this situation would suddenly make a lot more sense.*

*Now then— What can I do?*

*When my consciousness is stuck inside a dream.*

*In a world where I literally can't move my arms and legs, where everything is a fantasy. How can I escape the dream—armed with nothing but my brain?*

*When everything I see before me is nothing but a lie?*

*And among all those illusions, the one that gives me true despair—oh, how great it would be if it really *were* an illusion—is that.* Marie turned her eyes toward one of the thick-paned windows of the room.

Outside, she could see the nightmare responsible for this situation. The towering object that was blocking out the sun—an absurdly enormous mobile weapon. The monster that had wiped out everything so easily was standing there like a symbol of despair.

"—Wha— R, RyuZU?!" Naoto cried out.

Hearing his voice, Marie turned her gaze back in his direction. What Naoto was looking at—was a silver-haired girl collapsed on the floor. Panicking, Naoto leapt towards her. As he tried to lift her up in his arms—

"—Ow! —haaah?!" The moment he touched her—rather, the moment he tried to touch her, he recoiled. At this point, he seemed to have finally realized the source of the heat that had woken him up. Naoto paled, his face flushing pure white...

—RyuZU was wallowing in a sea of blood.

Or rather, the half-melted, glowing red, metal panels of the flooring were hot enough for one to mistakenly see it that way. The reason for that was RyuZU herself. Her very body was what was emitting enough heat to melt the iron in the floor.

Naoto almost collapsed from terror while still managing to yell out with a trembling voice, "—Hey, where's AnchoR?! Old man Halter too! That babbling head as well—"

Marie answered silently, motioning with her eyes. Following her gaze, Naoto found Halter, whose body was fuming, collapsed

on the floor. Next to Halter, he saw AnchoR collapsed like a puppet with severed strings. She was dead still. Finally, there was Vermouth, eyes vacant, and settled by Halter's feet.

"...Were you listening? I told you, didn't I." Then, as if reciting content of a bad dream, Marie declared that—

**"———Everything's been broken..."**

.....

.....

A stillness like the ocean depths began to settle over them; however— "Don't mess with me..." A clack could be heard as Naoto clenched his teeth together and pulled Marie up by her collar. "Then we have to hurry up and repair them— You can do it, can't you?!"

Marie didn't offer any resistance. As Naoto shook her, Marie answered with a faint smile, "...Sure I can... if I could just demagnetize them **—erase their magnetic field—** that is."

"Then what are you sitting around for?! Get your ass—"

**"—And how would I go about doing that?"** Marie asked quietly. The tone of her voice shut Naoto up. Meeting the gaze of his gray eyes, Marie continued, "...Ignorance is bliss, isn't it, Mr. Naoto. I'm envious, really."

*—Of course, in theory, I know how to demagnetize something. If clockwork can become magnetized, then the opposite—that it can become demagnetized—must also be true.*

For Marie, who was an ex-Meister, tuning clockwork that had become magnetized was a simple task. She could even do it with her eyes closed. The idea was simple, either apply an alternating electric current through the material, or force it against an oppos-

ing magnetic field until its own charge fades away. That was all there was to it. Marie was well-versed in both the methods and procedures to do so.

However, in order to even begin— " **Electricity is absolutely necessary!** Understand?! That shitty weapon fired off a damn EMP, in a clear, brazen violation of the international treaty...!!" Marie lamented as if in pain.

Feeling daunted, Naoto let her go. Released, Marie sank right back down against the wall once more. She was completely lost in thought. —*Ahh, but of course...* ***No country, no organization actually adheres to that treaty.*** The wireless EM transceivers equipped to Halter and Vermouth's artificial bodies were also in clear violation of the treaty. But that was beside the point —

"You can tell with those bizarre ears of yours, can't you?! That EMP **completely destroyed** Akihabara Grid you know! Well?! Just how exactly am I supposed to get out of this room?! How am I supposed to get my hands on the demagnetizing equipment?! Would you mind explaining it to me in simple terms so that I can understand...!!" Marie was shouting, and by the latter half of her tirade, her words had become mixed with tears.

—It was impossible.

Marie knew, in theory, how to generate electricity using gears. However, it was impossible to control the electricity generated with that method as precisely as necessary for demagnetization. Simply having that knowledge—much less testing it—was a crime. And as far as legal demagnetizing equipment goes, they were managed as strictly as level 4 pathogens.

Such technology wasn't something that Marie, currently a civilian, could freely access. Not to mention, there wasn't even any demagnetizing equipment that could work on a human-sized machine, much less municipal grids.

*Just for argument's sake—even if I went to an EM management facility and stole some demagnetizing equipment, I'd still have to carefully demagnetize the clockwork parts one by one. The protective shell around Halter's brain should hold on for a while longer, but… even so, there isn't enough time. In the first place, right now—* "…What am I even thinking… I can't even get out of this room…" Marie muttered as she hung her head.

*—In just one move…*

*Has the enemy really rendered me this powerless in just one move?*

*All the knowledge, all the skills that I've carved into my flesh and bones till now, neutered by just one move—*

*Now *that* feels like a lie for sure—* Just as tears began to stream down her face, suddenly, Marie heard the sound of thick glass cracking.

Startled, she raised her head to see Naoto slamming a chair against the window. A second time, a third, a fourth—the cracks in the tempered glass grew—— "Argh!!!" Until, with one last hit, the window was smashed to pieces. Perhaps he had swung too hard, because the chair flew outside, slipping right out of his hands.

"Alright. Let's see, so we've got RyuZU, AnchoR-chan, old man Halter… and the talking head, but I guess we can just carry him in our hands. I'm going to lower them down one by one, so… is this the eighth floor that we're on? Well, in any case, find me something like a cable or cloth that's long enough to reach the ground."

"……" As Marie watched dumbfounded, Naoto impatiently clicked his tongue.

"—Argh, fine, forget it! Keep grumbling over there then. Just stay out of my way!" Naoto yelled at her before turning towards

RyuZU. Hands outstretched, he reached towards her body which was hot enough to melt the floor without hesitation.

"—Wha, wait a sec—" Marie hurriedly called out to stop him.

Ignoring her, Naoto grabbed ahold of RyuZU's body. "—— ngggggggggh!" As his face twisted, the stench of burning human flesh reached Marie's nose. In spite of it, Naoto casually lifted RyuZU up in his arms as if he didn't feel a thing.

"What are you doing?! Are you insane?!"

"Shut up! Any dead weight can just go ahead and sit in the corner and keep its mouth shut!" Naoto howled as he moved RyuZU away from the red-hot floor. " **—I don't know why!** But I get the feeling that RyuZU can't be left where she's lying!" Yelling through agonizing groans, Naoto gently lowered RyuZU down on her back onto a cool part of the floor.

It'd be an understatement to say that RyuZU's body was in terrible condition—a good chunk of her abdomen was entirely gone —which seemed to suggest that a good number of her parts had vaporized after melting. One could even see distortions in her frame as well... The damage was such that not even Marie could repair her on the spot.

Ordinary automata would be discarded without a second thought if they were damaged this heavily. It wasn't merely a question of having the necessary tools, Marie would also need a ton of extremely expensive replacement parts. However—at the same time, Marie felt certain that something didn't add up.

*After being exposed to temperatures high enough to melt metal, and for such a long time at that—this is all the damage that was done?*

Considering that its parts had vaporized, RyuZU's abdomen should easily have reached several thousand degrees Celsius.

However, despite being subjected to such high heat, neither her clothes, her artificial skin, nor a single section of her hair was damaged. She looked practically unscathed aside from her totaled midsection.

*No, in the first place* — Marie wondered, as doubt took hold in her mind, *could electrical impedance really induce heat* ***hot enough to wholly vaporize*** *clockwork parts?*

"—guh!" Glancing at RyuZU once more, Naoto shook his head for focus as he fiercely rose. He didn't seem to pay any mind to his burnt skin or the clothes that were now glued to him by sweat. He gathered things like cables and wires, anything stringy that seemed structurally sound, and began to tie them together.

"...What... are you planning to do..."

"Can't you tell by looking Miss Genius! **If the door won't open then we'll get out through the window!** "

As Marie had mentioned, this room was a workshop. It was made to be airtight, not a single speck of dust could get inside. If the door to such a room wouldn't open because its autolock had been broken—then what?

—One could just smash the fixed window and get out that way. That was all there was to it. However...

"—Right, so we escape, and then what..."

Naoto whirled around in frustration. There was a clear tint of contempt in his eyes. "I'm gonna get outta here! Then I'll find a way to 'demagnetize' things somewhere! When I do that, I'll be able to fix up RyuZU and AnchoR-chan, and old man Halter as well! I guess, while I'm at it, what's his name, Vermouth?! I'll fix him up too!! And then—!!!"

Marie had never seen him make such a bloodcurdling expres-

sion before. Saying that there was murder in his eyes as he looked out the window wouldn't do the vehement glint in them justice.

**—The culprit behind everything.**

Glaring at the enormous weapon that was trampling through Akihabara's streets, he shouted, **"I'm gonna stuff the bastards who did this to my wife and daughter in a kettle and boil them alive—is that good enough of an answer for you?!"**

"———"

"If you're not gonna help, then at least keep your mouth shut and stay out of my way!"

*—Does this guy really not understand the situation after all?* Marie thought, but at the same time, she found she was content with his answer. *I'll admit—right now, I've fallen so low that I couldn't even think of escaping through the window. Even an idiot could come up with something like that…*

"…You sure can talk, eh. With Akihabara Grid magnetized and its gears literally sitting still… The number of ways to get to a neighboring grid are pretty limited. Do you realize that…?"

"Hey, at least I'm doing something! How's grumbling going to change anything?"

"Yes, **you're right…** Really, **it's just like you said, isn't it?!** *" Surely, I must admit that rushing into things like Naoto's been doing—is far more* ***commendable*** *than anything I've done so far.*

Naoto seemed surprised by her reply as he faltered for a moment. In that moment, Marie slapped her cheeks with both hands and stood up, she was peering directly into Naoto's eyes. His ashen eyes were as radiant as always—no, even more radiant than

usual, in light of the grim situation. Even with things as they were, **Naoto still hadn't given up on anything.** That was what his eyes were saying. Nothing. Not a single thing.

*Just for now— **I'll follow your lead.*** "First, we should go to the rendezvous point that the other Meisters and I agreed upon— Grid Ueno. Though, now that one of Tokyo's grids has stopped functioning, it surely isn't going to be easy to get there, as — **there's no one in Akihabara right now.** Under normal circumstances, it would have been possible to use the restricted connecting bridge between the two grids, but..."

As Marie spoke, she suddenly began to feel a strange sensation. Seeing Naoto smile at her, his eyes narrowed and his face relieved—she felt something deep inside her heart grate.

Just then.

**"—Confirming that the magnetic field has dissipated. Ending emergency sequence. Booting in normal mode."**

A quiet voice caused Naoto and Marie to turn around with a start. Before them was— "That really surprised me!" AnchoR. Blinking her wide eyes in astonishment, she slightly tilted her head.

*We're the ones who're surprised* — Before that thought could even run through Marie's head— "Thank gahhhhhhhhhhd— So AnchoR-chan was unharrrrrrrRRRRmed! Daaaaammit, I almost had a heart attack y'know!" —Naoto, who had been standing next to Marie, leapt towards AnchoR, joining her in a mutual embrace.

"—ah?! No! I don't want you to die, Father!" Taking his words literally, AnchoR, with her dainty arms, pulled him tightly into an even deeper hug.

"Don't worry, I won't die! After all, **RyuZU is fine as well.** But really, I was on the verge of fainting from worry, you know."

"...Was it AnchoR's fault? ...Is AnchoR a bad girl?"

"No! You're a really gooood girl! Oh you! It's thanks to you being alive that Papa's still here you know! Cuz I *might* have been seriously considering suicide **if your gears weren't turning!** "

"...? Even though Father almost died, because of AnchoR, Father survived... because of AnchoR? ...?"



And so, watching an idiot and an automaton having such an exchange—Marie was at a loss for words.

*—What's going on here?*

*No way. Was she seriously able to withstand the EMP?*

*The same magnetic field that pierced right through Halter's anti-magnetic shielding and melted his parts in spite of him sporting the Breguets' next-next generation military cyborg body?!*

*Is it dumb of me to be surprised by the capabilities of the Initial-Y series at this point? No, wait— If that was the case, then why was she inoperational— No, wait wait! More importantly, what did that idiot just say?!*

"—Naoto, just now... you said that AnchoR's gears **were turning...?** "

"Yeah, that's right. Her gears were turning **the whole time.** That's why I was able to stop myself on the brink of committing suicide."

As if saying something obvious, Naoto continued:

"If AnchoR was moving, then RyuZU must have had **a reason for heating herself up as well** , or so I thought, but it wasn't like I had concrete proof. That's why I was so desperate to hurry up and do something. But you kept grumbling..." Naoto muttered as he petted AnchoR's head.

Ignoring him, Marie thought to herself. *—The **reason** —she **heated herself up** ...?*

For a moment, something began to click in Marie's head, but before she could formalize it in her mind, AnchoR said apologeti-

cally, "…I'm, sorry… for the 'prickly countermeasure'… umm…"

It seemed like she didn't fully understand her own functionality—actually, it seems like she doesn't understand it at all.

"…I think I was in an emer-gency— **'hea-ting'** se-quence…?"

"_____"

Marie desperately held on as she felt like she was going to faint. *—Ahh right—there's 'one more way' to demagnetize things. I'll admit, I did forget about that in my moment of distress—but at least let me give an excuse,* Marie begged internally of no one in particular.

*Normally, that method is something that's absolutely impossible; and even in the case that it *is* possible, it's a method that no one would ever willingly utilize, much less set to* ***automatically execute.***

Marie yelled at the mysterious object who proclaimed such a thing, " **Demagnetization through the application of heat** — Demagnetizing yourself by heating yourself up to the Curie temperature? You seriously did that? You've gotta be kidding meee!"

—It was the phenomenon known as Curie's law.

Magnetized materials completely lose their magnetic fields once they exceed a certain temperature. In short, one just has to heat them up. That was all there was to it. It was an exceedingly simply method.

However, it was also a last resort—actually, it was more a method that normally would be out of the question, failing even to serve as a last resort.

Why, you ask? Naturally, as clockwork parts heat up, they

warp and eventually melt. The Curie temperature is different for each part of a clockwork mechanism. The wider the range of Curie temperatures in a system, **the more likely for the system to break** with the method. In other words, it was only natural for gears and wires that have lost their strength due to high heat to perish—it'd be strange if they didn't.

*In the first place, even if that was possible, AnchoR should have shut down when the EMP hit. In that case, just **how** did her heating mechanism **continue to operate—?!***

Ignoring Marie, who was struggling with that question by herself, Naoto simply muttered, **as if to confirm her suspicions,** "So basically, it's possible to demagnetize things by applying heat. AnchoR slowly raised her core temperature with her frictionless Perpetual Gear over time while RyuZU deliberately shut herself down by **converting all her power to heat in one go.** Is that right?"

Hearing those words, AnchoR abruptly stood up while hoarsely yelling in a panic, "B, Big Sister...! That's bad, Big Sister, can't cool herself d—"

"Don't worry, AnchoR~I got that feeling somehow~so I already moved RyuZU to a cold area on the floor!"

"—Father, you're amazing...!" AnchoR exclaimed in admiration with big eyes. However, quickly noticing the burns on Naoto's hands, her expression completely reversed, her eyes drooping sadly. "...But, doesn't it hurt...?"

"Ah-ha-hah! If it's for the sake of my wife and daughter, burns like these ain't a thing!" Just like a real father putting on a brave face in front of his child, Naoto declared his fortitude with a dapper smile.

*Ahh—yeah, he really is amazing*. Marie thought as she watched on, dumbfounded. *So amazing, in fact, that I can't even*

*understand it anymore. He's weird.*

—The situation had far exceeded her imagination. However, Marie muttered softly, "Yeah… yeah. Demagnetization through the application of heat—"

She wasn't satisfied with that answer.

She couldn't comprehend how it was possible.

However, there was something about the way Naoto and AnchoR marched on, leaving her dumbfounded self behind, that…

As she was washed over by a feeling of stark emptiness, Marie picked up the talking head that had been lying on the floor.

*For now, I should do what I can, too.*

"—Well at any rate, let's get out of Akihabara Grid first and foremost." As she said that, Marie hurled the disembodied head at the red-hot spot on the floor.

•

"—You rotten whore! My brain nearly cooked you know?! Is your head just as loose as your crotch?!" Vermouth suddenly shouted as the gang ran through the stilled Akihabara.

"My, so you're alive. I was almost certain that you had failed to demagnetize," Marie coolly answered the barking head without stopping her feet. Beside her was AnchoR, who was carrying RyuZU, and a panting Naoto trailing slightly behind.

Leading the way, Marie carried Vermouth and Halter's heads under each arm. Vermouth was confused. "Huh…? What's going on here? Why is the master a talking head now too? Oy, phantom princess, explain yourself— What the hell do you think you're doing?!"

As Marie ran past a streetlight, she slammed Vermouth against its pole to shut him up. Halter's artificial body had been too damaged for repair and was far too heavy to carry, so Marie had been forced to settle for saving just his head.

*I feel bad for Vermouth. Because he was still asleep, there's no way he could've seen the way Marie's face looked when she removed Halter's head...* Catching up, Naoto awkwardly managed through ragged breaths, "...Ah—it was a bad time to ask that old man... but anyway, so you really were fine after all?"

"Huh? Ahh, you're the guy who was with this absolutely rotten princess. I'm fine? —Where the hell did you get that idea? First, I might die anytime now, maybe even within the next three seconds. I have no way of knowing, my oxygen gauge's askew. To add to that, it's looking like my right eye's crushed, so I can't see color all that well either. The very fact that I can still hold a conversation with you right now must be a miracle. If you call this fine, then I guess you'd figure a zombie with four limbs to be the paragon of health." —Despite his claims to the contrary, the talking head was quite spirited indeed.

As athletic as Marie was, running at full sprint with two heads in her arms was a tough task, the heads alone were as heavy as bowling balls. As she fought the urge to throw away the one under her right arm, Marie squinted.

There was nothing moving on the streets of Akihabara under the morning sun. However, the city's clockwork devices must have caught fire as flames could be seen rising up here and there.

That, however, paled in comparison to the groaning sound that even Marie's ears could catch ringing from underground. It had been going on for a while now. It was surely the sound of the city breaking down.

"By the way kid, did anything happen to my handsome face?"

“You know that guy who sank in a blast furnace from that really old robot movie?”

“Did my artificial skin melt?! Bitch, what did you do to m— Hey, you’re being downright abusive!” Still running at full tilt, Marie had slammed him against a guardrail this time.

“Listen well, okay, Mr. Talking Head?” Raising Vermouth, she glared at him at eye-level.

“Whether or not you end up stuffed in a trash can or tossed in a toilet all depends on my mood. And right now, I’m in an absolutely atrocious mood. So much so that when I was demagnetizing you, I seriously considered letting you boil to death just to let off some steam. Fortunately for you, I have the rationality of a world-class genius and the kindness of an angel to boot. Be grateful that I decided to let you live. A shitty hooligan like you ought to swear loyalty to me while thanking me in tears, got it?”

“You’re doing what some brute or demon would do,” Naoto retorted, but Marie ignored him. She continued in a kind voice that would instill terror in the heart of even a demon king:

**“—Serve me well. Otherwise, die ♡.”**

*That’s your raison d’etre,* Marie implicitly asserted between the lines.

Vermouth muttered dejectedly, “—Oy, kid, is it just me or is this filthy sow legitimately insane?”

“I see that you’re fond of trash cans. Or do you like toilets better?”

“Calm down old man. The answer is yes, but seriously, I’d keep quiet if I were you.”

“—Don’t screw with me you shitty brat! Come on, think about

it rationally, I have the right to be mad don't I?!"

"...See, whether one has rights or not... is a matter of jurisdiction..."

—Vermouth was impressed. "...For how young you are, it seems like you get it. Let's share a smoke for reconciliation if we ever get out of this mess alive."

Unsurprisingly, Marie snorted at their exchange between huffs as she ran. They drew close to a place that's been known as Mansei Bridge since antiquity.

Large shadowed objects could be seen against the dawning sky if one turned their gaze slightly upward. Surrounding a truly gigantic pillar extending upwards as far as the eye could see were a number of enormous, several kilometers in diameter, discs with small gaps between them. Those discs were the other grids that made up Tokyo.

Amongst Tokyo's grids, Akihabara had the lowest elevation. The connecting bridge that led to the grid just above Akihabara was where the gang was trying to get to right now.

—*So,* Marie thought as she turned around.

The Pillar of Heaven was blocking out the morning sun, casting a gigantic shadow over the ground. In its shade, Marie glared at the enormous mechanical spider arrogantly lording over Akihabara...

"Give me a short answer. That weapon is the culmination of electromagnetic technology... yes?"

"Is there some sort of meaning in asking such an obvious question, princess?"

Marie stopped. Dropping the head under her right arm to the

ground, she stomped on it. “I don’t need your snide remarks. If you answer with anything other than a ‘yes’ or ‘no’ next time, I’ll beat you to death.”

“Yes.”

“Good. Next question, what does that thing plan to do next?”

“No.”

Without missing a beat, Marie grabbed Vermouth’s head and raising him up, prepared to pitch him overhand into the Kanda River below. Naoto, however, stopped her—and not a second too soon. “Calm down, Marie. Don’t kill people in front of AnchoR.”

“Oy kid, it’s great that you saved me, but isn’t your reasoning for it a bit strange?”

Looking beside herself with anger, Marie growled, “I was a fool to try to rely on this schmuck for even a second. Say, just to be sure, wouldn’t AnchoR be able to do something about that thing?”

*If it’s AnchoR’s overwhelming combat power that stayed toe-to-toe with even RyuZU’s Mute Scream* — Marie thought, but AnchoR looked down and shook her head.

“…I’m sorry… Mother…”

Seeing her like that, Naoto cut in, “AnchoR is low on charge right now. It’s unreasonable to expect her to do something about that monster.”

Upon those words, Marie understood. *Ahh…*

The Perpetual Gear was an instrument that manifested perpetual motion through infinite heat. Being that as it may, even if AnchoR’s input energy has no limit, her output energy certainly

does. If she continues expending more energy than she can output, then she'll begin to eat into her Power Reservoir.

As she was currently using her First Balance Wheel of Differences—her lowest gear—as long as she possessed the initial energy from her spring, she could continue operating perpetually in this state. That was precisely why she had been able to autonomously demagnetize herself.

However—after being seriously damaged in the fight with RyuZU and subsequently repaired, AnchoR had lost nearly all of the surplus energy that had been stored inside her Power Reservoir. If she continued exceeding her output by raising her Balance Wheels of Differences, she'd run out of energy in minutes.

*—In other words, we can't resolve the situation by letting AnchoR go ham.* Marie groaned, shaking her head. "If we could at least read that thing's movements, there'd be some things we could try, but…"

"I'll say it again, princess. What meaning is there in asking such an obvious question?"

"Shut up. I'll really toss you in the river you know."

"—I'm being serious here, Miss Self-Proclaimed Genius. The pieces are all there. If you can't figure this out I'll be disappointed, you know?"

"——"

Accepting the challenge, Marie organized the situation in her head—or tried to. She shook her head.

*I'll admit it. I'm flustered right now, it's true.*

*In the first place, everything started with this talking head's short-wave transmission.*

*Chasing after the source of the transmission led us to Mie Grid's underground levels, where we discovered that enormous weapon.*

*That weapon was something that Shiga Grid's Technical Force, which had been conducting illegal research on electro-magnetic technology in their home city, had created to ensure their survival, a weapon that could destroy the world.*

*Then we learned that the feds and Mie—Shiga's military of old—were about to engage in a large-scale conflict.*

*In order to mitigate that, we took the initiative and evacuated the population by giving advance notice of our terrorist attack. And after the coast was clear, we baited Tokyo's security force underground and had them intercept the enormous weapon.*

*Then—all we did turned out to be for naught. We failed. From a strike powerful enough to pierce through a grid and the EMP that followed it, Akihabara was completely wrecked.*

*Not only that, Halter is barely clinging on to life. RyuZU was seriously damaged and is out-of-order right now, and AnchoR has insufficient energy to act—and to top it all off, the city's been turned into a magnetic field. I'm completely powerless right now.*

*All of our plans were torn apart; all of our combat strength was thoroughly neutered.*

—Marie had yet to recover from the shock of that.

*The pieces are all there…? What is? —It's no good… my head's going in circles. I can't collect my thoughts…* Marie bit her lip, seeming vexed.

—However, just then, Naoto unexpectedly raised his head. He

had the same scary expression on his face that Marie had seen just a little while ago—only this time, his gaze was penetrating, as if he were saying with his eyes, "I can see everything you're up to."

He shot a piercing look at the enormous spider that towered over its surroundings, blocking out the sun.

**"…We don't need to do anything.' —Isn't that right you shitheads?"**

Upon those words, Marie turned to show Naoto her incredulous face but, before she could, Vermouth's laughter reverberated throughout the post-apocalyptic world that was Akihabara causing AnchoR's shoulders to jump in fright.

"Ha— Hahahah! This brat really is something else! Oy princess, you sure picked up an interesting kid didn't you!"

"What… do you mean?" *—Again. Once again, things are proceeding due to factors that I'm unaware of. Because by relying on logic, there are some elements that I can't comprehend.* Feeling a sense of anxiety for the unknown, Marie sullenly knit her brows.

Vermouth explained, "That thing is over there because it **chose** to appear over there, and that very fact—is the worst-case scenario for the feds. The enemy queen has suddenly appeared out of nowhere and put their king in checkmate. It's a terribly unfair cheat move—but regardless, the match is over."

*—I don't get it. What did Naoto and this schmuck grasp in order to come to that conclusion?*

"—Princess," Vermouth said, trying to stifle his laughter, "I feel bad for saying this, but you're nothing but a sheltered little girl after all. How cute."

“Wha—”

“On the other hand, this brat is—how should I put it. Despite his cute face, he’s capable of some nasty thoughts. You’ve got what it takes to become a great scumbag kid.”

“I’m used to being called a pervert, but the word scumbag irks me a little,” Naoto pouted, discontent.

“—In short,” Vermouth summed things up, “just like the kid said, **all they have to do now is sit and wait for the feds to self-destruct** — It’s checkmate.”

# Chapter One / 07 : 20 / Explorer

While all of Earth's humanity had indeed made a life atop the "Y's" enormous gears, not all of those gears were the same.

Cities that had been important before the Earth's clockwork mechanization—for instance the capitals of developed countries or major financial centers—possessed special mechanisms that differed from ordinary cities.

Tokyo Multiple Grid was one of them. It was the nucleus of Japan, formed from the composite of many city grids. As Japan's greatest population center amongst all the cities in the nation, Tokyo Multiple Grid was at the forefront of politics, power, communications, education, industry, and culture—it was a composite city that could be considered a microcosm of Japan itself.

And within Tokyo, Kasumigaseki Grid was considered the political sector. It was an administrative city that housed both the National Diet Building and the buildings of the various government ministries. On a regular day, Kasumigaseki was simply a quiet city where civil servants of the various ministries solemnly went about their work.

Today however, from late last night to the present morning, the city had been practically a warzone. At the moment, there was no end to the ongoing crisis in sight.

The staff of the Ministry of Defense and the National Police Agency were dashing about with desperate looks on their faces.

The scrambling bureaucrats in charge of the lines of communication with the other ministries were working their resonance phones to the fullest as they shouted into their receivers.

And at the center of Kasumigaseki Grid, where the building of

the current ruling party stood, in one of its many conference rooms—the Anti-Terror Committee was holding an emergency meeting...

"—So, just what is going on here?" the incumbent prime minister of Japan leisurely inquired.

Having paid no mind to the great disturbance that had been going on since late last night, when the man finally showed up to the meeting at dawn, he had casually cut across the room to take his seat at the head of the table. Currently, he was nonchalantly looking about as he absentmindedly sipped his tea.

"I've only heard that there was some sort of terrorism late last night. I'm guessing that the situation has been brought under control by now?"

"—Prime minister, with due respect, the situation is far more dire than you think," the chief cabinet secretary replied.

The prime minister scowled. "Don't tell me that there've been civilian casualties? Hey you, that's not okay! I just formed my cabinet, you know! If my approval rating drops again because of this..."

"The situation is far beyond that. Akihabara Grid is currently not functioning."

"—What'd you say?" the prime minister couldn't believe what he'd just heard.

"Not only that, an enormous unknown weapon belonging to an armed group is currently occupying Akihabara."

The prime minister muttered with his mouth agape, "An enormous unknown weapon...?"

"It's exceedingly enormous—a super ultra-dreadnought class mobile ground weapon. The Seventh Aerial Squad of Yokosuka

Grid had deployed in the gray of morning to intercept it, but I just received news a little while ago that they've been wiped out…"

Upon receiving that report, the baffled prime minister started to look anxious for the first time. "Hey now, that's not okay. Tactical fighters are quite expensive, aren't they? We just cut the defense budget last year you know. The media's going to have a field day with me."

"Like I said, the situation has progressed far beyond that, prime minister."

"Prime minister, please listen to his explanation for now." The secretary general of the ruling party pointed to a man as he cut in from the side.

The one being pointed at was a young man in his early thirties. He was tall and bony with tousled hair that he hadn't put much effort into combing. The young man was wearing jeans and a casual leather jacket which overall, gave off a somewhat unreliable impression. His informal attire stood out all the more amongst all the bureaucrats clad in suits.

"…And you are?" the prime minister asked suspiciously.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, my name is Yuu Karasawa. I'm a civilian Meister—I was sent here by the Ministry of Technology as a consultant today," the man responded with a slack smile.

"A Meister…?" the prime minister said dubiously.

The man presented his chrono compass—the proof of being a Meister—to the prime minister. After the confirmation of his identity, the man continued with a pained grin, "Frankly, the situation at hand couldn't be worse. An armed group has taken over Akihabara Grid after all—if the enormous weapon invades other grids as well, the damage done will surely grow even greater."

“What are we sitting around for then? We ought to subjugate the terrorist scum without a moment’s delay, no? Isn’t that why we have a military?” There was an edge to the prime minister’s voice that showed his irritation.

Karasawa answered the prime minister calmly with a smile, “It isn’t so simple. Tokyo’s security force discovered the enormous weapon deep underground and intercepted it back when the terrorism first broke out late last night—but they were entirely wiped out.”

“—Hah?”

“Furthermore, the fighters of the Seventh Aerial Squad that were shot down just a little while ago were in CzFG-11’s, the newest model out there. Taking the skill of the pilots into account, that squad was the most powerful aerial force that the military possessed.”

Karasawa paused to let that register.

“When we confirmed that they had been wiped out, we tried firing at the enemy directly with Tokyo’s defensive cannon tower… however, despite confirming that all shells hit, we were unable to deal any damage to the target’s armor.”

The prime minister stared at the man in mute amazement for some time before turning towards the minister of defense. “…Just what have you all been spending the yearly defense budget on? You’re telling me that you can’t even subjugate mere terrorists?”

The minister of defense blushed as he answered in a low restrained voice, “With due respect, our military armaments are limited to normal weapons that were intended for inter-municipal warfare. We do not possess a weapon with enough firepower to deal with a situation like this.”

“Hey you, that’s a problem. Protecting the city is your min-

istry's job, isn't it? Yet you're telling me that you all can't even subjugate mere terrorists."

"...Our role is to defend the country from a foreign invasion. An immensely destructive weapon suddenly appearing out of nowhere from within the nation is entirely beyond expectations —"

"I don't care about the fine details of our military," the prime minister, who was legally the supreme military authority, blurted out before continuing, "Can't you launch a cruise missile or whatever and annihilate it already?"

Karasawa interjected with another smile, "The enemy possesses the anti-air capabilities to one-sidedly exterminate our newest tactical fighters, you know? Not only that, it has plating that can withstand a direct hit from the defensive cannon tower— surely, you're not thinking of launching an AMM against one of our own cities are you?"

"...an AMM?"

"I'm talking about an antimatter missile... In antiquity, a nuclear missile would have been the closest thing to it."

"Oh, I see... then say so from the start. You specialists are always so quick to resort to jargon— Anyway, that wouldn't work. It'd incur backlash from the people." The prime minister shook his head, immediately rejecting that option. "So, what does the military plan to do?"

Karasawa assertively replied, "In short, subjugating the armed group with a head-on attack is impossible under the present circumstances."

"Hey you, telling me that doesn't make it okay. This is due to the military's negligence, isn't it? The responsibility lies with—"

“It doesn’t matter whom the responsibility lies with right now.”

The chief cabinet secretary interjected. He was reputed to have an iron-clad level of patience, but even he couldn’t hide the irritation in his voice—

“Listen, alright? Due to this terrorist weapon, Akihabara Grid has ceased functioning. For all practical considerations, it’s the same as though it were destroyed. If we leave the situation as is, it’ll only be a matter of time before the other grids are destroyed as well. We must deal with the situation immediately.”

“Like I was saying, that’s the military’s jo—”

“The military cannot bring the situation under control. As such, we must consider the next-best option. Enacting it would require your authority as prime minister.”

“Mine?”

“We must purge Akihabara Grid immediately. Please give the authorization to do so.”

The prime minister darted his eyes about in a panic. “Hey you, what are you saying so abruptly? There’s no way we could do that!”

“There’s no other choice.”

At this point, Karasawa stopped smiling for the first time. Standing up, he raised a hand before interjecting, “Ah—excuse me. As the technology consultant, I really can’t recommend purging Akihabara as the countermeasure…”

The chief cabinet secretary turned around and glared at Karasawa with eyes like needles. “—Why is that?”

“Because Akihabara isn’t simply another city. Structurally, it’s

a critical component of Tokyo as a whole operating smoothly. If it's purged, the other grids will definitely be affected."

"But that's how a purge is by nature, no?" the chief cabinet secretary answered sharply. "Thanks to that weapon, Akihabara might as well have been destroyed already. According to your words, shouldn't the other grids have already been affected?"

"Yes, of course. Currently, the other grids are compensating by burdening themselves with Akihabara's workload. Nothing's going to happen today or tomorrow… however, they'll surely fail within six months' time if things keep up like this."

"Is there any prospect of repairing Akihabara as it is right now within those six months?"

"That depends on how badly it was damaged. As of right now, I can't tell you anything for certain. However, if we were to gain the full support of Meister Guild, I can't say that it'd be impossi —"

"Out of the question," the chief cabinet secretary said, cutting Karasawa off. "I can understand you wanting to play up your former employer, but clinging to such uncertain, wishful thinking and averting your eyes to the practical threat before us is simply irresponsible— Well, Prime minister?!"

Karasawa tried to object, but the chief cabinet secretary ignored him while pressing the prime minister for a decision.

Seeing the secretary's intense countenance, the prime minister quailed. Despite that, he still disjointedly objected as cold sweat oozed out of his forehead, "However… uh, what about the residents? We just tried to purge Kyoto not so long ago. If we try to conduct a compulsory purge of Akihabara now, wouldn't the backlash from the public… be something else?"

"Eight hours have already passed since the incident began.

The evacuation of the residents is already complete, it's a grid with a small population to begin with."

"Wait, chief cabinet secretary! You're being too rash!" the female diet member who served as the minister of foreign affairs yelled to interject. "There's still a chance that Akihabara can be repaired, right? Furthermore, the enemy's identity and objective still isn't clear. We should try negotiating with the enemy first!"

"Is now the time to suggest something so complacent? We should take a bold measure. There might be problems later, but we should prioritize resolving the situation at hand immediately, no?"

"Purging Akihabara wouldn't just be the problem of our nation! Other countries would react as w—"

"As long as the situation ends up being promptly resolved, we can gloss over the purge any which way, no?"

"What kind of foolishness are you spouting! That inclination towards covering things up is exactly what brought about the downfall of the previous administration! If we adopt such a hardline stance here, censure from other countries will be unavoidable!"

"Dealing with that is *your* job isn't it?!"

"That's exactly why I'm telling you that I can't accept your resolution from my standpoint as foreign minister! We should try reaching for a peaceful resolution first—!!"

The chief cabinet secretary and the foreign minister shouted back and forth in an uproar. The prime minister, who was stuck between them, simply looked on nervously—the words, **"What should I do about the next election?"** were clearly written on his flustered face.

*Maybe I chose the wrong job to take up after Meister Guild…* Karasawa internally groaned as he sat back down and reclined in his chair. While staring at the quarrel that was far beyond his control, he sighed in exasperation.

*—Absolutely ridiculous.*

*The chief executive is incompetent, he has no proposals of his own and can't make any decisions.*

*The chief cabinet secretary who does accurately grasp the situation is a proactive realist, but his ideas are far too drastic.*

*Then we have the foreign minister, an idealist who, while she does understand the situation, probably can't offer a practical solution.*

*—It's like nothing has changed in a thousand years. Actually, make that two thousand years. Or more. No matter how far one goes back, politics have surely always been like this.*

*Even my old home Meister Guild, a nonprofit organization that operated beyond borders, was no stranger to politics like this.*

*Maybe this game of power is the true nature of humanity…*

As he was enveloped by a sense of resignation, Karasawa narrowed his eyes. *Dr. Marie… are Dr. Konrad and the other Meisters safe…?*

Karasawa had an accurate grasp of the details of the Akihabara Terror Incident. Actually, he was an accomplice that assisted them with the clean-up.

In his previous job at Meister Guild, he was in the first division, second company's communications department—he had worked under Marie, who led the company. Because of that bond,

he had readily agreed when Marie had come to him seeking help, but...

*...Expecting me to be able to handle a situation like this is unreasonable, Dr. Marie,* he grumbled internally, while making sure not to show it on his face.

*The existence of the enormous weapon may be one thing, but Akihabara Grid collapsing is clearly not part of the plan.*

*—In other words, we failed.*

*I should probably try to contact her somehow to discuss how we should deal with the situation from here, but—* Seeing the internal feud unfolding before him, Karasawa sighed for what might have been the hundredth time today.

"I wonder if I'm going to be paid overtime for this..."

•

The sun was already high in the sky indiscriminately showering warm, white light across the city. However, even at midday, there was a place that its light didn't reach.

In one corner of Ueno Grid was a slightly soiled underground shopping district—supposedly, it was a red-light district that bustled with the nightlife, but around this time of day, it was just a deserted street lined by shuttered doors.

There was only one place here open at this time of day. Cheap-looking neon gears languidly flickered before the mildly dirtied flower decorations which adorned the building's front.

There was no front door, but one could hear lively music coming from the back. The place had been made so one couldn't see anything from the entrance.

In front of such an establishment were three people. One of them, a petite boy—Naoto—was quietly reading the words on the place's sign aloud. "The Ueno Strip…?"

The girl beside him silently lowered her gaze to where an old poster pasted on the wall fully came into sight…

**"150% true to life! The real deal! Pole dancers with everything exposed—!!"**

Along with that incendiary text was an automaton girl who looked about Marie's age. She was situated in a such a way that the average person, applying contemporary community standards, would find to be appealing to a prurient interest. Which is to say, that the poster both depicted and described, in a patently offensive way, extreme sexual conduct that even when taken as a whole, lacked any serious literary, artistic, political, or scientific value.

In other words, it was obscene.

"—ngh?!" Marie reflexively turned her face away.

*I don't know what's what anymore… Actually, I do. Everything, everything's filthy. Impure. One could even call it repulsive. I don't even want to think about what that poster is referring to as "150% true to life."*

Behind Naoto and Marie, AnchoR curiously asked with RyuZU still on her back, "Father…? What kind of store is this…?"

"Ah— It's eternally too early for you to know, so I think it's best if we save that talk till you're a grown up…" Naoto replied, dodging the question before whispering out of the corner of his mouth to Marie, "Hey… you're sure that this is the right address, right?"

"…That… should be the case… Yes, indeed it should."

“But I mean—”

“Don’t say it.”

“No, I’m gonna say it. No matter how you look at it, this place is exclusively for those who’re eighteen years or older, you know?!”

“Like I’d know anything about that! This is definitely the right address, okay!” Marie yelled, her face flushing bright red.

The business the two were creating a commotion in front of was a back-alley sex shop no matter how one looked at it. A special strip club, so to speak.

But it wasn’t one where live human girls danced. No, it was a place of “refined” interest where pleasure automata wore scandalous clothes, danced scandalous dances, and provided scandalous service—it was a debaucherous theater born from the degradation of modern society and the cultivated tastes of “elevated” men.

Normally, Marie wouldn’t ever look at such a place, much less step foot inside it. However, though she checked over and over again, this was indeed the rendezvous point that Konrad had designated in case of an emergency.

Just then, someone came out from the back, perhaps because he heard the commotion by the entrance. It was a classy old man wearing a well-tailored suit with gusto.

“—Dr. Marie! I’m so glad you’re alright…!”

Marie froze still on the spot. Sure enough, the one standing there was Konrad. His characteristic monocle was continuously swirling in colors as it reflected the light of the neon gears—the combination couldn’t have been more awkward.

“Dr. Marie, what happened?! Just what is going on—”

*—That's exactly what I want to know. There's a heap of things that I should report to him and just as many things that I need to consult with him on. It's true that I'm relieved to be able to meet the old man, but frankly—because of the location, I can't bring myself to feel happy at all…*

As she was assaulted by an intense feeling of lethargy, Marie asked, "Um… Dr. Konrad. Er… this place has the equipment at least… right?"

"Of course. Don't just stand by the door. Come on in."

*As if it were an obvious question…*

While Marie couldn't make sense of anything, she did agree that they shouldn't be discussing these matters in public, so she followed him on back.

…She had to muster a significant amount of courage to step through the doorway though…

Behind her, she could hear Naoto instructing AnchoR: "AnchoR-chan. Keep your eyes on the floor. It'll be bad for your upbringing otherwise."

"…? Okay…"

•

"—Hmm. I see… It appears that the situation is more serious than I expected," Konrad said solemnly as he led the way, but honestly, Marie wasn't paying much attention. Despite the gravity of the topic at hand, this carnal place filled with "oooh's" and "ahhhn's" had made it impossible for Marie to maintain a serious attitude from the get-go.

The inside of the establishment was almost exactly as Marie had imagined, but at the same time, it didn't fail to surprise her.

The interior was dimly lit with red light, so one couldn't see very far inside. The automata dancing on the stage, however, were clear as day. 150% true to life, they worked the poles to the intense beats of some extremely loud, exotic music…

The real problem though, were the leather sofas that sat along the walkway. They appeared to be customer seating and came with a partition screen that provided privacy from the outside.

*—If that's the case, then why're there a pair of legs sticking out from the top of that screen? What kind of awkward sitting position is that?!*

*And why is the sofa creaking so much…?*

*Hey, what do you mean, "I'm coming"?! Aren't you already there?!*

*Hwah? Some woman's underwear just flew over my head! Just what kind of miracle is that supposed to be—?!*

*—Such decadence. Such depravity. Such immorality!!* Marie locked her eyes facing forward, her face flushed bright red. However, just then, a nude, curvaceous automaton—her magnificent breasts on full display—brushed past Marie with a sensual wink.

Marie's emerald eyes lost their luster. She was dead inside. Behind her, the fully-equipped pleasure automaton coquettishly smiled at Konrad as she drew nearer and nearer to a panicking Naoto, who, eyes darting about, became frozen stiff.

"—Gyahuhwha?!" Feeling a soft hand caress his butt, Naoto let out a strange noise.

AnchoR, who was still obediently staring at the ground next to him, asked, "…? Father, what's wrong?"

"A, Ahh nono… Children mustn't look!"

“ *You* shouldn’t be looking either! Heck, I’m not supposed to be looking either, you know?!” Marie retorted, unable to put up with things any longer.

Catching those words, Vermouth flippantly said from under her arm, “Hahaha, relax your shoulders, princess. Is this your first time in a place like this? I heard that your new job is being a terrorist, no? No need to mind any silly laws at this point.”

“That *ain’t* the problem!” *—It’s absolutely filthy!* Marie nearly shouted before restraining herself in consideration of Dr. Konrad.

Making their way past that unwholesome space, the gang entered a back room where inside was a staircase leading to an underground level. Descending the stairs, they briefly walked through a hallway before coming across a wide room.

“—Here we are. Sorry, it’s a little dirty.”

The room Konrad guided them to was considerably more respectable than the upper floor. At the very least, there was nothing so conspicuously obscene. The lighting was a bright clean white and the loud music above was inaudible. The only things in the room were a simple bed, sofa, table, and some assorted basic necessities. There was a thick door in the back of the room. It seemed like the workshop lay beyond it.

Finally calming down, Marie let out a deep, deep sigh. She then threw out the question that had been burning inside her. “I’d like to explain the situation but… could I ask you just one question before that, Dr. Konrad? —Why did you choose this place?”

Konrad looked puzzled. “Isn’t it nice? —Does it not suit your tastes?”

“Did you think it would?” Marie replied coldly.

Vermouth cackled. “That so? It’s a nice venue, don’t you

think? I'd love to visit this place again while equipped with my lower half."

"In that case, let me give you a coupon later. There's a discount for staying the whole day," Konrad said smilingly.

Vermouth grinned. "Despite your appearance, you know what's good, gramps. If you could give me a smoke as well I'd be in heaven."

"Unfortunately, I quit smoking many years ago, you see."

"That's a shame. Smoking is a man's duty, you know."

"At my age, a good glass of scotch is more than enough."

"...Dr. Konrad?" Marie shot a sharp look at the old man with the appearance of a gentleman.

Holding his hands up in surrender, Konrad explained— "A close friend of mine owns this business, you see."

"A friend of yours does?!"

"Yes, the owner is an old friend of mine. Once in a while I come here to tune up the showgirls for him and in return he treats me to a drink."

"Dear lord, you were using your skills as a Meister on an establishment like this...?!" Marie eyes went wide with shock.

Bursting into laughter at how the girl who felt like his granddaughter was reacting, Konrad shrugged his shoulders.

"Business here has been quite good lately. Supposedly the girls' dancing has gotten better, which is why my friend gladly provided us a hiding place here today. And," he continued in a whisper, "this isn't something that you can go around telling people, but this place is also an auction house for illegal automata."

"—Hah?"

"Well, it's a black market dealing in high-class automata sporting illegal parts marketed towards men. The authorities turn a blind eye to it because they have ties here themselves, so it's a perfect hiding place that comes with a workshop."

"Wow, politics sure is dirty…" Naoto grumbled from the side.

Feeling so disgusted that she was getting a headache, Marie held her head and sighed.

*—No, he's right. There was the workshop in Akihabara Grid too. That Dr. Konrad, an Englishman, has so many connections in Japan is simply remarkable.*

*It may not be able to match a full-fledged workshop, but it's at least equipped with the basics. Beyond that, while there isn't any military-grade stuff here, there's still a ton of illegal parts and high-grade materials.*

*However—to be honest. Putting that aside… should this really be allowed? Dr. Konrad was someone that I'd always believed to be a fine gentleman. He's a senior clocksmith to whom I give my utmost respect, as well as a master craftsman from which I've learned a great deal.*

*But of all things, to think that that person* ***was secretly a pervert like Naoto…!***

That fact gave Marie such despair that she felt as if her legs would give out from under her. "Well… in any case." She shook her head, switching gears. *There are more important things than that right now.*

Holding up one of the head casings under her arm—Halter's—Marie said, "First, can I ask you to take care of preserving his mind? He's been magnetized… but if the brain inside is un-

harmed, then he should be fine if we just switch out his head casing, right?"

She didn't dare mention the words, "If he's still alive."

*—Halter was burning from being magnetized. That Vermouth was fine was a miracle as he said himself. If Halter's artificial body broke down before the life preservation mechanism could activate—I don't want to think about it, but it's possible that Halter's already brain-dead. As of right now—there's absolutely no guarantee that he's alright.*

Konrad nodded, appearing to have grasped Halter's situation. "Hmm... so he needs a reverse-transplant brain operation, yes? That's the specialty of one of my acquaintances, a back-alley doctor. I'll make the arrangements with him immediately."

"Please do. And also..." Marie hesitated a little before asking, "—Doctor Konrad, would you be able to get a spare artificial body for Halter? Within thirty-two hours... no, within twelve hours if possible."

"...That's impossible even for me."

"———"

"Simply acquiring a military-grade artificial body right now would be exceedingly difficult to begin with. Dangerous even. Actually, to be honest with you, just before you guys arrived, some bureaucrats on an inspection run had stopped by here. Even here. Again, keep in mind that not only does this store not sell any military-grade goods, it also has ties with politicians."

"..."

"I suspect that the underground vendors throughout Tokyo are being exposed right now. Acquiring a military-grade automaton in this city would be impossible right now. The moment you

get one, you'll be hunted down."

"Is that so…" …*Then, what should I do?* Even though Marie knew that their hopes were slim from the beginning, she still felt crestfallen upon having reality thrust before her.

Seeing Marie's countenance darken, Konrad said gently, "… First, let's connect his brain to a life preservation device right this second. There shouldn't be any problem in waiting until that's done to consider what to do about his artificial body."

"—Yes, please… take care of him." Marie surrendered Halter's head over to Konrad who swiftly set off, leaving the room. She then slapped her cheeks with both hands.

*I don't have time to be dilly-dallying*.

Turning around, Marie faced Naoto, who was standing in a corner of the room. "Naoto, carry RyuZU into the workshop and put her up on a hanger. While you're doing that… I'll find some suitable parts to make something like an auto-fan, so cool her with that."

Naoto nodded, but seemed unsure. "Right… but wouldn't cooling her with water or ice be faster?"

"Seriously… do they teach you nothing at school? If you cool something extremely hot too quickly, it'll crack or deform. — RyuZU did what she did because she thought it was the right choice… Believe in her."

*—I know I'm stretching things a great deal, but…* It seemed like AnchoR noticed Marie's gaze, because she inadvertently raised her head—

"…? Mother?"

"Stop calling me that," Marie curtly warned AnchoR before

looking away.

The built-in anti-magnetic shielding of Halter's artificial body was currently the world's best. His body had been designed to be able to function even in the mock ionosphere that the Planet Governors produced for a short period of time.

However, the enormous weapon's EMP had easily pierced through that shielding and totaled his body.

Given that AnchoR and RyuZU were not only able to endure such a powerful EMP, but even demagnetize themselves on their own—there could only be one conclusion.

—"Y" had anticipated electromagnetic attacks from the very beginning.

*This adorable little lump of absurdity that's currently tilting her head at me proves that. In that case, RyuZU should also recover once she cools back down—it may be ridiculous, but I'm convinced of it.*

"———"

*...How ludicrous. Halter's artificial body—that is, the culmination of the Breguets' full technological efforts—didn't stand a chance against that EMP, and yet, an antique doll that had been made a thousand years ago is walking around just fine as if nothing happened?*

***—In that case, what exactly have we accomplished up to now...?!***

Disgrace, powerlessness, and above all, anger at herself for her weakness prodded at Marie's heart... however, she couldn't outwardly express it. That would be *too* disgraceful.

Marie took a deep breath and locked away her melancholy.

Steeling herself, she headed to the back of the workshop to get started.

"...Ohh." Taking a look around, Marie found some surprisingly decent equipment. Even if it was an old model, there was a device for machining out parts for automata. Not only that, but the workbench and automata hangers were quality ones that could withstand the abuse of a professional clocksmith.

*If nothing else, this might be the best there is for a personal workshop.*

"As expected from Dr. Konrad..."

For the time being, Marie decided to gloss over the fact that the equipment here was used for the dolls dancing on the upper floor. Naoto, who had followed after her, asked, "Oy Marie, is this hanger fine?"

"Yes, that's fine."

"Roger— Well then, AnchoR-chan, I'll leave it to you."

"Okaaay," AnchoR cheerfully replied before hanging her sister's body up on a hanger that was close to the workbench.

Now that there was good lighting, it was clear just how awful RyuZU's injuries were...

Her abdomen was the most damaged area.

Not only were her clothes melted there, but even her artificial skin itself. The trauma had caused her inner mechanisms to be exposed, including her main cylinder. An entire bundle of extremely fine wires that served as her pseudo-nerves had been torn apart and were protruding outward from the wound.

—She seemed to be missing several parts as well.

The deformation of her skeletal frame was worse than expected too. Even if they restored her power, as she is now, she surely wouldn't be able to maneuver her arms and legs properly.

*If that's how bad things look on the outside, just how bad is the damage on the inside…?* Naoto anxiously looked over RyuZU. *Her injuries look far more painful than my measly burns, but more than that—there's something that's—*

"…Father, Big Sister… will be okay, right?"

Hearing AnchoR's worry, Naoto crisply changed his expression into a smile. "Of course silly~ The reason RyuZU did what she did was because it was the right choice. So she'll be just fine! You don't need to worry, okay AnchoR?"

Still worried for her sister, AnchoR's shoulders drooped, so Naoto patted her head.

*—The palms of your hands have awful burns too, you know.* Marie let out a soft sigh before exiting to the previous room. There was a first aid kit mounted on the wall near the entrance. She opened it up, took out its contents, and returned to the workshop.

"…Come over here, we have to hurry up and treat you too," Marie said while holding up a syringe. "These are medical nanomachines. If you don't want to die from your burns becoming infected then hurry up and take off your clothes and sit over there."

"…Oh, thank you." Giving his brief thanks, Naoto obediently followed her instructions. His face tightened from the pain as he slowly took off his scorched clothes and threw them in a corner. He then sat down on the ground.

Marie readied the syringe—a cylinder that was as thick as a can of juice—by peeling off the film on its tip. "Just so you know,

don't expect this to be some kind of cure-all. So long as you don't get an artificial skin transplant or a skin graft—there'll always be scars."

"Not a problem. As long as I can move my hands I'm happy."

Marie let out a sigh. Naoto's back was just as blistered as she had anticipated. Aligning the syringe against it, she applied pressure.

The needle thrust painlessly inside his skin. Pressing down on the plunger, Marie injected an ample amount of medical nanomachines into the worst of Naoto's burns.

The nanomachines would keep his wounds sterile and even assist in tissue regeneration until all his wounds were fully healed. Naoto may have been lucky that such materials were on hand, but in all honesty— What Marie had just done was a **test.**

The medical nanomachines were powerful, but they also caused extreme pain after injection. Marie had deliberately chosen not to mention this.

The intense pain of having nanomachines stir up everything from one's bones and muscle fibers to one's skin layers and nerves should be unbearable enough to make an adult man cry out for mercy, but Naoto didn't let out a single groan.

*I don't think it's that his nerves endings are dead. As proof of that, his face is heavily twisted and his tightly clenched fists are trembling.*

However, in the end, Naoto never verbalized his agony; instead, he simply let out a deep sigh.

"...Wait here, I'll see if I can find some clothes for you."

"Right, sorry for the trouble. Please do."

Feeling as if she had lost to him somehow, Marie left the room.

"——————"

Naoto had clutched RyuZU and moved her simply because his intuition had told him it was necessary to do so. The expression he wore and the words he said back then, and now his current stoicism, played over and over again in Marie's mind.

*...I suspect that...No, I'm sure of it. There's no room for doubt. Had that guy, that gigantic fool determined that it was "necessary," he would have even cut off his own limbs without hesitation.*

A chill ran down her spine.

*That expression, that look of his, convinces me of that fact. It isn't resolve. No, it's something else—that quality of his that lets him assert that his decision was simply a matter of course, for some reason, it really...*

After managing to find a change of clothes for Naoto somehow, Marie returned to the workshop. She handed Naoto what appeared to be some sort of promotional item, a T-shirt with the logo of a store printed on it.

As he ran his arms through the shirt's sleeves, Naoto appeared to remember something. "Oh, by the way, what are you gonna do about that old man?" Naoto was looking at the head that Marie had offhandedly laid upon the workbench.

As they focused on him, Vermouth said, seemingly discontent, "Do you guys not have souls or something? If you've forgotten then let me remind you: It wouldn't be strange if I died any second, you know? Hurry up and hook me up to a life preservation device, please."

Marie shook her head. "...God, and then there's this guy, who's

something else in his own right. Why are you and Naoto both so… Meh, forget it." Marie changed the subject while ignoring the picture of the sexy-looking automaton with her legs spread wide open printed on the back of Naoto's shirt. "In any case, I can't let you sleep just yet. I still have things I want to get out of you."

"Give me a break would you… Wait, hey. Hey hey, wait you dirty sow! What the hell are you planning on doing?!"

"I'm going to kindly link you to a suitable automaton. I'll install a life preservation device inside as well, so rest assured."

"You're seriously insane you shitty bitch! You're telling me that your master plan is to connect me to a dutch wife?! What the hell do you take a man's dignity for?!"

"No such thing," Marie coolly asserted as she pulled on a hanger holding up a doll towards the workbench. Then she offhandedly—at least, that was how it looked to Naoto—plucked off the doll's head and plunked Vermouth's right in its place.

"……Damn it. Is this crazy princess for real…" Vermouth felt a chill as he glared at the self-proclaimed genius in front of him in disbelief.

It wasn't due to his aversion to being transplanted onto a female body. It was because he had no choice but to acknowledge that this sheltered little brat of a princess was indeed worthy of being called a genius.

Vermouth was terrified.

—In the first place, full body cyborgs and automata were completely different machines. One was a reproduction of the very "essence" of the human body, while the other only merely replicated its "functions."

Put simply, automata did not have brains. Depending on the

model, an automaton could continue to operate even after losing its head. Full body cyborgs, on the other hand, housed a live brain.

Because of this, all artificial cyborg bodies were made to replicate the vast majority of the human body's structure. If that wasn't done, the brain would reject the artificial body.

*And yet, this little brat managed to exchange an automaton's head with mine like it was nothing. Not only that, my brain doesn't feel out of place at all... how she installed a life preservation device inside before I even realized it is simply inhuman.*

Vermouth muttered, seemingly lost in admiration, "—I see, so you weren't a ghost but a demon. Sorry for the various things I said, princess. If you're a demon, it's only natural that you're lascivious **— Gyaaahh?!** "

Vermouth had cried out from the pain of having all of his nerves connected to the automaton in one go. Behind him, Marie said cheerfully, "Now then, let's sort out what we know about the situation—"

•

The Anti-Terror Committee's meeting was embroiled in turmoil. As the gravity and danger of the situation sank in, the debate became rowdier and rowdier.

—In any case, we should resolve to purge Akihabara. No, we should try negotiating with the criminals first. How about reassembling the military of the neighboring grids and counterattacking? We should consider evacuating the residents first. We should consult with other countries and take a united response...

Various opinions were given and refuted. They couldn't come to a decision. As a whole, the meeting had yet to advance even one step closer to its destination.

A minister of state, who was against the purge, raised his hand. “Fortunately, I don’t think we have to worry about the Pillar of Heaven being attacked considering its relative position to the enemy, no—?”

“Are you still asleep?” the minister of defense spat. “So long as they have their main cannon, they can hit anything in Tokyo! It doesn’t matter whether there are grids in the way.

If they want to, they can shoot right through any of the grids, just like they did with Akihabara! That thing intentionally turned up in Akihabara because it’s the bottommost grid of Tokyo, so that means that the entirety of Tokyo is in its firing range, understand?!”

A different Diet member shouted, seeming agitated, “In the first place, what in the world *is* that weapon?! Whether it be the power of its main cannon or how it invaded Akihabara from the deepest underground layer, aren’t its capabilities simply too absurd...!”

As he spoke, he stood up and looked across the faces of everyone in the room. There, he noticed the existence of the civilian consultant sitting in a corner. “You! Just what is the enemy armed with?!”

The consultant—Karasawa—tilted his head with a blank expression. “Are you asking me?”

“Who else is there?!”

“I’m glad to hear that. I thought I’d been forgotten,” Karasawa said, smiling sweetly. He then stood up while scratching his head. “Um—you were asking about enemy’s armaments, right? I’m happy to take a guess.”

“Get your act together! What do you think you were hired for?!”

“With due respect, I was hired as a consultant on clockwork technology—I’m not versed in the field of electromagnetics, something that we all know violates the international treaty.”

The meeting instantly fell into silence. The diet member who questioned Karasawa was taken aback. Yet another minister of state asked Karasawa with a pale expression on his face, “Electromagnetic technology you say...?”

“Yes. I’ve carefully read through every single word of the report. There’s no other possible explanation,” Karasawa said crisply as his voice carried through the silent room.

“First, as far as what their main cannon responsible for firing through Akihabara could be, I have absolutely no idea. However, I do know that what they emitted afterwards was an electromagnetic pulse. The armor that was capable of withstanding shots from Tokyo’s defensive cannon tower is also likely to be a magnetic shield or something. And the fighter planes? That was probably a railgun.”

Agonized moans of terror resounded from the faces of the committee members. Desperately clinging to some last ray of hope, the minister of state asked, “Umm— Is there any chance at all that they’re utilizing some sort of new clockwork technology?”

“No. That weapon produced two phenomena that no clockwork mechanism, no matter how it’s used, could ever create.”

In other words,

“The magnetization of the entirety of Akihabara Grid and furthermore the nullification of Tokyo’s resonance cannons—those two things can’t be explained with clockwork engineering even in reference to the current leading theories being researched by the Five Great Corporations.”

*Considering the capabilities of certain composite materials,*

*it's possible that the armor which withstood Tokyo's defensive cannon tower was just that. There also exist clockwork mechanisms that could produce something akin to the super-ultra high velocity cannon that shot down the fighter planes, at least, in theory.*

*However, nullifying the resonance cannons is simply impossible at a fundamental level. If something can defy cracking from resonance, it wouldn't be due to its material—the only possible explanation would be that it has an outer membrane that can't resonate.*

*And keeping in mind that Akihabara Grid was magnetized—the most natural conjecture would be that the weapon had a magnetic coating.*

"—B, But this should be outside your expertise as well! You can't say for sure can you?!" Getting ahold of himself, the diet member who had been the first to ask Karasawa for his opinion exclaimed.

Karasawa nodded with a frivolous smile. "Yeah, that's true. After all, if I was well-versed in electromagnetic technology, that'd automatically make me a criminal."

"—It's technology that violates international law as set by the IGMO, you know? Since even researching it is forbidden, I think the real question is why a weapon that employs so much of that forbidden technology is in Japan. Isn't that far more important?"

The diet member's face turned paler than paper.

*—There's no way that such a thing suddenly appeared out of nowhere. The research necessary to create it must've began a long time ago and probably in Japan at that. I'd bet anything that at least some of you know the truth behind what's going on...* was what Karasawa had said between the lines.

All present at the meeting were blown away by the bomb that the civilian had dropped on them. An uproar ensued.

“D, Do you have any proof!”

“That’s right! Don’t spout out irresponsible speculation when you don’t even have any proof!”

“Please excuse me for that,” Karasawa said placidly as he was crucified by everyone’s gazes. “However, the threat that looms below us is an undeniable reality you see, so I have simply given my thoughts on the matter as befitting my role as a consultant, nothing more.”

The committee fell dead silent. However, within seconds, they began making remarks intended to sound out the truth from one another. As the committee was consumed by mutual suspicion, the meeting plunged even further into the depths.

*If I were to immediately report this matter to the IGMO, this country would be on the brinks just from that…* Karasawa sat back down while entertaining that dangerous thought.

*If knowledge of this spreads worldwide, the international community would surely adopt harsh sanctions against Japan at the bare minimum.*

*Well, their saving grace is that the weapon is brandishing its spear against them… but honestly, will “terrorism” really serve as an excuse for this situation?*

The international treaty that the IGMO and its affiliates wrote covered many different things. And this was what Karasawa grasped of the present situation:

—First, the research on as well as use of electromagnetic technology.

—Second, the manufacture of any weapon capable of dealing grave damage to a municipal grid.

—Third, the great expenditure of Earth's limited resources on any enormous product that doesn't contribute to running the planet.

—Fourth, the implementation of a cannon turret with a firing range of fifty kilometers or greater on any weapon.

—And Fifth, doing all of the above— **without special permission from the IGMO and therefore being in possession of such a weapon without a security council resolution.**

Forget just the IGMO, these five facts alone trampled all over ten articles of the international treaty as written by the international grid security council (IGSC), the international electromagnetism agency (IEA), and the world resource organization (WRO).

*...But in the end, we're all birds of a feather.*

Indeed—every country **has possessed illegal weapons of a similar nature since antiquity.**

No nation in existence abided by the rules. If there was one, it'd be an insignificant third world country. If nothing else, each country at least trusted that the rest of the world community would violate the treaty—otherwise there'd be no need for the IGMO to have an inspecting body in the first place.

It's precisely because of this unspoken truth that the penalty for the exposure of any illegal weapons always ended with **mere** sanctions. The real issue was that the rogue weapon wasn't under government control.

*Frankly, things would be much simpler if that weapon had*

*invaded a foreign country.*

*If that were the case, the situation would simply end with an international armed response. As extraordinarily powerful as that weapon is, it wouldn't be able to hold off the pressure forever. It would eventually meet its demise, succumbing to the difference in sheer numbers.*

*However powerful a weapon it may be, in the end, it's still just a single weapon of war. It isn't enough to sway the balance of power in the world, and tactically speaking, attacking with just a single unit severely limits your options.*

However, if such a weapon is pointing its cannon at its own country... then what?

At this very moment, the committee was switching gears. No longer satisfied with shouting at one another, they were now verbally lynching a diet member with a suspicious background while in a wild uproar.

Watching the ensuing chaos, Karasawa inadvertently discovered the terrorists' endgame *—I see. So this must be what the enemy was aiming for. Sons of bitches...*

•

"...So you're saying that, in short, the feds and their military will both self-destruct just by virtue of that weapon sitting there in Akihabara—and all the Shiga guys have to do is just sit back and watch it happen...?" Marie muttered in a trembling voice.

*You're telling me that that weapon—or rather, the people inside that weapon, thought that far ahead?*

Vermouth confirmed Marie's suspicions with his gaze. "But if that conjecture's correct, then things will get troublesome... ain't that right kid?"

“Yeah. I mean, the Shiga guys have no intention of letting things end there, after all.”

“…What do you mean by that.”

Naoto sighed, shaking his head. “I said that the weapon won’t move… but at the same it *can’t* move.”

“……”

“I don’t know anything about electromagnetic technology… but it’s not like it can just move without a power source, right?”

“Well yeah… the weapon should have a battery or generator of some sort, but—” Marie muttered.

Satisfied with her answer, Naoto nodded. “That thing’s power probably comes from gears.”

“—Hah?” Marie’s jaw dropped. *Is he saying that the weapon in question, which is equipped with technology antithetical to all clockwork devices, uses clockwork technology itself…? But if that’s the case, wouldn’t it ruin itself?*

As question marks popped up all over Marie’s face, Vermouth sighed. “It appears that they combined conductive gears with an insulator. So apparently the weapon isn’t simply a revival of ancient technology—but a hybrid design that utilizes the best of both worlds.”

Marie furrowed her brows. “It makes sense in theory… but is such a thing really possible?”

“They made it possible. That’s precisely why that enormous object can still move after emitting an EMP,” Vermouth sneered. “The mobile composite electromagnetic assault weapon, Yatsukahagi—that seems to be its official name. Feel free to laugh. After all, the ones who named it weren’t the guys from Shiga but the

feds."

"...What'd you say?"

"In the blueprint that my team found, the original proposal had been thoughtfully attached alongside it— What do you think was written on it?"

Before Marie could answer, Vermouth spat, "—'We hereby approve the research and production of a mobile composite electromagnetic assault weapon on the twenty-fifth of March in the 985th Year of the Wheel'— It came with the signatures of the prime minister, chief cabinet secretary, and minister of defense at the time, you know? What a riot right?!"

Marie didn't find that the least bit funny. Seeing her expression tense, Vermouth said, "...Well, in short, the power source of that enormous thing is no different from other clockwork devices. It uses spring generators that draw energy from gravity. I don't know how many it has in total though..."

"—It has 1,033 of them. The sound they make is strange, but its undeniably the sound of springs. And, the enemy is currently recharging them."

Marie and Vermouth looked at Naoto in disbelief.

Paying no mind to their stares, Naoto scowled as he continued, "That initial burst of light which caused that... what was it called, an electromagnetic pulse? The weapon probably used up all its power on it. I don't know why, but after that, it's been continuing to recharge while sustaining itself on ten percent of its available power.

Because of that, based on the last sound I heard from it before we left Akihabara Grid, it'll take 71 hours 32 minutes and 12 seconds before it replenishes to its full capacity. It's been five hours since then, so... there's roughly 66 hours remaining. It shouldn't

be able to move during this time."

Vermouth was bewildered. "——Oy kid, you've seen the blueprint? —No, that wouldn't be enough to explain how you know all that. Just who the hell are you, you bastard?"

Ignoring Vermouth, who was understandably baffled, Marie pressed Naoto. "—You said that for the next 66 hours and 30 minutes, that weapon can't move? Are you certain?"

Naoto shook his head. "I'm not sure since I know absolutely nothing about electromagnetic technology. If it cuts off the charging to some of its armaments, it might be able to move again sooner.

Also, I don't know what it's been spending that ten percent on, but if it shuts off whatever's consuming that energy, the charging should speed up to the same extent—but that's not the problem."

"Wait… there's more…?"

Seeing Marie looking lost, Vermouth interjected, "Despite it being checkmate, they're still bothering to recharge the weapon. Do you still not get it, you sheltered princess?"

"—!"

Eyes glaring, Marie turned around to face him, but Vermouth merely laughed. "This isn't terrorism—it's a coup d'etat. Sure, they plan to wait for the feds to self-destruct—but from there it's on to phase two, whatever that may be."

—At that moment, Marie finally understood. She was flabbergasted, dumbfounded. Her emerald eyes were as wide as saucers… With everything that'd just been said, there could only be one conclusion. Namely— **that the federal government was on its deathbed.**

*So that's what Vermouth meant by "checkmate." Terrorism? This isn't something so cute. They are on the verge of overthrowing the government after having literally put the feds in check.*

*No wonder they always got the better of us despite our crafty plans. Considering just how much time, how much obsession, how much endless spite Mie's—no, Shiga's military of old must have put into their plan—it's only natural that we, who've only been reacting to an impending crisis, would be utterly crushed.*

*—With that in mind, think about what you can do right now, Marie.*

*The enemy has the heart of Tokyo at knifepoint.*

*Akihabara Grid has been magnetized, so the control system bypass that we worked so hard to create is no longer an option.*

*And, the government cabinet is probably in total chaos right now, just as they planned.*

*As for what they plan to do afterwards, Naoto and Vermouth aren't sure either.*

*But at any rate, it's inevitable that the feds will self-destruct. Not to mention, if other countries find out about that weapon—in the worst-case scenario, the IGMO might even consider an armed intervention due to international security concerns.*

*If the use of Tall Wand—the anti-surface assault satellite is authorized, Tokyo will vanish from the Earth.*

*No, even if the international community didn't take any action for the time being, it would still only be a matter of time.*

Marie imagined the hypothetical best and worst-case scenarios in her mind.

***—In the best-case scenario—the Shiga guys succeed in their goal and seize power over this country.***

*If they're the ones in power, demagnetizing and restoring Akihabara might be possible given their expertise in electromagnetic technology. However, in exchange, the entire world would view Japan as a rogue nation and immediately move forward with military sanctions.*

***—In the worst-case scenario—the situation at hand is resolved through a foreign armed intervention by coalition.***

*That would probably be the quickest way to resolve the situation. However, that would also signify the destruction of Tokyo, something that would affect all of East Asia's grids and likely embroil the world in total war as a result.*

*Such a horrifying possibility isn't so far-fetched, if I may say so myself… And facing a situation of this scale, what can we even do at this point…?*

*We've lost RyuZU and Halter, two big components of our fighting force, and AnchoR is currently without her supernatural combat capabilities too… No, even if everyone was at a hundred percent, what could we do?*

*An imploding national government and an enormous weapon that complicates international affairs just by existing. Japan will surely end up in a stand-off with the principal nations of the world.*

*As it were, what could we, a few self-proclaimed terrorists—possibly do?*

*There's only one answer… Absolutely nothing.*

The second Marie came to that conclusion, Naoto sprang to his feet, his face totally serious. “Hey AnchoR, let’s go on a daytrip somewhere.”

“...A daytrip?” The young automaton girl tilted her head, looking puzzled.

“Yeah, I mean, you haven’t been able to do what you wanted to for a whole thousand years thanks to that cursed limiter, right? Let’s go check out a bunch of different things,” Naoto said while extending his hand towards her.

“...Yay!” AnchoR happily grinned as she took Naoto’s hand.

Marie stared at Naoto in disbelief. “—Are your heart and nerves made of some sort of super tough alloy or something? What are you thinking? Are you planning to stroll around shopping as one of the most wanted terrorists in the country right now?”

However, upon seeing Naoto’s gaze, she swallowed her breath.

—She felt as if her heart had been clutched by something.

Naoto’s eyes weren’t wavering in the slightest.

“Isn’t it obvious?” With enough determination to rekindle Marie’s fading hope, Naoto concluded— **“I’m going out to do what I can.”**

•

“...I’d like an order, please.”

“Yeah! Yeah! anything’s fine! What is it~?” Naoto instantly nodded with a slovenly smile.

AnchoR happily beamed as she pointed towards a trinket shop two buildings down. “...Can we take a look, inside that store?”

“Any store is fine! If there’s anything you want— Heck, I’ll buy out the whole store if you’d like!”

“Hey, Naoto,” Marie called out from behind, she seemed to be looking through him rather than at him. She was out of sighs at this point. “I’ll ask on the off chance that you actually have a good reason: What are you doing right now?”

“—I’m doing what I should be doing right now!” Naoto replied crisply, his gray eyes shining. “Everything that AnchoR-chan has wanted to do but couldn’t all this time—!! Now! I’ll grant all of her wishes with my own hands—!! What else could there be besides that?!”

Marie didn’t answer him. She simply smiled a dry, empty smile as she looked up at the bright blue sky. “...The weather’s nice today isn’t it? That reminds me, there was an ice cream shop I wanted to try. Maybe I should stop by before the sun sets on Tokyo...” she muttered as her shoulders drooped. Her words were already filled with calm resignation.

They were in a shopping district of Ueno Grid, which was situated immediately above Akihabara. The sign on the arch at the entrance read “Ameya Alley” in an old font. The street was filled with liveliness, almost as if the events of last night had just been a bad dream. Despite it being daytime on a weekday, there was no end to the number of people walking around.

Seeing the great amount of displayed merchandise protruding onto the street and hearing the shouted deals from the stalls— Marie felt a strange sense of pity... none of the people around her suspected a thing.

—After all, a gag order had been imposed. They knew nothing about the enormous weapon that had appeared in Akihabara this morning.

Marie had received a report from their mole, but even without

it, she could have easily guessed that the government would take such a measure.

"An electromagnetic weapon that violates the international treaty suddenly appeared out of nowhere in the center of Tokyo yesterday. Its goal is a coup d'etat and even now, it's occupying Akihabara, and putting all of Tokyo in danger of being destroyed."

*There's no way they could honestly report such a thing to the populace. The feds—no, not just them, anyone who would be inconvenienced by the truth should have used their full authority to censor the news.*

*—It was the obvious response.*

*We're talking about a national-level crisis here, not to mention the fact that it all stemmed from something that the feds sowed in the first place.*

*As Naoto anticipated and Vermouth stated, that weapon is a bomb that had dealt a lethal blow to the feds just by surfacing in Tokyo. It's obvious that it'd spell bad news for the feds if the citizens found out about this—but it'd spell even worse news for them if the various member nations of the IGMO found out.*

*...Really, how ironic. For the feds, there's a silver lining—thanks to the EMP that the weapon released, all the equipment that could prove its existence was silenced across the board.*

On top of that, because Marie and Naoto had issued the advance notice of their own terrorist attack, Akihabara's residents had all been evacuated. Because of that, it just so happened that the two had served to divert the citizens' attention as well.

Looking up, Marie saw a large street-side television reporting on the Akihabara Terror Incident that had occurred last night:

**“Due to the advance notice given by terrorists last night regarding a plot to freeze Akihabara, the city is currently under lockdown. The government has prohibited travel to the city so as to ensure the safety of all metropolitan residents. Furthermore, the government has announced that the identities of the terrorists have already been identified and that they have a promising lead on their whereabouts. Chief Cabinet Secretary Orihata remarked that…”**

—That was the news report. Of course, the feds hadn’t actually discovered anything about Marie’s group.

*It appears that even at this late a stage, the feds still want to hide the existence of the weapon from the populace. They must be retarded,* Marie scoffed.

*Once that weapon starts up again and begins moving, the truth will be known immediately. Not to mention, if even a single scoop-hungry journalist ignores the lockdown and takes a news helicopter down into Akihabara right now, it’ll all be over.*

*However… if Naoto and Vermouth are right, that’s exactly what those Shiga guys want to happen.*

*The more the government tries to coverup the weapon that destroyed Akihabara, the angrier both their own citizens and other countries will be when the truth is exposed—if that comes pass, the populace and the world community could become bigger threats to the current government than the weapon in question itself.*

*And what have the feds been doing in the meantime? Nothing but pointing fingers at each other in an attempt to shield themselves from blame—* “…Hmph,” Marie snorted as she looked up at the sky through her sunglasses.

Seeing yet another high-speed helicopter fly past above, she smirked. *I'd be willing to bet that the one in that helicopter is a fleeing government official.*

"Playing the victim and seeking asylum abroad huh… It's only a matter of time before knowledge of the situation spreads to the neighboring countries."

*—In short, the peaceful and lively everyday scenery before me will end in just a few more hours. What'll befall all of Tokyo then is surely…*

"…Fath— Mother, I'd like, an order, please."

"Yes yes~! Papa will let you do anything you want— No, I mean Mama will!"

Marie slumped her shoulders. *…Just what am I doing right now?*

The one AnchoR had called Mother wasn't Marie. Well, that's not to say that Marie had ever accepted AnchoR calling her that in the first place, but in short— AnchoR was addressing Naoto, who had replied with a sloppy, smitten expression.

Going out into public required them to disguise themselves. One could say that that was all there was to it, but the process had been like a nightmare for Marie.

The makeup artist for the automata girls that Konrad had introduced them to had been a massive deviant. She was a gaudy woman who was the very picture of the term "lady of the night."

The second Naoto and Marie entered the dressing room, the first thing she had yelled out was this: "Kyah—! How wonderful! Dr. Konrad! Can I really dress up these cute little fellows?! I'm gonna get serious you know?!"

“Yes, I’m counting on you.”

“Ufufu~♪ It’s been so long since I dressed up humans! I’m dying to show off what I can do once I get my hands on them ♡.”

—At that moment, an indescribable chill ran down Marie’s spine. Naoto had looked somewhat uneasy himself, at least, at first but…

In a dazzling flurry, the makeup artist had ripped off Naoto’s clothes, applied light makeup to his face, put a wig on him, and clothed him in a dress. Finally, she had him stand in front of a mirror, upon which— “H…Huh? Holy crap, could it be—that I’m actually pretty cute ♡?”

—Naoto had acquired a new kink.

As Marie was caught in despair, AnchoR’s eyes were glittering next to her. “…Father, you look cute… ngh♪”

Receiving AnchoR’s high praise, at that very moment, Naoto immediately awakened. “I see— I see! So Papa really is cute~! If AnchoR-chan says so then it’s like God said so, so I guess I *am* cuuute ♡,” Naoto yelled as he picked AnchoR up in his arms and spun joyfully right out the store.

*What an admirable pervert. I’m jealous even. I too wish that I could just forget everything and chase after butterflies right now from the bottom of my heart…*

“Now then ♪, you’re up next sweetie—”

“I’m just fine thank you—!!” Marie rejected the poison fangs of the perverted woman with all the strength that she could muster. *Who knows what I’ll end up looking like if I leave myself in this woman’s hands.*

*One could say that me managing to quickly rearrange my*

*hair, snatch a pair of sunglasses, and find a suitable change of clothes, before scrambling away to safety was the silver lining in that mess…*

After dispelling the cursed memory from her mind with a shake of her head, Marie muttered, feeling fed up, "Seriously, what's everyone doing when a bomb that's likely to lead to a regional—no, an international crisis—is sparking right before our eyes."

Apparently, Naoto heard her mutter with his sharp ears because he chided, "It can't be helped can it? How can the people here make a fuss over something they don't know about? I was in the same position during Kyoto's incident until you showed up. That's just how it is."

"I'm talking about people like you—you total pervert!!" Marie angrily shouted at Naoto. "You're in the group of people who know the truth aren't you?! Worry a bit won't you! Actually, before that…" Sensing that they were making a scene, Marie quickly lowered her voice. Still, she was unable to stifle her anger.

She glared at Naoto, who was scowling himself, hissing, "Have some restraint would you? So you had a fetish for crossdressing on top of everything else? I see that your disease has finally become terminal!"

—Naoto had declared that he was going to do what should be done. This boy had displayed the resolve to accept any sacrifice necessary to that end.

*Yeah, okay. Considering that we might all be dead soon enough, I'll admit it. His decisiveness, his resolve, his unwavering proactiveness—those are the things that I lack right now. Naive as I was, I was even moved for a second back there.*

*And yet—this was the action the pervert decided to take using any means necessary with his perverted proactiveness and per-*

*verted judgment, even going so far as to brave the risk of being discovered by our enemies… A fun and relaxed date with a little machine girl while in drag.*

*—If we weren't in public, I'd take him to the ground this very second and beat him till he blacked out.*

"Fath— Mother… Is it… okay for me to want that?"

"My, what a cute stuffed animal that is! AnchoR-chan, you have great taste~♪ Forget permission to want it, I'll buy it for you!"

Lost on cloud nine, the pervert and the doll continued their date, paying no mind to Marie who was doing her best to prevent herself from committing murder.

*To be honest, even now, I'd still love nothing more than to drag him into an alley and beat him to death.* A different thought suddenly popped into Marie's mind. "Hey… Naoko-chan. You're acting quite generous, but if I recall correctly, wasn't RyuZU the one who earned that money for you?"

Naoto tilted his head looking puzzled. "Yeah, what about it?"

"You're always calling RyuZU your wife, and yet you're going to spend her money on some other girl?" Marie looked at him as if he were scum.

However, Naoto swiftly countered, "Stupid fool. RyuZU is my wife and AnchoR is my daughter. What's wrong with a parent spending money on his child?"

"……I get it now, so just do whatever you want."

"Sure, I would've anyway, even without you telling me to!"

*— Really now, what am I doing*. Marie thought.

First, she detested how she couldn't do anything about the current shit-show situation. Second, it irked her that there was a multimodal pervert enjoying a merry old date at a time like this. And third and possibly most of all, it pissed her off that said incorrigible pervert—

"Oy Mama! If you don't hurry up, we're gonna leave you behind, you know?!" Naoto yelled while waving at her.

**—actually looked damn good as a girl. Every part of him.**

As Marie answered with a groan, she inadvertently looked away. In the display window of a boutique shop she saw her own reflection. She looked like a teenage girl from a foreign country. Her light blond hair was put up in a ponytail which showed off the straps of her thin, almost transparent camisole. She'd concealed her characteristic emerald eyes behind a pair of heavily shaded sunglasses.

Next, upon turning her eyes towards the pervert in front of her, she saw what appeared to be—if she turned a blind eye to everything she knew—a beautiful teenage girl, one that might be found on the cover of some fashion magazine.

Naoto was wearing a thin, blue summer coat over his dress and soft, high-laced boots. He had a childish but well-proportioned face and pristine, porcelain skin due to being a shut-in. With the wig and the cat-ear hood as well… he looked like a real girl through and through…

That cherubic-looking girl was laughing as she walked alongside an even more cherubic-looking child—which one would be hard-pressed to believe was actually an automaton—while holding hands… *Who would ever think that they could be terrorists?*

In this congested crowd of people, the two of them gathered attention simply by walking together. All of the onlookers saw

them as a pleasant sight for sore eyes.

*— Yeah, why don't I just kill them. That'd be lovely.*

Without realizing that she was drawing plenty of fascinated attention from the crowd herself, the blond-haired foreigner girl sporting a poppish look, chased after the two ferociously.

•

A nearby street television was playing a detailed follow-up report on the Akihabara Terror Incident:

"...This boy is Naoto Miura, age 16. He is a prime suspect believed to be involved in the bootlegging of illegal military automata parts and the trafficking of automata that have been illegally modified with them.

Our experts have pointed out the likelihood that he has ties with the international armed organization Avant Ceglie. The suspect appears to have been attending Tadasunomori High School, a public school in Kyoto as a cover.

However, it is extremely likely that the information in his family register is fabricated, so the police and the military are requesting those who may know anything about him to step forward—"

A blown-up picture of Naoto in his normal attire was displayed on the gigantic screen. It must have been a picture taken of him on the rooftop last night, as Halter could be seen in the background as well.

Across the street from the public television, that very same villainous fiend of a boy—Naoto—couldn't keep himself from grinning. "Wow, I'm really something else aren't I? What's that supposed to be anyway? The backstory for the protagonist of a manga?" He shuddered as he sipped his cold vanilla shake.

Marie, who had been stuffing her face with apple pie across from him answered sardonically, “Well yeah, no one would believe them if they announced that the one who pulled off such a grand terrorist plot was just some high school student. It’d be humiliating for them if they don’t play you up to some extent.”

“Even so, didn’t they put too much effort into it? I mean, what’s this ‘Avant Ceglie’ thing about?”

“If I remember correctly, it’s an armed organization that’s having a grand old time in Europe. Some pretentious idiot called Cagliostro is the leader… in reality they’re just a small group that focuses on international fraud.”

“Oh, I see,” Naoto replied, not seeming particularly interested. He then pouted, “Actually, all things considered, shouldn’t the one on the screen be you, not me? ‘An illegitimate clocksmith who participates in terrorist activities while attending school with a falsified family register’ —When you think about it, there’s someone here who fits that bill perfectly.”

“Don’t point your straw at me, pervert,” Marie sullenly groaned as she sipped her chocolate shake.

“—The man beside him is Halter Vainney, age unknown. He is a full-body cyborg mercenary and there are records of him being involved in many international conflicts. He also bears a reputation as an infamous professional terrorist…”

Marie’s eyes widened. “Well would you look at that, they’re actually reporting the truth on Halter.”

“Wow, really? Old man Halter comes from that sort of background? …Well, I guess it makes sense. He’s tough enough to serve as a bodyguard for a walking bomb like you, after all.”

“Who are you calling a walking bomb? —Well, Halter’s supposedly famous in that line of work, you know? Famous enough

that the talking head knew of him as well."

"—Also, two female students who were reportedly friends of the suspect went missing around the same time. Their safety is currently a matter of concern..." Next, the faces of a blond-haired girl and a silver-haired girl—Marie and RyuZU—were displayed. Considering that they were wearing uniforms, the pictures were probably taken from the school's student register.

Naoto looked dissatisfied. "...The ringleader is treated as a victim while me and old man Halter are treated as international villains... Life's really unfair isn't it? Well, whatever."

"It's probably karma for your everyday conduct as opposed to mine."

"I'm a saint compared to you." Naoto scowled, but his expression changed as he suddenly remembered something. "By the way, is this gonna be okay for you? They're displaying your photo on live TV when you should be dead you know?"

"Don't worry. They'll never suspect that the girl in the picture is the 'deceased' Marie."

"...Why?" *Did you use the authority of the Breguets or something?* —Naoto looked as if he wanted to say that.

"I can guess what you're thinking, but you're off the mark. I'm the one who severed my ties with the Breguet family, so there's no way I can borrow their authority." Marie narrowed her eyes slightly. "...I simply took the liberty of using my elder sister's cover. That's why it's absolutely impossible for anyone to catch me—apart from her."

*—And to be honest, when I think about what would happen if she were to find out, I think I'd rather be caught by the military or the police instead.*

•

Throwing her emptied paper cup and wrapping paper into the trash can, Marie let out a sigh. While exiting the restaurant to where Naoto and AnchoR were waiting, she mused over a question she'd thrown on the back burner.

*—Now then, in the end, what does the situation look like right now…?*

*Funnily enough, the feds are using our previous actions to their own advantage—I mean, it's incredibly frustrating—but at least there haven't been any civilian casualties thanks to the precautionary measures we took.*

*Who knows how many tens of thousands of people would have died from the initial main cannon shot or the accidents following in the wake of the EMP? Without us necessitating Akihabara's evacuation, things could have been far worse.*

*In that sense, our actions weren't completely meaningless. That's the one thing we can take pride in—but now, it's being used against us. We've indirectly helped the feds cover up the incident and that's ultimately aiding Shiga's ex-military in their plans as well.*

*I find that fact simply—*

"Mother… I'd like an order, please."

"—Huh, eh, what?" Marie jolted up after having lost her train of thought. Before she had known it, AnchoR was right there in front of her, looking up at her with a worried face.

"Mother… you're 'crying.' …Please give me an order to help you."

*—Crying? Me?* Marie inadvertently felt the corners of her eyes

just to be sure… but they weren't wet. *As I suspected, even if "Y" was the one who made her, an automaton's an automaton in the end. She might not be able to process human expressions very well. Somehow, that feels like a relief… Wait, why should I feel relieved?* Before Marie could answer her own question—

"…You're crying… You're saying 'help me.' …That's why I'd like an order to help you, please."

"—"

Marie was *really* astonished now. Though it hadn't been very clear to her up until now, Marie felt something like disgust towards AnchoR. Upon those words, however, that disgust had lost its place and was now lingering inside her with nowhere to go.

*AnchoR's an automaton. There's no doubt about that.*

Marie could understand the psychology behind loving a doll as a doll. She thought dolls were cute as well. However, as a completely separate matter, the clocksmith within her still thought of **that** as just a man-made creation.

*Automata aren't human, in the same way that I'm not an automaton. In that case, is it weird of me to want dolls to act like dolls? No, it's common sense.*

*It's also only natural that I feel disgust towards her uncanniness. She's made me realize that she makes me feel uncomfortable, something that I was previously unaware of before.*

"…Is AnchoR not good enough to help you?"

*No. This is weird. It's impossible.*

Marie didn't know of any doll that acted like this. A human-shaped automaton was expressing sorrow right in front of her, and it just didn't feel right to her somehow. It defied any logical

sense.

"...Well... In that case, AnchoR— Can you destroy that thing?" *—I shouldn't think too deeply about this,* Marie's intuition told her. Obeying that, Marie gave the doll the order she had requested.

"...Would that help Mother?"

"Yeah, that's right. If you could damage that thing enough that some of its abilities are limited, the situation would considerably change."

*Yeah— If I can utilize AnchoR to change things, that would be the best choice. If that enormous weapon is destroyed before the public finds out about the current gag order, the situation will improve considerably. At the very least, things won't go according to their plans.*

*Since we were the ones who broadcast the advance notice of our terrorist attack...*

*"Everything was just a terrorist plot that the government successfully subjugated." —If that narrative passes in the public eye, then the situation will come to a better conclusion than where it's currently headed.*

However, while Marie was thinking that, AnchoR replied with the smile of a pure and innocent child, "Well then, Father will help you, Mother... so don't cry, okay?"

Marie was dumbfounded. *What are you talking about?* Marie reflexively searched for Naoto with her eyes but— "...Wha— Hey, Nao— Wh, What's wrong with you?!" Marie barely managed to restrain herself from screaming out his name as she rushed towards him in a fluster.

Naoto was sitting on the ground by the roadside panting heav-

ily, his face was completely pale. "...Ah— Marie. Hey, mind getting me a migraine pill...? An anesthetic would be fine too as long as it doesn't make me fall asleep," Naoto said with a strained smile, his face covered in sweat.

Getting a close look at him, Marie finally realized— **"Hey... wait... What happened to your headphones?!"**

"—What the heck are you saying Marie? They obviously broke back in Akihabara..."

*That's right. He threw them away right in front of my eyes. But more importantly—* "If you have the time to pamper a doll then go buy new headphones first! How stupid can you be?!"

Marie couldn't imagine the world that Naoto perceived, but even she could faintly hear the strange noises coming from Akihabara, the grid below.

*There's no way that Naoto doesn't hear that.*

*Actually, considering that Naoto has been talking to us through 100% noise-cancelling headphones this whole time, now that he's not wearing them, wouldn't the world be* ***way too loud*** *for him? Not to mention we're in the middle of a bustling street right now...!*

Wincing, Naoto shook his head with a weak smile. "I don't need them yet... If I buy them now, I'm not confident that I'll be able to stand not putting them on."

"This isn't the time to be saying stupid crap like that! Do you know how pale your face looks right now...?! You look like you're about to die!"

"Ah— Please stop, Marie. The temptation is seriously hard for me to resist right now."

—*The temptation? What?* Marie was confused by what Naoto was saying, but looking into his eyes, she found her answer. His gray, quivering eyes told her everything she needed to know.

*"If I lose focus right now, I'll immediately want to drive a screwdriver into my head and end it—"* That's what his eyes were telling her.

Naoto groaned, "...Once I find what I'm looking for, I'll go buy new headphones as fast as humanly possible, even without you telling me to. So please just get me some painkillers for now."

Overpowered by Naoto's resolve, Marie inadvertently nodded. "A, Alright... but what are you looking for Naoto?" *There should have been a drugstore at the corner of the last street we were on...* Almost in two places at once, Marie hurriedly looked around in a panic to confirm her memory while awaiting his answer.

In complete contrast to Marie, who by AnchoR's estimate had been "on the verge of tears," Naoto said faintly, feebly—with eyes filled to the brim with a fierce, almost uncontrollable determination—some words which made Marie goggle: "It's obvious... **I'm looking for a way to win!** Someway that we can thoroughly beat the crap out of the ones who had the gall to do such a thing to RyuZU!"

•

"Father, can you please order me to pet your head...?"

"Oh~ sure, sure! Father will recover in no time if you pet his head!" Naoto was happily playing with AnchoR. Throwing caution to the wind, he had taken painkillers—an entire pack of them.

*It's true that I was a little worried by his pained face.*

Apart from the moments that he touched AnchoR, Naoto's

face had been twisted the whole time. Marie now knew that it wasn't simply due to the pain from his burns.

*Naoto should be feeling pain much greater than that right now.*

"…" Marie looked down, in silence. She was ashamed of herself.

*When all's said and done—Naoto has been doing what he said he would this whole time.*

*He's been doing what he could.*

*On the other hand, I've been simply standing around doing nothing, stuck worrying about things beyond my control.*

As Naoto pet AnchoR, he looked up at Marie. "…Marie, just making sure but: Akihabara is one of the components that makes up Tokyo Multiple Grid, so it can't be purged, right?"

"…Yes. While it isn't impossible for the system to execute its purge, all of Tokyo would be affected, so a purge wouldn't make any sense."

Clock towers were what governed the municipal functions of the grids—and what governed the clock towers was the core tower. And, what governed the core towers of every Japanese city was Japan's horological control tower colloquially known as the Pillar of Heaven.

Unlike the core towers which extended deep underground, just as its name implies, the Pillar of Heaven was an enormous structure that reached towards the heavens.

"It's easy to understand if you think of Tokyo as one big clock. If Akihabara Grid is purged, all of Tokyo might collapse along with it—and if that happens, a chain reaction might start affecting

all of Japan. At the worst, all of East Asia might be devastated. That's how much of an effect purging Akihabara can have."

"In that case." Naoto smiled. "Thinking about it the other way, even if Akihabara Grid isn't functioning, it should still be possible to alter its current condition from a neighboring grid, right? — Ah~ thanks to you, Papa's all better now AnchoR!"

"…Really? You mean it? You still look like you're hurting, Father…"

"If it's for the sake of my wife and daughter, this level of pain is nothing! —So, going back to what I was saying…" Naoto flashed a daring smile. "We can just heat it up, or burn it if that's easier. Akihabara Grid, I mean, and that weapon along with it."

"———"

Marie stared on in mute amazement. Words wouldn't come to her.

*The bypass we used when we broadcast our fake warning has been magnetized and is no longer usable.*

*Even if it weren't, that plan isn't as simple as Naoto's making it out to be. Given that our bypass is out of order, it should already be impossible to manipulate Akihabara Grid's municipal functions but…*

"—Even if one grid stops functioning, the neighboring grids will shoulder its functions and maintain the status quo, right? If the status quo can be maintained, then naturally, it should be possible to destroy it as well. Right?"

*—So in short, this whole time, just as he said he would… This guy has been thinking of nothing but how to boil Shiga's ex-military alive.* Feeling half-relieved upon that revelation, Marie asked, "…So, have you discovered anything useful?"

"Not yet. I've found several bypasses, but it seems like going through just Ueno Grid alone won't have much of an effect.

It's probably just like you said, Tokyo Multiple Grid is one system and the countless intertwined governing mechanisms are covering for Akihabara Grid's burden right now but..." Naoto continued emphatically, "Just one more... If I can confirm just one more thing—!"

Naoto practically snarled like a wounded animal, "I'll beat them and beat them until those bastards cry. Until then, I'm not going to wear any headphones."

Then, in a complete reversal, as if he were a different person entirely, Naoto sat AnchoR on his shoulders and rose with a carefree smile.

"—But finding things that AnchoR-chan wants to do is important as well! She has to take back a thousand years' worth of desires you know! How could I make her wait any longer!

Alrighty, where should we go next, AnchoR! Should we check out some clothes? Though, the ones you're wearing right now are cute already! I have absolutely no complaints about them!"

However, AnchoR muttered from atop his shoulders, "But Father... Mother asked me, if I can, destroy that..."

Naoto whirled around in anger. "Marie! You were still saying things like that?!"

"Y, Yeah... After all, if she can destroy it, then—" *It'd be a much quicker and easier solution than trying to heat Akihabara up through its neighboring grids.*

Before Marie could finish her thought, Naoto interrupted her. "That's a no. Absolutely not! What do you take AnchoR-chan to be, you walking landmine?"

*What, you ask? Well obviously—* The clocksmith inside her was saying this: *—An automaton that's the embodiment of absurd and unreasonable violence. Isn't she a weapon that was made precisely for times like these?*

But before Marie could answer, Naoto continued, "...Well, if AnchoR was in perfect shape—then yeah, she could easily send an unseemly piece of junk like that off to the recycling plant in one hit. AnchoR's a strong one after all—but..."

"Uhm... I'm sorry..."

"You don't need to apologize, AnchoR! There's no need to listen to the babbling nonsense of a walking landmine. Especially when she pretends not to know any better."

"Wha—" Marie reflexively tried to defend herself, but Naoto glared at her.

"Didn't she say that she needs to recharge? I'm pretty sure I remember that she was using her Twelfth Balance Wheel when she was fighting RyuZU. If she used that right now, she'd only last a few seconds—that is, a few seconds from AnchoR's frame of reference, to be clear.

In any case, she'd have to revert back to her First Balance Wheel after that, so she'd be left vulnerable in the resting state that she's in right now. So, even as powerful as AnchoR-chan is, do you really think it's reasonable to ask her to destroy that stupidly enormous piece of garbage in such a short amount of time?"

"...That's—"

"In order to operate for a meaningful amount of time at her greatest output, she would need to continue storing the excess energy that her perpetual gear is putting out.

Let's see..." Naoto paused to strain his ears. "—It'll take about

160 hours. The enemy will become operational before that… So forget the convenient thought of making AnchoR solve everything —and, more importantly—!!"

Naoto said with a hint of scorn, "Don't go and shove all the burden onto a child! Were you planning to just sit back and watch? —How selfish can you be?! Aren't you ashamed? Frankly, I'm disgusted with you."

"—ngh!" Marie was trembling as her entire body flared up, it was as if her blood was boiling. The words "humiliation" and "shame" could barely scratch the surface of the emotions that were broiling her brain right now.

However, AnchoR said hesitantly, "…But Father… Is there any other way—?"

"There isn't. But even without another option, having you fight against that thing is rejected, denied, forbidden, and absolutely no good!"

"…O, Okay…" Overpowered by Naoto, AnchoR fell into silence.

—*What are they talking about?* Marie was irritated that the conversation had drifted away from her understanding. It was a pattern that she had grown to hate. Once again things were being decided through an alien logic and morality that were completely foreign to her—left out of the picture, Marie could only grind her teeth in frustration.

"…I'm sorry," AnchoR said from atop Naoto's shoulders, hanging her head down.

As Marie's heart was pierced by the sorrowful tone of AnchoR's voice, Naoto said mockingly, "Wow Marie… making a child who's been depressed for a thousand years even sadder, could this be the very peak of sadism?"

“N, No— That’s not what I was trying to d—”

“…I’m sorry, Mother.”

“I told you to stop calling me that— Argh no, come on! I get it! I understand! I was wrong, I’m sorry! So don’t make that face—!!” …Even Marie herself didn’t understand what she was trying to say.

*Lamenting this, lamenting that, and in the end, coming up with nothing.*

*And to top it all off, I had the immature thought of resolving the situation by conveniently leaving everything to a little girl.*

*And while I’ve been trying to pass the buck, Naoto has been— No, even now, he’s gathering as much information as he can. He’s been practically killing himself to come up with a way to break the impasse we’re in.*

*Now that I think about it—ever since the EMP hit, this guy hasn’t stopped for a single moment.*

*And you, Marie Bell Breguet?*

*Just what have you been doing?*

“__”

Marie clenched her teeth so hard that it felt like her molars would crack.

*If I continue to become this pathetic at every little surprise, I’m really gonna come to hate myself.*

*Just how many times, how many hours, how many days, how many years am I going to twiddle my thumbs before I finally learn my lesson…!*

"—Naoto."

"Yeah yeah, what?"

"Sorry, but I'll be heading back before you guys. AnchoR, can I leave this guy in your care?"

"...If that's Mother's orders—"

"It isn't an order. It's a request. I'll leave this guy—Naoto—to you. If you guys are found by the police or the military shake them off as best you can and return to base."

Marie hadn't realized—but at that moment, for the very first time, she had treated AnchoR not as not a doll, but as a comrade. Only AnchoR picked up on it.

"...Okay, a request. It's much more important than an order..." Seeing AnchoR nod with a smile like a blossoming flower, Marie nodded as well.

Naoto didn't ask where she was going to go.

Marie didn't tell him either.

*My brain is finally working again after that fiasco with the EMP. That's all there is to it.*

*I'm simply going to do what I can—what I should be doing—without hesitation, I'm going to give it all I've got—!*

•

After Marie fully disappeared from their sight, AnchoR said, "Mother wasn't crying anymore... Father, you're amazing!"

"...She's actually an amazing person too, you know," Naoto whispered to her with a somewhat ambiguous smile. "She's a genius."

"...Ge-ni-us?"

"Yeah, it means she's a su~per ama~zing person."

"...She's more amazing than amazing?"

Seeing AnchoR's eyes open wide while hugging her stuffed animal, Naoto felt at ease. The two resumed their walk. "Yeah! It's a secret that I said that though!"

He began to walk faster and faster, breaking into a jog.

"That girl wastes her time worrying about the strangest things—but when push comes to shove, she's a genius that always pulls through in a pinch. She's different from a guy like me."

*Geniuses probably have their own worries that only they can understand,* Naoto thought. *But even so, for a genius like her to waste her time stressing over trivial things is—annoying, to put it mildly.*

*I mean, for someone to be so smart that they loop right back around into turning stupid, now that's stupid.*

"Well, it looks like I'm feeling a little better, so let's do what we can as well! Alright, let's go somewhere that's a little far away next. Full speed ahead!"

"...Okay." Atop his shoulders, AnchoR was lost in thought as the wind brushed past her face.

*—My amazing father is saying that my mother is even more amazing than amazing. If the two of them are here, no one will have to die. Everyone will be saved and start smiling again. Big Sister too!*

Feeling a sense of hope for the future for the first time in a thousand years, AnchoR smiled.

"———"

"...Father, I'd like an order, please."

"R, Right... Umm, yeah, you see... there's a, a sporting goods store, over there, so..." Between wheezes, Naoto's voice began to flag. "C, Could you buy me some water... and an oxygen can?"

Without the slightest dignity as a father, Naoto's form slowly wilted until he was fully prostrate on the ground. Lungs heaving, he couldn't do anything but watch as AnchoR scurried off to the store.

•

"—Excuse me, prime minister. What... did you say just now?" the defense minister asked, his voice trembling. He spoke for everyone present with that question.

The meaningless, fruitless conference of the Anti-Terror Committee was still going strong. The conference had been adjourned several times now. It was now in its fifth meeting.

In face of what the prime minister—the representative of the ruling party—had just said out of nowhere, none of the committee members could conceal their astonishment or terror.

The prime minister shook his head, seeming dissatisfied with the committee's response. "It's just like I said. I was on the hotline with the IGMO just now and I've just finished explaining the situation our nation is in. And—" He took a breath, before emphatically declaring: **"I made an emergency request for the use of Tall Wand on Akihabara Grid."**

The meeting room didn't erupt into a clamor. Just the opposite, everyone was flabbergasted. The room was simply covered in silence.

With a face as if he had just chewed on a bitter pill, the chief cabinet secretary stepped forward from behind the prime minister, who was puffing up his chest, full of confidence.

He explained in a strained voice to all present, “The gag order is reaching its limits. It’s only a matter of time before our present situation is discovered by other countries.

Once that happens, they will eventually propose the use of Tall Wand on Japan. Regardless of which nation brings it up, it’s inevitable that all the countries of Asia will oppose it, in which case a war is likely to happen.”

…*We know that already,* Everyone in the room probably thought at once. *At the very least, apart from the prime minister, everyone in this room—regardless of what their position is—should have swallowed that solemn truth.*

*Wasn’t the purpose of this committee to decide what to do based on that premise, and isn’t that also why we’ve been arguing at an impasse this whole time—?*

“But,” the chief cabinet secretary continued despite everyone staring on in mute amazement, “if we request assistance for resolving the situation by reporting this national scandal ourselves, then it’s a different story. We’ll disclose all the information on the target that we currently have to the IGMO and have them destroy it along with the grid.

As of right now, the militaries of the neighboring countries and Meister Guild are heading towards us as quickly as possible. This is the best action we can take to keep the damage done from destroying Akihabara Grid to the bare minimum. This is also our best means of avoiding the worst-case scenario of a world war. — **That’s the prime minister’s reasoning.** ”

The chief cabinet secretary ended his explanation like so. The terrifying tone of the words he had added at the end made it ap-

parent to all the members present how he really felt.

After hearing the chief cabinet secretary's explanation, everyone simply had one thought. It was a singular question that for a single miraculous moment, united the opinions of the committee members for the very first time. Namely, that thought was—"What the hell are you saying?"

*If it's a joke, it's in poor taste—and if it's the truth, that makes it even nastier.*

The defense minister bellowed, "—Prime minister! Do you have your wits about?! I can make countless rebuttals, but first—calling what you just did at your own discretion above your legal authority wouldn't be enough!!"

However, the prime minister simply replied with a composed face, "—It's an emergency right now."

As everyone was at a loss for words, the prime minister puffed out his chest as he continued, "As this country's prime minister, I hereby declare a state of national emergency! Everyone, the fate of the nation is in jeopardy right now. We don't have the luxury of waiting for the target, Yatsukahagi, to begin moving again!"

*He really did it...! That god damn son of a bitch... ugh!* As angry roars filled the room, Karasawa felt a chill creeping up his spine.

*—There's an utter fool here. Not the prime minister. He's nothing but an idiot not even worth mentioning. But I'm certain of it. There's a god damn son of a bitch here, an utter fool who gave our idiot prime minister that insane idea.*

*An utter fool who inflated our idiot prime minister's ego. Look at him, he really thinks he's the cock of the walk.*

*In short, this is what happened:*

*—"Even if you stay quiet and continue observing the situation, in the end you'll be forced to take responsibility and resign. In that case, why not avoid that scenario by making an appeal to the citizens as well as the other countries that you're a sincerely faithful prime minister? After the situation is resolved, you can evade responsibility by blaming everything on the previous administration that held the power in this country for such a long time."*

*That should more or less cover the nonsense that the utter fool crammed into the prime minister's head.*

*In the first place—do you think that if you make a request for the use of Tall Wand that the IGMO will answer with a "Understood, it'll be delivered to you in thirty minutes," like a pizza place or something?*

—Tall wand was the most powerful anti-surface weapon of mass destruction in known existence. It was made using the scientific theories from the ancient era. An orbital satellite, Tall Wand was a simple device that worked by dropping a rod made of heavy alloy at something on the Earth's surface from its platform up in space.

While there were no records of its use—Tall Wand was understood to possess a destructive power that could easily pulverize a city. Using it required a majority vote of at least three-fourths of the IGMO's executive committee in favor.

*However, as there are seven Asian countries in the executive committee in the current term—getting a favorable decision would not be easy.*

*There's no way that this idiot, who I'm not even sure knows what kind of weapon Tall Wand is, has the diplomatic skills to have gotten the IGMO to authorize its use in such a short time.*

*Which means that—without a doubt, this is all a part of someone's pre-arranged scenario, everything's been scripted from the start...!*

"—Yes, you're right! A declaration of national emergency is in order...! After all, prime minister, the nation will be left in ruins if it's left to an incompetent like you!!" the defense minister bellowed, the veins by his temples popping.

Rebuked right to his face, the prime minister unsurprisingly responded in kind. "Watch your mouth, Mr. Tokita! Who do you think I—"

"Shut up! I have no intention of speaking with a traitor. In light of this national crisis, I hereby strip you of all your power by my authority as this country's minister of defense!"

The defense minister continued shouting with the intensity of a conflagration, proclaiming, "As of now, the military will temporarily seize the authority of the prime minister! At the same time, we indict you for inciting civil unrest as well as treason!!"

"Wh, What did you say?!" the prime minister—or rather, the man who was now designated the ex-prime minister—yelled, looking startled.

Slamming a thick bundle of documents on the table in front of him, the defense minister howled, "You! Despite knowing of that illegal weapon's dangers, you gave it your tacit consent! The evidence that you tried to use it to strengthen your political foothold is right here!

However, as soon as that plan failed, you conspired with foreign countries to greatly harm our nation for the sake of escaping responsibility! This is none other than a breach of faith against our nation!"

"Th, That's a false accusation! What do you think you're say-

ing?!”

“Your squirming is unsightly! The evidence is already in order! —Play it!!” The second the defense minister yelled that out, a video was projected onto the enormous screen hanging on the front wall of the meeting room.

The video showed a somewhat dimly lit room. In the center of the room was an old man wearing an aged military uniform. He was sitting in a chair. The viewers couldn’t make out the expression on his face due to the dim lighting, but the old man indifferently said:

“I’m sorry, prime minister—but to try to use us as a tool, I can only say that you’re belittling us. If you’re looking down on us as naive ideologues who fancy themselves revolutionaries, then I shall have you pay with your blood. We shall impeach those of you in the federal government and mete out our enmity and indignation on equal terms.”

As the short video ended, the room was filled with a commotion. It was a clamor of animosity and outrage directed towards the prime minister.

In the midst of it all, the defense minister shouted in triumph, “—Ex-prime minister, this is the enemy’s proclamation of criminal intent that our public security police found on your computer. Pretending to be a faithful public servant while concealing something like this is quite the joke isn’t it?!”

“I—I’ve never seen this video before! I know nothing of this!!”

“Shut it! We’ll hear all your excuses in the interrogation room — Take him away!” Two military officers that had been standing behind the defense minister stepped forward and took positions by the ex-prime minister’s sides before trying to escort him outside.

However, a minister of state blocked their way. “With all due respect, defense minister! I’d like you to hear what I have to say as well!

Regarding the order that a section of the military was given two weeks ago to be on standby which resulted in a hole in Tokyo’s security force’s defenses! Isn’t that the underlying cause of that terror broadcast from Akihabara?!

Actually—who *but* the Technical Force of Tokyo’s military would have the technology and knowledge to make that possible?!”

“Wha— What are you trying to say!”

“Are you not currently playing the part of the hero in a situation you helped instigate yourself?!”

“What nonsense! That’s an insult that I can’t let slide you bastard!!”

“In that case, I’d like you to answer my question—!”

...At this point, the meeting was in such pandemonium that no one could put things back in order. Before Karasawa realized it, even the prime minister, who had been in the middle of being escorted out, was a part of the clamor again, set on repeating his own claims without a clue as to what anyone else was saying.

*There’s no doubt about it at this point. Someone’s definitely pulling the strings here...!* Karasawa groaned a step away from the center of the commotion. *Everything’s simply falling into place too perfectly.*

*Whether it be the prime minister acting at his own discretion, the coup d’état by the military, or the indictment against the defense minister just now, it all happened like clockwork.*

*Things will no longer end with just the collapse of the government cabinet. It's only a matter of time before all the different factions of the federal government, including the military, fracture and a civil war begins.*

*Is it the double agent from Shiga's ex-military described in the intelligence report provided by Dr. Marie...? No— In this whole chain of events, the Akihabara Terror Incident was the one thing that the mastermind shouldn't have accounted for.*

That event had been an unprecedented miracle. Even having known all the details, Karasawa had doubted the plan was possible when he first heard of it from Marie.

But now, even that unforeseeable miracle was being used as a part of the present scripted scenario.

*A monster who's even successfully using the magic of Dr. Marie's group against us— Is the identity of that monster really Shiga's ex-military?*

*...I can't help but feel that that isn't quite right.*

Taking a little time to get a good look at the room that was currently embroiled in chaos—Karasawa became convinced, albeit reluctantly, that— *I'm the only one capable of thinking rationally in this room right now.*

*Has the grave situation thrown them into disarray, or are these the true faces of our excellent elected officials?*

While hoping that it was the former as a Japanese citizen, Karasawa came to this conclusion: *At this point, I have no choice but to investigate matters myself... though it's extremely dangerous.*

*What can you do? I guess, it's my job as a consultant— No,*

*actually, this clearly falls outside of the call of duty, doesn't it.* Karasawa shook his head with a bitter smile.

At the same time, his sharp gaze focused on one person. A suspicious man who, like himself, wasn't taking part in the commotion. A step apart, that man was currently trying to sneak out of the room.

*Well then, I guess I'll have you show me your tail at least…!* With a sly smile Karasawa erased his own presence and set off in the pursuit of the escaping man.

•

Even after the sun set on the Tokyo metropolis, the city didn't sleep. In a complete reversal of how desolate it was during the day, the underground shopping center was now filled with lively voices and light from neon gears. Naoto and AnchoR returned to base, jostled by the crowd along the way.

As they entered the workshop, Vermouth, who had been left on a hanger called out cheerfully, "Sup kid— Wait, huh? What's with the cute dress? Where're your balls kid? C'mon, show me real quick. I'm worried that a bad mister will assault you."

"So someone like you, old man?"

"Hey now is that any way to address a lady? Not that this whole dutch wife situation was my idea— So what happened, kid? Bahaha," Vermouth laughed as he tilted his head.

Naoto was looking towards the workbench in the room. His eyes had been locked there since he entered the workshop. There, he could see Marie's back as she repaired the heavily damaged RyuZU.

"…How long has it been since Marie started working?"

It had been nearly seven hours since Marie had left Naoto and AnchoR and returned alone. During that time, Naoto and AnchoR walked all around Ueno Grid and even Sakuradamon Grid as well — Still, Naoto didn't think that RyuZU would have cooled down by the time Marie had gotten back.

"Yeah." Vermouth nodded, answering with a bitter smile, "I can imagine how you feel— Four hours. She's been at it like that for four whole hours."

"—"

"Of course, she wasn't twiddling her thumbs while she waited. She was making preparations, trimming replacement parts and assembling them. Once RyuZU's body cooled down— Well, she's been like that the whole time."

Even as the two spoke, Marie continued working. Most likely—no, without a doubt—she hadn't even noticed that Naoto and AnchoR were back.

"What a bad joke, right? Is what we're seeing even humanly possible?"

—Indeed, it was a terrible joke. It was something that Naoto was intimately familiar with—the miracle he had had the privilege of seeing in Kyoto. It was the apex of an art form that could only be described as a divine feat.

**It was like the air was grating.** The physical laws of the world seemed to distort around the petite blond-haired girl.

Screws, cylinders, wires, springs, gears—every single clockwork part in her vicinity defied gravity—or rather, they flew up and returned to their proper places so rapidly and so precisely, that it was as if time were being unwound. At least, it looked that way to others.

Raw materials were refined, nerves were tuned, and mechanisms were adjusted. She was like a conductor operating with a grace that could bring one to tears. The girl's breaths, her blood flow, even the gliding of her bones and muscles were all in splendid harmony. Marie was performing the symphony of a god.

*—Is this really a living, breathing human?* Naoto began to doubt his own eyes. *Am I not seeing an artisanal music box of the highest order? An instrument made in the human form with an absolutely transcendent technique?*

Watching Marie defy her human limits, AnchoR asked quietly, "Father— Is this… 'genius'?"

"—Yeah, that's right. It sure is… goddammit." As Naoto nodded, he grit his teeth in vexation.

*Back then, I was simply moved. I even felt envious of how beautiful it was. I was entranced by her forceful, even violent technique—by a talent that felt like it could even remake the world.*

*But now, I'm feeling something so much more. Jealousy, thirst. If it was any other automaton or maybe a core tower that was being repaired, then I wouldn't care, but… Why is the person over there, the one repairing RyuZU?* ***Why is that person not me?!***

Suddenly, the melody broke down.

"—Haa! I'm out of sugar! My chocolate, where's my chocolate… Ah, there it was… Hmm…? Oh, Naoto, you're back?"

Upon remembering to properly breathe, Marie had fallen over on the spot. As she munched on a bar of chocolate that she'd taken out of her pocket, she noticed Naoto's presence and raised her head. Naoto nodded lightly in response. He still looked queasy.

“Yeah… I’m back~”

“…Mother, we’re back.”

“Yes, welcome back— Did you find what you were looking for?” Marie asked, seeing new headphones sitting atop Naoto’s bed of black hair.

Naoto nodded before hesitantly asking, “Yeah… but first, Marie, could I ask you a little something?”

“What? Ah, do you mind if I answer you while I work?”

“No, not at all.”

Marie nodded as she returned to the workbench. Her work pace was slower than before as she was a little less focused—but even so, it was still far faster than what an ordinary person would be capable of.

“So, what’d you want to ask?”

“…Marie, how are you repairing RyuZU? You can’t get compatible replacement parts for her from the stores can you?”

Marie didn’t slow down at all as she answered, “Aside from that absurd Imaginary Gear, I can fix the rest of her mechanisms one way or another. RyuZU was originally owned by and kept under the care of my family—the Breguets—you know?

Do you have any idea how many times I analyzed and rearranged her parts to try to get her to operate? —Even without her blueprint, I’ve memorized her mechanisms down to the arrangement of her nanogears.”

Seeing Naoto stay silent, Marie lowered her gaze onto an object on the floor in her vicinity. She was looking at what looked like a corpse but was really a thoroughly dismantled automaton lying on the ground.

“Fortunately, there are a ton of automata here that used high grade materials for shitty, indecent purposes… Let’s see, how many did I take apart in all?”

Vermouth answered, “Twenty-seven.”

“Ah, yes yes. After I dismantled twenty-seven automata, I had all the parts I needed.”

“Hey Princess, try to be a little more thoughtful, eh? That gramps called Konrad was making a teary face like it was the end of the world you know?”

“Like I care. These objects are evil,” Marie muttered with a straight face. She then turned around to face Naoto as if she had just remembered something. She pointed her screwdriver at Naoto with a snap.

“Just so you know—my ears aren’t as handy as yours. What I can do with the equipment available here amounts to nothing more than first aid. Making the final adjustments is *your* job, got it?” she said teasingly.

Naoto slightly nodded as he looked away. While being somewhat surprised by his reaction, Marie resumed her work.

“Ah, what about old man Halter?”

“—I couldn’t get an artificial body for him. I’m putting his case on the…” *That’s a lie,* Marie muttered internally. *No, not exactly. It’s true that I couldn’t get an artificial body for him, but because of that, I tried hooking him up to a speech device instead.*

*—But there was no response.*

*It isn’t certain. But, even with a proper procedure, transplanting the brain pod into another artificial body would undeniably involve a fair amount of risk. Not to mention, considering*

*what had happened, it wouldn't be strange if the damage reached his brain as well—*

"Rather than that, could you give me a hand? I'd like three resonance-linking autonomous movements."

"—Sorry, I can't make those."

"In that case, just the circuits would be fine, so make me—"

"—I can't do that either. What you're doing right now is way beyond my understanding," Naoto said as he shuffled off to a corner of the room and sat down.

Marie sounded a bit irked as she reproached him. "Now look here... shouldn't you have learned how to construct circuits in middle school? Why can't you even do something as easy as that? Have you never thought that throwing your school fees down the drain is wasteful?"

Naoto raised his voice and retorted, "Oyyy oy Marie, I have no idea what you're talking about! But don't go underestimating machine enthusiasts! I've read through my textbooks so many times that they're all worn out, and who knows how many manuals I bought with the pittance of a fortune left to me—I don't even remember myself!"

"You. Not. Remembering. Is *exactly* the problem here—tch! Don't say it like it's something you should be proud of!" Marie yelled back, matching his tone. "—For god's sake! Why can't you do it when you have such handy ears..."

*Do you have any idea how many times I thought— "If only I had superhuman hearing like you..."*

*I wouldn't waste even a single second if I suddenly got it now. I would immediately get to work mastering it and show you all I can do with it, and yet you...*

Marie shot a resentful glance at Naoto, but he simply replied, "Good question. I'm mystified by it myself. Because, you know, no matter how many textbooks and manuals I read—I don't understand the things written in them one bit!"

"Stop taking pride in something so stupid! I'll knock you down, you know?! Ahh, the poor trees that were wasted on you…" Marie sighed, as she felt a migraine coming on, probably because she had blown a fuse.

Taking another bite of her chocolate bar, she stopped. Suddenly, a question arose in her mind, …*Why can't he do it?* She wasn't attacking him. She was genuinely perplexed.

***There's no way he isn't trying,*** *I mean, we're talking about Naoto here—!*

*An idiot who loves, and only loves machines—so much so that he seriously fell in love with a mechanical girl, he even proposed to her for god's sake.*

*I could understand it if we were only talking about general subjects. This guy truly has zero interest in things that don't appeal to him. However, when it comes to machines— He should have been paying attention in technology class.*

*He gave up because he couldn't understand it?*

*—As if. I can't imagine this guy giving up. So much so that even just hearing him say that he can't do something feels out of place. I understand at least that much—about this boy.* Marie was proud of this.

*In that case, why can't he do it despite having that level of resolve and such an absurd talent? It's not like he has a bad memory. He isn't hopelessly incapable either. In the first place, even if he could grasp all of RyuZU's inner workings, would that*

*alone have been enough to fix RyuZU's malfunction—?*

Marie cast the doubt that arose in her mind at Naoto. "—Hey, didn't you fix RyuZU up back in Kyoto? How did you do it back then?"

"I just fumbled around inside her with my hands."

Dumbfounded, Marie repeated Naoto's words. "...Fumbled around, you say?"

"I don't understand the explanations written in the textbooks, so I just fumbled around with her parts until the unpleasant sound I heard inside her went away through trial and error." Naoto answered with a sigh.

*—Simply ridiculous. Does this guy not understand how complex of a machine an automaton as advanced as RyuZU is? With that talent of his, he should—even more so than me.*

*I don't get it. This guy has to be making some ridiculously basic mistake... Wait.* At that moment, Marie felt an indescribably chilling thought creep up inside her mind— *Or perhaps, even though I think I get it, I'm actually the one missing something ridiculously basic...*

"———"

Marie stopped thinking about it. She felt that it was **a dangerous line of thought.**

"...I really don't get you, you pervert." She partitioned off her thoughts with a curse and changed the topic. "So, is that all you wanted to ask? What happened with things on your end?"

"Right." Naoto nodded before beginning, "Marie, that remarkably gargantuan tower—the Pillar of Heaven was it? That isn't under the jurisdiction of the military right?"

"…Hm? That's right, it's under the jurisdiction of the Imperial Household Agency. Why do you ask?"

"The Imperial Household Agency? Then that means… ahh, I see." Naoto nodded with a knowing face.

With that, Vermouth seemed to have caught wind of what Naoto was thinking. Vermouth explained, "This nation known as Japan is rooted in old traditions that began well before the planet was recreated with gears. No one can make a move **there.**

Kid, as a Japanese, you should know what I'm talking about right? A de facto inviolable territory—it's the perfect place to build what's literally 'the cornerstone of the nation' that governs the core towers which are the nucleus of Tokyo's various grids."

Naoto looked at him with a suspicious squint, muttering, "…It doesn't sound that way to me."

"Well duh! That's nothing more than a pretext after all!" Vermouth cackled.

Lost in their exchange, Marie confusedly asked, "…What do you mean?" At risk of being left out by the familiar pattern—Marie suddenly gasped. "Naoto, just what are you thinking?" Her voice was trembling a little.

However, the boy being asked looked bold. Naoto was not wavering in the slightest. His gray eyes glittered daringly, and his lips were curled in the smile of a kid that was up to no good.

Naoto said something that made Marie doubt her ears, Vermouth explode into laughter, and AnchoR tilt her head— He thrust the fruit of his labors before Marie.

"I'm just gonna skip to the conclusion, Marie. We're gonna take over the Pillar of Heaven—or should I say, **the Imperial Palace.** "

•

What Naoto had spent half a day looking for—was namely **a way to win.** As for the **method** , simply calling his plan outrageous wouldn't do it justice.

"—So yeah, what do you think?" Naoto asked as he finished going over his plan.

"Hah— Hahaah! Oy kid— Oh Naoto-chan! My eyes didn't deceive me after all! You plan is as **interesting** as it gets! You're on your way to becoming a good scumbag kid— Actually, you might be one already!"

"Father… you're amazing—!!"

Vermouth convulsed with wild laughter while AnchoR's eyes sparkled. Only Marie was left astonished. She said, as if struggling to breathe, "—You…you aren't sane. Do you truly understand everything you just said?"

"Well, yeah? —Come on Marie, try recalling what happened," Naoto said as he raised his index finger. "Who was the first one to claim responsibility for the terrorism, us or them?"

*—Us. We announced that we would freeze Akihabara.*

"Who's the one being taken as the perpetrator for this chain of incidents?"

*—Us. Indeed, it's being reported on the news.* Feeling a chill run down her spine, Marie gulped.

"So why not just go ahead and answer all of their expectations by playing the part they gave us? Fiendishly at that. How about a name befitting a group that's related to that international armed organization, whatever it was. For example, Mr. Naoto Miura and His Merry Friends—" Naoto said with a twisted smirk that didn't

suit his baby face.

"We were responsible for everything" —An exceedingly simple and straightforward "evil" that anyone could easily recognize. It would be the creation of a convenient culprit—a scapegoat for everyone to easily lay the blame.

"If they want to put on a farce then let's gaudily dance to their tune. So much so that that enormous piece of junk is overshadowed and we steal the show! Coup d'etats? Conspiracies? No one will be made to take responsibility for something that 'never happened.' After all, everything was caused by a random group of terrorists blindsiding everyone ♡."

With just one move—just like how Shiga's ex-military put the feds in checkmate, this time, they'll be the ones put in a corner. Seeing Naoto's ominous sneer, Marie shuddered.

*—The logic checks out. However, does this guy understand what* ***that method*** *would imply?*

"With just this—we can jam them into a boiling crucible, that crucible being Akihabara, and the firewood to fuel it will be the Pillar of Heaven."

*He does. He really does. He's suggesting it despite knowing the ramifications.* Upon discerning both reason—and madness—from the glint of his eyes, Marie finally understood.

*—It takes a lot to make Naoto Miura truly angry. Even if someone made fun of him or cursed at him, it would be inconsequential to this boy.*

*However—there's probably just one thing that Naoto Miura can't forgive, one extra-large landmine that he has. And Shiga's bunch* ***stepped right on it not once, but twice.***

*The first time was restraining AnchoR with that mask. The*

*second time was wrecking RyuZU with that EMP.*

*I finally understand why Naoto was abnormally composed upon waking up after fainting. This guy completely snapped at that moment. He was possessed by an endlessly cool, stark rage.*

*—It's just the same as his burns. If Naoto finds something to be necessary, he'll do it. He'll do whatever it takes to achieve his goals. When you get down to it, that's all it is—but how many people actually have the resolve to literally pay any and every "price" to achieve their goals?*

*—Naoto Miura is scary.* Marie acknowledged that that was how she felt. But that wasn't all, deep down Maire thought that —*Naoto Miura is strong.*

Even though she thought it was a pointless, frivolous hypothetical, she still couldn't stop herself from thinking it:

*—If I were ever to make this guy my enemy, would I be able to win? If I used all of my knowledge, my skills, my connections, and... Basically, if I fully use everything I have at my disposal...*

*"Naoto Miura's specs are no match for Marie Bell Breguet's." —That should... be the case. But why is it then that I can't imagine a world where I beat this guy...*

"Hey, princess. I implore you from the bottom of my heart. I won't be spoiled and ask for a military-grade artificial body, so could you please switch me to another body that I can move properly in at the bare minimum?"

Marie, who had been at a loss for words, turned to face the man who was meekly speaking. What she saw as she looked over —was AnchoR with her eyes sparkling and Vermouth looking like he'd found his resolve.

*Naoto is AnchoR's master. It's only natural that she'd obey him—but* "—Are you seriously on board with Naoto's plan? **Hell awaits whether the plan succeeds or fails** you know?!"

*That's right, even if everything does go according to Naoto's plan, we'd still become "evil"—heinous, unsurpassable* ***epic villains.***

*This man has no obligation or motive to take that burden on. He's just a spy who lent his services to some corporation for money. He has neither a sense of justice nor any sort of creed; he's simply an outlaw that works for money. A criminal. I don't trust him, nor should I. That's the kind of man he is.*

However, Vermouth answered without shifting his gaze away from Marie, "Didn't I say that his plan is **interesting?** —Does a man need a better reason than that?"

"__"

"You can't understand? Well, that's fine. But I'm serious. In fact, there's only been… yep, only one other time in my life that I was this serious."

Inadvertently having her curiosity piqued, Marie asked, "Just for reference, what was the first time?"

"It was for some stupid dream," Vermouth instantly replied, as a bitter, cringing smile surfaced on his face. "I screwed up though. Then, as I was drifting through my second life as a cyborg, like a dead man really, that runt over there—"

"Ah… I'm, sor—"

" **—saved me.** I remembered just as I was about to kick the bucket—that I'm alive." Vermouth turned his gaze towards Naoto. "Then, as fate would have it, when I woke up to my third life, this brat was here.

A crazy bastard who says he'll crush anyone who rubs him the wrong way—no matter who they are. I'm 'in love.' I would very much like to have a front row seat. I want to see just how far this kid'll go. What kind of schemes he'll perpetrate."

Marie sighed. Exasperated, she gave Vermouth and Naoto a look that said, "I can't understand the two of you from the bottom of my heart."

AnchoR looked up at her, asking, "...Mother, are you scared? AnchoR will... protect you, so..."

"What are you getting cold feet for, princess? Hurry off to the dressing room and put on some lucky panties for your date tonight. This is the part where you're supposed to shake your ass to mark the start of our imminent counterattack, you know?" Vermouth laughed, egging Marie on.

"What are you saying Miste— Miss? Not that it really matters, but this won't be a counterattack," Naoto corrected him, sounding exasperated. "After all, the feds were the ones who were attacked by the guys from Shiga, not us. And Marie—"

"...What do you want?"

Seeing that Marie was still hesitating Naoto said—with the bright, innocent smile of a child, "When you were a kid... didn't you ever see other kids desperately trying to make sand castles in the sandbox—and think it'd be crazy fun to kick their sand hills into oblivion and run away?"

—Marie suddenly remembered.

*When I discarded my identity as a Breguet and a Meister. When I decided to call myself a terrorist after thwarting the compulsory purge of Kyoto... Back then, on the rooftop of that school, just what did I say to this guy?*

*“We probably wouldn’t be praised or thanked by anyone—”*

*“—but it would definitely———”*

Marie sighed with a bitter smile. She ran a hand through her hair and scratched roughly. “—You two really are hopeless boneheads aren’t you?”

“But it sounds fun right?” Naoto smiled.

Though she got the sense that her resolve was being dragged out and manipulated by Naoto’s smile, strangely, that didn’t feel unpleasant to her—Marie nodded.

*I get it now—I’m an idiot too.*

And so, at this time, at this very moment, with the frivolous air of children plotting a prank, the crime that would be the first and last of its kind in scale was set into motion.



# Chapter Two / 05 : 17 / Disaster

The day had broken. A long, enormous silhouette extended towards the dawning sky dyed in blue and orange.

It was a tower. An enormous pillar that towered over its surroundings. It stretched from the surface all the way to the heavens— It was the structure known as the Pillar of Heaven.

Looking down from above, one could see an enormous gear which the base of the pillar passed through. The “roots” of the pillar extended outwards below that gear.

The pillar was in Sakuradamon Grid—the city with the highest elevation in Tokyo. It was a small city that was several kilometers in diameter, but as the Pillar of Heaven occupied the majority of its surface area, there were no civilians who lived inside this grid.

However, in the center of the city—inside the castle that enclosed the Pillar of Heaven, there *were* a few residents. A family whose imperial lineage traced all the way back to the ancient era along with those who worked for them.

There was a deep trench encircling the castle which isolated it even from its own host city. As it is the nature of gears to constantly turn, the same holds true for the world’s cities which rest upon them. This place was one of the rare exceptions. It was motionless.

In one quarter of the still castle there was a space adorned with vibrant greenery and water above the castle gate. The scenery wasn’t artificial. It was a plaza filled with real nature. It was a hanging garden.

There was an observation deck by the edge of the garden that let one survey all of Sakuradamon Grid and more.

—A young woman was standing there. She was wearing a light pink silken blouse under a hand-tailored black pantsuit with heels. Her glamorous, flowing black hair reached all the way below her waist.

Given her looks and outfit, one might mistake her for a normal girl working an entry-level job after college. Only her eyes attested to something more. The young woman had keen, lucid black eyes that an ordinary girl could never have, they projected a will that was as tough as steel.

Her sharp gaze was currently focused on the military deployed below, right before the castle gate.

—Currently, this palace was under siege.

•

For the most part, Houko correctly grasped the chaos and crisis presently befalling the nation.

*Yet, there is nothing I can do about the situation… that, too, irritates me…* "—Things just will not go the way I want them to, huh. I'm so powerless," Houko muttered in self-reprimand as she turned her gaze downward and pulled back her left sleeve to reveal a silver wrist watch. It was a plain, functional model. The letters "MARIE" were engraved on the clock face in a small, subtle font.



The time was 5:17. There were forty-three minutes left until the declared time of the military's raid.

On February Eighth— The Akihabara Terror Incident had occurred late at night and an unknown, enormous weapon had appeared at dawn. The electromagnetic weapon had made Akihabara Grid stop functioning and annihilated the military forces that had gone to intercept it.

A national state of emergency had been declared, and the prime minister had been stripped of his authority. He had been indicted for inciting domestic unrest and conspiring with foreign enemies. Furthermore, the minister of defense was also accused of the very same crimes.

—It was around then that a news station discovered the existence of the enormous weapon and reported the scoop.

Now that it had come to this, riots had simultaneously broken out in all of Tokyo's grids. The residents had fallen into a great panic upon learning that Tokyo was at risk of collapsing. It didn't help that this followed right on the heels of the shock from the Akihabara Terror Incident.

The police, unable to handle the chaos by themselves, had asked the military to declare martial law. However, a unit centered around a group of young officers had defected from the military, and thrown its entire chain of command into disarray. After defecting, they had immediately attacked the garrison in Ichigaya Grid. After plundering the equipment in the garrison's armory, they had then closed in on Sakuradamon Grid and surrounded the palace.

—That was the gist of what would later be called the Uprising of 2/8.

"...At this point, we can't leave it up to the brass," a young cap-

tain said from his seat at the negotiation table. “Neither the government nor the military is even trying to fulfill its duties of resolving this national crisis.

And that’s hardly the end of it, considering that both had tacitly consented to the research on electromagnetic technology which led to this crisis in the first place. The incident in Kyoto was just a few months back, and now this— We won’t stay silent about this any longer.”

*Well, he’s right,* Houko thought. *At the very least, the upper echelons of the government and military are nonfunctional at this point. And it’s also true that they were the ones who brought about this crisis.*

The young captain added, “We don’t have much time. The threat of the enormous weapon is still looming and the request for authorization of the use of Tall Wand that the prime minister submitted to the IGMO has not been withdrawn.

We must swiftly seize power and begin negotiating with the group behind that enormous weapon. There’s also the diplomatic inquiries of the various foreign countries to think about. However, for any of this to happen, we need a symbolic gesture to prove that we truly possess the authority of the nation— **Your Highness.** ”

*So you mean the Pillar of Heaven,* Houko thought. *His reasoning is correct in one respect. Even if they use military might to defeat the current administration, if there is no entity that acknowledges their legitimacy, they would merely be looked upon as rebels. The only ones who can do such a thing, even if it is just a formality, are we, the residents of the palace.*

*And, it’s only natural that they wouldn’t choose the bedridden emperor. The imperial prince is also still too young. That only leaves the one officially substituting for Father on the throne, me*

*—Imperial Princess Houko Hoshimiya.*

*However, just how convincing will that symbolic gesture really end up being—?*

"This country has become rotten! The situation must be rectified! I know there can be no excuse for intruding upon His Majesty's personal residence, but please, Your Highness! Could you lend us your hand for the sake of the nation right now?"

*—Honestly, from a personal standpoint, I very much understand how they feel. I even think they're right. If times were better, or if the situation at hand was a little different, I might have bestowed them with the Imperial Standard.*

*However, reality is not as sweet as daydreams. That's exactly why it's obvious how I should reply,* "—It'd be pointless. I humbly refuse."

The young captain's face twisted. Houko gazed through all the captains that sat before her. "I think it would be best if each of you cease this meaningless pursuit and immediately return to your original stations. You each have duties to uphold. You probably will not go unpunished, but I promise that I will write a formal petition under my name to lighten that punishment as much as possible."

"Your Highness! Please reconsider!"

"I have already given plenty of thought on the matter. This is my conclusion."

The captain's face flushed red as he said in a low growl, "We cannot afford to withdraw. To be clear, we are prepared to use force to get a yes out of Your Highness if you insist on maintaining your position."

"There is no helping it. In that case, do as you like, captain."

"...Do you think it's an empty threat?"

"No. I am sure that you have your own design. However, I too have beliefs and duties that I cannot afford to compromise."

And so, the negotiation broke down. After that, the rebels made several more inroads—but in the end, there hadn't been enough time. **6:00 a.m. on February 10th** — That was the deadline that they gave her highness to change her mind before they would storm the castle...

"—So you were here, Your Highness." Being addressed from behind, Houko turned around. There, she saw a small old man wearing a black tailcoat.

"Mr. Kusunoki."

"Given the present situation, it is dangerous for you to walk alone."

"Killing me would accomplish nothing. In fact, considering their goal, they would want to avoid me dying at all costs." *Breaking into the palace with the sword is already dangerous enough as it is. If someone in the imperial family dies on top of that, it would be forever impossible for them to assert their legitimacy to the people.*

However, Grand Chamberlain Kusunoki replied doubtingly, "That might be the case for their leaders... but I doubt that everyone who is caught up in this momentary fervor are as wise as Your Highness."

"True." Houko nodded. "I wonder. If everyone were wise, would the situation have come to this?"

"I do not know. ...However, perhaps if someone like Your Highness stood at the top, then—"

“I wonder about that. In the end, I too am powerless.” Houko smiled self-deprecatingly as she returned her gaze to what lay below the observation deck. Gazing fixedly at the deployed forces, she muttered, “They too must be doing what they think is right.”

“It is a gathering of fools. Breaking into the palace—absolutely blasphemous.”

“Perhaps. Still, while we may call them fools, it is not like we can do any more about the situation than they can.”

Kusunoki gasped. “Your Highness—are you suggesting that they are in the right?”

“No. I said this at the negotiation table as well, but there would be no point in me affirming them. In the first place, doing so was out of the question at the point that they decided to revolt. Especially so, when there’s a clear threat looming over Tokyo.” Houko paused for breath. “Even if I hypothetically do agree with their position and therefore acknowledge their legitimacy—what would change?”

“Your Highness, that’s…”

“I am not making light of my imperial authority. However, even if the citizens accept it, just how much respect would foreign countries—and those operating that enormous weapon—recognize what would be, in the end, nothing but a pretext.”

“According to the reports, they are Shiga’s ex-military and their goal is a coup d’etat of the government… If that is the case, I do not think they would take the authority of the imperial family lightly, no?”

“—Is that really the case? I am a little suspicious regarding that as well.” Houko narrowed her eyes, muttering, “—Speaking of reports.”

“Yes…?”

“Have you made any headway regarding Marie Bell Breguet’s whereabouts?”

Kusunoki made a conflicted face. “About that… as you know, she is officially dead, so tracking her is very difficult. We have yet to get any leads on her at all. If Your Highness hadn’t noticed the resemblance from that photo, we surely would not have even thought of her name.”

“Still, it is certain that she is involved with the Akihabara Terror Incident in some capacity.”

“Does Your Highness think that she holds a key of some sort?”

“More precisely—I think she is the ringleader of it all,” Houko said as she wrung the guardrail of the deck with her hands. “Seizing an entire grid and manipulating it freely is impossible even for the clocksmiths of the Imperial Guard stationed here. I cannot imagine that a clocksmith in the security force could do it either. I do not know of any other clocksmith with the otherworldly skills necessary to pull such a feat off.”

“…If I recall correctly, she was your friend at school, yes?”

“Only for a month, but yes.” Houko smiled faintly. “I had the chance to get to know her during my studies abroad in Europe. I remember her well. She had a sense of justice many times the size of her small stature and burned with a passion like fire itself. And, of course, she was one of the best clocksmiths, if not the best, back then as well…”

“…Are you suggesting that a person like that is the ringleader behind this disturbance?”

Houko shook her head. “I feel like the Akihabara Terror Incident does not fit with the rest of the occurring events somehow.

The coup d'etat would have succeeded even without it—rather, was it not thanks to the terrorism that all the residents were able to evacuate safely before the enormous weapon appeared?"

"Then is Your Highness suggesting that the Akihabara Terror Incident and the coup d'etat were carried out by different parties?"

"Yes. Of course, it is nothing but a fuzzy conjecture. However, if it turns out to be true…" She paused for a breath. "There might yet be another incident. That is the feeling I get."

*Of course, that is probably nothing but my personal fantasy. It would be way too convenient for it to be true. I am not so naïve as to believe that reality is as sweet as daydreams. Rather —I thought I was not, and yet…*

—However, at the time, Houko still hadn't known that just a mere ten minutes later—852 seconds to be exact—not just Houko herself, but the entire world would be reminded that lacking imagination is what's truly naïve. That the world they were living in has never been cut and dry. That they were in fact living such a fantasy. **That reality has always been stranger than fiction.**

•

At that same time— Outside the palace.

Sakuradamon Grid was filled with a tense, imposing atmosphere. It was just moments before the scheduled raid of the palace. The soldiers felt the zeal of justice, pre-battle excitement —and at the same time, guilt from the transgression they were about to commit. News helicopters were peeking at the army surrounding the palace that was moments away from waking from its dormancy.

The air was suffocating— As everyone present got that feel-

ing...

"—Ahh... Finally, some fresh air after almost forty-eight hours. Exquisite. Actually, I am not equipped with any mechanism equivalent to human lungs, but even in spite of the riff-raff who have still yet to evolve past their flea-like brains tarnishing the sight before my eyes, this invigorating sensation is most definitely real."

What was slowly approaching from behind the back lines was "reality." It was a small group.

The one leading in front was a silver-haired girl wearing a formal black dress. Her springy steps matching the graces of her good mood, she gave the impression that she might start elegantly dancing at a moment's notice.

What had blossomed out of her flowery lips was a cool, bell-like voice. The maidenly automaton's topaz pupils filled with vigor as she showcased her first performance of verbal abuse in quite some time.

Behind her, a black-haired boy and a blonde girl were following in a leisurely stroll. Furthermore, between the two was a young girl wearing red and white armor. Nonchalantly, but full of confidence they boldly advanced through the middle of the road.

In their approach, the girl wearing the black dress turned to look at the boy with a smile that could enchant an angel. "Master Naoto? Though I am merely a humble clockwork servant, even I should have the right and dignity to at least choose whom I pay my respects to.

My head is neither so light nor so cheap that I would lower it to those whom even single-celled organisms would be nonplussed by. I would like to point out once more that I find this order exceedingly objectionable."

“Right, no, I get that, but, see—” It seemed like they had had this exchange many times already. The black-haired boy nodded, looking fatigued.

However, the girl continued, as if she couldn’t contain her discontent. “I understand your reasoning. I see your point, shoddy as it may be, that I should take care to distinguish between the beasts who do not even comprehend the word ‘man’ in ‘manners’ and those who can at least make do. I will obey your orders, but nonetheless— I still find it exceedingly objectionable.”

Catching onto her true voice hidden beneath that flowery smile, the boy replied with a bitter grin, “Yeah, **we have to put on an extravagant show,** so please bear with it for now— I’ve even prepared a reward for you, so…”

“—I am Master Naoto’s belonging. Giving a reward to a follower… Please remember your place.” Contrary to her words, her face was filled with glee—however, it was something that only the boy could detect.

“How about you AnchoR? …Are you all ready?”

“…Yes, if that is Father’s order— I mean, request, then…” Having her head patted by the boy, the young girl in red and white nodded with a smile.

And lastly, there was the blonde girl smiling bitterly in self-abandonment. “Is the word ‘nervous’ not in your vocabularies? … This is gonna work, right?”

Contrary to her words, her voice didn’t sound all that anxious either. Perhaps the boy and the girl in black picked up on that, because they replied with cheerful smiles.

“That depends on you, Marie. After all, there’s no way that RyuZU or AnchoR will fail.”

“Mistress Marie, I do not know if… Well, if Master Naoto says it can be done, then it is only logical that even challenges that would confound the gods would prostrate themselves and yield— Of course, that is only *if* a certain dull-witted fool does not drag him down, but…”

“…Fine, fine I’ll leave it at that. Curiously enough, even your venomous tongue feels reassuring to me right now RyuZU. Besides, this is the perfect opportunity to vent my anger and really cut loose.”

A small-sized mobile weapon was lined up alongside a car as an impromptu barricade to block their way. As they approached it, the boy was muttering as he carefully listened to the sounds of the army encircling the palace.

“There are eighteen heavily armored multi-legged tanks, thirty-two heavily armored soldiers, as for the heavily armored and lightly armored automata… argh, distinguishing between them is too troublesome. Just know that there’s sixty-eight of them altogether. In addition, there are ninety-eight cyborg soldiers as well—”

The boy, who had easily grasped the full makeup of the force sieging the palace, casually asked, “Marie—if the world’s most powerful troops were to do the job, how long would it take to **annihilate this entire force** ?”

“Without causing any collateral damage to the palace whatsoever? It would be near impossible with that condition, but let’s see…” The blonde girl looked down slightly as she considered it.

The girl was a clocksmith, not a mercenary or a soldier. And so, typical of a clocksmith, she calculated and compared the capabilities of the opposing forces to answer: “Hypothetically, if you supply troops seasoned in urban warfare and subjugation with the **next-next generation equipment.** Lightly and heavily armored automata along with cyborgs as well… With four compa-

nies, I think a conservative estimate would be **fourteen minutes.** ”

Hearing her answer that was based upon an impossible premise in the first place, the boy readily declared, “In that case, RyuZU, AnchoR—your time limit is **seven minutes.** Easy-peasy right?”

“Master Naoto, I think Mistress Marie asks more than enough dumb questions for all of us, you need not join her.”

“…Destroy all… of that? I’d like an order… May I, hold back some…”

“Sure, hold back as much as you can. **Don’t kill anyone.** That’s an absolute condition, got it?”

—If there were any outsiders listening in on their conversation, what would they have thought? Would they have laughed their butts off? Maybe they’d chide this pack of cheeky kids for their ridiculousness. At any rate—

“Well then, RyuZU, AnchoR—as planned, **draw their attention with a bang,** I’m counting on you.”

“Understood… Excuse me then.”

—Now then. Over the course of the year, Japan had faced an unprecedented chain of incidents following the attempted purge of Kyoto.

The Akihabara Terror Incident, the Akihabara Magnetization Crisis, the Kasumigaseki Convention, the authorization request for the use of Tall Wand, the Uprising of 2/8, the Mutiny of 2/9, the Battle at the Palace Gate…

—As if to mock all of that, **something happened.** A massive upheaval that wrapped everything up as **an epic crime perpe-**

**trated by a single terrorist organization.**

That something—was the last incident in this chain of events. A grand conclusion that tied all of the preceding incidents that had occurred together under one neat name. It was also the very first of the incidents in a chain of numerous others to follow which would shake the very foundation of this world.

This grand incident was what would later be known as the Uprising of 2/8. But it had another name. And that other name was the Second Ypsilon.

In this year, on this day, at this hour, in this second… 5:59 a.m. Japanese Standard Time, on February 10th in the 1016th Year of the Wheel—

Hearing a loud rumble all of a sudden, the soldiers all turned towards the source. What they saw was a building that had been sliced into a jigsaw collapse into pieces. Amidst the roar of the collapse, a clear voice, like that of a music box, resounded.

"—Your attention, please ♪." Standing before the collapsing building, the girl in a black dress gave a single elegant bow. Crudely mimicking her big sister's gesture, the young girl clad in red and white armor bowed as well.

"How are you all faring on this day? I am the First of the Initial-Y Series, RyuZU YourSlave."

"U, Umm… I'm the Fourth of the Initial-Y Series, AnchoR the Trishula , o-or the One Who Destroys. N, Nice to meet you."

—It all began with the greetings from two automata.

"Gazing upon germs, who, failing to discern their place, always busy themselves with some crude ploy is, to put it mildly, great comedy. Given my master's orders as well as a little bit of my own personal resentment towards what has been done to me—

Frankly, I am **just rearing to vent my anger upon you** , but…"

"U, Umm… p, please let me apologize, in advance… I, I'm sorry… ngh"

With the smile of an angel, the girl in black revealed two obsidian scythes that extended out from the hem of her skirt. Meanwhile the young girl in red and white looked sorry as she twisted her solid gear cube and pulled out an enormous sword from the void.

All those who had just heard them name themselves—doubted what they had heard. However, as if she didn't need them to believe her, the girl in the black dress said with a smile—

"I am not sorry in the slightest, and though this is much too high of an honor for those brains of yours which are sorely lacking in specs, savor the supreme bliss of having heard my voice—" She paused for a breath. " **—as well as the taste of dirt in your mouth** as you grovel in worship of my name."

"I, I'm sorry… ngh!"

—Immediately after, forget resisting, all those who had heard those words couldn't even cognize what was happening. In an absurd turn of events whom none could defy, everything down to the handguns of the armored soldiers broke into pieces and fell to the ground.

As the latest bits of mythology proved their existence and overwrote what the people knew, the people who lived atop the Clockwork Planet were forcefully reminded once more— Just what kind of world it was that they lived in.

In other words—that which is called **reality** trivially **annihilates** the boundaries of mundane **fiction.**

•

"There are no facts, only interpretations." ...Who was it that said that again? In any case, that truth applies to everyone, even those who witness history being made firsthand.

Take for example—Captain Sumitada Hikoshima of Tokyo's central intelligence unit, who just turned twenty-eight this year. He was a young officer who had climbed through the ranks as fast as had been possible for someone his age.

The role of the central intelligence unit that he belonged to was to process information pertaining to the missions of the military and support the operations of other units. And so, after the Akihabara Terror Incident had occurred and an enormous unknown weapon had appeared...

"—A joke, an absolute, complete joke! Okada died for something like this? ...Ghh!" Captain Hikoshima slammed his fist onto the table in rage, shaking the tent walls of the makeshift command center. Seeing the sharp, threatening look on his face, the other officers who happened to be gathered around him gulped.

First Lieutenant Tsutomu Okada had been his friend. He had been a member of **Tokyo's security force.** He had been deployed to intercept the enormous weapon... and he had been killed in action.

Even as the military's chain of command fell into chaos as conflicting reports surfaced on the situation, Captain Hikoshima, whom many looked to as a young hope, was roused to take revenge for his friend. That was when he learned of one of the military's top secrets:

That research on electromagnetic technology had been tacitly approved by the brass and ultimately led to Shiga Grid's purge in an attempt to conduct a cover-up— That their attempt to turn their wrongful past into an opportunity to recover political

ground was what led to the current situation.

*—In other words, my friend was killed by politicians attempting to scrounge for votes...! Those bastards, I'll never forgive them.*

He was certain that he couldn't leave this matter in the hands of his superiors. Seeing the brass fracture into factions as they tried to shove the blame onto one another at a time like this— He gave up on them and immediately contacted some colleagues whom he trusted.

All of them were promising young officers he had toasted with before vowing to give their all for the nation. Captain Hikoshima's righteous indignation had spread like wildfire, igniting the hearts of many young officers. The result of that was this mutiny— No, this noble mission.

He was extremely disappointed in the princess's reply, but even his friends chided him, saying, "You can't blame the imperial family for being conservative."

Captain Hikoshima understood it in his heart of hearts as well — That there was no way that forcefully seizing political power could possibly be right. That they weren't on the side of justice.

*—However, we're in a state of national emergency, we're facing a crisis in which the fate of the nation hangs. At times, there are things which must be done even if it means straying from justice. Why can't you understand that...!*

*Considering the true intentions of those inside that weapon— obeying the brass who are simply squandering away valuable time would be no different from committing a tortuously slow suicide. We must immediately consolidate our power and rally the military's forces. We don't have a second to lose.*

*However... attacking the palace just because of that? Ludi-*

*crous, if I may say so myself,* Captain Hikoshima thought, shaking his head. *We can't just atone with the results from our hardline approach. ...Frankly, in the end, this too is nothing more than meaningless internal dissension.*

*Indeed, the truth is that we have neither the time nor the luxury to spare troops for something like this. I didn't want it to come to this, but I have to finish things up here quickly.*

The hour of battle was drawing near. Just as Hikoshima was about to give a final warning to those inside the palace— **An explosion rang out.** And not just a single one either, a second, then a third blast rang out after it.

"What's going on! Who's the idiot that jumped the gun—?!" Assuming that an antsy squad must have decided to begin the attack, Captain Hikoshima clicked his tongue.

*—This is bad. Although we did give an advance warning, starting the attack without a final warning will become a problem later.*

*Actually, an even bigger problem is the fact that there are idiots here who would begin the attack without orders.*

"The seventh squad has been wiped out! It appears that we're being attacked from the rear!"

"...What did you say...?"

However, what the communications officer said next would shock him even more. "The self-propelled artillery positioned in our right flank has also been destroyed!"

The captain's eyes opened wide in an astonished stare.

"I'm not getting a response from the second armored soldier unit! As for the third and fourth units—they've also gone silent!"

"—Impossible, who are they?! Which squad is attacking us?!" he angrily shouted at the communications officer as he hectically tried to figure it out.

*The military brass? No, those incompetents are still engrossed in the blame game even now.*

*The mobile police squad? No, they're not it either. They don't have the luxury of attacking us. They have their hands full just trying to maintain the public order.*

*S.W.A.T? Impossible. They don't have enough men to assault an army of this scale.*

*In that case—the imperial guard force huh… Tsk.*

The members of the imperial guard were the Technical Force who managed the Pillar of Heaven. Because of that, Hikoshima had judged their combat strength to be low.

*But at the end of the day, they're still the unit that's charged with protecting the Pillar of Heaven—did I underestimate them?!*

*They most likely used something like an underground tunnel below the palace to ambush us. In that case, what if we respond to their attack with our main force and send a flying column to storm the front during the engagement?*

*It's different from what I planned, but with this, we can keep the damage done to the palace at a minimum—!*

"Give me a report on the scale of the enemy forces!" the captain yelled as he turned around, however…

" **—Come again?** To give me an order… I see that you are quite bold. You are free to determine the value of your life at your own discretion, but if you think you have the right to aggravate

me without reproach, you had best think again—”

What answered him was the clear voice of a girl—and silence. The members of his squad all fell face-flat upon the table in the command center. The large amount of equipment that had just been operating was all turned to scrap.

*What just happened? When exactly? How—?*

As the wind lightly lifted the flaps of the slashed-up tent, the scenery outside suddenly became visible. As Hikoshima looked about himself, he spotted the four-legged Komainu tank that had been positioned behind the command center—or rather, what was left of it.

It had become an unrecognizable heap of scrap metal. Atop it, stood a girl in a formal black dress. She was revealing two scythes from under her skirt with a confident smile.

“.....Haaaaaah?” Captain Hikoshima’s eyes seemed empty as he let out that questioning sigh. It was a model case of how humans react when encountering an impossible situation.

“Hoooly... ah, well, so, I’m guessing that you’re the one in charge?”

Whirling around, the captain saw a blonde girl who looked like she just happened to be passing by.

“Well, I can understand how you feel... I’m sorry, just... pretend that you were caught in a natural disaster or something, alright?”

Peeking inside the tent, the girl looked like she sincerely sympathized with him as she closed her eyes and made the sign of the cross.

Bracing himself, Captain Hikoshima mustered all the strength

he had to bravely question the girl: "...Wh—Who, are you?"

"—It'd be, to put it mildly, exceedingly tiresome to introduce myself over and over again... We've left one of your transmission devices over there untouched, so could you do me a favor and relay this to all of your troops for me? That'd make this so much quicker."

—Suddenly, a violent gust swept through the command center. This time, the entire cut-up tent was whirled up by the wind. At the same time, three heavily armored soldiers were sundered in one blow before having any chance to retaliate.

The girl donned in red and white armor—the one who had brought about this inconceivable tragedy—suddenly noticed Hikoshima.

"Ah, umm... Nice to meet you. My name is... AnchoR."

"And I am her elder sister, RyuZU—we are Initial-Y Series automata. Thank you for your meaningless work. Have a nice day."

And just like that, they were gone. Captain Sumitada Hikoshima was left in a daze.

—Captain Sumitada Hikoshima had just borne witness to history. If someone were to ask him what had happened, I wonder what he would say?

Absurdly, unreasonably, off-handedly, abruptly—his revolution, which had burned with righteous indignation, was incomprehensibly squashed before his very eyes.

Would he describe it as a battle? An incident? No— It had been a phenomenon that could only be described as an "accident" and nothing else.

At any rate, deriving meaning from an interpretation was not the job of a witness—but a historian.

•

—The scene had been like one big punchline. It hadn't been a battle. It was just one side being completely mowed down. But it wasn't a natural disaster either... In short, it had simply been a stomp—just another case of the strong trampling the weak.

"...I knew what you guys were capable of going in to this... but really, your powers are totally unfair," Marie muttered in sympathy for the young officer who appeared to be the commander.

"It's obvious that RyuZU and AnchoR would be capable of this much," Naoto replied with pride.

They were talking as they ran around the moat of the palace, making their way to its drawbridge. All the while, enemy forces were being annihilated around them. Yet another pair of lightly armored automata aiming their guns at them were shredded during that short exchange.

About a second later—a self-propelled artillery that had been positioned several hundred meters away was annihilated in much the same way.

Both these cases had probably been RyuZU's work. Marie couldn't be sure. After all, she was **completely blind** to RyuZU and AnchoR's movements.

RyuZU was continuously moving at an ultra-high speed while maintaining a defensive perimeter around Naoto. Anything that threatened her master was minced to pieces. In other words, the destruction being done in their near field of vision was most likely the work of RyuZU.

As for AnchoR— "...Oh, no... my kick... ngh," AnchoR said in a slight fluster.

*From what I can see, I'm guessing what happened was that*

*after she swung her sword, she couldn't bring the blade around in time to deal with the Komainu behind her— So she kicked it with her heel instead. She was probably trying to hold back as best she could, but…*

"Hey Naoto… Komainus are incredibly heavy; they weigh in at about 38.4 tons. Did you know that?"

"Really~? That's surprisingly heavy~"

"Yes… they certainly are. And yet here they are **flying in the air…** Is this some kind of joke?" Seeing 38.4 ton lumps of metal fly in the sky, Marie let out a dry laugh. Those tanks weren't supposed to fly.

—The C & S 22 Type 22 four-legged tank—Komainu, also known as a Guardian Dog. These multi-manned four-legged tanks were jointly developed by Seiko and Citizen.

Even if they weren't at the level of the Five Great Corporations, these were still the two largest clockwork corporations in Japan. They possessed advanced technology that received worldwide recognition.

Their current flagship model should have been the successor to the Komainu, the A-un—but given the abrupt nature of the revolution, the rebels probably couldn't get their hands on the military's newest equipment.

However—Guardian Dogs were **masterpieces** of design that still made their appearance on the modern battlefield. As a clocksmith, even Marie couldn't help but admire their design.

Despite being manned weapons, the units possessed a 360-degree field of vision. More impressive still, was their loading capacity—in addition to the basic 1200mm cannon and 300mm auto cannon, they were also capable of fielding four additional armaments and possessed the ability to switch out their loaded con-

figurations during combat in real time.

Even so… “Ah… ngh, Father, Mother, I’m sorry.” AnchoR suddenly flew so quickly in front of Naoto and Marie that it was as if she had teleported. She casually swung the back of her hand.

Immediately after— Marie heard the burst of an explosion far above her. A second later, Marie grasped what had occurred: *AnchoR just effortlessly diverted a shell that was closing in on us with the back of her hand…*

Retracing the trajectory of the shell, Marie saw the Guardian Dog that had fired—its body was split vertically in two. AnchoR was currently apologizing to its flabbergasted operators who, still sitting in their positions, were having their hair tussled by the wind.

Seeing such a spectacle, Marie couldn’t help but put on a strained smile. The level of equipment possessed by Japan’s militaries were by no means shoddy. If anything, it could be considered top of the line.

This was especially impressive considering that they equipped themselves by and large with domestically manufactured technology. However, all of that equipment had been reduced to this.

“…Hey Naoto, think you could pinch my cheeks for a sec? I think I’m dreaming.”

“Sure thing— Hey, why are you punching back?!”

“Even absurdity should have its limits…”

“Oww… That’s my line… god…”

Witnessing the tempest of violence firsthand, Marie finally understood. RyuZU calling herself the weakest of the Initial-Y Series wasn’t out of humility in any way whatsoever.

"...Looks like I should have taken the fact that RyuZU, the self-proclaimed 'weakest' of the Initial-Ys, was capable of cutting through current-gen military weapons like butter a bit more seriously..."

*Now that I think about it, RyuZU had also casually, effortlessly shredded the Vacherons' latest manned weapon, the Goliath. That enormous spider shrugging off her attacks had been an exceptional case. The* ***absurd truth*** *is that it is perfectly natural for the Initial-Y Series to reduce modern weapons to nothing.*

*All the more so when they aren't up against the "weakest," but the "strongest..."* Seeing AnchoR mow down three Guardian Dogs with a single swing of her massive sword, Marie suddenly seemed very tired.

"...Hey Naoto. What do you think 'Y' had in mind when he gave that child such incredible combat capability? —Even aliens would turn tail and run if they saw a scene like this..."

Naoto looked confused. "Isn't that the point? AnchoR's here to make those who would threaten the Clockwork Planet scurry away in fear, no? You sure do ask some obvious questions sometimes Marie."

—A moment later. "Marie, **I found it.** " Naoto had been searching for the enemy without his headphones this whole time. "The heavily armored automaton Cz35C Black Tortoise—there's no mistaking it. I found it."

They could have just invaded the castle now while humming away freely if they wanted to. However, that **wouldn't be good enough.** They had to crush the entire force gathered here before they could begin to retreat.

Under Naoto's plan, they had to destroy all of the forces here as absurdly, overwhelmingly, and unreasonably as possible—in

other words, **at a speed that would be impossible for even the strongest military force in the world.**

—And there was one additional condition as well. “Okay, on to the next phase then…!” Tightly hugging the **brain pod** she was carrying in her arms, Marie pursed her lips in firm resolve.

Looking to the skies she saw multiple news helicopters darting about as they fearlessly covered the storm of destruction below their feet. Confirming that one said news helicopter was pointing a camera her way, Marie raised her left arm and swung it in a large arc.

•

The imperial guard had established their emergency headquarters in the palace parlor. The upscale furniture had all been cleared, and things like transmission devices and an enormous screen took their place.

Just minutes ago, the imperial guard had been enveloped in a heavy air as they resolved themselves to honorably defend the palace to their last breath. The others inside the palace had been trembling in hopeless fear. But now, everyone’s eyes were glued to the live footage being played on the enormous screen.

“—E, Everyone please take a look at this incredible sight…!” a female reporter exclaimed. She seemed astonished herself, her voice was unevenly shrill.

That was understandable. The video being captured was, indeed, truly incredible. After all, the military force that had surrounded the palace was being destroyed by “something” making its way clockwise through them.

“Their true identities are uncertain! H, However, one of them is—ah yes, that boy over there! There is Naoto Miura, the suspect believed to be behind the premonitory broadcast announcing the

Akihabara Terror Incident! And according to eye-witness testimony, two automata who claimed to be from the Initial-Y Series have appeared during the incident as well— Oh!"

Her eyes fixed to the screen, a young, black-haired woman—Houko—muttered, "What... is this?"

A nearby young Technical Force officer of the imperial guard replied, "W, We don't know... There shouldn't be any weapon capable of this, but..."

"Is the video being played in real-time? Is it not possible that the video is being edited?" the princess cautiously asked.

The officer considered it for a moment.

"Since it appears that this is indeed being broadcast on live television, no one would have had the time or the technology to prepare such an intricately doctored feed. And not just that, no one would have had a motive to do so in the first place."

—But of course. Who would gain anything from fabricating footage like this? In the first place, it was something that was happening within a stone's throw from the palace. Things were such that the people inside the palace could likely confirm the situation with their very eyes. As long as they had a window, any effort to alter the video feed would be pointless.

"In that case—this video is accurate then, yes?" Houko asked to confirm.

The officer who couldn't quite bring himself to express it in words nodded in reply.

—This was **reality.** The same reality that surpasses and even tramples upon fiction—a fact that even Houko herself had almost forgotten.

Shuddering in fear, she returned her eyes to the screen—upon which she noticed something. Beside the boy being reported on, Naoto Miura… was a blonde girl looking directly up through the screen. Her emerald eyes were gleaming as she raised her **left arm** as high as she could behind her head.

"__"

Houko inadvertently turned her left wrist over revealing the face of her silver watch engraved with the letters "MARIE."

"A, An anonymous tip has just come in! …Wha? Ah, no, excuse me! According to the report, a, apparently, they're—"

As she heard the announcement that followed, Houko's eyes widened. She was the only one that understood what those words were— **The magic words that would resolve everything.**

"—the criminal group behind the Akihabara Terror Incident, and also the ones responsible for both the manufacture and the activation of the enormous unknown weapon that halted Akihabara Grid… **The report appears to be yet another declaration of responsibility from the criminals themselves —!!!** "

•

"Hoo… hell yeah! Finally! Haven't felt alive without this suit, it just isn't the same without it."

—A road near the palace. On the rooftop of one of the buildings was a woman in a rubber suit smoking a cigarette. She stood by the edge of the roof, gazing at the boisterous scene below her.

To be precise, "she" wasn't a woman. Strictly speaking, "she" wasn't even human. "She" wasn't a full-body cyborg or an automaton either. The **man** who had had his brain pod forcefully connected to the body of a female automaton heard his named

called out over a resonance transceiver.

"Vermouth, according to Naoto, the target seems to be in a unit of five at 2 o'clock from your position." The resonance transceiver built into his body was transmitting Marie's voice.

S-he stood up lazily, stretching his-her arms. "Alright, as expected of the kid I fell in love with. Tell him that I'll stuff him full later as a reward."

"Naoto said— 'Stay away, I don't want to be infected by your gayness.'"

Vermouth cracked a bitter smile as he vaulted off the building's edge and leapt through the air— He jumped from one rooftop to another as he made his way towards the designated position.

Over the transmission, Marie seemed anxious, or perhaps unsatisfied. "—I know it's too late to change the plan now but... you really can pull this off right?"

*Damn right it's too late,* Vermouth internally sneered. "What's the matter honey, getting cold feet? You're the one who tuned this body, you know. If you don't even have faith in your own work, then you're just as much of a bitch as I thought—"

"How am I supposed to have faith in it? I did the best I could, but—that body isn't an artificial body. Do you understand what I'm saying? **It isn't something that was made to be connected to a human brain!** "

"—Seriously?! That's news to me! In that case, would you mind telling me just one more thing princess? Who was the *bitch* that linked *my* brain to such a thing again?" Vermouth spat, shutting Marie up.

—She didn't need him to tell her that. She was well aware of it

herself. However… “There’s no need to worry, I’m feeling pretty good. You did a great job Missy.” Vermouth wasn’t lying. His body’s shock absorbing mechanism was cushioning his landings with ease.

Vermouth’s new lascivious body was like that of an actress or a top model. It was typical for a love automaton. But miraculously enough, despite the difference in height, he hadn’t needed to adjust much to get a feel for it.

As for its power output, it couldn’t compare to the original—a military-grade artificial body. On the other hand, perhaps because it was specialized for dancing, his new body was capable of some surprisingly supple maneuvers that his original body hadn’t been capable of.

—Indeed, it was. And because of that, **he felt almost no lag in response time from this body** . No one but Marie could have tuned this body to his brain so well. Even if they had used high grade parts for everything.

*I see. Sure enough, this is the work of a genius—* Vermouth privately thought. “After all, despite being a lady love machine, it comes with such a big cock—”

“I’ll really kill you, you know?” Vermouth’s jest had been met with a freezing voice full of murder.

“No, but really, why’d you go out of your way to deliver me a package?”

“I didn’t! It was there to begin with! I didn’t want to touch the wicked thing so I just left it!!”

Vermouth’s eyes widened. He could just imagine how Marie’s face must be flushing red right now. “Oy, this is the standard model? You’ve gotta be kiddin’ me! So this is ‘Cool Japan’? I mean, I’ve heard the rumors but… Wow, the Japanese always live

in the future regardless of the era don't they!"

Vermouth laughed, seeming fully amused, but upon sensing an ominous air from his transceiver—he abruptly turned serious. Lighting a new cigarette, he said in a quiet voice, "—You know, these cigs taste great."

"What do you mean by that? There's no way you can taste with that body— Actually, that goes for your original body as well."

Vermouth bitterly laughed. *You don't get it at all.* As he jumped from rooftop to rooftop, he visually confirmed his destination. Just as Naoto had said, there was a unit of five machines at 2 o'clock. Vermouth verified that the target was in the unit.

"For example, princess, people say crap like 'the air here tastes great,' but what does that actually mean?"

"..."

"Like air could have any taste. What they mean is that the air puts them in a great **mood** ."

—The heavily armored automaton Cz35 Type C Black Tortoise. Made by Citizen, it featured both thick composite armor and heavy firepower. Featuring two 40mm autocannons, one for each hand, and a thermobaric buster as its main cannon on its shoulders, it was additionally equipped with a high-precision, high-speed artificial intelligence.

...Vermouth couldn't help but crack a bitter smile at the fact that a young officer was able to field such a powerful weapon for his mutinous antics.

But it seemed like the commander couldn't get as many of them as he had wanted. The manned units accompanying it were three Iron Demons, and a four-legged tank, a Guardian Dog. By their feet were several cyborg soldiers and lightly-armored au-

tomata as well.

As he looked down at them, Vermouth recalled Naoto's demand inside his head. *Let me repeat your order. Destroy* ***only the AI*** *of the Black Tortoise and eliminate all of the units supporting it* ***without killing anyone*** .

*Will that complete your order? Would you like some fries and a drink with that?* Vermouth stifled his laughter. *That brat gave a scumbag like me such an impossible task.*

"And yet... right now, these cigs **taste like the best thing in the world** to me!"

*"—This is something that only you can do, no?" That's what that kid told me.*

"...And what does that mean?" Marie asked, befuddled.

Hearing that, Vermouth kicked off from his rooftop perch and leapt downward. He descended in a zig-zag between the walls of a six-story building on the opposite side of the road and the original, and made his way to the ground.

*"I'll crush them for pissing me off"* —Recalling Naoto's eyes when he had said that, Vermouth puffed out a large breath of smoke and bit down on the filter of his cigarette with a daring smile.

"—It means that there's no way I'll screw this up!" Vermouth sneered as he headed towards the chaotic battlefield—running out from the shadows of the buildings.

He charged in a straight line toward a cyborg soldier who was vigilantly scanning the surroundings. Naturally, the soldier discovered Vermouth. "Wh, Who are y—" Bewildered by the love automaton charging at him, the soldier readied his rifle.

But Vermouth accelerated even faster and closed the distance — And at the same time, he threw out a kick. The tip of Vermouth's kick connected with the rifle, causing it to spiral out of the soldier's hands.

As the rifle's original orientation reversed Vermouth grabbed it and fired. A gunshot rang out as a bullet pierced the right leg of the cyborg soldier. Passing the soldier by, Vermouth unloaded three more rounds into the soldier's abdomen to incapacitate him.

As the enemy soldier keeled over, Vermouth flashed a smile. "What do I look like to you? I'd very much like to know."

"—There's an enemy here!!" Hearing the sound of what were in total four gunshots, the other cyborg soldiers in the area responded.

"Ah, nice, things'll be easier if you bunch see this passing basket case of a dutch wife as an enemy." Vermouth laughed.

Enemies showered him with bullets from three different directions, but Vermouth kept his feet moving. He evaded the rain of fire with skillful, dancelike steps.

He was weaving through the blind spots of the enemy cyborg soldiers and automata as he took advantage of their formation in order to bait friendly fire. All the while, Vermouth continued advancing with a slick glide.

Though they were only shooting at him with rifles, if the body of a love automaton eats even a single bullet, it'd be fatal damage —and yet, there was no fear in Vermouth's expression. He continued moving with a sardonic smile.

Right then— "I'll be borrowing your head for a sec, little boy." —Vermouth stepped on the head of a cyborg soldier and leapt into the air. What stood before him was an armored walker—an

Iron Demon.

Landing on the armored walker's shoulder—which was roughly eight meters from the ground—Vermouth clung on tightly. Though it was no match for a military-grade artificial body, the strength his current body possessed still far exceeded human limits.

Losing track of the enemy that had caused a melee by its feet, the Iron Demon assumed a cautious, defensive posture—but it couldn't find its target. Vermouth was very much aware of the fact that none of the eight cameras on an Iron Demon covered his position.

Vermouth stretched his hands out, and opening the hatch hidden by the machine's nape, pulled the emergency release lever inside, twisting it clockwise.

Immediately after, the Iron Demon stopped moving. As the sound of turning gears and cylinders rang out, the hatch to the cockpit was parted like a fully-opened backpack. The pilot of the Iron Demon looked like he had just graduated from a military academy.

"……Hah?" The officer stared in blank amazement at the target he had been looking for.

Shoving the muzzle of his rifle right up the officer's nose, Vermouth grinned. "Hey kid, that's quite the sexy car. By the way, did you know that this beauty's a single-seater? Shocking, I know."

While keeping his rifle firmly in place with one hand, Vermouth used his other to cram a cigarette inside the pilot's mouth. "Whaddya say you trade me this babe for that cig? I mean we're friends, aren't we? You can tell me your thoughts on your journey through the air afterwards, alright?"

Grabbing the head of the bewildered officer, Vermouth forced him to nod. Satisfied, Vermouth pulled the ejection lever under the pilot's seat. Immediately after—a fwoosh rang out as the pilot's screams echoed up to the high heavens as his seat blasted off.

"Thanks mate." Unnecessarily blowing a seductive kiss in the pilot's trajectory, Vermouth slipped inside the cockpit. "Now then—guess I'll show everyone that I can answer lil Naoto's expectations by acting like the scumbag I am."

Since the seat had been ejected, a portion of the steering system was lost. However, unlike a fighter plane, the cockpit itself was still there. Vermouth clutched the joystick and some torn wires—and was able to grasp the steering system of the Iron Demon with just that.

*If Marie saw these skills of mine—just what kind of face would she make?* As he thought about that in a corner of his mind, Vermouth went over the remainder of the mission plan in his head. At the same time, seeing the armored walkers and the four-legged tank before his eyes acting flustered, he scoffed.

*Hah— Can't even override your machine's recognition of this unit from ally to enemy? You juveniles aren't even fit to be called amateurs.*

Despite having had an Iron Demon stolen from them, the enemy had yet to retaliate. Due to a mechanism that prevents friendly fire, they couldn't use their armaments against the stolen Iron Demon until they changed it to an enemy in the settings.

Much the same, the military automata, including the Black Tortoise, couldn't change alliance settings at their own discretion. The automated condition required for them to alter that setting for a unit—was detecting not just one, but two attacks from that unit towards a friendly unit.

In other words—until Vermouth attacked them twice, no one could open fire on the Iron Demon that Vermouth was piloting aside from the foot soldiers with their rifles.

*If that's the case, how should I play this?*

*—The one I have to crush first and foremost is definitely the four-legged Guardian Dog. With the light plating of this Iron Demon, not to mention these incomplete controls—it'd be game over if that unit takes a shot at me.*

*In that case—I'll crush the Guardian Dog in one blow and right after that—destroy the Black Tortoise's AI.*

*There's no other way.*

*If I can't take out the Guardian Dog in one go, the instant I land a second hit, the autocannons of the Black Tortoise will turn my Iron Demon into swiss cheese.*

*That said, if I go for the Black Tortoise's AI first and the crew of the Guardian Dog manage to change its alliance settings—that's game over as well.*

*So in that respect, the best odds would be to incapacitate the Guardian Dog first, then take care of the Black Tortoise. After that, while they're surely pissing bullets all over me—I'll have to take out another two Iron Demons.*

*And—without killing a single person at that.*

*Easy enough to say, but this mission easily makes the top ten in difficulty for my career.*

*But —* Vermouth made a ferocious smile that looked out of place on a love automaton's face— *It's fun as all hell.*

Vermouth kicked the floor of the cockpit, saying, “Hey there you piece of junk—know what Code D3 is?”

Naturally, there was no response. As the pilot’s seat had been ejected, the system of this unit recognized its current status as unoccupied. However, even if there had been a response, the system would surely have answered no. After all, Code D3 was a combat order that Vermouth had arbitrarily named himself.

“You don’t? Well, that figures. How about the one that the ghost princess taught me then?” Vermouth said as he operated the wires in his hands with precise micro-movements. The wires he was manipulating were connected to the cylinder that controlled the Iron Demon’s power output.

The command which Marie had taught him how to execute before the mission started was— “Release all limiters—in other words, shake those hips for me as hard as you can, like your life depends on it. Got it, you pathetic virgin?”

As if responding to him, the few gauges that were left in the Iron Demon lit up. A countdown of the operational time left read “162 seconds” on the screen in front of him.

“Hah—two and a half minutes for your first time? No need to worry ya touch squirt. I’ll show you a technique that’ll make all the ladies come two minutes in—!!” Vermouth yelled as a rallying warcry from within the tremoring machine.

Marie’s fed-up voice sounded from his resonance transceiver: “...You have a disease.”

“Oh? What, you were listening in ya little shrew? —I’m hard-boiled right?”

“...Are you seriously saying that? I’ll gladly stuff some sense into your head if you are, but—”

“Hahah! Did you get confused? You’re on the side that gets stuffed!!”

With that, Vermouth pulled on the wires like the reigns of a horse—and the Iron Demon heated up and began to sprint. It unsheathed a high frequency oscillating blade with its right hand as it charged towards the Guardian Dog as planned.

In an instant, his unit closed the distance at a speed near its functional limit. Vermouth bitterly smiled.

*AnchoR and RyuZU—those cheats dealt with them casually—but normally, a four-legged tank, even an outdated one, is a monster on the battlefield.*

*Challenging one with the capabilities of an armored walker is basically equivalent to suicide.*

However, even if he didn’t understand the unit’s design like Marie did—Vermouth still understood their weaknesses inside and out.

There were three weaknesses to a multi-legged tank. The supporting AI, the power spring, and the cockpit found on its underside where the armor was thin.

However, the first two weaknesses were protected by sturdy armor that couldn’t be pierced by the power of an Iron Demon without exception. As such, the best option was to slip underneath the unit and kill the crew.

However—Naoto’s order had stipulated not killing anyone. Because of that, Vermouth chose to go for its “fourth weakness” by process of elimination. It was a vulnerability that was present without exception in all multi-legged tanks—no, in all manned weapons. Cutting the steering control that existed in all human-piloted weapons.

But that too was protected by tough plating, though not to the extent of the first two weaknesses. The only part of the plating that was thin enough for his Iron Demon's blade to penetrate—was the back of its waist. That spot was right above the cockpit.

—Incapacitating the tank by piercing its armor there without damaging the cockpit directly below it. He had been given this ridiculously difficult task.

*"—This is something that only you can do, no?"*

Recalling the boy's expression as he had said that, Vermouth grinned as he pulled in the wires in his hands and pushed the joystick all the way forward. At the same time, the Iron Demon's boosters propelled it at max power as it kicked off the ground and soared in the air.

The burst that surpassed the unit's power output limiter made the actuators throughout the machine cry out under strain. But that didn't matter. Vermouth adjusted the Iron Demon's posture in midair and measured his aim.

Like driving a nail using a 14.2 ton nail gun with gravity's help, The Iron Demon thrust its high frequency oscillating blade into the back of the Guardian Dog's waist——!!

"God daaaamn—!!" Feeling the impact of the strike coursing through his body, Vermouth loudly cursed. "It fucking hurts!! So you're gonna contest the power of my cock, huh? You shitty mongrel—!" Vermouth roared as the recoil of the impact hit his hands.

The blade was creaking as it distorted, but Vermouth continued pressing down as hard as he could.

Marie's voice sounded from the transceiver again. "...Just so you know, the vulgar way in which you speak—is actually the antithesis of being hardboiled."

“Ngh——?!” Shocked by Marie’s words, Vermouth choked on air as he finished his maneuver and jumped backwards. At the tail end of the swing, Vermouth had felt the resistance against the controls give way. He figured that the blade had finally managed to go through—if only barely.

As proof of that, the Guardian Dog’s knees gave out and it collapsed on the spot. *With this, it should be out of order until it gets repaired—a few hours at the very least.*

*...But, more importantly.* “Wait, what?! ...Huh? Masterfully applying words like ‘fuck,’ ‘shit,’ ‘damn,’ and ‘bitch’ to a situation is what makes a man chic, isn’t it?!”

Upon completing its swing, his Iron Demon’s right arm had burst apart, and upon landing back onto the ground, its legs were damaged as well.

Meanwhile, all the automata in the area adjusted their recognition of his Iron Demon from “ally” to “target for reevaluation” —and focused their attention on it. At its feet, foot soldiers were showering his unit with bullets—but Vermouth ignored them.

“...Are you from America or something? I mean, even the hooligans in gangster movies spit out more elegant lines these days, don’t they?”

Sensing veracity in Marie’s fed-up voice, Vermouth said, “—Seriously? So what that bastard told me was a lie?! I’m gonna kill him if I find him in hell.” After cursing Amaretto, his deceased colleague— Vermouth stared down the Black Tortoise in front of his eyes.

*In just one more hit—the instant I land a second attack, I’ll be exposed to a shell-storm. As such, the target of my second attack is, of course—the heavily armored automaton Black Tortoise.*

Vermouth unsheathed the remaining blade of his Iron Demon

with its still functional left arm and fiercely accelerated forward. Ignoring the annoying malfunction reports popping up on his screen, he closed in on the Black Tortoise—

*—Suck on th—*

Just then, his unit heavily swayed. One of the remaining enemy Iron Demons tackled his unit without using its armaments. Even without adjusting the alliance settings—a tackle was possible.

"Fuckin' A— Looks like there's a virgin here with a working brain after all!" Vermouth growled through gritted teeth.

*Even though the enemy unit's the same, it's not much for mine now that all its limiters are released.*

*With that in mind, it should be possible for me to ignore this guy and attack the Black Tortoise, but—I wouldn't have the necessary precision to only destroy the AI while being grappled from behind—I need to eliminate it first.*

Vermouth hesitated—but only for an instant.

"Hey, were you telling the truth earlier? Despite how it may seem, I'm an authentic Neapolitan you know?! At least, I think so. On my family register—actually, I don't have a family register or any memory of my youth, but it should be true you know?!"

"Whatever the case, aren't you just a punk from the cesspools of society?"

Resolving himself, Vermouth spent his remaining free attack on striking the waist of the enemy Iron Demon.

"Oy bitch! Apologize to all of Italy! Italy is, you know—number one in the world for luxury cars and ball games! And by ball games, of course, that includes bedtop sports as w—"

“Maybe you should just die.”

The Iron Demon that had had its power spring destroyed collapsed onto the ground. However, at that instant, Vermouth felt himself surrounded by an artificially murderous intent. Naturally —that applied to the prize in front of him as well.

“—Ah~ well, careful what you wish for.”

The Black Tortoise turned its thermobaric buster towards him. Forget a direct hit, if his unit was even grazed by a shot from the enemy’s thermobaric buster, he’d have a guaranteed ticket to heaven.

“—Vermouth?!” Marie cried out.

Vermouth shouted with his entire body, “Hey bitch! There’s no mistaking it, I’m an Italian after all. That’s what my soul is telling me!!”

For a split second, Vermouth was staring down the barrel of the cannon but— “Fuckin’ A!” Vermouth snarled. *I still have a chance to win.* Pulling on the wires, he made his unit step to the left. The next moment, the shell from the thermobaric cannon flew right past him.

*...I just have to stay out of this guy’s line of fire! I can withstand the shots from the lightly-armored automata for the time being but...*

“—After all, it’s screaming at me to act cool in front of a girl even at a time like thiiis!” Vermouth intuitively moved his unit further to the left. Shortly after, autocannon shells showered where he had just been.

—The attack had come from the last enemy Iron Demon.

“So you finally learned how to alter the alliance settings eh?

But—I wanna thank you, you know? I truly appreciate it." Vermouth sneered as his unit continued veering to the left.

The enemy's autocannons howled as they chased his Iron Demon with continuous fire—however, Vermouth had swiftly made his way to the right flank of the Black Tortoise.

He took a position where he could use the Black Tortoise as cover from the enemy bombardment as the cannon fire that had been chasing him from his side fell into the plating of the Black Tortoise, producing sparks.

Vermouth snickered. "If you're gonna alter the alliance settings, change only the one you're supposed to. Let me guess, you've self-studied a billion times but never had any experience with an actual woman?"

All the automata in the area now recognized the other Iron Demon as an enemy as well. *—With this, there are only two enemies I have to deal with now.*

The Black Tortoise's AI hesitated for a moment in deciding whether it should prioritize the new enemy threat or the old one.

A momentary reprieve, *but* — Vermouth curled his lips. He swiftly slid his unit from the Black Tortoise's flank to its rear and thrust his blade where the AI of the machine was stored. Sparks scattered as his blade pierced deep inside the plating.

"On the battlefield, hesitating for less than a fraction of a second can be the difference between life and death. Was this educational for you, cherryboy?" —The resistance that his hands felt disappeared. The reason Naoto had said that this was something that only Vermouth could do—was this.

If only knowledge was required, Marie could have done it as well.

Where the actuators of the AI were bundled, how their processors and control systems were positionally arranged, where the weakest spot in the plating was, and what amount of energy would be just enough to destroy the AI and leave the rest of the machine untouched—Marie knew all of that.

However, she wouldn't be able to execute the necessary actions in combat to realize it—what amount of power would be just enough, and what amount of power would be too much? Even if Marie could say the correct value, she didn't have the finesse to precisely apply that value while being fired upon in a commandeered war machine.

After all, the Iron Demon's oscillating blade was massive, measuring two and a half meters long. It was on a completely different scale from a clocksmith's handheld tools. If she were to accidentally destroy the unit's circuitry along with the AI, they would have to repair the Black Tortoise afterwards.

*Just like cute lil' Naoto said, this is something that only I could have done.* Vermouth boasted to himself. Due to "a certain reason," Vermouth had experience in destroying over a hundred models that followed the same design philosophy as this Black Tortoise.

Seeing the Black Tortoise which had ceased operating in front of him, he became certain. *—That should do it, I've destroyed just its AI as ordered.*

*The only things left to take care of are the enemy Iron Demon, which, like mine, has been recognized as hostile by the enemy automata, and the fodder on the ground. However, it'd be difficult for lightly-armored automata to take down an Iron Demon by themselves.*

*So much so that in the worst case, the enemy Iron Demon could prioritize taking me down first. The pilot could always try*

*and figure out how to reset the alliance settings for his squad's automata after.*

*Furthermore, with that attack just now, my unit's left hand is a mess. My unit has lost both of its blades as well. Even if I get out of this unit, it'd be difficult to escape from the fodder with my current body's capabilities.*

*—In that case.* "Still one more unit left on the hit list… Hey there, you piece of junk. Remember what I said about Code D3?" Vermouth looked at the gauges. *Sixty seconds left huh. Well, that should probably be enough.*

Tugging on a single wire—Vermouth hooked it to a lever by his feet while muttering, "'Die for my sake' —See ya. We got along well, but pumping and dumping is my way of life. No strings attached."

"Really, you're the worst." Chuckling at Marie's comment, Vermouth jumped out of the cockpit.

Immediately after—at an aberrantly swift speed, the Iron Demon that Vermouth had been piloting grappled the other one before freezing in the midst of the firing automata. Both units were locked in a hail of gunfire.

Meanwhile, Vermouth was also assaulted by shelling from cyborg soldiers and automata on the ground. If even one of their shots hit him, the commercial automaton's body he was using would immediately turn to scrap. However, Vermouth evaded the enemies' shots with graceful somersaults as he headed towards his destination.

Glancing at the sky, he zeroed in on his target. "—Welcome back buddy. How was your flight? You promised that you'd tell me your impressions, right?" Vermouth kindly smiled at the silhouette that floated down from above.

—It was the pilot who had been forcefully ejected from the Iron Demon earlier.

As Vermouth deftly untangled the parachute and restrained the pilot, he nonchalantly said, “The car I borrowed from you broke down. It was definitely defective, no doubt about it. As such, give me back my cig please.”

Vermouth snatched the cigarette from the pilot’s mouth and took a drag— “Hm? Does your mouth feel lonely? Try a taste of this then.” In a flash, Vermouth swiped the handgun from the pilot’s holster before the pilot could even react. He then stuffed the muzzle of the firearm in the pilot’s mouth, locking the pilot’s dropped jaw in place.

Now behind a hostage, Vermouth flashed everyone around him a big smile. “Now then… if you guys don’t want this guy’s head blown off—even an idiot would should know the drill, right?”

“F, Fggh… ngggh.” The hostage floundered about in his arms, but Vermouth’s hold didn’t loosen.

One of the cyborg soldiers who had their guns pointed towards the two of them spitefully said, “You dirty little crook!”

“Haah? A crook? Reaaaally? …That’s weak, man. Yes, and?”

—Crook. A cheat and a swindler, but also a term that typically implies some manner of success at it. Vermouth chose to focus on the latter point. *Yeah, you’re perfectly right* — Vermouth laughed.

Paying no mind to the countless guns pointed towards him, Vermouth took a deep drag of smoke and blew it out. Naturally, the automata in the area couldn’t fire at Vermouth, one of their designated allies was in the way.

*Five, four, three* … as Vermouth mentally counted down, he said, “Work on your vocabulary a bit more pal… Hoo—— And zero.”

Right then— The Iron Demon that Vermouth had piloted converted all of its remaining energy to heat and exploded. With a thunderous roar, the air shook as the shockwave’s hot wind flew past Vermouth. Shrouded by dazzling light in the distance, the enemy Iron Demon collapsed, a hole having formed in its abdomen.

Vermouth had set his Iron Demon to self-destruct in twelve seconds. It had done so by converting the remaining forty-eight seconds worth of operational energy to heat— But, just as planned, it had only been enough force to destroy the abdomen of the remaining Iron Demon.

Confirming that the pilot of the freshly incapacitated Iron Demon had successfully bailed, Vermouth blew out another puff of smoke. “Hell yeah… The cigs today really are delicious… Mission accomplished— Oh.”

Then, with his gun still stuffed inside the pilot’s mouth, Vermouth showed the cyborg soldier who had accosted him a filthy smile. It was a total mismatch for his bewitchingly beautiful face. “Give me a more fitting adjective next time, got it Japanese? Like, for example—”

—Just then, a chain of black flashes broke out. All the fodder in the area were minced. Cyborg soldiers were incapacitated, automata were made irreparable, only assorted piles of humans and scrap metal remained.

The girl who landed in the midst of the wreckage—RyuZU—scoffed, “What a cowardly, sleazy way of fighting. Really, I am impressed even.”

Vermouth laughed. He bumped the back of his hostage’s head

with his elbow to knock him out and released him. “You get it dont’cha Miss Dolly… Yes yes, call me ‘honorable’ in that tone of voice.”

At that, Naoto, AnchoR, and Marie also turned up. Marie immediately gasped, “…I can’t believe it. You really pulled it off? — With that body…?” Her voice was filled with true astonishment— as well as relief.

Her reaction satisfied Vermouth, who took another deep drag with a smug smile. “—What Missy, were you worried about me? So that’s why you kept yakking over the radio. Let me guess, is it love?”

“Die, pervert. It was because if you screwed up, Halter would be in trouble.”

“Hah— That so. So the Master’s your number one huh. Guess there’s no helping it then, I can’t compete with the Master.” Vermouth laughed as he raised both hands in resignation.

As Marie ran off towards the Black Tortoise, Vermouth called out to her from behind, “—Confess your love for me already ‘Missy.’ If you screw up, I’ll comfort you, ya ‘bitch.’”

*“I managed to pull off a miracle.”*

*“Now it’s your turn to show me that you’re the real deal Missy. Or are ya some self-proclaimed genius who’s really just a bitch?”*

Picking out Vermouth’s meaning between the lines, Marie smirked at his way of cheering her on.

*I see. He may be an uncouth, infuriating man, but he did finish the job like he said he would.*

“RyuZU, AnchoR, and especially you, Marie— I’m counting on

you guys okay?”

Obeying Naoto’s words, a pair of legs intersected in a curtsey before turning on their heel and kicking off from the ground. RyuZU tore open the back plating of the Black Tortoise whose AI had already been destroyed by Vermouth.

Then, AnchoR carried Marie up to the freshly exposed internal mechanisms of the automaton and said before leaving, “… Mother, do your best… ngh!”

“Ugh, I told you to stop calling me that,” Marie grouched before sighing. She put down Halter’s brain pod and laid out her tools. Nodding, Marie opened and closed her fists to warm her hands up.

*—I’ll make Naoto’s plan a success.*

*To that end, we have to destroy the entire enemy force absurdly, overwhelmingly, unreasonably, and at a speed which would be absolutely impossible for even the world’s strongest army.*

*—And, there’s one more thing too.*

As she ferociously began her work with Halter’s brain pod in front of her, Marie recalled the details of last night’s meeting…

•

“Link Halter’s brain to a heavily-armored automaton— What, are you screwing with me?!” Marie cried out.

As Marie listened to the plan—no, it was questionable whether this crackpot idea could even be called a plan—Naoto proposed the above solution to the problem of finding a new artificial body for Halter.

Given his abundance of fighting experience, Halter's absence hurt their overall strength considerably. However, connecting him to a cheap artificial body would actually be more dangerous.

In that case, Naoto figured that they could just seize the enemy's main weapon, the heavily-armored automaton Black Tortoise, and hook him up to that. That was what Naoto was saying— But.

"...Now look here—and I won't let you tell me that you don't realize this—human brains are things that control **human bodies!** A heavily armored automaton's body is completely different from an artificial body that's made to be compatible with human brains!" Marie preached.

Despite having the most basic common sense shoved in his face, Naoto tilted his head in confusion. "...I mean, I think old man Halter can do it though, you know?"

"—Because you figure Halter has experience operating manned weapons? Well yeah, of course he does. But that's completely different from having his brain linked to an automaton!

Have you ever taken in a panoramic image all at once like insects do with their compound eyes? Could you handle operating eight legs like a spider? The information that artificial skin and touch sensors send are completely different you know? A human brain can't process that kind of information."

"Nooo? You're wrong about that, Missy," the one linked to a love automaton that was hanging on a workshop hanger—Vermouth—interjected. "I feel like you're looking down on the brains of veteran soldiers—I'm talking about the ones who successfully trained themselves until their weapons became like their own flesh and blood."

"...Don't be ridiculous. In the first place, there's no precedent for such a—"

"But there is. **Countless examples** , in fact."

As Marie was left in mute amazement, Vermouth scoffed, "If a human brain is directly linked to a weapon, one can avoid being limited by the inflexible algorithms of an AI while also avoiding the major shortcoming of manned weapons, the control lag. There are those who were forced to do it—and those who chose to do it on their own, you know?"

Hearing Vermouth insinuate that countless such human experiments were being conducted, Marie glared. "Don't screw with me! That's a violation of human rights—it's totally illegal!!"

"Hahhah—! That one-liner's a masterpiece. To speak of human rights of all things on a battlefield! Just where is this goddess of yours who respects something like that, because unfortunately, I've never met her!"

Ignoring the flabbergasted Marie, Vermouth sarcastically laughed as he shifted his gaze. "So— Brat, as I thought, your craziness is sublime. Moreover, you suggested this because you realized it right?"

"Ah, so I guessed correctly? I had heard that the old man's artificial body was a verification unit, so I figured—"

"I love it. I love that scummy, keen perception of yours! On the other hand, I'm surprised that you don't know anything about it, princess."

Marie sullenly asked with a sigh, "...What are you talking about?"

Vermouth answered her question with a wide, exceptionally repugnant sneer on his face. "I told you didn't I? There are **those who chose to do it on their own** — Master Halter is one of them."

Hearing his answer, Marie muttered, practically suffocating "……You must be joking…"

"I'm genuinely surprised that you didn't know. It's a famous legend in our line of work, you know?" Vermouth erased the sneer on his face before continuing.

"—The Scarborough Fair Incident. Oberons. The absolute war machine Overwork. Only an imposter or an amateur scumbag wouldn't know of the legendary mercenary who brought about a miracle in that desperate, hopeless predicament. The master hooked himself up— **in the middle of combat** you know?"

Vermouth continued in a somewhat boastful tone— "He linked his own brain! On the spot! To the heavily-armored automaton that he captured from the enemy!" —As he shouted with pride.

"The master supposedly said this back then you know? That 'no AI can ever match the brain of a human who has survived the battlefield.' And with that, the master destroyed twenty-seven heavily-armored automata of the same model as his linked one and survived. He provided the truth of his words," Vermouth fervently preached, it was like someone reciting a legend of his favorite baseball team.

"…That's a lie. If there were any such cases, there would have been papers written on the subject already, but there aren't any," Marie replied.

"Scarborough Fair was an unofficial operation. It was something that happened before you were born, princess. By the way, should I tell you why I said I was surprised that you didn't know about this when lil' Naoto managed to sniff it out?"

The words that followed— "Listen, princess. A verification unit basically means a test model." —truly made Marie choke on air this time.

"Savvy? Normally it might be a human rights violation, but what if the subject was someone who couldn't be more suited for the job?"

*...Vermouth doesn't look like he's lying.*

*It's true that I don't know the original reason that Halter was hired by the Breguet Corporation to begin with.*

*But, if what Vermouth's saying is true, then that'd mean that Halter's a test model—*

Marie doubled down. "Even theoretically... that's impossible. If a military grade automaton feeds its sensory information to a human brain—the brain would be ruined."

"It's just as you say. That's the reason that such 'weapons' aren't mass produced. It's also the reason that there are countless idiots who ended up losing their own names after trying to follow in the Master's heroic footsteps," Vermouth sneered. "—You know, like me for instance."

Shocked, Marie stared at Vermouth. The man who had lost everything except his brain smiled impishly. "—I told you didn't I? That I'm the Master's humble fan."

Marie looked down and sank into silence as she pondered—letting out a deep sigh, she lifted her head. "Very well. But I have a condition. If you call yourself his fan then you should know the unit that Halter connected himself to, yes?"

"HS-FK2, 'Oberon'— It was an antique model even at the time. This country doesn't stock it, and even if you did find one it'd be useless on a modern battlefield," Vermouth replied after deducing her line of thought.

*She probably wants to use the same model as the one that the Master connected to back then to lower the risk as much as pos-*

*sible, but...*

However, Marie was muttering to herself while staring into space. Satisfied, she nodded calmly. "—Oberon, huh. I see, I can see how it was possible then. So Halter didn't actually go for broke without any consideration back then."

"Hah?"

"An Oberon—it's a model that has a 'flawed design' due to concentrating its control system and processors in one spot. In a live fire test, it would shut down if it was simply hit in the back by an anti-materiel rifle, so its back plating was reinforced. But because of that, its center of gravity became lopsided. So to stabilize it, the designers overloaded it with frontal armaments. That's the kind of failed creation it is."

Mouth agape, Vermouth stared at Marie. "—Oy, don't tell me that you have the blueprints of all the weapons of the world—"

" **Memorized?** But of course," Marie readily affirmed, smirking. "Don't underestimate an ex-Meister for your own good alright, Mister Dutch Wife? But if that's the case, we might be able to solve the problem."

"Err, what do you mean?" Naoto asked with his head tilted.

Marie explained, "It's true that concentrating a weapon's control system and processors in one place is a design flaw overall, but it does have the benefit of making maintenance of the unit easier. There are quite a few weapons that employ this type of design...

For instance, there's a model with a similar design philosophy as the Oberon currently in service in Japan as well—the Cz35C, 'Black Tortoise'—Naoto, can you tell where the Black Tortoises in Tokyo are with those magical ears of yours?"

“So my hearing is magic now, huh… Like I could tell from just their model number, I need to hear their sou—”

“—Okay, you’ll know if one’s turned on then right?” Marie asked with a serious look. She repeated her query for confirmation. “—Right?”

“Yeah. If there’s one that’s turned on, I’ll find it.” Naoto looked right back at her, nodding.

Evaluating his credibility from the expression in his eyes—Marie nodded in return. “I see.”

*What am I doing? I don’t have the luxury of doubting this guy’s plan at this point. And doesn’t Naoto always pull through?*

“Then that’s what we’ll target. We need to make the necessary preparations for connecting Halter’s brain to that specific model —Vermouth.” It was the first time she’d called the man in front of her by his name. “Answer me honestly. …What do you think the chances of success are?”

Halter was completely unresponsive right now. He didn’t even make a peep when connected to a voice device. He was currently unconscious, essentially in a vegetative state.

*Will this really work? Will Halter really wake up?* — As Marie was feeling anxious…

“Let me tell you something good Ms. Marie Bitch Breguet.” Vermouth showed her a daring smile. “ **Soldiers** are those who live and die by the battlefield. Even if he did change his job to being your babysitter, his soldier blood will stay in him for the rest of his life. If the master gets even a whiff of the scent of a battlefield—”

He paused for breath.

"He'll wake up even if he's dead—and in the best possible way at that—by being in the worst mood ever."

•

—Connecting a human brain directly to a heavily armored automaton. Facing a task that any clocksmith would laugh off as impossible, Marie too laughed mockingly.

The high frequency oscillating blade that Vermouth had offhandedly thrust into the unit had destroyed only the AI as planned. No more, no less. Perfectly. Precisely.

*I see, he's a vulgar and irritating man but it looks like he's not all talk—he did his job. In other words, he answered Naoto's magic with his own no less than miraculous feat.*

"Well then... next up is me I guess—"

—Thirty seconds. That was the time limit that Naoto had given her. The maximum amount of time that AnchoR and RyuZU could **lure the enemy to one spot** while defending the group around the Black Tortoise from the increasing number of enemy attacks—was thirty seconds.

"Sure— Just watch me! Piece of cake I tell ya!!" Deliberating putting on a great show of confidence—Marie howled with a ferocious smile.

Right then— Time slowed down. At least, that's how it felt to Marie. Intensifying her focus, the clamor all around her faded away as she looked over what was in front of her. Tossing Halter's head into the air, Marie spread out her tools like a bird unfurling its wings.

Dismantling and removing the processors that had been destroyed—2,876 parts in total—she finished all the necessary preparations. As Halter's brain fell before her eyes **precisely 2.4**

**seconds later** , the automaton's control system was prepped for a recreation of history.

*—The operation itself is simple. Repairing RyuZU was much harder.* However, the nervousness she felt now was on a whole other scale from that time. All the bones in her body creaked, her muscles spasmed. She felt as if her blood was boiling.

If she messed up a single procedure or calculation going into this, Halter would not wake up. That's an understatement. She would have struck the final nail in the coffin—Halter's coffin.

Facing the immense pressure of such a terrifying possibility, Marie wore a mystifying smile. *It's doable. It's doable if you're the one who tries, Marie—!*

Immediately after she had finished the preparatory cleanup, Halter's brain pod fell back into her hands—27.6 seconds remained. She swiftly yet carefully began to connect his brain pod to the control system—

*This'll take 7.6 seconds. From there, it'll take me 6.1 seconds to test the automaton's nerve-circuits, 4.9 seconds to tune the control system's algorithm to the one closest to human cognition, 3.3 seconds to reboot the unit externally, and at least 4.1 seconds for Halter to awaken.*

That added up to 26 seconds in total. The buffer she had to deal with any unexpected situations was less than two seconds—*Man, I have* ***two whole seconds*** *to spare...!*

In that instant— Marie got the false impression that time had stopped. Her heart began to rapidly beat. Sound faded away. She felt like her body temperature had suddenly taken a nose dive. As her tension and focus reached their limits in a quick burst, Marie felt as if her very consciousness had ascended to a higher plane.

Marie felt herself touch something like the imaginary domain

that only RyuZU was allowed to tread in this universe. What she felt was just like Mute Scream, the sensation of the interval between the present and a second later being stretched out infinitely.

The only difference was— *My hands are so slow— Ngh! Get moving already...!* Her body wasn't able to keep up with her mind in that infinite second. She simply felt irritated that her whole body felt heavy and slow, as if she had sunk into a sea of tar.

—However, from the rest of the gang's perspective, her display was already in the realm of magic. All sorts of parts and tools danced in the air of their own volition before settling into their proper places.

It was as if there were special gravitational forces that existed between them, a dictated orbit that decided where they should go —that was how it looked to the others. If this spectacle wasn't that of a divine work, then just what was it supposed to be?

"...I can't believe it... Oy lil' Naoto—is that girl really human...?" Vermouth muttered, bit by bit.

"Yeah, that's genius," Naoto replied. "See that, AnchoR?"

"...It's, more amazing, than amazing... So Mother's, a genius," AnchoR said in admiration as she turned around in the midst of a battle with the shells, bullets, and enemies swarming her.

"Make no mistake, AnchoR. That—is merely **the limits of a human** ," RyuZU responded, " **...at least for now.** "

RyuZU's voice seemed to harbor mixed feelings—but, without any regard for the things going on around her, Marie became sharper, faster as she further immersed to reach a level of focus beyond focus still. In the depths of her trance, Marie recalled Vermouth's words:

*"—I feel like you're looking down on the brains of veteran soldiers—I'm talking about the ones who successfully trained themselves until their weapons became like their own flesh and blood."*

*Yeah, it's true that I underestimated human prowess. I get what he was saying now. After all, currently, my mind fully grasps all the machinery that my hands have touched just now.*

*The gears, cylinders, wires, screws, springs hidden beneath the heavy-duty plating, the power mechanism that they make up —I understand everything about them. Everything.*

*If I felt like it, I could name the kinds of parts being used in every one of its junctions, in what numbers, even the condition they're in. Forget just that, this mechanism that I'm touching, this enormous power mechanism too—*

***—Even this city that I'm standing on———!!***

*——ngh* Marie's expanded consciousness perceived danger. A self-propelled artillery roughly three kilometers away was about to bombard her position.

*It seems like the others haven't noticed it yet, having their hands full dealing with the enemies close by…*

Marie tried to warn them, but nothing came out. She couldn't breathe. She was sinking into the sea of tar. Her ascended form remembered that it was perhaps human after all. Her honed awareness was dulling.

*No, I can't—not yet!* She still had work to do. She still needed another second to tune the control system— No, she screwed up. She needed two seconds to recover now.

There were eight seconds left. She pulled back her receding

consciousness and continued to focus— *Done!* —The unit began to reboot.

One, two, three— Success. There were five seconds left. However, immediately after, she saw that the self-propelled artillery had taken aim from the corner of her dulled awareness.

*This is bad. I don't have any more time— Move. Move move move move move move— I said move— Halter!!*

She should have done everything correctly. However, the unit that had had its power turned on showed no response whatsoever.

—The only thing left to do was wait for Halter to wake up. That should have been the case, but—

The self-propelled artillery fired. As she was right now, she even perceived the shell spinning in the barrel as it accelerated against the rifling.

*Why hasn't Naoto noticed?* — She wondered, before immediately answering her own question. *That guy—can't hear anything faster than sound* — Marie finally remembered something that she should have realized much sooner.

*Estimated time left until the shell hits—twelve seconds. The trajectory is stupidly accurate. It's shooting towards me in a straight line. In twelve seconds, the shell will rip through my body and into the exposed internals of the unit where Halter's brain pod is, pulverizing him.*

She could see a clear vision of that future— However, in that instant— Her footing shook. As her expanded consciousness was pulled back into real time, her posture crumbled. She was flung into the air from the impact of the shell that had landed to her side.

Marie just barely managed to comprehend what had happened. *The unit narrowly moved to the side—incredibly enough, just that was enough to make the shell that had meant certain death for me miss.*

Immediately after, the Black Tortoise rotated violently, its feet tearing up the earth as it nimbly caught Marie's body with its right arm. Then, with an unmatched accuracy and speed that astonished Naoto—no, even RyuZU and AnchoR—the Black Tortoise vaporized the self-propelled artillery with its main cannon, the thermobaric buster on its shoulders.

Without even a momentary pause—the Black Tortoise turned the wheels affixed to the inner sides of both its feet—actually drifting—as it traced a large arc and unleashed a volley with its 30 cm autocannons.

The autocannon shells burst forth like a sudden shower, and yet, they had the precision of a sniper rifle. The Black Tortoise was absolutely annihilating the enemies that even RyuZU and AnchoR couldn't fully contain on their own anymore.

"—M, Mother!" AnchoR cried out as she hurried to catch Marie, who had been flung into the air from the abrupt maneuver of the Black Tortoise.

Ignoring her—the Black Tortoise continued its rampage all the while, as if it had gone mad. As it barraged the area with its side cannons— No, as it sniped targets with its fusillades, it spun round and round with its large legs, plowing the lightly armored automata in the vicinity around.

Seeing what looked like the frenzy of a vengeful god, Marie's eyes widened as she dumbfoundedly muttered, "...Hal...ter...?"

The only thing emanating from the Black Tortoise that was connected to Halter's brain was stone cold murderous intent. The desire to mow down and trample everything in its sight—that was

it. There was no air of human emotion whatsoever.

"Could it be that… I screwed something up—" Marie muttered in a trembling voice.

Naoto responded with a blank look, "Screwed something up? Wait, you screwed something up Marie? **The old man seems to be perfectly back to normal though.** "

"—Hah?"

"Allow me to explain so that even someone like you, Mistress Marie, whose deficiency in mental faculties is enough to engender a sense of pity in others—or in the layman's terms, so that even a monkey could understand. Namely, please visit an eye doctor if it looks to you like any of his attacks are hitting us."

Marie turned to see RyuZU take a break from her attacks to smile at her. Marie finally realized it after having it pointed out to her. *It's true that we haven't been attacked by the Black Tortoise at all. But then, what is that terrifyingly systematic destruction all about…?*

As if for good measure, the Black Tortoise fired two shots from its main cannon. Heavily armored automata several kilometers away were hit and vaporized—upon which, **"…Godammit… Oy, which one of you bastards was the one who woke me up when I was sleeping so comfortably?"**

Hearing the Black Tortoise—or rather, Halter—unhappily groan through the static of the external speakers, Marie's eyes welled up. In an attempt to try to hide her truly heartfelt relief, she yelled out, "Halter! Halter, do you hear me?!"

"Aahh? …Oh, it's you princess. What's going on here… Wait, what the, what's with this nauseating field of vision— Am I seeing through compound eyes? Oy, so you hooked me up to an automaton? What the heck have you been up to?" Halter muttered, the

tone of his voice changing from angry to baffled as he grasped the situation.

Marie retorted with a teary smile, “That’s my line— Making me go through all this trouble— What the hell were you doing?!”

“Yeah, sorry about that… I was taking a little nap.”

Marie repeated those words in shock. “—A little nap…? …Don’t tell me that the reason you didn’t respond when I hooked you up to a voice device was because—”

“Oh, that happened? No, see, when my sensory organs are cut off I get really sleepy somehow… I’m sorry, really. Feels like I got some sound sleep for the first time in a long while.”

“__”

Marie’s body shook as it emanated a menacing aura.

*Are you kidding me? In other words, this guy was sleeping like a baby while I worried my brains out? —I’m going to slaughter him when this is over,* Marie vowed.

“Missy, I told you didn’t I? That the master would wake up— **in the best possible way, the worst mood ever,** ” Vermouth laughingly interjected.

“A soldier who’s rudely awoken by a night raid loses all sense of rationality as he retaliates. His body and mind are strung to their limits—in other words, the perfect condition for him to perform a massacre. That’s why one of the few rules that is actually respected on the battlefield is— ‘No night raids.’”

Not entirely satisfied with Vermouth’s explanation, Marie sighed in frustration. Meanwhile, Halter nimbly tilted his giant mechanical head upon seeing an unfamiliar face “—Oy, you’re that greenhorn? What, did you awaken to that kind of thing?”

“Hardly. This little number is something that your princess gave me. Despite how it looks, it comes with a pretty big cock. If I felt like it, I could give the brat that I fell in love with over there a good dicking.”

“—Deary me,” RyuZU interjected, her voice cutting like a knife. “Is this perversion that pierces the heavens-level deviant a homosexual man—excuse me, a homosexual doll—as well?”

The scythes of the reaper grated against the ground as RyuZU began to walk towards him. Despite that, Vermouth daringly continued, “Calm down, Miss Dolly. It was just a figure of speech. I’m just looking forward to your master flipping this world upside down as one of his fans, that’s all.”

“...Is that so. In that case, you are correct in your evaluation of Master Naoto. I shall interpret your statement that way and let you off the hook. But should you ever look at Master Naoto with lecherous eyes—”

“Give a guy a break, will ya? Geez. I’m straight, okay? ...Oh, right, I guess you missed it. I gotta say though, that kid in drag—Naoko-chan—was quite the jewel you know?”

RyuZU froze. Like an old iron gate in need of oiling, RyuZU slowly turned her head towards Naoto with an audible creak. “———Have you finally gone and awakened to that particular kind of sexual fetish while I slept, Master Naoto?”

“RyuZU, I’m used to others looking at me this way but you looking at me like I’m utter trash seriously hurts you know?! It was a disguise okay? A disguise!”

“Father... had a lot, of fun... He was... cute, you know?”

“——So, everyone except me and that magnified piece of patchwork over there witnessed it?” RyuZU asked. Her voice was slightly trembling.

Even Marie understood how RyuZU was feeling from the sound of her voice. *How novel, it's astoundingly hard to believe, but it appears that RyuZU is—sulking*. Marie let out a sigh. "If a photo will do, I have one that the woman who dressed up Naoto took. More importantly, right now—"

"Understood. I shall take it from you even if I have to kill you," RyuZU said with a wide stare, cutting Marie off.

*Ah, she's serious*. Seeing the intensity of her stare, Marie reflexively resolved herself for death.

Meanwhile, AnchoR was tugging on RyuZU's sleeve. "Big Sis… here…" AnchoR presented several photos that she had retrieved from her pockets to RyuZU.

RyuZU accepted them with trembling hands. She scrutinized and absorbed every last detail in them before hugging them to her chest and sighing, "Ahh…"



Having attained her prize, RyuZU quickly stuffed the photos down the collar of her dress with a smile like that of the Holy Mother. “AnchoR— Exceptional, simply exceptional work, if I may say so myself as your eldest sister. Do you realize that you have just saved a human life?”

“…You aren’t talking about my life, right?” Marie muttered in a trembling voice.

AnchoR showed her sister a broad smile. “And… And also, I had a date with Father! It was really fun!”

The saintly smile disappeared from RyuZU’s face. “…Is that so. It was a lot of fun, huh.”

“Y…Y, eah…?” AnchoR rigidly nodded while feeling the sudden change in the wind.

RyuZU formed a smile with her lips, but her eyes were dead. “I see, that is good to hear, AnchoR. However, should you two partake in such activities next time without me, I shall be forced to take the appropriate measures—so be warned. More specifically, measures of force. Discipline…”

“Oy RyuZU?! I won’t allow any sisterly figh—”

“…I, I’m sorry… but, I don’t want to fight you, Big Sis… I would, probably win.”

“What are you saying, AnchoR?! The one who would be put to the sword is obviously Master Naoto.”

“—Wait, meee?!” Naoto cried out.

Coldly looking down on her master, RyuZU said, “It is with extreme regret that I must inform you of this, Master Naoto—but while I can accept you having a ‘sister sandwich,’ I too must be part. That is the most I can compromise.”

“I—I’m so sorryyyy! I’m a failure of a husband to have gone on a date without my wiiife!” Naoto exclaimed as he dived to the ground and prostrated himself before RyuZU’s feet.

Halter, who was watching this conversation from above, sighed. “—Hey, could someone answer my first question already? What’s the situation?”

*Oh, right,* Marie thought as she shook her head. Due to the relief from Halter’s return, Marie had almost forgotten the situation they were in herself. Just as she opened her mouth to explain the circumstances that led to the current situation, Naoto stood up to interrupt her—his answer was extremely concise: “It’s a **fun** situation.”

Naoto smiled wickedly. “We’re gonna beat the hell out of the fools who wrecked you, old man. We’re gonna take revenge for what they did to RyuZU, and all of Akihabara, until they cry. And after that, we’re going to stuff them in a crucible. We’ll send anyone who gets in our way flying and silence all loudmouths who think they know anything. That’s all there is to it.”

—Naoto asserted all Halter needed to know.

“I see, well that certainly sounds **fun** indeed. Do let me take part.”

“That’s why we put you in that unit. How do you feel?”

“Perfect. —Thanks, princess. I wouldn’t expect any less from you. You did great work,” Halter said, adroitly giving Marie a thumbs up with the Black Tortoise’s hand.

Looking up at him with an exasperated smile, Marie puffed out her chest. “But of course. Just who do you think I am?”

“Haha— Well then, Naoto. It seems like the commander of this operation is you, so what’re your orders?” Halter asked with a low

laugh.

RyuZU and AnchoR looked at Naoto as well. Vermouth too. Even Marie's ears perked up so that she wouldn't miss what he said.

*Naoto, RyuZU, AnchoR, Vermouth, and lastly—Halter.*

*When I first heard Naoto's plan, I thought it was idiotic. I thought it was idiotic when we decided to do it, I thought it was idiotic after we started doing it, and to be honest, I still think it's idiotic even now.*

*But for some reason, I feel like no matter what Naoto tells us to do right now—I'll believe that it's possible.*

In response to everyone's gazes, Naoto daringly smiled. Surveying the enemy force that encircled them from a distance, he muttered, "...Hm, I see that you guys rounded up the remaining forces like I asked."

If they had left Marie behind and continued to subjugate the enemy instead, they could have kept the battle at a distance and ironically enough, let her work more safely. The intention behind them having paused their advance for thirty seconds was **this—**

"To start things off— Annihilate the 378 enemies here in the remaining thirty-eight seconds without killing anyone ♪."

Hearing those words, Halter chuckled. "Talk about anticlimactic— That's a piece of cake."

Everyone smiled a little at his bravado— And so— 22 seconds passed. That was the time it took for the gang to annihilate the weapons and armaments of the 378-man strong force.

After neutralizing all remaining threats, they entered the palace as Naoto flipped off a news helicopter in the air behind

him.

•

Opening up the enormous palace gate, the gang went deep inside the palace. The passageway was large enough that even Halter could walk through it comfortably in his current form. After advancing straight ahead for some time, the passageway led to a courtyard-esque hall. There were people there waiting for them.

Several tens of imperial guards stood in a line before them. They were poised behind a sorry excuse for a barricade as they warily studied the intruders. Behind them were two slightly out-of-date armored walkers.

It seemed like they were aware of what had happened outside, because they looked afraid of Naoto's company. Even so, it was apparent that they were hyping themselves up, as if to say, "We won't give up without a fight."

*What should we do?* Just as Marie was thinking that, someone came forward alone from behind the line of imperial guards—it was a young woman. She walked straight to the front, brushing off the hands of the soldiers trying to stop her.

Marie smiled. *Thankfully it looks like she remembers me.* "Wait here." Marie made her way to the front of her group as well.

When the two came within two meters from each other, they stopped.

Marie elegantly bowed. "— **Nice to meet you** , Your Highness Princess Hoshimiya."

"Yes... I believe this is the first time we have met, Ms. Terrorist." In response— Houko lowered her head in kind.

After the two had exchanged their spoken and tacit greetings, Marie continued, “Well then, allow me to introduce myself. My name is Maëribell— The ringleader behind this country’s current crisis, and the most nefarious terrorist in history————————is my boss.”

Marie pointed a thumb over her shoulder at Naoto. Upon which Naoto glared at her. “—Oy. Oy you bastard! You dodged your responsibility just now, didn’t you?! You just tried to make a contingency plan in case things go sour, didn’t you?!” Naoto howled.

Marie simply ignored him as she smiled at the princess.

Houko seemed to be a bit at a loss. “Well then, Miss Maëribell. Have you come here for the reason I imagine to be the case?”

“It might be a little different.” Marie shrugged. “We came here for our own sakes. That’s all.”

Houko furrowed her brows. She followed up with another question, **“…Are you really certain that this is what you want?”**

“Of course. This is the path that we chose for ourselves. …Also, I think you’re misunderstanding things so allow me to restate my position. That idiot over there—is truly the ringleader behind the chain of incidents this time.”

Upon hearing that, Houko’s eyes widened. She deeply bowed her head to Naoto this time as if to correct some sort of mistake. When she raised her head, she castigated the entire group in a stern, elegant voice, looking at each of them in turn:

“In that case—all of you terrorists of whom this is my first pleasure of meeting, allow me to express my sincere resentment towards you.

You wreaked unprecedented havoc upon this nation in your attempt to subvert it. Now, you even threaten my very life for your own gain.

I shall surely never forgive your nefarious crimes my entire life. I have conviction that you all will be met with due punishment one day."

Her obsidian eyes filled with a sharp, powerful will of steel as she asserted, "Now then, pray tell: What do you hope to achieve?"

The one who replied to those resolute words—was RyuZU.

"Yes, let me see... For now, I think a **deep cleaning** of the palace is in order, much like the **landscaping** of the grounds we did outside. Master Naoto?"

"Yeah, we've **advertised ourselves** plenty by now. Let's give everyone watching the last push—I'll leave it to you."

Upon those words, RyuZU reverently bowed, then touched the clock by her chest. If she had used this method from the beginning, forget seven minutes, it would have taken her a wink to annihilate the forces outside—but she deliberately chose not to.

As for why... it was because an advertisement should be easily understandable. An advertisement that no one could understand would be meaningless.

However, now that they had destroyed the outside forces in seven minutes—now that they had completed that "impossible" demonstration—all that was left were the two words that would perfectly top things off for the grandest finale ever... As her formal black dress transformed into a white bridal gown, RyuZU said:

**"——'Mute Scream'——"**

A new “advertisement” that was absurdity itself, a display exhibit **beyond anyone’s understanding** , abruptly began—and abruptly ended.

Six minutes and forty-eight seconds after Naoto’s initial declaration—all enemy forces, both inside and outside the palace, were completely neutralized.

•

“—As we first reported a little while ago, the criminal identifies himself as Naoto Miura—”

This news report was on live TV, broadcasting to the entire world. The footage was so compelling that everyone living in Tokyo, no, everyone living in Japan—no, everyone living in the world was glued to the screen.

The ordinary citizens of Tokyo walking the streets were obviously watching, but also the politicians who had been embroiled in their fruitless meeting and the police and military who had been busy handling the unrest. Even foreign businesses were watching with astounded eyes.

Among those assorted groups of viewers, the military and the arms manufacturers—took the footage being shown the hardest. Of course they did. After all…

“Furthermore, according to testimonies from the survivors, the ones who caused the vast majority of the damage were two automata who referred to themselves as Initial-Y Series automata —”

—*This is it*. It was the report one such person had been scouring the channels for.

*I see, the rebel army that had surrounded the palace was nothing more than a ragtag force in the end. Their leaders were*

*delirious youngsters whose degree of proficiency was nothing to boast about.*

*As far as equipment goes, our reserves and old weapons made up more than half of what they had. But, even taking that into consideration—*

"I repeat! It's been an hour since the terrorist group occupied the palace, but there haven't been any confirmed casualties so far..."

—Seven minutes. Strictly speaking, six minutes and forty-eight seconds. That was the amount of time it took for a terrorist group whose member count didn't even reach the double digits—to annihilate two battalion-sized military forces.

Had there ever been such a force to be reckoned with in this world? It would be easy for an elite army to do something similar if their lives were no object and they used more time.

—However, no one could produce such a result in so short a period of time. Those in the know of military matters and clocksmithing understood that fact all the more, painfully so.

Not to mention, no matter how many times they replayed the footage taken by the news helicopters in slow motion—they still couldn't even get a clue as to how the terrorists annihilated the imperial guard force. In other words, they had done "something" at a speed that was faster than even a single frame of video.

In the group that produced such an impossible phenomenon were two who called themselves Initial-Y Series automata. Legendary automata that the one who had recreated this planet once upon a time—'Y'—had left behind.

The common perception among ordinary folks—was that they were legendary things, fairy tales, an urban legend.

Those well-versed in technology had thought—that if they really did exist, they would be world treasures.

Those well-versed in politics knew—that they did exist, but that none of them were in operation.

Still further into the dark side, those who knew secret intelligence and highly classified information that would never be divulged to the public, for example, people at the top of the Five Great Corporations or a small group of politicians—understood. They do indeed exist—and that if they were ever to be activated, they would become the most terrifying weapons in history.

The understanding of the Initial-Y Series among these different groups of people were either altered or made certain by the news broadcast. The series of footage that was broadcast was unmistakably impossible to reproduce with any current technology. That was the greatest proof that there truly were Initial-Y automata among the terrorists.

Just then, noise suddenly flooded the live footage that the whole world was watching. At the same time, a severe quake centered around Tokyo broke out.

All communication mechanisms in the area ceased functioning and the resonance gears began turning irregularly.

The gears of Tokyo's core tower that coordinated municipal functions began to behave in unprecedented ways.

It wasn't a malfunction. It wasn't a fault caused by degradation over time either. Everything about the system's operation was normal. Only, for some reason, the mechanisms wouldn't obey the orders of the superintendent.

The people of Tokyo remembered a phenomenon that was very much alike to this one— Two days ago, as Tokyo's denizens simply looked on, petrified in their helplessness, they had been

thrust with a boundlessly cheerful claim of criminal responsibility from the devices all around them—

And now...

**"Ladieeeeeeeeeeesssssss annnnnnnnnnnnnd gentlemen!!** As well as you insignificant others that I'll skip naming, do y'all remember the voice of little old me?!

It's been a while hasn't it? Maybe a couple days or so? Did you miss me? Were you lonely maaaaaaaan ♡?

Sorry for making you wait but check it—I've been stirring up trouble for a few consecutive days now! **I love you baby baby babyyyyyyyyyyyyyyy!!"**

Once again, the voice and face of nightmares was broadcast as the entire world watched on.

•

"So by popular request! For all you nincompoops who fell in love with me after the last broadcast! Today's my grand face reveal hehee~! Let me guess, you're head over heels right? I'm such a stud right?!"

As that maniacal voice prattled on, someone was pacing the transmission room of the headquarter building of the current ruling party in Kasumigaseki Grid.

"Sure looks like they're having fun over there." One of the few people who understood the true intent behind this broadcast—Yuu Karasawa—smiled bitterly.

*...Dr. Marie must be pretty upset. This broadcast's far too close to entertainment for her tastes. I've no doubt that the expression on her face right now is something that she hadn't ever shown during her time with Meister Guild.*

*If possible, I'd have liked to see it. Take a picture for posterity's sake, but—* "Work work work— Good lord, laborers sure have it hard."

Karasawa turned his gaze from the TV back to the plain door in front of him. The door had no doorplate; instead, the words "Transmission Broadcast Room" were painted directly onto it. It was not a room equipped for short-range transmissions, but rather, for super long-range ones that could reach the opposite side of the planet.

"Well, grumbling about it won't help. Guess I'll get to work—as a consultant..." *This is definitely outside my role's official duties though,* Karasawa thought as he took a short breath— Exhaling, he kicked the door in front of him with all his might.

"—!!" With a boom, the door was flung open.

As Karasawa entered without a moment's respite, a startled man jumped up and turned around. Karasawa knew his face—it was unmistakably the man who had skulked away from the conference room two days ago.

"Wha— Who the hell are you! What are you doing here?!"

"My my, that's what I want to ask *you* ."

Unsettled, the man's face twisted into something ugly. On the other hand, Karasawa wore a cool expression and a soft smile.

"Would it be alright if I asked you where you sent that message just now? You know, as a consultant ♪."

"I have no obligation to answer you, bastard."

"Well, I guess I don't have to force an answer out of you. I can find out easily enough if I just check the logs after all."

“You bastard, you don’t have the authority to do either of those things!!”

“—Yeah, maybe. But who’ll hold me responsible?”

At that moment, the man drew a handgun from inside his jacket. Seeing the maneuver, Karasawa realized that the man was clearly a cyborg who was used to combat, though his body was disguised as flesh.

The man had aimed his gun at Karasawa in one slick movement. Just as he was pulling the trigger—

“Hey, soooooo no offense, but I’m a little disappointed okay? Heck, I feel bad enough to cry! I mean, I knew there’d be small fry but I didn’t expect you guys to be *that* weak. You minnows aren’t even a meal! Or is my grand old gang a little too strong?! Sorry for being too strong, seriously!”

*Clang*. The handgun fell to the floor.

“—Really, it’s just like Mr. Naoto Miura said, isn’t it,” Karasawa continued while maintaining his smile. “Challenging a Meister with an artificial body of all things—you’re selling us way too short, you know?”

As he folded and put away the portable tools that he had instantaneously drawn, Karasawa looked down. At his feet was a groaning man who had just had his artificial body dismantled in a flash.

Karasawa picked up the man’s gun. “Well then, I’ll give you just three seconds, alright? Think you could tell me who you were communicating with by using the ruling party’s transmission equipment without authorization?”

“You bas...tard. How much do you know—”

“That’s enough thank you.”

Without even a second of hesitation, Karasawa fired. Bullets successively pierced all of the parts of the man’s artificial body.

“Be grateful, alright? I’d rather just dispose of uncooperative people myself, but due to the request of a certain cute girl, I’m stopping myself just short of killing you. I figure someone’ll find you within the forty-three hours it’ll take for your brain’s preservation device to fully expend its power. Now then—”

Karasawa tossed away the emptied handgun.

“Time to find out what someone who clearly doesn’t belong to the government communicated and to whom using the ruling party’s transmission station— Ah, I need permission right?”

Karasawa scoffed before roughly pulling the man on the floor up by his collar. He fetched his ID card to show the man’s artificial eyes which were clearly out of operation at this point. “I’m Yuu Karasawa, a consultant hired by the ministry of technology. I’ll be checking your transmission logs, alright?”

Karasawa violently shook the man by the collar to make him nod before slamming his face into the ground with a smile. “Thank you for your cooperation.” The man wasn’t even twitching anymore as Karasawa turned away.

Karasawa took out a mobile device from his pocket and connected it to the transmission equipment’s terminal with the movements of a veteran Meister. Then, as he waited for the transmission log starting from two hours ago to download...

“Ahh— By the way, I’m not an official employee of the Ministry of Technology, so once I find out who you were communicating with, anything more than that would be extraprofessional work... so even if someone uses this room afterwards without authorization, it’ll be considered your fault for failing to manage the

premise properly, not mine— Don't think badly of me," Karasawa said, briskly tapping away as he operated the terminal.

With that, notices saying that communication lines to the ruling party's headquarters have been opened were sent to eighteen different locations in the outside world.

"Now then—have I done enough to earn my pay?" Karasawa quipped before reading through the log while humming.

•

At that same time...

"Honestly, grand old me is super disappointed at how easyyyyy it was to chew through the military. Despite us going through the trouble of giving advance warning of our terrorism in Akihabara to round the military up in one place, they were destroyed! Annihilated! Eradicated! By just *one* of our toys?! What the hell?! Why're y'all such party poopers maaan?!"

Inside Tokyo's military headquarters in Ichigaya Grid, the military's chief of staff trembled as he listened to the madman, his face flushing a furious red. Around him, other officers were slamming their fists on the table and cursing—but the chief of staff was enduring an even deeper rage, as well as terror, as he bit his lip.

—He couldn't refute Naoto's statements. The enormous weapon was occupying Akihabara even now, and the imperial guard had been literally subdued in an instant. How could he refute someone who backed his big talk up with action...?

"And so! Frankly, because you guys are so weak and easy to chew through, it's starting to feel like a chore to follow through with the rest of the plan that I put together!"

And now, with this broadcast—the chief of staff shuddered at

what the consequences of this broadcast would be.

*...The nations of the world have already gotten word of the existence of the electromagnetic weapon. Now, there's even this footage. At this point, knowledge of what happened in Tokyo has circulated throughout the entire world.*

*For a threat as large as this—the ISS committee will surely authorize the use of Tall Wand even if the neighboring Asian countries oppose it.*

*Normally, the motion would require the permission of the Japanese government, but—the prime minister's hasty request has still not been withdrawn.*

*Actually, considering that the government isn't even in full control of the military right now and there isn't even a functioning provisional government, the ISS might deem Japan to be in a state of anarchy right now.*

However, the chief of staff's consideration—

"So I'm thinking that I'll liven things up a bit baby! C'mon now everyone! Shake your booty and scream: Yayyyyyyyyyyy!! You like me! You really like me! Thank you! Than~~k you everyone! To answer your expectations— Ngh! I solemnly swear! That within three hours..."

—was blown away by the following words from the villain:

"We'll make **the entirety of Tokyo collapse in a suuuuper flashy fashion!** Yay!!"

Hearing those words, everyone in the military headquarters—no, in all of Japan froze stock still.

*—Three hours?* The chief of staff flew up, his eyes gawking. *Did he just say three hours? The ISS committee wouldn't be able*

*to authorize the use of Tall Wand in such a short time. Forget that, the weapon itself wouldn't be ready to fire even if it was authorized right now.*

But even this consideration from the chief of staff was stopped dead in its tracks...

"Whoooooooooooopsies how rude of me! Grand old me completely forgot! I got so into things that I left my guest in the waiting room! Hey, come on dowwwwnn! It's time for the gueeee~eeest segment!!"

In accordance to the boy's over-the-top gesture, the camera turned. Upon which, what came into sight—was a certain young woman bound in ropes. The chief of staff knew her face well. Actually, it was someone whom nearly all the Japanese people watching this broadcast had seen at least once before.

**"—Dear citizens, please listen to what I am about to tell you calmly."**

It was the First Princess of His Majesty the Emperor, Imperial Princess Houko Hoshimiya. Arguably the most highborn woman in the country—had been reduced to a pitiful prisoner.

Her face looked haggard, and her complexion pallid. Despite that, she resolutely raised her face to gaze into the camera and spoke to her subjects.

"These people have truly seized control over the grid regulating mechanism of Tokyo—the Pillar of Heaven. I believe that this broadcast proves that fact beyond all doubt."

Hearing those words from the princess—forget just Japan, the entire world froze still in mute amazement.

•

Even the ordinary citizens of Tokyo understood what that meant. The terrifying reality was that with just a touch of his finger that villain could destroy Japan—and along with it, all of East Asia. This problem wasn't merely limited to Japan anymore. This was now an international crisis.

The princess continued stout-heartedly: "All of you in the military, please, pay no mind to my safety and promptly regain control of the Pillar of Heaven—these people are serious. Also, to all citizens of Tokyo, I beseech you to obey the directions of your officials and calmly evacuate the capi— Ahh!"

The princess let out a brief yelp as she was yanked from behind and fell backwards out of the frame of the camera. In her place—Naoto Miura came back on screen and stuck up his middle finger with a sadistic expression.

"Hey hey heeeeeeey?! Uhhhhhh princess?! What kind of garbage do you think you're blurting out?! If you keep going off script I'll string you up tortoise style and have everyone watch me play piñata with my cock— What the hell old man! What kinda cue card is that?! I've got my wife and daughter here y'know?! Do you want my wife to skewer me in a family meeting?!

Ah, right right, my wife and daughter are the two Initial-Y Series automata that made their debut in the news just now. How about it, they're crazy cute right?! But I better not see any affiliated goods, I wouldn't be able to stop myself buying them! Please forward such business requests through my agency! Using their likeness without permission is forbidden! Absolutely forbidden!"

...At this point, nobody watching the broadcast knew what to even think anymore. The woman who had been on screen earlier was Japan's first princess—though she had no political power, she was one of the most important people in the world culturally as a symbol of the nation.

Though she was technically substituting for His Majesty the

Emperor, who was currently bedridden, she was just as important as the Queen of the U.K. or the President of the United States—indeed, she was a VIP. Nearly all the Japanese people regarded her as such, regardless of what region they were from.

Not to mention that the young, beautiful princess had acted so courageously despite having been tied up by fiendish terrorists. Even citizens who were normally unconcerned with the imperial family—even foreigners, felt their hearts powerfully stir.

"Ah, hey, oy watch it! I'm telling you, don't kick me. Ugh~ gaw~d you keep slowing me down. Man this princess is a serious party pooper. Oy, keep giving me trouble—and I'll fucking kill you, got it?!" the terrorist rashly asserted.

Upon seeing this, those who watched the scene unfold began to feel a strong sense of solidarity in their swelling anger. Their minds rapidly cleared to focus on just one thing—the unforgivable criminal had laid his hand on someone sacred.

•

"...I see, how impressive." Inside the enormous weapon trampling down on Akihabara Grid—Yatsukahagi—Gennai Hirayama muttered quietly. The broadcast was being displayed by the giant screen in the control room.

*—It's clear what their intentions are.*

*If they had just wanted it to be known that the princess has been taken hostage, they could have gagged her. There'd be no need to risk letting her talk. Yet, they let her talk at length freely —because they didn't need to silence her.*

*—At the very least, the military now has a pretext to end their infighting and unite against a common foe. The city inhabitants that had fallen into a state of violent panic will probably obey the directions of the police to some extent as well.*

*And of course, the princess functions as a hostage as well. At the very least, there shouldn't be any commander who'd ignore her safety and launch an attack on the Pillar of Heaven.*

*Even if they did do it, a raid would be a last resort—they'll surely wait the three hours. In that time, they'll… no, "Y" will—work on gaining full control over the Pillar of Heaven. Easily, without anyone hindering him—he'll undoubtedly destroy this Yatsukahagi.*

*With that, the ex-military of Shiga who had attempted a coup d'état will disappear… and the only thing that will be left is a convenient "truth"—* "Ahh, how truly impressive… With that, they've taken away all our options."

"Y—Your Excellency! We should immediately declare criminal responsibility ourselves!" the adjutant by his side yelled, flustered.

Gennai looked up at him with a calm expression. "Right… and what would we say? That we have no relationship with them and that a coup d'état is our goal? Do you really think that there's anyone who would believe such nonsense?"

"T, That's—" The adjutant faltered for a second but then shook his head. "H, However, if things continue like this, the capital will collapse within three hours, so either way—!"

"Calm down, major. They have no intention of making the capital collapse. A trifle like this—is within expectations."

*—That's right, they have no such intention. What they did was to take on all the blame.*

*By taking on responsibility for all the horrors and malice of the military—including ourselves—the government, and the industrial economy, they washed away the sins of the elite and in*

*doing so united everyone against themselves.*

*The reason they did so, when one gets down to it—is to save this country.*

*They didn't even kill anyone in the military forces that they annihilated, and you're telling me that they'll make Tokyo collapse? It's obvious they're bluffing.*

Gennai incidentally recalled a legend of the ancient era, it was a story of a man who bore all the sins of humanity and was executed for it. Gennai bit his lip, growling, "—So you want to play a messiah after playing god?"

"Y, Your Excellency...?"

Gennai ignored the adjutant. "Answer me—what is our current charge?"

One of the operators replied, "R, Right, we're at 72% charge! ...Y, Your Excellency, what would you like me to do—?"

"Stop all power usage. Get back up to 82% charge within twelve minutes."

Everyone in the crowded control room looked confused — *Just what would rapidly recharging accomplish at this point? — More importantly, shouldn't we get out of Akihabara immediately?*

Gennai lightly muttered, "Now then—how far have you really figured us out? —Show me. I wonder if you realize that we still have some cards left to play... 'Y'!"

# Chapter Three / 07 : 15 / Liberator

Now then. As for the atrocious villain who had just thrust all of Japan into the depths of terror and thrown the rest of the world into a crucible of frenzy—in other words, the boy who had declared that he would wipe Japan off the map in an unprecedented indiscriminate act of destruction...

"Ahhhhhhhhh~~~n... Oh~ yes yes yes~... this happiness is what I liiive for..."

He was kicking back as he was enveloped by a feeling of safety and security as if he were in his own home.

More concretely, he was rolling about with his face buried in the lap pillow of an automaton girl in a formal black dress as he squealed in delight.

The automaton girl providing the lap pillow—RyuZU—sighed, "Master Naoto, with all due respect, I suspect that just about anything would make you very happy considering the simple brain you were born with."

However, Naoto countered while continuing to dig his face into her thighs, "How rude, RyuZU! And not just to me! Are you insinuating that there could possibly be a pillow more luxurious than your lap in this world?!"

"—Excuse me. It is the height of humiliation to be cornered with a sound argument from Master Naoto, but—it is true that nothing in this world could match the value of even a lock of my hair. With that in mind, my lap pillow must be an awe-inspiring, ultimate treasure that would draw the envy of even the gods... It is self-evident that making use of my lap pillow is a peerless luxury. I apologize for my mistake." RyuZU lowered her head to apologize.

Seeing their exchange, the little automaton girl in red and white armor muttered with her index finger against her lower lip, "...Father, I'd like an order please..."

"Yeeees yes yes! Dive right into papa~n's belly~! Comon!" As Naoto spread his arms and looked up at her with a silly grin, AnchoR dove into his belly with a pomf. "...Tee-hee... Father, you're warm..."

Achieving Nirvana, Naoto slapped his forehead, yelling, "—Kaaaaaaah—!! No one else in the world is happier than me right now!"

"Well, Master Naoto, considering that you crushed the ephemeral happiness of the masses just a little while ago, that much is obvious.

Actually, even in absolute terms, considering that you get to monopolize the ultimate works of art that are AnchoR and myself —something that even the gods above would be envious of—it does not really matter how happy the rest of the world is, does it?"

—It was just as she said. Indeed, in the present moment, Naoto was rising beyond cloud nine. Naoto prayed to no one in particular, "Hohh... the great one who brought me as well as RyuZU and AnchoR into this world, whoever you are, I love you ——!!"

Now, leaving that syrup-smeared, drippingly sweet microcosm as it were...

—The Pillar of Heaven. On the twentieth floor of Tokyo's alpine central management tower that, just as its name implied, pierced the heavens...

Right now, that floor was enveloped in an atmosphere that was as tense if not more so than during the battles that had taken

place just a little while ago.

"Dr. Konrad! Everyone else too! How does the sensitivity feel?!" Marie yelled out.

Eighteen automata that were hurriedly doing work on the insanely detailed mechanisms of the Pillar of Heaven turned around and answered her with a thumbs-up in unison.

Those weren't the responses of an AI—they were the responses of the eighteen clocksmiths remotely controlling the automata used for maintenance in the Pillar of Heaven.

The automata had been modified to allow for remote control and were being used by Marie's associates scattered throughout Tokyo by way of the transmission station of the ruling party's headquarters.

The eighteen were made up of the same Meisters who had lent their hands to Marie during the Akihabara Terror Incident in reverence for her. Their skills were top-notch even compared to other Meisters.

Currently, they were doing minute work remotely through a relay station—a setup which largely limited their senses as clocksmiths. Even so, under Marie's command, they were able to work as one and showcase a manual finesse far beyond the understanding of ordinary people.

If the clocksmiths of the imperial guard who serviced the Pillar of Heaven's mechanisms daily saw this sight—and keep in mind that they were Meisters who could become an immediate asset to Meister Guild upon joining, if they chose to do so—they would probably cry and submit their letters of resignation, saying, "From now on you're the ones in charge of this place."

And, "Ahh, it's going well on our end too, Missy. …Good grief, so this is the skill of a Meister? I can't get enough of it." Vermouth

grinned.

Then— The voice of an old gentleman came out of the same voicebox. “Dr. Marie, don’t mind me. Most likely, this body is the most stable one here in terms of sensitivity.”

Hearing that, Vermouth sneered, moving only his mouth while the rest of his body was remotely controlled by Konrad. “Well duh gramps. This body’s sensitivity is the best ‘in many ways,’ right?”

Indeed. Though she didn’t want to admit it, Marie couldn’t help but agree with Vermouth. The transceiver equipped to Vermouth was a unique, custom-made article that Konrad had personally installed in the love automaton before Marie had used it as Vermouth’s body.

To begin with, resonance devices—in other words, non-contact coupled movements—required an element that was particularly difficult to create among all the man-made elements that had been discovered in the last thousand years.

Made with liberal use of an extremely precious material, close to 100% pure—these specific ones were known as super long-distance resonance gears. Their maximum range was about forty kilometers on average, give or take.

Put plainly, one could erect a building in the most expensive district of Tokyo for the price of just one of these super valuable gears. And furthermore, for personal use, one would need at least two of them, one for sending and one for receiving—so with some simple math, the cost would be double.

In the first place—normally, there’d be no need for super long-distance transmissions. The world was already thoroughly equipped with wired infrastructure. If one went through several relay stations, one could send a message to the opposite side of the Earth with almost no latency through a series of short-distance jumps.

As such, the only ones who would have a use for something like this would be limited to a small group of corporations, militaries, and high-ranking government officials—people who needed to regularly exchange information that they couldn't risk being intercepted.

—However, there was another use for them. And that functionality was most likely the true reason that Konrad had this thing installed onto a love automaton of all things.

Super long-distance resonance gears had three big merits—distance, confidentiality, and information processing power.

Transmissions that went through relay stations obviously shared the relay station's bandwidth with other users. As such, depending on how much traffic there was at any given time, the number of resonance gears one could couple at once were limited—which translates to the precision which one could remotely control an automaton being limited.

—But, when it came to super long-distance resonance gears, naturally, the amount of information that could be exchanged was far greater. For example—yes, it would be possible to receive information from all five senses at once.

Now then. As for the reason that Konrad not only had such an extremely expensive and scarce device but had installed it onto a love automaton… Thinking about it made Marie hold her head.

"But, it's proved to be fortunate now… Yeah, don't think too deeply about it, Marie," Marie muttered, trying to persuade herself.

Seeing her expression, Vermouth grinned. "Hey Missy, did you know? These super long-distance gears were originally developed not for distance but informational throughput."

"…So?"

“Sex is always the driving force behind everything in this wor—”

“Dr. Konrad, please shut him up. Please. I’m begging you.” With that, Marie cut the conversation short and returned to her own work.

*Now that I think about it, something’s felt off ever since the emergency rendezvous point turned out to be that strip club— No, stop thinking about it…* Marie refocused and announced, “Everyone, we’re eighteen seconds behind schedule! Work faster!”

*There’s no time for that right now…*

*—The military probably won’t notice, but, if the fact that we’re using a relay station to remotely control the service automata here is discovered, they could copy the signal and interfere with our work.*

*In the worst case, they might even be able to trace the locations of the eighteen Meisters helping us.*

*Should that happen, we have to get as much done as we can now before—*

“Miss Maëribell.” Called by her fake name, Marie looked up and saw a young woman—Houko—standing in front of her with a stiff expression.

She prompted Houko to go on with her gaze as she continued working, her hands continuing to type on the processor console connected to the Pillar of Heaven’s control mechanism.

“There is something that I have to ask no matter what.”

“—”

Marie could imagine what she wanted to ask. Without replying, Marie turned her gaze towards Naoto, who was frolicking about with two legendary automata right next to her.

Houko followed Marie's gaze. "—From where did he procure the blueprint of the Pillar of Heaven?"

"Such a thing doesn't exist. ...Does it?"

"No. That is why I am asking. Your group clearly grasps the structure of the Pillar of Heaven, more so than us, the ones who regularly maintain this place. Though you are the one supervising the work, he was the one who gave out the instructions to begin with."

"—"

"As such, I can only think that he obtained the blueprint somehow."

"That's wrong. You said it yourself, such a thing doesn't exist—but regardless, this guy didn't know the structure of the Pillar of Heaven until he came here."

"Do you think I can believe that?"

"No. ...But that's the truth."

Houko pressed Marie for an answer. "Well then—are you telling me that this boy fully grasped the structure of the Pillar of Heaven just by listening carefully in silence for six minutes?"

•

*Impossible* , Houko thought.

—The Pillar of Heaven was the literal backbone that supported the country known as Japan. It far exceeded core towers and clock towers of normal grids in terms of both scale and complex-

ity in detail.

As such, even the Department of the Imperial Household didn't fully grasp its structure. It had taken the country over a thousand years of analyzing it just to make a rudimentary diagram of its structure.

Even that rudimentary diagram was already on a higher level of classified information than other state secrets. Not even the prime minister was clued in as to where it was kept, much less given permission to copy it.

Even so, if one were to obtain that diagram, one still couldn't possibly hope to fully grasp the structure of the Pillar of Heaven. It was just a fragment merely scratching the surface of its design.

*And yet, you are saying that he managed to do so just by listening carefully for only six minutes?* Houko could feel her complexion pale, something chillingly cold crept up against her spine. It was something she had felt when she learned firsthand of these adorable automatas' capabilities, but—in a way, the sensation this time was far more extreme.

*—Is this boy not far more dangerous than the automata that are "Y's" legacy?* As if she guessed what Houko was thinking, the blonde girl—Marie—said, "I understand you having misgivings about this, but sorry, I can't explain it. Could you maybe do me a favor and pretend you didn't see anything?"

"I cannot," Houko asserted. *In the first place, the reason I allowed them free rein was because I thought that it would be for the nation's good—in other words, I did so to use them.*

*On one hand, to have them take on the hate and blame for the country being on the brink of collapse. And on the other, to learn what the perpetrators of the Akihabara Terror Incident intended to do with the Pillar of Heaven.*

Houko herself wasn't a layman when it came to clocksmithing, she had formally studied it during her study abroad. Though she wasn't as good as a Meister, she was a licensed Geselle.

She had planned on observing things like their procedure and techniques as well as their sources of information for the sake of the nation's future security. She was seeking thorough countermeasures to prevent such an incident from ever happening again. She had gone along with them with those interests in mind, but…

"—"

Houko sharply narrowed her eyes. *The answer to how they did what they did—is the ability of this boy? This exceedingly average looking boy who looks unremarkable from every angle? If he really can grasp the structure of the Pillar of Heaven just by listening carefully, what countermeasure could possibly be taken?*

*If that is the truth, then this boy in front of me is—* "He is someone who cannot be allowed to exist—a grave threat to national security."

Marie sighed. "Rest easy—or so I'd like to say. I very much do think that there's a scientific explanation behind how his hearing works, but even I don't understand its principles."

*In other words, his ability is something unreplicable. So, as long as he disappears, something like the Akihabara Terror Incident will never happen again—* As Houko was considering that, Marie lowered her voice. "Let me warn you. Knowing you, I'm guessing that you're probably thinking of ways to kill this guy once he's served his purpose here, but…"

There was no need for Marie to go any further. Before either of them knew it, a black scythe had been nested against Houko's throat. That scythe, of course, belonged to the automaton wearing a formal black dress.

“If you truly wish to end your own life, then please take half a step towards me. If you could do that then I promise that I will provide you with the most painless euthanasia in the world.”

The automaton’s topaz eyes showed no hint of emotion, just like those of a doll. The smaller one in red and white next to her also looked at Houko with an expressionless face. “...If you do bad things to Father... I’ll do, bad things, to you.”

“Whahh? Huh, wait, what’s going on?” the boy said with a blank expression, seemingly the only one who didn’t understand what was happening.

Houko sighed. *It would be senseless to die for this.* “I apologize. That was improper of me. As for your offer, I am quite fine, thank you, so I would appreciate it if you would retract your scythe,” Houko said as she took a step back.

The automaton wearing a formal black dress quietly retracted her scythe.

“...Do you get it now?” Marie asked.

Houko nodded with another sigh. “Yes. Unfortunately, it looks like there is nothing that I can do... I will think more on possible countermeasures to his ability at a future date and set things aside for now.”

•

*—Looks like she gave up for now, thank goodness.* As Marie placed a hand over her heart in relief at seeing her friend spared from death, she was surprised to see Houko take out a small device—something that looked like a choker. As Marie watched on looking puzzled, Houko put it on and smiled sweetly at Marie.

“Now then— It has been a long time, Marie.” Houko’s voice was completely different from before—the choker was a voice

changer. It appeared that she had prepared it beforehand to make doubly sure that there would be no record of the princess and a terrorist speaking intimately with one another.

*Thoroughly prepared as usual,* Marie thought with a smile. "Yes. It's been a while, Houko."

"I am happy to see you again. This should be the first time since attending your funeral, I think."

"Yeah, though that coffin was empty and I was actually in another country."

"I knew that you were actually alive. But even so, I thought that I would never get the chance to see you again so…"

If it was the imperial princess and her friend from school, the younger daughter of the Breguets, there would be opportunities for them to meet. However, there would be no such chance or justification for Maëribell Halter to do the same. Unlike Marie with her colleagues and fellow Meisters, an imperial princess couldn't just meet whomever she wished.

Though it was too late to do anything about it now—the outcome still made Marie feel lonely. She sighed. "—Yes, I'm glad that we were able to see each other again." Lowering her eyes, she added, "So you're still wearing the watch I gave you."

"Of course. It is a precious gift, the work of a dear friend. After I parted with you, this watch has always been with me, sharing every minute."

Grasping her left wrist with her right hand, Houko went on—"When I heard that you had lost your life in Kyoto Grid, I was unbearably grieved. For you to lose your life in my country of all places…that is what I would think back then… I know this is very much late, but I want to say that I am sorry."

“There’s no reason for you to apologize. It was something that I had decided to do myself after all.”

The computer in front of Marie made mechanical popping sounds. A metal belt—a punch card—had countless holes punctured through it as it horizontally streamed by on top of the console.

“Moreover, I didn’t decide to come here because this is your country. Regardless of where the malfunctioning grid was, I’m sure that I would have done the same thing. Because that’s my job as a clocksmith.” Marie slid her finger across the belt, reading the contents of the punch cards that were rapidly streaming by as if it were Braille.

Seeing Marie continue to work even as they talked, Houko muttered, her voice sounding a little lonely, “…You are right. That is the kind of fair person that I remember you to be.”

Just then, “Hey hey, why are you friends with the Japanese princess Marie?” Naoto casually cut in from behind them as he lay sprawled out with his head resting on RyuZU’s thighs. It was a simply voiced, spur of the moment, question.

Marie sullenly clicked her tongue and slammed her hand on the console. “Naoto, it’s bad manners to interrupt a conversation, you know?”

“Ahh, sorry ’bout that— So anyways, why?”

“In short, she and I are friends from school,” Houko replied.

“—We got to know each other pretty well when I studied abroad in Europe for college. It wasn’t as much time as you might think though since she finished all her requirements and graduated in one month.”

“One month?!” Naoto squawked, his eyes wide open.

Marie shrugged. “If I hadn’t been playing with Houko, I would have been gone in a week.”

“Come now! That makes it sound like I was bothering you, you know?”

“Isn’t that more or less the truth? Are you going to claim otherwise when you were the one dragging me around everywhere?”

“That is a good joke, Marie. I am quite sure that you were the one who had the most fun running amok. What happened back then is still talked about at our alma mater to this day you know?”

With that exchange, Marie and Houko rekindled their old friendship. However— “I mean, I’m no expert, but shouldn’t there be attendants or something who follow along when the princess of a country studies abroad? Also, of all people, why was Marie the one you happened to befriend?”

Marie raised an eyebrow. “…Look here you. The Breguet Corporation stands at the top of the world as one of the Five Great Corporations, and our family originated from French aristocracy. I was the daughter of that noble family, you know? What problem could there be with me associating with the imperial princess of Japan?”

Naoto was making a face that said that he clearly hadn’t thought of that. “In that case, could it be that the reason that old man Halter calls you ‘princess’ is…”

“…? What about it? It’s a simple fact.”

“I thought it was sarcasm.”

“Like that could be the case. He obviously calls me that in praise of my overflowing intelligence, noble blood, and overall aura of elegance.”

Naoto’s face turned serious. “Sorry, I don’t understand what

you're saying. Was that supposed to be a gag?"

"...I'll have you *thoroughly* tell me just what you mean by that later," Marie growled while glaring at Naoto.

Seeing that, Houko chuckled. "You have changed a little, Marie. No, perhaps this was your true nature all along... I am a little envious."

"...Houko?" Marie cocked her head in puzzlement.

However, Houko didn't explain. Instead, the tone of her voice turned serious. "By the way, would you guys kindly tell me now? What do you actually plan to do by gaining control over the Pillar of Heaven?"

"That's— You're right, I guess we ought to let you know." Marie nodded as she continued, "Houko, how much do you know about the enormous weapon that appeared in Akihabara?"

"I do not have any certain proof, but judging from the circumstances, it is clearly an electromagnetic weapon of some sort. From what I gathered from the intelligence reports, it is controlled by Shiga's ex-military, who are trying to execute a coup d'etat."

"—As one would expect from you." Marie nodded in admiration.

"So it is true then?"

"Yes, due to that electromagnetic weapon, Akihabara was magnetized. If things continue like this, I don't know whether it'll be possible to repair the city grid even if the enormous weapon is taken care of. So—" Marie paused. "—as this idiot had suggested —we plan to throw them into a crucible and boil them alive. Akihabara will be the crucible, and its temperature—should rise to roughly two thousand degrees."

Hearing those words, Houko's eyes opened wide.

*She really is smart,* Marie thought, *It looks like she understood our scheme with just those tidbits of information.*

—Heat all of Akihabara up, including the grid itself, until everything in the city reaches its respective Curie temperature. Under Naoto's plan, the enormous weapon would be eliminated and Akihabara would be demagnetized all in one go.

"——"

Marie suddenly remembered something.

*The first thing that Naoto said back in Akihabara Grid was what he would do with the ones who fired the EMP...*

*...Even though he shouldn't have had any knowledge about electromagnetic technology, what he said was— "I'll stuff the ones who dared to do this in a kettle and boil them alive."*

*...Even though at that moment in time, he shouldn't have known that things can be demagnetized given enough heat. This guy has always, consistently, all the way through—*

Marie turned her gaze towards Naoto. Perhaps prompted by that, or perhaps not—as Marie may have literally been out of her field of sight—RyuZU, who had been stroking Naoto's hair suddenly said, "Master Naoto... I am sincerely sorry."

*—Was that an apology I just heard? Did RyuZU really just sincerely, unsarcastically apologize to someone?* Marie was astounded. She inadvertently fumbled her hands, nearly hitting the wrong key on the console. Even Naoto was surprised, he asked with wide eyes, "RyuZU?"

"Simply because I couldn't safely demagnetize myself—the hands and shoulders of the one in charge of the planet's fate

are…” RyuZU quietly felt the tips of Naoto’s fingers, his palms, and then his shoulders with her dainty, pale hands.

Those were the places where Naoto had been scalded when he carried RyuZU over his shoulder to a cool place on the floor. Though his wounds weren’t festering thanks to the medical nanomachines, painful-looking keloids continued to line his skin in those places even now.

Marie was concerned about his burns as well. *The cramps and the pain should disappear within a week, but as for whether he can regenerate the nerve tissue necessary for a delicate sense of touch paramount for a clocksmith… is something that I can’t say. I have no idea how well his wounds will heal.*

And this was precisely why Marie couldn’t complain even though Naoto was messing around at a time like this. He had already done plenty—he deserved to rest.

“_”

Feeling like she lost to him for the umpteenth time in these last few days, Marie sighed. She recalled what Naoto had been like when she first met him.

*He was just an ordinary boy who endlessly whined about the situation that he found himself in—and yet…*

*While I nearly broke down after the enormous weapon’s EMP, he on the other hand didn’t stop for a single second. He has continued taking the best course of action since then.*

*—The best course of action indeed. Seemingly without any concern whatsoever for the price he has had to pay to do so.*

Even when Akihabara had been magnetized and all modern technology became unusable, when the people they trusted the most were left broken—in Marie’s case, that was Halter—but in

Naoto's... RyuZU was probably more important to him than his own life.

In the midst of that awful scenario, Naoto had managed to follow his intuition and moved RyuZU despite her burning up hot enough to melt the metal floor.

Without any sleep or rest, he endured an agonizing pain from his burns that would blamelessly leave one wishing for death. And all the while, he reassured AnchoR and went around the city trying to find a key to turn around the situation—

*And **this** —is supposed to be an ordinary boy? A mere amateur? What a bad joke,* Marie thought through clenched teeth.

*Just how much am I going to rely on the power and determination of an ordinary boy, an amateur?*

*And in comparison, just what I have done? If Naoto hadn't pulled me along, I might very well be in Akihabara right now, still wallowing in despair.*

*On top of all that—* "It's fine as long as you're safe, RyuZU. I think stuff like this is what they call the proof of manliness? Haha." *—Even now, he still has his headphones off.*

Naoto had his headphones off so that he would immediately notice should anything suddenly change. Despite the cold beads of sweat dotting his forehead, he was answering RyuZU with a gentle smile.

*—That's supposed to be an ordinary boy? Don't make me laugh. That... That—is what I've always—always—been aspiring to—*

"Oh, but if you feel sorry then how about giving me a reward for my efforts! More specifically! What I mean by a reward is—"

“I see, Master Naoto. You are telling me to serve as an outlet for your hopelessly twisted sexual desires, yes? Understood.”

“That’s wrong! —Uh, I mean, yeah, you’re wrong… I mean, not right now, yeah… I’ll leave that for another time, I think…” Naoto babbled as his nostrils flared.

—Seeing that, Marie hurriedly rejected her previous thought. Naoto continued, completely ignorant of any broken pedestals… “Ahhhh! Yeah! Not ‘right now!’ So, going back to my date with AnchoR—”

“To bring that up again right now, Master Naoto, I see that you are quite an admirable masochist. I understand now. Seeing that you wish to be spanked—where would you have me spank you?”

“Gee could you let me finish?! I, I didn’t want to leave you behind either! That’s why I got you a present—”

“—This is what Father gave me…♪” Cutting Naoto off, AnchoR beamed with the smile of an angel as she opened up her hand for RyuZU to see.

On her finger was a shiny— **ring.**

“——Master Naoto? I am having a little trouble understanding. Just how intense are you hoping to be spanked?”

“Put your scythes away please I’m begging you!! Take a good look it’s on the middle finger of her right hand, see?!” Naoto cried out.

RyuZU turned her gaze back onto AnchoR. AnchoR was looking at the ring on her hand tenderly, joyfully.

“…Father made this for me. He said that… it’s a good luck charm… to help me stay true to my own will…”

“It’s also supposed to protect against evil spirits. That’s what

the salesperson said when I asked him—but well, I thought that if that's the case then it'd be better if I made one for her myself. That happened as I was shopping around to find a gift for you during my date with AnchoR, you see— Now then…"

RyuZU tilted her head looking slightly lost. With a smile, Naoto revealed a small box from his pocket and opened it in front of RyuZU. Inside was a silvery, lustrous—— **ring.**

"For my reward… could you give me your left hand without asking why?"

"……"

"It doesn't really have any special meaning until I put a matching one on too, so you don't have to worry about that—or is this still too much to ask?"

RyuZU didn't answer him. Her expression didn't change either. She simply nodded and held out her left hand.

Naoto gleefully smiled. Perhaps he caught a delicate change in the sound of RyuZU's internal workings despite her indifferent outward appearance, something that no one else could hear.

"Thanks, RyuZU." Naoto put the ring on the girl's left ring finger.

"If you think having me accept this enough of a reward for the excessive care you showed to me, your follower… then I am sorry to say, but…" Contrary to her words, RyuZU tightly held onto the ring that had just been fitted onto her finger.

*—I have to add this to the list,* Marie thought.

*This is yet another thing in his list of accomplishments up to now—he probably made this while I was busy with repairing RyuZU, giving Vermouth a new body, and preparing Halter's*

*brain pod.*

*Even in his downtime—he was doing something productive—making this ring.*

"—Ordinary my buuutttt. As if someone like you can be called ordinary," Marie murmured.



•

Houko had been listening to the conversation between the boy and the automaton in front of her. The two had just exchanged a traditional confirmation of love that has been repeated trillions of times on this planet.

Houko didn't know what it felt like to love a machine. But she could tell that the boy was serious and that the automaton could answer his feelings.

Those were the only two things she could understand.

*...But, this is not enough. It is necessary that I get to know this boy better*. With that thought in mind, Houko quietly called out, "—Excuse me, may I ask you a couple questions?"

"Eh? Uhm, yeah..." Seemingly surprised, the boy raised his head. Houko could tell that he was nervous despite the arrogance he had shown.

*It appears that he is simply not used to others striking up a conversation with him*. Houko smiled sweetly. "My name is Houko. I believe you were Mr. Naoto Miura, right? Would it be alright if I called you Mr. Naoto?"

"—Er, yeah. Sure."

"Thank you. Excuse my rudeness, but may I have you answer two questions for me?"

"Uh, err, what do you want to know?"

"The automaton next to you, whom you treasure a great deal, was injured by the enemy— Is that why you want to destroy the enormous weapon? For revenge?"

Upon being asked that—Naoto looked confused. "Eh, revenge?

Hm… no. That's not it. Because they made AnchoR do horrible things and even hurt RyuZU on top of that, I'm going to make them pay the price for that, I guess."

"Make them pay the price… Is that not revenge?"

Out of his element, Naoto made a complicated face as he awkwardly tried to answer using polite language. "No, it's more like I want to settle things or square things up… No, that's not it either. I don't like putting it that way, I'm not sure why. It's complicated — Argh, basically, in short—" Naoto paused for a breath. "I want them to pay their dues—right. That's it."

Houko slightly tilted her head. "Their dues… you say?"

"Hm… I can't explain it well, but…" Naoto rubbed his forehead. "Eating at a diner then leaving without paying is messed up, right? Don't you think that if someone can't pay then he shouldn't have ordered something in the first place?"

"…So you are saying that given that they ate already, they should pay for their meal?"

"Right right. That's it. That's how I feel," Naoto said with a smile, looking refreshed.

Houko nodded. "Thank you. Then, for my second question— With a talent like yours, would it not have been simpler just to purge Akihabara?"

"Hah—?" Naoto's eyes widened.

"If cleaning up that enormous weapon is your goal, then it should have been easier to just make it sink into the earth along with the city from behind the scenes. Is that not so? You would not have had to brave such dangers in that case."

"Uhmm." Naoto looked a bit lost. "I mean, I heard that Tokyo as a whole would be damaged in that case… no?"

"Yes. As you say, Mr. Naoto, if Akihabara collapsed then all of Tokyo would probably collapse—but, what of it?"

Naoto was left speechless. Houko continued as she looked at Naoto with a steel gaze. "In my view, I had assumed that you were someone who would stop at nothing for the sake of your goals. And yet, you did not choose the most efficient method—why?"

"...But I mean, only the ones operating that enormous weapon are responsible. Everyone else has nothing to do with it, right?"

"———"

*I see, so that is why he did not choose to purge Akihabara.*

*He said that he would have them pay the price. In other words, he would not seek payment from those who did not owe him anything. At the same time, it also means that he would not hesitate to pay the price himself.*

*I understand why he has not killed anyone up to now. It was not that he respected human life. It was not that he considered the impact his actions would have on Japan either.*

*He is simply seeking payment from the entity that harmed something precious to him. For that, he is prepared to pay any price. That—is all there is to it.*

*I see.*

*—If I make him an ally, he would probably be the most reliable companion there is.*

*—But if I make an enemy of him, I would have to be prepared to risk being sunk into the ground along with the nation.*

Houko smiled, nodding. "I understand clearly now. As I thought, you are not one to be trusted, Mr. Naoto."

"Ehhh?! That's your conclusion after my explanation just now?! Did I say something strange?!"

*Indeed, how could I possibly trust this boy? He would purge Tokyo without hesitation if he concluded that it was a necessary price to pay. At the very least, he has both the means and the nerve to do so.*

*Letting a person like him roam freely with neither a leash nor any contingency plan would be immensely dangerous—but…* Keeping a smile on her face, Houko cheerfully said, "However—I also clearly understand why Marie trusts you now."

"—Huh?"

"Hey, what the heck are you saying Houko?!" Marie cried out from behind while Naoto simply put on a blank face.

Ignoring her dear friend's confused cry, Houko said with conviction, "Because, you are a very 'fair' person."

*Or perhaps—this boy is actually a terrifyingly avaricious and selfish human being.*

*But at the same time, I am convinced that he is "fair" through and through. He would not approve of "unfairness." He would not tolerate injustice. He wouldn't think, "I want this, but I don't want to pay the price for it."*

*"If you want something, then pay the price for it" — This boy holds himself to that doctrine as well. Obtaining something without cost—an unfair thought like that would probably not even cross his mind.*

*If he wanted something, he would pay the price, whatever it was. In short, it is just a question of whether he thinks it is worth it. If he does, then he would without hesitation. That is probably*

*just the sort of person he is. Whether the price be his own life—or the lives of other people.*

*—For this reason, I should not involve myself any further with this boy and my dear friend.*

Leaving her personal feelings aside, as the imperial princess of Japan, Houko would surely end up thinking about how best to use them. That line of thought would always linger in the corner of her mind. Naoto's power was simply too enticing for Houko to keep herself from doing so—to keep herself "fair."

Suddenly, the automaton—RyuZU—spoke up. "...Frankly, I am astonished. I never once considered that there could be someone aside from Master Naoto whose eyes are not blind."

Houko chuckled at the questionable words of praise. "It is my honor to receive your praise. If a masterpiece of the great 'Y' says so, then I suppose there is hope for me yet."

RyuZU continued, "Mistress Houko, was it...? May I give you a word of advice?"

"Yes, what is it?"

"I would advise that you choose your friends better, as frankly, someone like Mistress Marie is hardly worthy of associating with you."

"N, Now you look here—"

However, Houko stopped Marie with her hand while smiling at RyuZU. "In that case, Miss RyuZU was it? I have a word of advice for you as well—I do not know what you have against Marie, but refusing to acknowledge someone's brilliance simply because you do not like her speaks badly not only of yourself, but your master as well, understand...?"

"———"

As RyuZU was taken aback, the tip of her nose paled. She opened her mouth, seeming to want to say something, but then closed it again. She then lowered her eyes and reluctantly nodded. "...I shall take your advice into consideration."

RyuZU's response made both Naoto and Marie's eyes widen in unison. Their astonished faces were saying one thing. Namely—"She managed to make RyuZU submit to her...?!"

"Hey," Naoto began, "Marie... old man Halter's always calling you princess, but..."

"—But what?"

"Well, I was just thinking that real princesses sure are charismatic aren't they...? I mean, really, everything about her is just on a whole other level from you."

"Oh, yeah?" Marie put on a threatening smile. "—Maybe you could care to explain to me a little more specifically what you are trying to say, Mr. Naoto?"

"Her brain, face, chest, height, as well as her character and air of refinement—I could go on if you wish, but..." RyuZU indifferently answered in Naoto's stead.

"Now. You. Two. Look. Heeeeeeeeeeeeere!!" Marie exploded.

Houko tried to stifle her laughter as she watched on.

•

"We're about to reach eighty-two percent charge...!" the operator reported in an excited voice.

Gennai placidly nodded, upon which the adjutant standing next to him impatiently said, "...Your Excellency, could you

kindly tell us what you plan to do in concrete terms now?"

Gennai briefly glanced at the adjutant's face, but didn't answer. Instead, he asked, "...What do you think of this world?"

"Huh...? What do you mean by that?"

"It's been a thousand years since the Clockwork Planet—the manmade world functioning right before our very eyes—was made. Even so, no one has been able to decipher, much less reproduce its technology." Gennai sighed. "Do you think that understanding something like this as 'science' is acceptable?"

The adjutant made a quizzical face. "It's true that there are still many mysteries regarding the clockwork technologies involved in the planet's functions but... as they do in fact exist, wouldn't it be truer to science and technology to make use of them regardless?"

"You're exactly right. Your view couldn't be more correct. Making use of things that operate on principles which no one understands because they're there— Indeed, that's science. But do you know what?"

"Your Excellency...?"

Gennai showed a sardonic smile to the confused adjutant. "It's been thirty thousand years since humans obtained fire. Yet, it was only ten years before the planet was remade that we discovered that fire is actually a type of plasma—a form of electricity.

That means that for the 28,928 years before we unraveled that natural phenomenon, we were using fire without even knowing what it was. Truly scientific, right?

But do you realize that this and that are two completely separate matters? In other words—" He paused for a breath. "—The Clockwork Planet is not a product of nature. It is a man-made object."

"That's..."

"You see, this universe was made by some kind of god—perhaps one called coincidence. Exposing and making use of its laws is science. Technology. It's theory, it's theorem, it's logic! But can I ask you one thing? By what 'science' was this manmade planet made?"

The adjutant couldn't help but feel daunted from Gennai's question, or rather, his sudden verbal attack and tone of voice. Gathering himself, he countered, "S, Still... it's certain that the one who made this planet was 'Y'—"

"Indeed, it's just as you say. And that's exactly why I shall assert that 'Y' wasn't human."

Seeing the clear madness—no, fanaticism—in Gennai's eyes, the adjutant gulped. Paying him no mind, Gennai continued, "That figure—'Y'—drew his blueprint based on theories that don't exist!

Super technology? Unknown technology? You're telling me that a single genius invented all this, and after a thousand years of trying there's still no one who understands his theories?

I think it'd be slightly more believable if you told me that it was the technology of an advanced prehistoric civilization or the work of aliens... but unfortunately, I don't love fairy tales enough to delude myself with such a fantasy."

*—I can understand trying to analyze natural phenomena that we have yet to explain.*

*Now that is science. That is the knowledge that humanity has continuously accumulated throughout its history.*

*...But to decipher the principles behind this manmade product that we're standing on?*

*That doesn't make sense. That's the opposite of how things should be. As such, the one who drew the blueprint of this planet must have known theories that no one else knew from the very beginning.*

*—How this planet is said to be made is most definitely not within the realm of science.*

*And just where was "Y," the one said to have done the impossible, supposed to have gotten his theories from?*

*Not only that, but the native ability of the automaton called AnchoR—Perpetual Gear…*

*A perpetual motion mechanism? It's ludicrous! You expect me to accept such a fantasy as technology? Don't screw with me!*

*Such a mechanism can only work according to* ***physical laws that can't possibly exist*** *— It is in fact a rebellion against our very universe itself—!*

Before Gennai knew it, the eyes of everyone in the room were on him. Their gazes revealed that they were confused, perplexed, baffled—maybe even terrified.

Upon noticing, Gennai angrily shouted, "We have continuously tried to analyze the Clockwork Planet for a thousand years… And yet, we have still failed to fully grasp it! Not its fundamental principles nor the many functions that we still don't even have theories for! —Well then, Major, would you tell me your thoughts on the matter?"

"Your Excellency…"

"—Where did 'Y' find the principles behind this gigantic machine that humanity has yet to comprehend even after a thousand years of trying?"

There was no one… who could answer. The silence made Gennai recall when he had raised the same question a few days ago…

Thirty-one years ago, as Gennai was busy trying to fuse clockwork and electromagnetic technology together on the federal government's orders, he realized something.

—Though humanity might never have unraveled all the secrets of the world, of the universe in which they lived, once upon a time, it had been one step away from uncovering at least a portion of those secrets. That portion was none other than what he himself was now researching, electromagnetism, a field through which humanity had once tried to define the universe.

—However, all of that knowledge crumbled away. On the day that the world was remade with clockwork by the entity known as "Y," everything changed. And, when the federal government purged his city to cover up the truth—everything collapsed.

That was when all his existing theories had been thrown out the window. That was when he understood, painfully so, better than anyone else—that the one who really rewrote and rebuilt the world was none other than humanity.

Only, humanity didn't change whatsoever even after the world was remade. Ironically enough—humanity was the one thing that even "Y" couldn't change. On that day, inside Shiga's collapsed core tower, Gennai became convinced—that "Y" wasn't human.

*Humanity doesn't change. It can't change. Only he was able to disprove all assumptions and arrogantly, insolently turn the whole world upside down.*

*There's no way that that was the work of a human,* he had thought. *In that case, I can accept it. Whether "Y" was a god or a demon, as long as he was a monster that transcended human intellect, then there's no way that we mediocre humans could do anything to him or his creation.*

As he had resigned himself, Gennai gathered his troops together to survive. Even if defying a god like "Y" would be a sin, Gennai wouldn't simply let himself be crushed by the other mediocre members of his species without a fight. He took over Mie, continued his research there, and at last, built the electromagnetic weapon that could destroy the world.

Upon which, he fell into despair once more. He had come to understand that the weapon, his brethren chasing after revenge with him, and even he himself were all nothing but ordinary existences in the end.

*Whether one realizes it or not, in the end we're all dancing in the palm of "Y's" hand. How pointless…*

—And so, becoming tired of it all, he retired.

*I see, in the end, we mediocre humans have no way to oppose transcendent beings—as such, I was disappointed by history and thrown into despair by the world. And so I thought that it'd be fine if I lived out the rest of my life in resignation…*

*—Until I met that boy touting around one of "Y's" automata.*

*"Sure, if you would be so kind as to humor a story an old man has to share first,"* Gennai had said a few days ago.

An Initial-Y Series had suddenly appeared in the deep underground layers of Mie Grid, at the dwelling where he had decided he would die. And it was one worth talking to too, unlike the Fourth.

Gennai recalled the story of "Judgment Day," an ancient myth. Supposedly, God would stand before mankind on the day of the apocalypse and lend his ears to their questions—and their justifications for the life they had led as well.

*If that happens, then I'll be able to hear God's answer* — With

that faint hope, Gennai had raised a question regarding the one who made the Clockwork Planet— *I'm referring to the riddle of his existence. In other words, where did "Y" come from?*

Was he or she a god? A human?

Are we truly in reality—or is this a dream?

However— "Are you done with your foolish questions? If so, I would like to have you give me my invaluable time back." The automaton had brushed aside the questions that he had raised. Her stone-cold topaz eyes were scoffing at him.

"Please do not take this too personally, I can see that you had the misfortune of being born with a smaller brain than a tick—not that I can really empathize. Do realize though, that labeling something you do not care to understand as the work of a god due to your own sloth is a style of living that comes naturally to the masses.

I am sure that to foolish humans, 'Y' must be a lofty figure worthy of being called a god... but confusing reality with fantasy is proof that you can no longer grasp even basic truths. With that in mind, it would probably be for the best if you immediately received the appropriate medical care..." RyuZU had said that with a smile, but her voice was full of disgust.

"—Are you fooling with me?" Gennai scowled, he was glaring at her with his moss-green eyes. "You call my questions foolish? A thousand years after 'Y' remade the planet, humanity still has yet to decipher the technologies he used...!"

"That appears to be the case, yes. I can clearly remember "Y's" face when he gasped, 'I can't believe it,' as he goggled at his own creation."

"Throughout all those years... just how many scholars and clocksmiths dedicated years of their lives to arriving at the truth?!

Though I may not have been worthy, I too was one of those people. Many a great person devoted his life to unravel this work of a god—and all of them were defeated. You dare scoff at that?"

"—Not at all. Quite the opposite, I value their effort highly."

Upon those words, Gennai shut his mouth.

"But, as you said yourself—they were losers."

"Yes, you're right. I once thought I had hit upon something, but that too was an illusion in the e—"

However, the automaton coolly interrupted him. "That was when you 'came to an end'— Yes? And so, you wasted the hard-fought, praiseworthy work you previously did in idleness…"

Judging that the automaton was toying with him, Gennai was on his feet before he knew it. "Answer me—what was 'Y' thinking when he remade the world?! Why did he throw us on to such a—vague and inexplicable, absurd and incomprehensible, contraption?!"

"—You're an annoying grandpa aren't you…" The one who replied was not the automaton, it was the boy who had fainted just a little while ago and had been resting on Gennai's bed. The boy was glaring at him.

"Master Naoto," the automaton girl chided. "You should still be resting… I will make this old man prepare an elevator for us, so—"

"Forget it, RyuZU," the boy said as he slowly got up and shook his head. "…I overheard the conversation; this is a waste of time. Let's leave this guy to his own devices and find another way to return to the surface."

"You won't be able to reach the surface you know. The current won't flow to the elevator unless I give the order," Gennai said

sharply.

"Current? What's that? ...Well, then hurry up and give the order or whatever for it. RyuZU and I don't have time to waste."

Gennai raised his voice. "I'm not done talking yet—!"

To which the boy scowled and said in an irritated tone, "Look here gramps, we're busy okay? We've got AnchoR-chan's case to take care of, which by the way, I'm off the walls pissed about! Turn the elevator on already, or else—"

"—What, are you going to kill me?" Gennai challenged. Part of it was due to his pride as an elder against an insolent youngster, and part of it was backlash against having the question that he had risked his life on being treated like the idle musings of a doddering old man.

However, the boy put on a blank face. "—Hah? Have you finally gone senile gramps? As if killing you would get the elevator moving. Turn the elevator on, or else—" Naoto paused, then declared with eyes that didn't harbor even a single shred of doubt, "I'll turn it back on myself. Elevators are those boxes that can rise so long as there's a wire pulling it from above, right?"

And then, just as easily as he divulged the location of the elevator—Naoto described its structure—and Gennai was thrown into silence. At the same time, Gennai remembered that the boy was the master of an Initial-Y Series. It was "Y's" legacy. The newest addition to mythology. An automaton that had been made by a god.

Gennai knew of their existence. He had seen the Fourth in operation before as well. However, this automaton wasn't the Second, the Third, or any other in the series—but the First, YD01 [RyuZU]. Gennai belatedly recalled that no one had ever gotten past the First's Master Confirmation.

"—Boy." *I was asking the wrong person* — Gennai thought as he turned to face Naoto. "Let me ask you a question. Depending on your answer, I might be willing to turn the elevator on for you."

The boy silently turned around. Staring straight into his light gray eyes, Gennai asked, "—Do you not have doubts about this world? This world that has mercilessly rebuffed all of humanity's attempts to understand it?"

*Living atop of this arcane, vague, hazy, and completely illogical planet… Do you really not have any doubts at all?*

However, immediately after, Gennai was thrust with a reality that he would never have wanted to know—truth is always stranger than fiction. The most merciless, outrageous, simple, and boring answer—was the correct one. Despite thinking that he had no hope left in him to lose, Gennai despaired for the third time in his life.

*The boy was unmistakably human. At the very least, he thoroughly looked like a human, he spoke a human language, and he acted as humans do.*

*And of all things, the boy saw through everything—including my despair—and said to me of all people,* ***me*** *,* "—You're free to keep calling yourself a loser and wasting your life away grumbling here if you want. But you see…" With disdain in his eyes, Naoto answered, "You paint with far too broad a brush, geezer. Who do you think you are to speak on behalf of all humanity?"

"———"

"Don't lump us in with yourself."

*—In other words, "Don't lump us in with someone who gave up like you, we won't despair."*

*That's right—he spoke of what it means to be human.*

Gennai sat back down in silence. Leaning back on his rocking chair, he let out a deep, long sigh, and nodded. "...Very well. I'll tell someone to turn the power for the elevator on."

Hearing that, the boy's expression changed in a flash. "Oh? Geez gr~am~ps~! So you're a reasonable guy after all! Alright RyuZU, let's go!"

"Please wait, Master Naoto. You will faint again from a lack of oxygen if you run."

With that little ruckus, the boy and the automaton rushed out of his home. As he saw them off with cloudy eyes, Gennai thought to himself, *What a joke—that fellow, that boy clearly, plainly, obviously possesses unique eyes that can see through the illusions draped before humanity—and yet, he had the gall to ask me why I can't see what he sees.*

*—So he might be human in appearance, true—those who babble that God made man in his image are a plenty.*

*However, that human-looking genius—whether he be a shapeshifter, superhuman, a transcendent being... A god or a demon—coolly asserted what it means to be human, despite not being human himself. With conviction, he said it without any hesitation.*

Gennai sneered. The target of the maddeningly seething hatred within him had just been right before his eyes moments ago.

*So you pretend to be a human huh, you arrogant, foolish god. In that case—* "We'll meet again, boy. Or rather..." *—"Y" in the guise of man...*

A shrill beeping noise rang out. Following it, a window popped up on the wall monitor's screen and began to flash. His mind re-

turning to the present, Gennai turned towards the operator. "— Answer me. What just happened?"

"Ah… r, right. We've just reached eighty-two percent charge…"

"Good." Gennai nodded as he stood up. He slowly looked out over the entire control room—at the faces of all his subordinates who were crammed inside.

They were the faces of old comrades that had been following him since the time he was working diligently on electromagnetic research in Shiga Grid as well as some of their sons whom they had raised in Mie.

As he looked over the faces of people whom, for someone without any relatives like himself, he could even call family, Gennai thought— *None of them matter.*

*If even the planet which we stand on is something ambiguous and uncertain, then in the end… the ones I see before me right now are also nothing but an ephemeral dream.*

*—If you really are a god, then I'll let you kill me obediently.*

*But should you turn out to be a mere human—*

*Then I'll have you know your limits—as a mediocre human just like the rest of us.*

*I'll have you know your sin when you defied that limit in remaking this world. I'll make you take responsibility for causing mankind to stagnate for a thousand years. When justice is served—perish in despair from your newfound knowledge, "Y".*

With a sense of indignation and hatred, but resignation as well, Gennai announced, "Good work, everyone. Well then—let me give you my 'instructions.'"

—Immediately after, an ultra-high voltage current that could easily carbonize the human body ravaged the inside of the control room.

•

Naoto suddenly sprang up like a coiled spring. Eyes wide as could be, cold sweat was spurting out from his entire body.

“Master Naoto…?”

“Hey, what’s going on with you Naoto?”

RyuZU and Marie asked confusedly. AnchoR, who had been lying on Naoto’s stomach, also looked up at him in confusion. However, he didn’t have the luxury of answering them. A dangerous sound was ringing. His eardrums, his intuition—frankly, all of his senses—were screaming danger to him.

*This isn’t just a threat to my life, it’s something even more sinister. It’s something I’ve never heard before—no, wait, I have heard this sound before!*

“Oy… Are you kidding me—?!” *Like I’d forget this sound,* Naoto seethed, *To think I’d have to hear this rank, disgusting, sickening sound again.*

“What’s wrong, Naoto? The bypass will be finished in just a bi—”

“Marie!!” Naoto barked. “Gather all the clouds! Immediately! To the south of where we are! Get on it!!”

Marie must have seen something in his expression, she wasted no time following suit— “Ngh— Did you hear that everyone?! Gather the clouds at six o’clock from the twentieth floor! Commencing weather manipulation!” —There simply wasn’t room for doubt, any questions would have to wait, Marie was already furi-

ously typing on the console‘s keyboard.

Immediately after, Naoto perceived the mechanical sounds of the Pillar of Heaven adjusting the temperature and humidity of its outer shell. As the atmosphere creaked and trembled, a massive amount of steam was produced—but...

“Ahhhhh God damnit! It’s no good, we won’t make it!! Everyone ruuuuuuuuuuun—!!!”

Naoto’s desperate cry reverberated throughout the huge floor. Then, exactly five seconds later...

—The light of destruction arrived and blew everything away.

# Chapter Four / 07 : 35 / Progressor

The light had surged up from the bottom of Tokyo and pierced right through the Pillar of Heaven. Looking up at that sight from the rooftop of the ruling party's headquarter building, Karasawa stroked his chin at a loss.

"—Oh man, I was too late huh…"

He was just about to contact Marie's group to tell them of what he had learned from the transmission log that he had pulled from the ruling party's transmission station.

"What should I do… The pay I'm getting for consultancy won't be enough to cover this…" *Even though it's my policy not to do any more than what I'm paid for* — Karasawa thought with a bitter expression on his face, he was still clutching the phone in his hand.

Reclining against the rooftop fence, Karasawa let out a deep sigh. *—I should have noticed. Dr. Marie had reported to me that the enemy had performed a successful override of the Master Confirmation of one of the Initial-Y Series before.*

*So why didn't they, being researchers of electromagnetic technology,* ***use the technology present on that device*** *?*

*Not to mention, with what the logs I just read seem to imply—* "It's way too risky for me to hold onto this information alone…"

*I did a good job decrypting the correspondence between Shiga's ex-military and their accomplice in just a little over an hour if I may say so myself, but… now that it's come to this, I wish I hadn't found out.*

"Whether or not the coup d'état succeeds, the goal of the one

behind it all remains the same—the purge of the capital. Really, what are we going to do about this…" Karasawa muttered to no one in particular as cold sweat broke out across his face.

Just then.

"—"

Karasawa silently pushed himself off the fence. He wasn't surprised. Back when he had gotten ahold of this information, he had already known that sooner or later it would come to this.

*Before it did, I had wanted to give Dr. Marie—my savior—this information, but…* "So you're already here huh… Geez, you guys may be scoundrels but I have to admit you're capable," Karasawa sighed.

Raising his head, he saw the person—no, the thing—that had appeared by the entrance to the rooftop. Karasawa couldn't clearly make out its figure, but by paying close attention, he was just barely able to make out a shimmering existence by the entrance.

—It was optical camouflage. "A portable model…? Oy oy, not even the Five Great Corporations have successfully developed something like that, you know? As a consultant, I'm certain of this." Karasawa smiled as he tilted his head. "Say," he began cheerfully, "if you don't mind, could I ask you something? —How much do you make?"

The shimmer didn't answer.

*—Yeah, no surprise there.* Karasawa smiled bitterly. *These guys aren't the type to waste time saying stuff like, "Any last words?" or "What have you found out?" or "Say your prayers…"*

Because if the shimmer belonged to the group that Karasawa had gotten information on, the presence would already know that

Karasawa had nothing left to say. The group should already be well aware of what information Karasawa had gotten ahold of, and just as well, Karasawa was an atheist.

In response to the murderous aura closing in on him, Karasawa undid his collar button at his own pace. Placing his right foot one step back, he took a stance.

"Alright. Let's both do our jobs. Hey, did you know? In this country, uncompensated overtime is just the way of life. Long live the labor force," Karasawa sardonically muttered as he sized up the enemy before him.

*My enemy is most likely a cyborg with cutting-edge equipment. The brain probably belongs to a professional hitman as well. Meanwhile, I'm just a mere consultant whose only arms are a single pistol and some portable clocksmithing tools... How many seconds can I survive? I wonder.* With a mental sigh, Karasawa clocked in overtime on a matter of life and death.

•

*—What just happened?* Marie struggled to breathe as she stared dumbfoundedly at the sight before her.

*—Everything's gone. Everything. That blast of light broadsided us from nowhere, it swallowed everything... There's nothing left.*

The central mechanism composed of incredibly sturdy material had melted like glass candy touched by fire. A wide, gaping round hole had been bored into the floor, the walls, the ceiling...

The light had pierced through the outer shell of the tower, melting the floor, and vaporizing the mechanisms in its way, until it passed back out again through the opposite end.

The holes it made all had ugly, jagged edges to them due to the

brief liquidation of the surface materials. Marie sank to the floor right next to one such gap. If she had been just a second slower in evading the light, she would have been vaporized.

As she looked around with trembling eyes, she found Houko right next to her. The enormous Black Tortoise that Halter was operating was resting alongside the tower wall, Vermouth was on the ground next to its feet. She also confirmed that Naoto, RyuZU, and AnchoR, who had been in a safe place to begin with, were fine as well.

She didn't see any service automata though. They had all been working where the light shot through, so it appeared that they had been unable to escape. *—But at the very least, it looks like there weren't any human lives lost to the light just now.*

Now that she knew that, a question popped into Marie's head. With a trembling voice, she asked that question aloud: "—What, was that... What the hell was that supposed to be?!" Her yell quickly vanished through the gaping holes in the walls.

No one answered her— No wait. "...We were shot at," Naoto, the lone person to raise his voice, succinctly answered.

"What'd you say?" *—I don't understand. Shot at? By whom, with what? Why?*

Seeing Marie befuddled in her thoughts, Naoto repeated—this time yelling, "We were shot at by their main cannon! The same piece of shit gigantic cannon that tore a giant hole right through the middle of Akihabara! Are you deaf?!"

She could hear him. At the very least, she understood the words Naoto was saying. However— "Why?! Why would they shoot at us?! Their goal is a coup d'etat isn't it?! If Houko was— If the members of the Imperial Family were hurt, who would be there to confer to them the right to rule Japan?! No, before that —!"

Jumping back to her feet, Marie paced back and forth waving her hands as she shouted in disbelief. “If they destroy the Pillar of Heaven, Tokyo would collapse and take them along for the ride you know?! Hell, all of Japan might collapse!”

*That wouldn’t be a coup d’etat. It’d be nothing but terrorism—and the worst kind at that, suicide bombing. This is different from what we thought. Things aren’t adding up. I don’t understand why they took such an action—*

But it seemed that even Naoto couldn’t answer her question this time, the only sound that could be heard was the wind gushing in from outside— Just then.

“—It is indeed possible to dampen the power of a maser shot by means of randomizing the directionality of the microwaves through the use of the refracting properties of steam…

An apt response to our assault I must say, cursedly so, in fact. But how could you tell that our main cannon is a maser cannon? —I’d very much like to hear your answer.”

A man’s voice resounded throughout the floor. His voice sounded composed, almost mechanical even.

*—Where is his voice coming from?* Marie wondered. *It isn’t from the speakers, nor is the sound coming directly at us.* As Marie looked around trying to find the answer, she quickly realized that the entire floor was vibrating to transmit his voice.

And so, while no one could respond, the voice continued, “I’m sure you survived that shot anyway, yes? ‘Y’ —or rather should I say, Mr. Naoto Miura.”

Besides RyuZU and of course Naoto himself, everyone else’s gaze turned towards Naoto. Looking as if they recognized the voice that was speaking, the two of them were the only ones looking down through the gaping hole in the floor.

Far off down below—they could see the pea-sized silhouette of the enormous weapon in Akihabara Grid. “—This voice… Don’t tell me it’s the gramps from that time…?” Naoto muttered in a daze.

“Naoto! Explain what’s going on!! What the hell is a maser canon?! Who is this voice?!”

“How should I know?! The heck is a maser or whatever?!”

“—My, if it isn’t the old pile of bones that we happened upon while we were still stuck underground. I am indeed speaking to those squawking remains of a loser who fancied himself the wise hermit when he was really just a shut-in, yes? Well, to what do I owe the displeasure of having to listen to your grating voice once more?”

“…Oh, but of course… Since it’s you, you probably instinctively knew what you should do to protect yourself without really knowing why…

You see there was a device called a microwave oven a long time ago, this maser cannon works on the same principle as that device. Likewise, I am also projecting my voice to you by sending electromagnetic radiation to make the walls of the Pillar of Heaven vibrate. With that in mind, I’m afraid that this will be a rather one-sided conversation. Do forgive me.

…Now that I think about it, I haven’t introduced myself have I — My name is Gennai Hirayama. I’m the leader of this coup d’etat. Setting that aside, I am sure that you are all wondering why I fired upon the Pillar of Heaven.”

“Gennai… Hirayama…” As Marie engraved that name into her memory, she nodded. *Yeah, you’re right. After all, should the Pillar of Heaven fall, the only thing that would await you is death.*

“Well, I’ll keep it short. About the coup d’etat… to be honest, it

doesn't matter to me. The subordinates **that I've dealt with** were certainly burning with righteous indignation though."

*—It doesn't matter to him? No, before that, what does he mean by having "dealt with" his subordinates…?*

The voice—Gennai—continued, "—We'll prove the superiority of electromagnetic technology, that is, the fruits of our research to the narrow-minded world we live in. A world that won't recognize any technology other than clockwork technology. And, in our just cause, we'll rectify the federal government's offense of throwing us away like trash. That, was more or less our proclaimed mission but…"

Gennai paused for a moment.

"I was certain that we would fail."

"—"

"Or rather, the premise didn't hold up from the very beginning. The world has long known the superiority of electromagnetic technology. Don't tell me that you lot are naive enough to believe that there's actually a country in the world that would dutifully uphold that shallow facade of a treaty and abandon such a capable tool."

*—That's true,* Marie thought. *Even Japan, a country that is extremely timid on the international stage, was doing research on the realization of an electromagnetic weapon. If one looked for it, there would surely be at least one or two secret research facilities in any country.*

"As for the overthrowing of the federal government—the goal itself can be easily accomplished, but should our electromagnetic weapon become public knowledge, a world war would be what awaits."

Indeed, there was no way that other countries would ignore such a clear threat to their national security. They would surely eliminate it by any means necessary. Even with their own respective electromagnetic weapons that they were concealing, should it come to that.

"Well, my subordinates seemed to have thought that with this weapon and its electromagnetic technologies, we'd be more than capable of holding our own against the rest of the world. Youth sure is a scary thing. My younger self retired in the underground precisely because, unlike them, I couldn't dedicate myself to such an extent—but..."

Gennai paused before changing gears. "That's when I realized that there was something far graver than the character of this nation or the lives that were stolen when Shiga was purged—far more arrogant, insolent... The identity of the one that twisted this world beyond hope!"

The voice that had been composed all this time harbored passion for the first time.

"—In conclusion, Naoto Miura— No, 'Y.'"

Naoto raised his head. His thoughts were impenetrable as his gray eyes stared into space.

"You insolently, haughtily pulled off recreating our very universe. You rejected the path that humanity had carved itself and bent the world itself to fit your own view—and that's exactly why I must test you once more."

Marie had no clue what Gennai was referring to. However, she could sense wrath, hatred—and a hint of resignation in his voice.

"—Show me what you've got. If you can stop me, then you aren't human after all. If you can't, then repent for your arrogant sin in bending the world to your will as I pull you down into hell.

I'll teach you what us mediocrities who crawl through the mud are capable of—you wretched monster."

—Then, silence fell. With that, the voice had stopped speaking. Breaking through his comrades' dumbfounded silence, Halter nimbly tilted the head of the Black Tortoise. "—So, Naoto. What kind of joke is this?"

Following that, Vermouth also spoke up. "Hey boy. Just what kind of crazy ass abuse did you hurl at that guy for him to flip out at you like that? Shit's insane—mind teaching me for future reference?"

However, Naoto dumbfoundedly shook his head. "Huh, but I didn't really say anything to him though...? I just gave some short, apt replies to the comments he made... right? I mean, did I say something strange to him, RyuZU?"

"Not at all. You simply told him a few exceedingly obvious things. Now then, what could he be angry about? ...Perhaps he is simply testy due to menopause?"

Unable to bear relenting in the face of the overwhelming situation at hand any longer, Marie shouted from the bottom of her lungs, "Don't fuck with me! —Like I'll let Asia collapse just because some old bastard has menopause—!! And Naoto!!"

Marie sharply pointed her finger at the boy in question. "Who was the loudmouth that called me a walking landmine again?! We're in this situation because you walked through a minefield and somehow managed to step on every freaking one! Did you ever think that maybe you're the problem?! You're a magnet for trouble you walking timebomb—!!!"

"I mean, you can say that, but asking someone to correctly identify and avoid the sore spots of a loony old man like that is way too much to ask, you know?! You heard the man! He's obviously pretty far gone!!"

"...Father? ...What was that grandpa saying...?"

"Ahh, you don't have to make sense of his ramblings AnchoR~ I don't think anyone gets it really," Naoto replied with a hollow voice.

Marie inadvertently felt a chill run down her spine. *—Is it just my imagination?* "A-At any rate, I'm gonna organize what we know about the situation!" Shaking her head, Marie dispersed the growing dread gnawing at the back of her mind. "Naoto, how long will it take that giant thing to shoot its main cannon again?"

"...I don't know. But, it probably shot at us... with about eighty-percent charge just now. With that in mind, it should be at about... thirty-percent charge right now, I think?

I should warn you, I don't know its precise structure, so this is just my guess. It might not be able to fire until it recovers at least eighty-percent charge, or maybe it can fire again at fifty-percent charge, I really don't know! There's no basis for me to judge!"

"...Very well. Let's assume the worst-case scenario—how long would it take them to recover fifty percent charge?"

Naoto held his head. "...I'm telling you, I don't know. It's already weird that they were able to get to eighty-percent charge so quickly to begin with. I told you in Ueno, didn't I?! That it'd take sixty-six hours! It's only been roughly forty-six since then—there should have been nearly a full day left! That prediction turned out to be totally off the ma—"

Marie seized Naoto by his collar. Her blazing emerald eyes glaring into his gray ones. "We can only rely on your ears and intuition right now! Answer me intuitively! What's the shortest amount of time it would take for them to fire a second shot?!"

"———Seventy-two minutes. There's no way—that it can be any quicker than that..."

*If this guy says so, then it must be true. We don't have any other frames of reference aside from his senses right now. So we'll just have to base our estimation on the figure he gave— we've got seventy-two minutes. That's it. That settles it.*

*—And that is by no means a long time. In this situation, seventy minutes may as well be seventy seconds. Let's take a deep breath and deal with the problems one by one—* Marie looked up at Halter—the Black Tortoise's head—and asked, "—Halter, how much time do you think we have left before the military stops twiddling their thumbs and sets out to regain control of the palace?"

"...If you want me to be frank, they'll probably be storming in any second now. After all, there's no longer any guarantee of the princess's safety."

"Argh god! Everyone just wants to stand in my way!" Marie furiously stamped her feet and scratched her head.

However, Houko took a step forward. "Actually, it should take the military at least forty minutes to get here... No matter what miracles they pull off it should take at least that long."

"Eh—?" Everyone chorused as they focused their eyes on Houko.

Houko faced everyone's gazes head-on as she continued, "—The enormous weapon quickly annihilated Tokyo's security force upon making its appearance. That caused the government to break up, which in turn caused infighting to break out in a total of eight locations in Tokyo.

The first to the fourth army corps commenced an emergency mobilization to subjugate the rebellion upon the request of the metropolitan police and are currently engaged in battle. The two battalions that made up the main force of the rebel army had besieged the palace, but they were eradicated by you all, yes?"

After a pause— “To put it plainly, the constituents that make up Tokyo’s military have either lost their fighting strength or are currently not under the normal chain of command.

“Assuming that the military used your recent broadcast as an opportunity to reunify itself, it would still need to reorganize its available forces, draft a strategic plan, decide on who should take the lead as supreme commander. They would also have to summon the reserve forces should reinforcements be necessary.

Even if there is an officer who has the capability, will, and popularity to swiftly handle all these things, considering how much time has passed up to now—it will take at least another forty minutes. That should be the absolute lower limit.”

“—Though.” Houko smiled tenderly. “I think if there were such a convenient person, then the situation would not have come to this in the first place.”

Marie stared at Houko in astonishment. “—You don’t have any political power, right?”

“Naturally. I am a woman in the imperial family after all.” Houko beamed.

*—What a waste, if she were born in an earlier era, or simply into any other family in Japan, she might have seriously ended up leading this nation one day.*

Dispelling the tangent that had surfaced in her mind, Marie said, “—Very well. Let’s use that figure as a guideline then. So, we don’t have to worry about the military storming inside here for at least another forty minutes. Meanwhile, setting up a barricade and having Halter and Vermouth defend it should be enough to hold the imperial guard at bay. In that case, what’s left is…”

—The biggest problem of all. Which was precisely why Marie had hesitated to even bring it up until now.

"...So the question is... in the seventy-two minutes that we have until the enormous weapon fires its main cannon at us again —how can we connect the bypass that will allow us to destroy that gigantic thing from the Pillar of Heaven, huh..."

*After all, the shot just now entirely evaporated the linkage that we were nearly finished building. We're back where we started in terms of the bypass, not to mention—* "With eighteen less pairs of hands to help at that... haha..."

—Marie could only laugh. The eighteen outstanding Meisters controlling eighteen separate service automata, Konrad who had synchronized with Vermouth's body, and Marie herself, had spent more than an hour working on the bypass together. Yet, with how badly things were damaged, they now had to redo the combined work of twenty people with just two in less time than before.

*—It's impossible. This joke's in terrible taste. No matter what kind of plan I draw up in my mind, none of them will manage to make it in time. However... I don't have the luxury to hesitate right now.*

In the midst of the silence broken only by the blowing wind, Marie shouted, "—Naoto, we're going to remake the bypass! Tell me how this place is structured again—"

"Hey Marie, do you even know what you're saying?" Naoto laughed shakily. "—Tell me, how the heck am I supposed to hear the sounds of vaporized gears?"

Marie gulped. With that short comment that hinted at an ordinary boy being on the verge of breaking—Marie felt like everything was absolutely and positively over. No ifs, ands, or buts. It was as if a god had just announced the end of the world.

•

The floor was enveloped by the abnormal noise coming from

the gears of the Pillar of Heaven, the windy draft, and— The thing most precious of all, time—ticking away from the clock. Miraculously, or perhaps cruelly, the device had survived the blast.

Everyone simply kept quiet where they were, not knowing what to do. Marie was also sitting on the floor, staring fixedly at the clock. Four minutes had already passed. *—A tenth of our remaining time has already fruitlessly gone by.*

Looking like she just thought of something, she muttered, "... Would it be too late to start evacuating the metropolitan residents now?"

Houko, who was sitting next to her, immediately replied, "I think it would be impossible. At present, there is no one who can oversee the task of informing the residents and leading them in an evacuation. Moreover, those who are sharp should have already begun to escape long ago... though whether or not their efforts will be enough to save them is another matter."

"...Yeah, you're right. I know that as well, but..." *I couldn't stop myself from asking anyway,* Marie sighed.

Naoto, who was sitting on the opposite side, said to RyuZU and AnchoR, "Hey, would you two at least be able to save yourselves?"

"Out of the question. In case you have forgotten, Master Naoto: The option of leaving you behind and escaping by myself does not exist within me. If this fact has already slipped your mind, then I would have to suspect that you have a severe case of amnesia," RyuZU immediately replied.

AnchoR also clung to Naoto tightly and wouldn't let go. "AnchoR doesn't want to either...! AnchoR won't leave father!"

*—Escaping from here is impossible in the first place,* Marie thought. *Gennai Hirayama had fired upon the Pillar of Heaven*

*with the intention of destroying it with that one shot.*

*Thanks to Naoto's intuition, we managed to limit the damage from the first shot to 'just this much,' but—with so many clockwork parts erased, forget linking up the bypass, we can't even manipulate the weather anymore. Defending ourselves from the next shot is impossible.*

*So what'll happen when it comes?*

*First, the Pillar of Heaven—which, true to its name, reaches all the way to the heavens—will break and collapse. It goes without saying that the collapse of the tower would be enough to trigger the start of a severe calamity.*

*Next, the entire capital will cease functioning and collapse down into the core of the planet.*

*And, should Tokyo collapse, all of Japan might follow. Should that happen, all of Asia and eventually even the entire Clockwork Planet might suffer fatal damage.*

*Run away? Try as one might, one still wouldn't be able to escape the consequences. And—no matter how much I think about it... there's nothing we can do to stop it.*

Marie lowered her eyes as she ran her trembling fingertips across her lips. Her lips felt dry and withered. There was a creeping unease crawling up her spine and yet, at the same time, she felt a numbing terror floating around her temples. *What is this...?*

Marie realized: *—It's despair.*

*It didn't start here. I've already been despairing for two days now—ever since I witnessed that EMP, a power that could destroy the world.*

*Back then, along with all the clockwork devices, my own heart froze as well—my will's been broken for ages. I've simply been clinging to the magic that is Naoto.*

Deep down, Marie prayed with her parched, frozen heart as she asked, "—Naoto, can't AnchoR and RyuZU destroy that weapon?"

Naoto replied with a lackluster voice, " *Maybe.* But the two of them would definitely be wrecked in the process—I'd rather let the entire world collapse than let that happen—but." Naoto furiously scratched his head and bit his nails with an expression that Marie had never seen before.

*—He knows,* Marie thought, *that if this continues, it'll only be a matter of time before the same fate befalls the two of them just the same.*

*He knows that, but he still can't bring himself to give them the order to attack the enormous weapon.*

*He can't resolve himself to abandon RyuZU and AnchoR to save the world but he can't just abandon the world either.*

*...That's to be expected. He's only human. He worries, hesitates, and makes mistakes like the rest of us.*

*He isn't some convenient magic that can grant any wish.*

Only understanding such an obvious fact now, Marie's gaze fell to her feet. Not even a sigh escaped her lips.

Just then.

"...Father." AnchoR suddenly stood up. "...Please, give AnchoR the order—"

Naoto immediately raised his head and shook his head sternly.

“—No, absolutely not! Please, don’t make me repeat myself over and over again… AnchoR.”

“But, but… if this goes on…”

“Yeah, I know, I know okay! Please, AnchoR—let me keep that as our absolutely last resort. I’ll do something about the situation. I definitely will, so—” Naoto begged.

However, Marie inadvertently noticed something unusual. AnchoR’s small shoulders were trembling as she took a step back from Naoto.

“…No…”

“Eh?” Naoto tried to look into AnchoR’s eyes, but AnchoR had lowered hers. “I’m sorry Father… I can’t… obey, that order.”

“AnchoR…?” Naoto muttered, dumbfounded.

Immediately after, a shockwave broke out. AnchoR had leapt, flipped in midair, and dove head first through the gaping hole in the floor—she was heading straight down towards the enormous weapon far below.

“AnchoR!!” Even as Naoto called out to her, she wouldn’t stop. The red and white figure in the distance shrank to a speck in a flash. Naoto turned towards RyuZU and yelled, “RyuZU! Bring her back immediately!”

“…I am not capable of physically stopping AnchoR once she has taken action.”

“In that case… nghhh,” Naoto groaned as he furiously scratched his head and flailed about. “Then tell her this for me! ‘Wait for just another sixty-four minutes! Please. I’ll definitely find a way to take care of the situation before then!’”

“—Understood,” RyuZU said as she elegantly bowed. Just as

the skirt of her black dress began to flutter, however, she suddenly stopped and turned around.

"Mistress Marie, may I have a word?"

"...M, Me?" Marie stuttered, taken by surprise. *What could it be? RyuZU's never said anything to me of her own volition before...*

"I simply wish to inform you that I have decided to consider the princess's advice post-haste. Personally, I am quite certain that this is nothing but a waste of time, a small vain hope but... That said, though I may be flawless as a follower, I am not reluctant to admit the very obvious fact that I am not a completely omnipotent being—I am the most modest one among my sisters, after all."

"...Oh, really." Marie nodded. *Don't you mean the haughtiest?*

RyuZU straightened her posture. "Mistress Marie, Master Naoto is always reading the back of your regrettable mind. You would do well to remember that a theory is ultimately nothing but an idea that has been selectively compiled into a clear text for the convenience of sharing with others. The Truth has never been universal, unchanging, or fair, which is precisely why I find it terribly difficult to admit this, but—"

RyuZU paused for a breath. Her topaz eyes were reflecting Marie's image in them as she said, **"—You are right. So is Master Naoto. But at the same time, you are both wrong."**

"Right... but wrong...?" Marie parroted in a daze. *...I can't get a handle on what she's saying*. However, RyuZU's words reverberated within her heart.

*—In the end,* ***who's really the one that's making a fundamental mistake?***

RyuZU bowed with a cool, composed face. “Feel free to push your lacking brain to its limits in considering what I have said, Mistress Marie. Well then, I am a bit short on time, so—excuse me.”

The next moment, RyuZU turned on her heels and dove straight down through the gaping hole, leaving Marie behind. Everyone that was left focused their gazes onto Marie. As everyone else remained frozen still, not uttering a peep, Naoto stood up and quietly said, “Let’s get to it, Marie.”

—*Get to what?* As Marie was still trying to fully grasp the inkling she got from RyuZU’s words, she muttered, baffled, “...I mean, what can we possibly do?”

“That’s obvious. We’re gonna **do something** about the situation.”

“I’m asking you what that something is!” Marie yelled from the floor. “You said it yourself didn’t you?! That there’s no way you can hear the sounds of gears that have been erased, that there’s nothing we can do! We’re just gonna ‘do something about the situation’? —No such convenient magic exists you know?!”

“So what! So what!!” Naoto’s angry roar reverberated throughout the floor. “So you’re just gonna give up?! So you’re just gonna kick the bucket without trying?! Yeah, if you want me to admit it then I will! I have no clue what we should do!!”

Having her collar seized by Naoto, Marie became unable to breathe as she was yanked up off the floor. Gray eyes full of anger glared down at her. “Listen stupid! Do I really have to remind you?!”

“.....about what?”

“About what kind of woman you are!”

Naoto's shout made Marie's shoulders tremble. Naoto's grip on her collar was forceful, tight. With a face twisted by rage, he said, "You— You're always spouting your ideals with that proud, haughty, insolent, and naturally condescending attitude of yours, and yet, when push comes to shove, you immediately give in to the pressure like jelly!

The very second things don't go your way you start grumbling as you think yourself into a corner. Then, you self-destruct and take everyone else down with you! That's why you're one hell of a nasty walking landmine... grr!!"

"—You lookin' for a fight?" Marie reflexively replied in her normal tone.

"But!!" Naoto paused for breath. "You're a woman who'll never believe that something's impossible—aren't you?!"

—Marie's eyes widened. For a moment, she couldn't comprehend what had been said to her.

Before she had the time to reply, Naoto irritably shook his head, ranting, "God damn it! Why do I have to say something like this for you?! It pisses me off to no end, I mean you're a genius, right?! Yeah, sure, so maybe I can do something that no one else can! But it was your talent that put my ability to use wasn't it?!"

"——"

"Wasn't that the case for what we did in Kyoto? What about Akihabara? Well, wasn't it?! I couldn't have repaired AnchoR or RyuZU in time without your help, and old man Halter wouldn't be here if it weren't for you! We probably wouldn't even have been able to escape Akihabara without you in the first place!!"

"———"

Flooded by the raging billows that were Naoto's words, Marie

ceased thinking. She blinked twice as Naoto continued madly shouting, "—Tell me Marie, please! With yours brain, skills, and talent—why do you always give up so easily?!"

What she sensed from his words, though baffling to her—was envy, jealousy...

"If you're just gonna let it rot then hand it over! Just give me that talent of yours— Hey Marie are you listening?!"

A word that Marie couldn't believe she heard pierced her ears.

*—Talent? Did you just say talent? Someone with a real, magical, godlike ability that no one else can imitate is pestering me of all people about talent...?*

"...Naoto?" Unable to understand, Marie raised her hands up in front of herself. She wrapped her hands around Naoto's, where he was still holding her up by the collar, and gently touched the scorched skin where he had been burnt. As she tenderly felt the bumps of his scars, Naoto released his grip on her collar.

"Marie..." Like a flame that had burnt out, all the energy left Naoto's body. Marie suddenly noticed the large teardrops that had formed in corners of his gray eyes. They looked like they would fall any moment now.

*...Ah. As startling and unbelievable as it is... it seems like this idiot seriously envies me. I can't understand it one bit. ...I don't know why he would envy the talent of someone so brittle like me, but he does.*

The moment Marie understood that fact, she felt a welling fire light up in her heart once more—as proof of that, Marie swung her right hand with all her might.

*Slaaaaaaaaaap!*

“Ugeh?!” Naoto’s left cheek rippled to that cracking sound. As Naoto’s neck recovered and recentered from the blow, Marie greeted him with her left hand all the same.

*Slaaaaaaaaaap!*

A cracking sound broke out again as Naoto’s right cheek rippled from the full force of Marie’s might.

“Ugwah?!” As Naoto was left in shock with two swelling cheeks, Marie seized his collar and pulled herself up. On her feet, she then rammed her knee into his solar plexus.

“Oof—?!” After which, Marie then slithered behind him and hooking his foot with her own, pulled him into an arm-lock at lightning speed. She proceeded to put him through the wringer. Literally.

“—Hey, wait, time out! S, Stop you idiot! Something’s gonna dislocate!” Naoto stomped with his feet, struggling to free himself.

However, Marie completely ignored his plea, roaring, “What kinda retarded bullshit did you think you were spouting in my face...!! Huh?!” Marie felt her body temperature rise from the agitation as she continued, “Like you’re one to talk! You’re the one who’s letting an absurd talent rot in waste—!! If you can’t even use them properly, then give your ears to me!”

*If I had this guy’s hearing, just what kind of amazing things could I do?*

*Or perhaps—what if this guy even had even a modicum of skill as a clocksmith?*

*...Just how many times do you think this absurd wish has inadvertently crossed my mind?!*

Naoto shouted back, “Yeah—damn it! I would if I could! If that’d help resolve anything about the situation then I’d give them to you right this second!!! Otherwise—”

He paused for a breath.

“Give me your talent—figure out a way to do so! Right this second!!”

“—Yeah sure, why not?! I’ll do just that!!”

As Marie yelled back tit for his tat, Naoto glared at her. Seeing his expression, Marie finally understood. *“The grass is always greener on the other side.” Just as I’m jealous of him, he’s jealous of me. We both envy and desire the other’s gifts.* Upon that realization, their whole argument became silly to her. .....*Yeah! I’m done, I’m done, okay?! That’s enough worrying brain, thank you very much!*

*That’s right, now that I think about it, everything is odd. Ridiculous. Why do I, the noble Marie Bell Breguet, have to count on this idiot, this incorrigible pervert, this crazy bastard who sees a completely different world from the rest of us to drag me around and show me the way?!*

*That’s gotta be wrong—it should be the reverse if anything!*

*Everything’s pissing me off! I’m so irritated!*

*I can’t help but be mad at both myself and everyone else as well!! All you shitheads in the world should just Die! Die die die!!*

*In the first place, everyone’s just doing as they damn well please! How dare you shitty good-for-nothing inferior creatures trouble me without my permission! Prostrate yourselves! Kneel!*

*—And, And... huh? Umm, what was I thinking about again?*

Marie released Naoto from her grip and quickly remembered. "—Right right, yes, right! Why don't I just teach you! If I do that—we can break through this shitty situation!!"

Marie's joyous yell gathered everyone's attention. *It's simple* , Marie thought to herself as she announced, "When you break it all down—if Naoto had my technical skills, we could do something about the situation. He'd be able to grasp the structure of the surviving movements of this floor and make a new bypass for them. Conversely—if I had Naoto's hearing, I could do the same thing. Isn't that right?"

"And so," she continued, "if I were to summarize why this shitty situation has had us at our wits' end up to now—it's because of one simple factor: The situation is so severe that if Naoto and I split up our work, we wouldn't be able to finish in time."

Marie turned around to see the idiot in question scowling at her as he nursed his aching joints. "That's why—we're gonna go with the give-and-take principle, Naoto."

With that, Marie returned to a thought that she had dammed up in the back of her mind. ***—Who's really the one that's misunderstanding something fundamental?***

The words RyuZU had said to her dashed round and round in her mind— *Damn it. I absolutely don't want to admit it, but as hard as it is to believe* — Marie took in a nice, slow breath and looked around herself…

Houko was there. Halter was there. Vermouth was there. She could sense Konrad's presence in Vermouth as well. And finally, Naoto was there, right in front of her.

Gathering the attention of all of them, Marie announced, "—**Your hearing doesn't lie** , so I'll teach you how to make the most of your ability. In return, teach me how to perceive things like you do…!"

•

"How to make the most of my hearing...?" Naoto parroted in a daze.

"You said it before, didn't you? That no matter how many times you read over your textbooks and manuals you can't understand what they say one bit. In other words, it's because what they say contradicts what you intuitively know from your hearing, no?"

"Y, Yeah..." Naoto nodded.

"Then it's simple—the textbooks and manuals are wrong. What your hearing's been telling you was right all along."

"...Haah?!" Naoto cried, telling Marie in a fluster, "W, Wait a second here. The stuff I read, those were the latest editions of technical manuals you know?!"

"I'm sure they were. That's why... **what's mistaken is our current understanding of clockwork technology.** "

Marie admitted it. ...*I ended up admitting it*. Marie nervously trembled at her own words.

Houko, Halter, and Vermouth all seemed to be staying their breath. Meanwhile, Konrad said in a frightful voice through Vermouth's voice mechanism, "Dr. Marie— Please excuse me for interjecting, but what do you mean by what you just said...?"

"—Exactly that. The clockwork theories that we learned are wrong."

Marie could sense Konrad gulping through Vermouth's voice box. *It's to be expected,* Marie thought. *Admitting that modern clockwork theories are wrong—automatically implies a rejection of all the knowledge and skill that we've engraved into our very*

*flesh and bones.*

*However…*

"Naoto's sense of hearing which allowed him to fix RyuZU's imaginary gear and precisely determine where the abnormality of Kyoto's core tower lay is **undoubtedly correct.**

So, if something contradicts that hearing of his—it must, by necessity, be wrong," Marie said as she stared intensely at Naoto. "Though I'm ashamed to admit it, I don't understand how your hearing works. But the one thing that I *can* say is—that ability of yours is not simply functioning on the dimension of good hearing."

"So… what exactly are you getting at with all this?" Naoto bewilderedly asked.

"You—know the answer to things," Marie asserted.

"I know… the answer?" Naoto parroted with a baffled expression.

Marie nodded. "The answer always comes to you first; you know how things should be, how mechanisms sound when they are functioning normally. If that weren't the case, you couldn't possibly grasp the movements of tens of trillions of fine parts, something that should be fundamentally impossible. In spite of you vaguely describing your ability as hearing the discord in the sounds of mechanisms, your answer is— **much too precise.** "

She continued, "—No modern clockwork theory was written with senses like yours in mind. In the end, that's why you're always left with no choice but to try and find the answer through brute force."

*—Indeed, it's no wonder that he couldn't properly do his schoolwork or read blueprints. If the work he was assigned, if*

*the blueprints he was shown—were "incomplete" in the first place—they would only confuse Naoto, because Naoto knows the "full" picture.*

"That's why—I'm going to give you a lesson. I'll probably be the first one to do so. I, Marie Bell Breguet, am going to teach you a curriculum tailored especially to you. So get the earwax out of your ears and listen carefully…"

Naoto gulped. He straightened his back and gazed intently at Marie. He was wearing a serious face that clearly showed that he didn't want to miss her slightest gesture, much less even a single syllable of her words.

Marie lightly nodded and began the lesson— "Break things apart and analyze them yourself. Class dismissed." —Which promptly ended in two sentences.

"…….Haah?" Naoto scowled, his disappointment apparent on his face. *Are you messing with me?*

Marie continued, "If you can already see the answer, then all you need to do is break the problem apart and work backwards toward the original question."

"Work backwards…?"

"To give you a metaphor, you probably… no, certainly—hear how the orchestra should sound before they even start playing."

"…"

"—And when the orchestra finally starts actually playing, you become disappointed at their shitty sound. So, you pick out the sounds of all the different instruments, all the individual musicians, and fix all the wrong notes until alas—it becomes the song you were supposed to hear. Know what I'm talking about?"

Naoto stayed silent. However, if one looked at the astonishment written on his face, the answer to Marie's question was clear—his face was saying, "How could you describe what it's like for me so accurately?"

"What you need isn't the blueprint of a mechanism but the score of the symphony of its gears, as you perceive things completely differently from us clocksmiths..."

Marie paused and shook her head.

"—Actually, it might not even be the score that you need but pictures of their waveforms. At any rate, you perceive gears in a completely different way from normal humans. That's the real answer behind the discrepancy between the manuals and your senses. What you see is how the gears move together, their music... in other words, their flow."

*—Hmm yes, it's the same as light for example.*

*Light behaves like both a particle and a wave.*

*It's said that the question of whether light is really a particle or a wave gave scientists in the ancient era a lot of trouble.*

*So, if we were to take that and apply it to clockwork—what modern clockwork theory considers purely "particles," Naoto perceives as "waves."*

*Without having been taught by anybody—he naturally hears them as sound. And, as absurd and irrational as it is, his interpretation is also correct.*

*Just like how light is both a particle and a wave—if you think about it that way, it all makes sense.*

*It would explain why Naoto, despite having the talent to grasp the structure of clockwork mechanisms more accurately*

*than anyone else in the world, can't understand even elementary clockwork theory.*

*This disgustingly talented boy—was taught things that are completely wrong. If nothing else—for Naoto, all of our modern clockwork theory is nothing but a shackle. Of course it is. It's obvious that that'd be the case. It has to be by definition.*

*After all, how could he possibly reconcile what he intuitively knows about how clockwork behaves as waves with how they behave as particles if he was only taught the latter?*

*And that's exactly why what Naoto needs isn't to understand modern clockwork theory—but simply to understand the basis of what he hears.*

"You don't need to worry about repairing or assembling mechanisms. What you should do—is break things down and work backwards from there."

Naoto can envision perfect images of clockwork inside his head. What Marie was saying was that if he took that image he sees inside his head, which isn't even a micrometer different from the real thing, and reverse-engineered the process by which he mentally constructed it—that the result would be his own personal blueprint of the mechanism.

Naoto eagerly watched Marie as he finished taking her lesson. His gaze expressed a jumble of respect, admiration, and envy. It was the same reverent gaze that Marie had received countless times from her colleagues during the time she had been in Meister Guild.

To have Naoto of all people look at her like that made her feel ticklishly proud—but at the same time, she also felt humiliating defeat. Pushing those complicated feelings aside, she forcefully declared, "Now then, it's your turn to teach me...!"

•

*...I'm no genius at all,* Marie admitted to herself with a calmness that surprised even herself. *I'm just a fake who desperately tries to keep up the appearance of a genius due to my pervasive inferiority complex.*

*A real genius would be my older sister or my father—or the aggravating, perverted bastard in front of me right now.*

*I have some talent. I also put in the effort. So I get results.*

*But that's all.*

*I can't go beyond that. Even if I can use what someone else created better than anyone else, I can't create anything new. I can't make the impossible possible with just my own ability. What's impossible for everyone else is also impossible for me.*

Because she understood that fact better than anyone else, Marie defined herself as such:

"—I'm a woman who'll never believe something's impossible."

It wasn't out of stubbornness or pride on her part. It was the self-imposed rule that she absolutely couldn't compromise if she was to live her life as someone she could be proud of.

And now, to uphold that rule, Marie chose to reject all the common sense that had formed the basis for her understanding of the world.

*—Now then, make your resolve, Marie.*

*What you're about to be told is an understanding of the world that works on entirely different assumptions.*

*Just what will he tell me? What will he teach me? And will*

*someone as measly as me truly be able to comprehend it?*

She shook her head to dispel her doubts.

*—No, Marie. It's not "will I," it's "I will."*

*Just how does the superhuman before me see the world? — You don't have to understand all of it. Just a fragment or a piece would already be plenty.*

*I'll swallow anything, no matter how absurd it is, then, I'll demonstrate my new understanding with my own hands. I definitely will—!* Marie worked herself up as she waited for Naoto to speak.

Naoto told her in one breath, "I think you already understand, Marie."

"...I already understand...?" Marie parroted, raising an eyebrow.

Naoto nodded. "You've already mastered it... my not-so-special little trick that is. You've had it down for a long while now. You proved that when you connected old man Halter's brain pod to the Black Tortoise didn't you?"

"...What are you talking about? That was—just because I happened to know the blueprint—"

"Really?" Naoto sighed. "You're telling me that you were able to make a modification that you had never done before, in that short amount of time, without even thinking about it?" His gray eyes brimming with admiration, Naoto asserted, "You can see it already, Marie. The 'outcome' that is—the future to reel into reality."

—Just as Marie was about to reflexively deny that, she shook her head.

*He isn't mistaken—didn't I admit it myself just now?*

*Naoto Miura—knows things that he shouldn't have any way of knowing.*

*I don't understand the theory or implications behind that fact at all, but it's been proven that it has to be the case.*

*In that case, if Naoto says I can do it—then I can do it, he's right. None other than the embodiment of the qualities I admire the most is attesting to my ability—what could possibly be more reassuring than that?*

Marie became certain.

*—Naoto Miura simply happens to have ears that are slightly keener than the average person. Just as he says himself, it's just a slight variance that lies within the standard deviation of all humans.*

*If one were to treat his hearing as a superpower simply because modern equipment can't compete with it in terms of precision—Marie Bell Breguet, if you really wish to claim that that is the correct way of looking at things—then show me a piece of modern equipment that can do a better job than you at anything clockwork-related.*

*In the end, it's just a little trick of his. A slight variance that lies within the standard deviation of all humans. A mere difference in aptitude.*

*However, when that slight variance meshes with a honed intuition—the human brain surpasses reason.*

*...Didn't Halter prove that?*

*...Doesn't Naoto's existence prove that?*

*—Haven't I proved that myself plenty of times up to now!!*

Immediately after, the image that flashed in her head made Marie stretch her eyes wide open.

"—I get it now. We're complete opposites from each other aren't we… in everything."

"Opposites?" Naoto muttered perplexedly.

Marie became certain of it as she gazed into his eyes.

*That's right, opposites.*

*Marie Bell Breguet starts by arranging all the facts that she knows about a scenario in her mind and tries to deduce the answer from there.*

*Naoto Miura starts with the answer he's looking for and tries to reverse-engineer a scenario that'll make it a reality.*

*In that case, it's just a difference in methodology—what I need to do is simple. …I just need to work backwards from the answer.*

Marie raised her head and said with vigor, "Naoto, tell me the structure of stuff like the main circuits and movements of the Pillar of Heaven—basically, anything you heard that sounded important to you. What I want you to do is convey to me the outcome we need."

"…Sure, I guess. I'm not confident that I can express it well in words though, alright?" Naoto replied with a troubled expression.

Marie smiled ferociously. "Just tell me—I'll decipher, memorize, and digest everything you say— What, are you implying that I can't? How impertinent!"

Seeing Marie like that, Naoto's eyes turned serious as he lightly nodded. "...Alright then, Marie. I'm not as smart as you are and I'm not that good with words. But, I'm sure you'll be able to understand even if no one else can, so I'm just gonna tell you my raw impression."

"—Right." Marie almost added "Bring it on," but swallowed those words at the last second as she bit down on her lip.

And so— "Marie, please listen carefully, then forget what I'm about to tell you."

"—Eh?" Marie uttered as she stumbled from the very beginning on Naoto's contradictory words.

However, Naoto paid her no mind and continued, "You don't have to memorize what I'm about to tell you, but don't forget it either. Just listen to everything I say, but don't listen too deeply, alright? Think about it, but don't think about it—acknowledge it flowing in one ear and let it flow out the other."

"_"

"Everything is right but at the same time wrong. What seems contradictory is in fact true. Right is left and vice versa. There's nothing here, but at the same time, that nothing holds everything."

"___"

"You don't know but you know."

——Say that again...?

"You know but you don't know."

——Hey...

"You don't remember but you do; alright, let's get started."

——Wait…

The temperature of Tokyo's grids can't be manipulated from the Pillar of Heaven—but they can be. All the floors and all the components that make up this tower work together. They're a single unit—but at the same time they're their own spare.

They flow from above to below, from below to above, from right to left, from left to right, from front to back, and from back to front again, as one block. If you just ignore the physical media, then what you're really left with is a flow of pure energy. Governing mechanisms are both nowhere and everywhere; in other words, there are some here too.

The gears that have been lost are still missing, they won't ever come back, but at the same time, the other gears that are left will shoulder their burden. **What we should do is not try to work around that fact**, but take the direct path instead.

Satisfy the conditions. **Trick the mechanisms.** Stop the balance wheels from turning, stretch the springs, twist the escape wheels, remove the hooks, drop the anchors, and raise and lower the needed gears, then restart the balance wheels and align them with the pendulum.

Lower the rotational speed of the 86,754$^{th}$ set of mechanisms all the way to the pace of the 96,640 set so that they match the turn rate of the 36,396$^{th}$ gear and keep them there at that speed... Reconnect the transmission gears then connect the 457$^{th}$ gear to the 3,360$^{th}$ wire and lower all the escape wheels. Lower the amplitude of the swing of the anchors from 4,634 units to 3,053 units. At the same time, connect the 1st through the 3530$^{th}$ set of mechanisms directly to the 406,464$^{th}$ set right below them.

If you synchronize the operations of the fifteenth floor to the eighteenth floor, you can control the energy that flows up from the set of springs at the base of the tower to the rest of the tower.

With that, you can have the energy that powers the twenty-second through the twenty-eighth floor shared with the twenty-first floor and through that, reach the twentieth floor as well—where the difference engine lies. With that, you can then seize control over the power mechanisms that power Tokyo's various grids.

So, ignore the missing mechanisms on the twentieth floor and draw power to the floor anyway. **Then, stop.** Restart the transmission gears and increase the turn rate of all sets of gears.

It isn't the weather or the temperature that we'll try to change, but the flow of energy. We're not going to induce weather phenomena by setting the right conditions but create them directly instead.

Find some numbers that'll let us bend the laws of physics to our will. You don't have to calculate them; just find some values that you like. Whatever you choose, they'll be the right ones. But at the same time, they'll be the wrong ones.

So, to make up for that, we're going to put some other mechanisms to work. Cut all the wires in the 35350$^{th}$ set of mechanisms then reverse the direction of the gears of the 457,060th set. **Let energy pass through those mechanisms without any being lost.**

We'll reverse the output and input of energy and use both, which will allow us to retrieve the energy we need for a split second. Synchronize the turn rates of all the sets of mechanisms from the fifth floor to the tenth floor. Raise their turn rates from 3,535 rpm to 4,540 rpm and make sure to tune them so that this increase doesn't cause any problems.

The mechanisms that'll need tuning are in the 3,500th set of the 3,356th block. Take safeguards to prevent the mechanisms from falling apart. Break them yourself. Turn the movements themselves. If you do just that, the mechanisms will rearrange themselves without needing any further help from you.

Before we resort to brute force, the gears will subordinate themselves to us willingly. Force the 5,356th set of mechanisms to operate until they break down. Then, continue letting the broken parts operate anyway so that they break down even further. That'll safeguard against the other mechanisms falling apart.

Tracing the connections of that set will lead you to the aroma box on the twenty-ninth floor. Reel in the box and have it replace the broken set. Have it turn both regularly and irregularly, redefine how it should normally function. Seal the gaps and wring heat out of it. Transmit that heat to the twenty-sixth grid of Tokyo. The characteristic turn rates of the mechanisms in its core tower are 3,430, 3035, 3056, 3053, 3124, 3894 rpm. Clockwise.

Though the two towers aren't connected by wires, we can use the coupled movements between its core tower and the Pillar of Heaven to transmit the heat instead. We have to raise the frequency of the twenty-sixth's grid's vibrations geometrically while keeping the frequencies of the surrounding grids the same.

The terminal movement on its first floor will serve as our reference. Nothing can be left approximate. Scale the values down for size but be sure to keep the ratios the same.

**And lastly, something for you to think about—If clockwork contraptions won't work with even a single gear missing, then how is this planet even running at this point?**

"...Marie, you awake?"

"————————Huh?"

Seeing the hand waving before her eyes, Marie finally uttered something. She inadvertently choked on air— *What did he just do to me... what the heck did he just say...?*

"Alright, seems like you're awake. Did you memorize it?"

"—Wha, huh, memorize what?" Marie tilted her head, still unable to properly articulate her thoughts. *I do get the vague impression that he just said a lot of things to me, but—*

"Alrighty then—I see that you have it memorized."

"W...Wait a second now?! What did you just do to—"

"I told you that I'd give you my raw impression, didn't I? So that's exactly what I did."

"W-Wait a second. You said that I have it memorized! I don't have a single clue what you just said to me tho—"

"You do," Naoto asserted as if it were as indisputable as pointing up to the noon sky and declaring that the sun is out.

"Look, Marie... You've not only memorized the blueprints of the products of the Breguet Corporation, but of all the weapons and machines throughout the world, even RyuZU. ...Isn't that right?"

As Marie blankly nodded, Naoto sneered as if to pay her back for her condescending attitude up to now, "If you weren't aware of it then let me enlighten you— **That's something that should normally be impossible.** "

Marie's eyes widened.

"I told you, didn't I? **You've already mastered my little trick.** The only difference between you and me is that you see it with your eyes while I hear it with my ears— Ah, and I'll have you know that I've got RyuZU's structure memorized down to her last wire, so you better not think you're the only one!"

As Naoto stood before her while haughtily puffing out his chest, Marie remained silent, gazing at Naoto dumbfoundedly.

—She thought about the meaning of his words. *Is it really that I "remember" it? Or do I "know" it?*

As Marie tried to hazily think her way through that question, Naoto said, "Don't worry—if my impression came across as words, then you definitely understand what I said."

"...Really?"

"You definitely remember what I said. You don't remember, but you do. There's no doubt that the Marie I know—the genius that you are—must have understood everything about this floor."

"—Where are you getting the confidence to think that?"

"I don't think that; I know that. The way you memorize things —it's a little embarrassing, but I'll tell you why I admire and even respect you." He paused for a breath. "—We're the same in this regard **and only this regard.** You don't 'memorize' clockwork structures, Marie. You simply vaguely, abstractly grasp them somehow. That's why—I thought that I might be able to do the same thing."

An embarrassed smile surfaced on Naoto's face. Then, with an expression that Marie had never seen from him before—a gaze of trust and conviction—he said, "Don't worry. Believe in yourself."

After just those few words, Naoto stood up. He picked up some tools that had been scattered on the floor and headed towards his

station. Marie gulped down the saliva that had built up inside her mouth, then slowly stood up herself, following his example.

She picked up some tools, as she let her feet naturally lead her to her station. However, at that point—as her hands suddenly froze—she worried.

*Frankly, I don't understand a single thing that Naoto said to me. What should I do? What would let me understand his words? How should I approach them—?*

As Marie began to follow that train of thought—suddenly, she **sneered.**

"Hah—" Marie scoffed at the her of just a few minutes ago, at the Marie Bell Breguet who had been twiddling her thumbs and basking in despair for the hundredth time, unable to move.

*But— I'm different now*. None other than Naoto, the unquestionable genius and hero that he is, her ideal self that she had always yearned for—had asserted with full confidence— *That I should believe in myself.*

*The image of a hero that I've kept in my heart since childhood is going out of his way to assure me of that.*

*—Perfect*. Marie smiled ferociously. *For now—just this once, I'll take his word as collateral and show him that I can enter the world that he sees just as easily as he's asking me to—!*

"—Four, in... Three, out—" Marie muttered as she submerged herself in absolute focus through a breathing exercise.

What she was aiming for was the focus she was able to achieve for just a split moment when she was connecting Halter's brain pod to the Black Tortoise. The domain that she had once stepped foot in, a place where she could undoubtedly grasp an entire grid —!

“Three, in. Two, out. Two, in. One—”

—As she closed her eyes, the external sounds around her faded from her consciousness. By erasing all extraneous noise from her mind, everything became clear. ...Fully immersed in her own mind, she apprehended a vivid image with her inner eye.

—What was before her was a deep cavern. It was a dark, unfathomable place with a gate that had been broken open and just left to settle. On the broken door was an engraved warning from a certain classic epic.

“—Abandon hope all ye who enter here.”

*I see.* Marie chuckled bitterly as she became sure of it: The literal hell that lies beyond this gate—is the world that Naoto sees.

*“—Abandon hope.” Hope, you say?* Marie smiled. *Forget abandoning it, I already **lost** that unreliable gift ages ago. In that case—I’ll replace my hope with the “greed” and “pride” that’ll allow me to pierce the veil and bring light to this world.*

*Just those two “deadly sins” are more than enough for me to dive into the hell that awaits me—!*

And so, Marie began to take a step forward. However, just before her foot could land, the meager amount of reason that she still possessed within her warned: “If you dive into this world you’ll never be able to return.”

*—I’m prepared for that. But, is this really—the world that Naoto showed me—?* That slight hesitation broke her concentration, causing her to open her eyes and nervously look around. Upon which—she found that Naoto had already begun to work.

He began as usual by staring into space as he strained his ears. Then, slowly but surely, he began moving his hands without hesitation. What she saw—was a right and proper clocksmith. And so

she became certain— *Naoto transformed.*

*His hands aren't as fast as mine. His work isn't as polished as a Meister's either. He picks up the wrong tool from time to time as well, but—because he doesn't hesitate for even a single instant when deciding which parts he should adjust, in the end he's working much faster than a newly certified Meister.*

Marie corrected herself— *Actually, he hasn't undergone any transformation at all— That,* ***that*** *is his true form.* ***That's*** *the reason I unconsciously detested him. Because, he's a bona fide...!*

*"—Amateur"? As if. You're a bona fide genius, Naoto—I know that better than anyone else... Tch...*

Marie felt the fire in her heart crackle and swell as it roared into a hellfire that could burn everything to ash. *—I'm gonna catch up to that! To that end, I'll do whatever it takes no matter where it leads me...!!*

As she became immersed in her own mind once more, she saw the cavern before her once again. Her world should have become silent again along with that—however...

"...Say, Marie." A vivid voice resounded inside her mind. Squinting her eyes against the darkness, she saw Naoto slowly turn around to face her. He was standing firmly deep, deep inside the cavern—hell.

"—What are you acting scared for?" Naoto extended his hand towards her teasingly.

Marie flared in red-hot anger. "—Don't get cocky, punk. Keep your hands to yourself— Don't worry, I'll catch up and send you a flying kick right this minute—!!" Marie howled in rage as she broke into a vigorous dash— She ran after the figure of her admiration at full speed.

And so, she dashed straight into hell— The instant she stepped foot inside the cavern—time stopped.

*Ah, I see. Indeed, I've felt this before. Whenever I was fully immersed in repairs or focused to the max on something, this is how I felt.*

*The feeling of being a fish swimming freely in a dream, of my consciousness being expanded limitlessly towards omnipotence —this much is familiar to me already.*

However, as Marie opened her eyes to reality—the world looked completely different to her, everything had changed. Looking up, she saw a set of gears chugging along just as usual—however, she could now see their force, their movement, their flow, their directions—as a jumble of wind and color.

She could see things she shouldn't be able to see as wind.

She could sense things she shouldn't be able to sense as color.

What Marie saw as color was most likely what Naoto heard as sound. Naoto perceived the vast amount of information that constantly assaulted his brain—through synesthesia. So too was a vast amount of information now assaulting Marie's brain, drowning her in a sense of euphoria.

The relationship of the parts were as wind and the laws of binding physics, color. Stirred by this extraordinary sense of omnipotence, Marie thought aloud, "—Man, so I really was a genius after all."

Suddenly, Marie recalled the despair and the absurd delusion she had filled her mind with in Akihabara. *Ahh, looks like there's hope for me yet,* Marie sneered internally as she picked up a tool with her hand.

*—Turns out that the false impression, no, the sense I got that*

*"everything is an illusion"* ***—was right.*** *Everything I saw back then was wrong.*

*Or perhaps it'd be more accurate to say that I could only see the surface of the world, just as the inside of a movement normally isn't visible due to its casing. Indeed, I've cleared away the veil.* ***This*** *is what the world looks like after you peel away its outer membrane.*

Marie, who had abandoned all her assumptions of the world, was now certain—

*Whether it's the "irregularity" of Naoto being able to grasp the structures of not only core towers, but even the Pillar of Heaven…*

*Or the "irregularity" of Vermouth being able to fight so well in that thing that shouldn't have functioned as an artificial body…*

*Or even the "irregularity" of me being able to successfully link Halter's brain to a heavily-armored automaton…*

*Actually, that's not all… Now that I've cleared away my assumptions—everything that I have simply accepted to be true up till now…*

*I can see that everything—* ***everything*** *in the world is both "irregular" and "normal."*

*Non-contact coupled movements? Nanogears? Clockwork AI that's capable of replicating human thought? Everything, absolutely everything, is "irregular."* ***—According to common sense, such things couldn't possibly exist…!***

*Most likely, the people who fathomed the principles behind such things did so subconsciously, or perhaps they created those*

*things by dipping their fingertips inside the "interior of the world." With the same view that I'm now seeing, they made the impossible possible through their own ability—* ***and fabricated the explaining theories after the fact.***

*All theories, sciences, and technologies work like that.*

*First there's a replicable result, then comes the theory that humans try to forcefully frame it with to explain it.*

*Once a phenomenon is understood, it becomes obvious—so there's something that can't be explained with our current theories? So what? That's nothing new.*

*—The Earth used to be flat.*

*After observing the stars, formulating equations, and creating the field of astronomy, people came to understand that the Earth was in fact a globe. They came to know that it was not the sun that revolved subserviently around the Earth but the other way around—so then, what was reality like before those facts were proven?*

*Was the Earth flat? Were we the center of the universe?*

*—No way, reality's been the same all along.*

*And yet, throughout history, our world has constantly been "remade" by none other than—we humans ourselves, through our human perspective—!!*

*Due to the work of someone who was juuust a bit of a madman, just a little bit ahead of his time, the Earth was remade once more, this time with gears. That was something that happened a thousand years ago…*

*However, does that really mean* ***—that the Earth wasn't a***

***clockwork contraption*** *before that?* Marie smiled. *Thanks to my newfound senses, I'm beginning to doubt even that.*

*"Y" is supposed to have said— "I'll show you all our world reproduced with gears." In that case,* Marie thought as she gazed at the whirling, colorful scenery around her once more. *—Would this not be the true form, then—of the interior of the world?*

Marie moved her hands. She sharpened her focus and invoked an image in her mind. Her accelerated thoughts wrung out the knowledge she was seeking from the vast amount of compressed information that her senses were feeding her. What she could do —was aligned with what she knew she should do.

"See? There's no way that you can't do something I can. Ain't that right?" Naoto said in a lively voice. He had sensed Marie's transformation from the sound and aura coming from her.

"—No duh...! Who do you think I am? I'm Marie—a genius who makes the impossible possible. I'm a god! The woman who'll have you completely beat out and crushed one day!"

*—Yes, I know. I can only see what I'm seeing right now because Naoto's showing it to me. However, I'll definitely show you that I can find my way back now that I know the feeling...!*

Then, as the two of them let their instincts and intuitions take over, they exchanged smiles, after which—Marie began a performance that exceeded the limits of human reason. Any explaining theory would have to wait until after the fact.

•

AnchoR stood at the edge of Ueno Grid, she was looking down at Akihabara Grid right below it. The enormous clockwork monster was reflected in her red, glistening eyes. She reached for the cube by her chest. Just as she grasped it— "Stop right there," someone called out to her from behind.

AnchoR didn't bother turning around, after all, AnchoR didn't have to turn to know who it was and what she had come to do. Instead, she simply said in a firm voice, "...Don't stop me, Big Sis."

"No," her elder sister—RyuZU—answered, "I will stop you, because Master Naoto asked me to."

"...Father said, that AnchoR can do what she wants... yes?"

"Acting freely and acting selfishly are two entirely different things. If a child mistakes the two, then it falls to the parent to scold and correct her. You are making that very mistake right now, AnchoR."

AnchoR slowly turned around. "Then... in that case... what else can I do?"

RyuZU didn't answer. However, AnchoR continued anyways. "...If I don't destroy **that** , everyone will die. AnchoR's the only one who can do something... Besides, AnchoR... can't do anything but destroy. I'm different from Big Sis..."



RyuZU took those words head-on. Lowering her gaze ever so slightly, the gazes of the topaz and ruby eyes met. Taking in a breath, RyuZU said, “That’s where you are wrong—AnchoR.”

“…Huh?” AnchoR’s eyes widened. *What’s Big Sis saying? Destroying is all AnchoR can do—I was the only one specialized for battle among us sisters.*

RyuZU took a step towards AnchoR and bent slightly forward to get a better look at her face. “I shall repeat myself as many times as necessary. You were not made for such a reason. What ‘Y’ had expected from you is not such a base, simple thing.”

“……”

As AnchoR stood rigidly in confoundment, RyuZU reached her arms around AnchoR and gently hugged her. “—As ‘AnchoR,’ the one who received the decree to serve as ‘the one who destroys,’ you are surely the strongest in terms of power.”

“…Yeah, that’s why… AnchoR can only des—”

“That is exactly what you are misunderstanding—both why you were expected to serve as ‘the one who destroys’ and why you were given the name ‘AnchoR.’”

“Why… AnchoR was…?” AnchoR muttered.

RyuZU slowly pulled away and tenderly patted AnchoR’s head. “However.” She smiled bitterly. “Your feelings are not in the wrong. That is why—I will not stop you.”

“Big Sis…?” *I don’t understand—what is Big Sis trying to say? What is AnchoR misunderstanding? What is the right thing for me, for AnchoR to do?*

As AnchoR became confused, RyuZU added, “Your feelings are

right and something to be praised. However, what I am saying is that you ought to believe in Master Naoto—and Mistress Marie, as well I suppose, but only as a footnote."

She paused for a breath.

"—Wait until things truly cannot wait any longer."

•

Watching as the boy and the girl demonstrated a divine feat that surpassed the limits of human reason before his very eyes, Vermouth quietly muttered, "Hey gramps… you're a Meister too, right?"

The voice of an old man answered from the same mouth as the one that had asked the question. "…Yes. Technically you could say that."

"Mind telling me one thing then? —Is that what a Meister is supposed to be? 'Cuz, if that's the case, and this is coming from someone who gave up everything human about him except his brain mind you, they are far less human than…" Vermouth couldn't bring himself to complete the sentence.

As Vermouth began to feel a sinking terror, Konrad said, "With due respect, Mr. Vermouth—those who would proudly call themselves Meisters before those two would only embarrass themselves."

*—Humans do have limits. They say "Human potential is limitless." —But wax poetic as one might, reality won't budge one bit.*

Konrad had seen many promising, talented young people in his time.

*They all certainly brimmed with intelligence. They would*

*pick things up as a sponge does water and master them, making them their own. By inheriting the accumulated learnings of those who had come before them, they were able to advance into territory that no man had yet to reach in his lifetime.*

*However—even so, they too would eventually reach a wall somewhere along the way.*

Frustration, complacency, satisfaction, overconfidence, loss of motivation—Konrad knew well that it would be simply too unreasonable to dismiss those reasons for people ending their self-improvement. It was simply human nature. It was the result of being spoiled by the taste of earlier success.

*Because that's what humans are. Thinking men always hit a wall somewhere. Despite having limitless potential, humans will seal away their possibilities somewhere along the line. Because if they didn't, they'd be crushed by that very same potential. They'd end up destroying themselves, even. Because they'd go mad.*

*—However, Marie has already transcended such human fragility,* Konrad thought. *She'd never crack. Never fold. Despite suffering many defeats along the way, she has always continued to move forward—and by doing so, she has now already reached a place that could be called the very peak of this world.*

At the very least, that was how it looked to Konrad. And that is precisely why the sight before his eyes baffled him—that small girl had willingly broken her own back by abandoning everything she knew. She'd wrung all the water out of her sponge and decided that she would advance forward no matter what.

—She'd given everything to chase after the boy who occupied that territory unknown to Konrad—no, it was territory that was most likely unknown to all who lived on this planet.

"...Dr. Marie, just how far do you plan to go I wonder..." Konrad muttered with admiration in his eyes, as if he were looking at something far away in the distance.

Vermouth sighed. "...How should I put it. Seeing something like this firsthand makes me want to challenge the dream that I had almost forgotten once more— They say that boys'll always be boys no matter how old... Is that why I feel this way? What do you think gramps?"

"Hmm... I see what you're saying... To be taught something by a youngling at this advanced age, I guess I still have a long way to go. Thinking about things from that perspective, I cannot help but feel excited. Even now, I am wondering what I will become capable of making in the future."

Hearing that bright voice, Vermouth laughed bitterly. "Yeah, I'm expecting lots from you, old man. Make me the best Dutch wife ever." He paused for a breath. "And this time—one that's truly on the level of little miss Y-Series."

Konrad didn't show any displeasure at being teased. Instead, he simply asked curiously, "...Hmm? Do those words mean that you can sense **it?** "

"Nah. I'm just someone who's been able to survive this long solely on my gut instincts alone."

Looking down at his own artificial body—more precisely, the body of the love automaton that Konrad had made—Vermouth continued, "I simply can't imagine that someone like you, someone who did such a thorough job on a mere love automaton—wouldn't feel anything after seeing automata like that."

"Well... it's not really a big deal. I myself had forgotten about it after all," Konrad said in a reminiscent voice. "—It's a story from when I was in my twenties."

“Now *that’s* gotta be some ancient history.”

“Back then, there was a greenhorn who had gotten carried away with hogging the label of genius all to himself. He was being fussed over as the youngest Meister in history, you see.”

“Oh, are you talking about yourself?”

“It’s great that you can read between the lines. Well anyhow, that greenhorn was summoned back to his homeland one day where he received a request directly from the incumbent queen at the time. Something to do with an automaton that the royal family had always kept hidden away that wouldn’t operate—if I recall correctly, the engraving on her neck… read ‘Y. [BezEL]’ ?”

“__”

Vermouth sank into silence as Konrad continued with a bitter laugh, “He couldn’t believe it. The equipment that was available back then—nearly half a century ago—certainly wasn’t as advanced as the equipment today, but seeing the terrifying, awe-inspiring, godly piece of art that was like an entire core tower compacted into an automaton the size of a girl—that greenhorn’s pride couldn’t help but be smashed to pieces. And so he swore… One day, he would definitely create an automaton to surpass that one.”

“…Is that why you’ve worked as a clocksmith all these years?”

“Hardly.” Konrad laughed bitterly. “I said that I had forgotten about it, remember? Well, surprisingly enough, it might have still been stuck deep in my heart somewhere, but… ‘To challenge the Initial-Y Series once more,’ hmm? …It’s not a bad dream.”

“Sure, why not. Rechallenging a dream from your younger days, right? People do that all the time—it’s called a bucket list.” Vermouth laughed, his shoulders shaking uncontrollably.

However—he soon turned serious as he found himself looking at the clock on the wall. “Leaving that aside… Forget surpassing the limits of humans, it looks to me like they’ve even surpassed the limits of gods… what do you think, Gramps?”

“Yes, indeed… however, even at this pace—it’s still a fifty-fifty chance whether they’ll make it in time.”

The clock indicated that there were less than three minutes left. Naoto and Marie had shrunk the work that would have normally taken dozens of clocksmiths an hour to do down to thirty seconds.

*However—will they really be able to make a new bypass for the Pillar of Heaven when it’s been damaged so severely?*

Konrad wondered.

*That is work that would take at least a month even with ten dozen clocksmiths working on it. And they mean to do so—in just a hundred and eighty seconds? It should go without saying, but —should they accomplish this, it would be a feat that surpasses even divine work.*

•

—The prescribed time came. The seventy-two minutes that Naoto had requested were just about up.

“It can’t wait any longer,” AnchoR said as she stood up. “… Well Big Sis… AnchoR’ll be going now…”

AnchoR touched the swaying cube by her chest. With a creak, the gate to AnchoR’s armory appeared out of thin air. Reaching in, AnchoR dragged something out of it, but it wasn’t a weapon—it was a teddy bear. It was the one that Naoto had bought for her two days ago.

Pulling off the ring on the middle finger of her right hand, AnchoR handed it to RyuZU along with the bear. “AnchoR… doesn’t want these to be dirtied or broken, so… hold on to them please…”

“…I shall keep them safe.” Receiving the ring and the bear from AnchoR, RyuZU continued, “AnchoR, if you were truly serious, I think you could move even faster than myself under the effects of Mute Scream. You could still stand to wait until at least seventy-one minutes and fifty-nine seconds have—”

“Sorry, Big Sis… AnchoR won’t wait that long,” AnchoR immediately replied with a shake of her head. “AnchoR has fulfilled Father’s request… so… it’s fine now. AnchoR will put an end to everything, so Father and everyone else can rest easy—”

AnchoR turned around and looked down below—at the target awaiting her in Akihabara. The sinister, enormous thing—that was trying to kill the ones she loves.

As she stared down at the thing which she had decided to thoroughly, mercilessly destroy— AnchoR took a deep breath. She once again touched the cube dangling by her chest.

As the spring unwound, all of the energy that her Perpetual Gear had stored up till now was converted into kinetic energy.

“AnchoR,” her elder sister called her name from behind.

However, AnchoR didn’t turn around, she took a step forward instead—towards the battlefield—so that she could fulfill her purpose…

“AnchoR,” her elder sister repeated before continuing in her usual elegant voice. “—When you return, I imagine that Master Naoto will educate you on the side of yourself that you are not aware of. So, while I will not tell you to play it safe…”

The elder sister she was so proud of continued in a dignified

voice, “All the same—come back in one piece. And, if you do not intend to do so—” RyuZU paused for a breath. “—I will bring you back with me right now. Even if I have to punish you a little.”

AnchoR bent her lips into a sorrowful frown. “...Sorry... but AnchoR’s too strong for Big Sis to stop.”

“Oh? I wonder about that. It is true that you are my proud younger sister, but it seems that you are getting a little carried away, perhaps some *reeducation* is in order...”

“———”

“—Past, present, or future, there is not a single automaton anywhere in the universe that surpasses me—nor has there ever been a younger sister anywhere—that surpasses her big sister.”

“Hehe,” —AnchoR chuckled and nodded. Immediately after, she kicked off from her perch, and leapt down towards the magnetized Akihabara Grid that lay 1,500 meters below...

As the intense wind caused her hair and clothes to flutter, the girl in red and white continued to fall. Opening her mouth slightly, she declared in a tone different from her usual stuttering. She was more composed, mechanical:

“Definition Proclamation—the Fourth of the Initial-Y Series, AnchoR, the One Who Destroys.”

Announcing her transformation, she confirmed her status.

(Condition check—all green. All mechanisms are operating normally under the First Balance Wheel of Differences.)

(All armaments are in working order. All conditions for running at full throttle cleared—limiter released.)

(Warning—Power Reservoir—is only 6.1% charged. Calculating projected run time... Calculations complete.)

(At full throttle mode with the Twelfth Balance Wheel of Differences, the maximum run time will be 3.2 seconds from your own frame of reference— Do you still wish to proceed?)

—AnchoR ignored the warning...

"Inherent ability— 'Power Reserver' ...Initiating transformational sequence."

...and declared mutiny. In other words, AnchoR declared that from this moment forward—she would violate the laws of physics.

At the same time, she visually confirmed the distance to her target—the mobile composite electromagnetic assault weapon, Yatsukahagi. It spanned 320 meters in height and 932 meters in length.

(Heat source detected from its central actuators. Use of electromagnetic technology confirmed.)

For an instant, AnchoR felt someone laughing from somewhere deep within herself, but at the same time, far far away from her own consciousness. *—Good grief, that's as far as they've gotten in a thousand years?* As AnchoR puzzled over what the voice inside her was, her combat algorithms analyzed the target in her sight.

(Enemy armaments: electromagnetic pulse radiation, railgun, maser cannon.)

(Equipping phased array radar and infrared sight. You are currently within the enemy's firing range.)

(The target utilizes a magnetic shield for its plating. Judging by the fact that it repelled the First's scythes, it is estimated that necessary force to neutralize it will require running on the Eleventh Balance Wheel of Differences at minimum.)

“—Enemy threat level, classification: ‘Black’ —Initiating Shift to the Thirteenth Balance Wheel of Differences”

Immediately after, the girl’s body flared up. As the laws of physics were contradicted, the air grated and friction was born.

“—Beginning transformation… Shifting to the Second Balance Wheel of Differences.”

The disk that had been inactive inside AnchoR—the automaton in the Initial-Y Series designed for combat—began to turn. The mechanism resembled a clock. Its clockhand jumped to where “II” was engraved, then “III.”

“—Shifting to the Third Wheel— ‘Bloody Murder’ can now be activated.”

At the same time, the girl’s glossy black hair spread out in an arc behind her as it was stained blood-red. Her pure white armor turned black and swelled as it was enveloped by an ominous web of red lines.

“—Shifting to the Fourth Wheel—the Fifth—Sixth, Seventh, Eighth—”

Her transformation accelerated. She could feel time being broken, creaking as it was distorted by the violent heat emanating from her body. Each time she shifted gears, the time in her frame of reference was stretched longer in a square function.

“Ninth, Tenth, Eleventh—”

As she felt the clockhand within her nearly make its way full circle, AnchoR resolved herself—to execute the “alternative method” that she had informed her master of a few days ago.

When AnchoR runs on high output, her available armaments become extremely limited, but the same is also true for the enemy —either way, it was not a problem, as she didn’t have any other

means available to her, or the time for them even if she did.

"—Shifting to the Twelfth Wheel— Deploying armaments LB01, BC08 from the armory."

The cube by her chest twisted. Immediately after, a sword of gears longer than her own height materialized in the grasp of her right hand. At the same time, eight floating orbs emerged from behind her and followed her movements to a tee.

**...Then, the girl's chest blossomed.** The clothes covering her chest unraveled as her artificial skin tore asunder, her ribs forming into a vessel in her disheveled state. The twisting cube continued to accelerate without restraint to a speed that was extremely close to that of light as it slipped into the recesses of the girl's vessel along with all of its infinite heat.

"—Removing precautionary limits by my own will."

Inside her body, the clockhand that had been pointing to "XII" violently trembled as if to resist. The clockhand twisted and turned, shaking as it ran out of control. Finally, as countless cracks formed along its surface—it broke.

And at that instant AnchoR knew— *Today's the day that I wake up from my eternal dream.*

**"Shifting to the Thirteenth Balance Wheel of Differences— Starting self-destruct mode."**

Eternity burst into flames and within those flames, the girl was reborn as a woman. Her limbs grew, as did her hair which harbored an enormous amount of heat as it flowed down her back like a waterfall. As her armor melted away, a gorgeously pink, velvety dress wrapped around her freshly reformed nubile limbs.

"Chrono Hook— Initiating output of imaginary power by means of the Perpetual Gear. Materializing."

Then, inside the world that had turned still, the beautiful young woman declared a second set of apocalyptic words of which, of all the Initial-Y Series automata, only she could say:

**“——‘Still Weight’——”**

She said it in the tone of an obituary that she had written for herself—her final farewell. The sound of her Perpetual Gear—the material manifestation of eternity coming apart sounded—and yet, at the same time it was still continuing to turn.

Reality repudiated the fantasy of an eternal girl, forcing her to awake from her dream. But what that awakening demonstrated was one simple fact. Namely, the absurd truth that, in exchange for her own demise—there was nothing in the entire universe that the Trishula could not destroy.

—It was simple really.

Unlike the First, who manipulated time by entering into imaginary time, the Fourth wrenched open a rift in time by letting her infinite heat do the work— Just now, AnchoR had cut all the power she was using to protect herself from the friction, inertia, gravity, and recoil which resulted from that—and raised her output to levels that would cause even her own body to disintegrate.

Just that was enough for her to continue to run at maximum output—just as the name Perpetual Gear implies.

—Perpetually… until the moment her body—her frame and all her parts—break apart as they reach their limit.

Leaving behind the contradictory sound of a symphony of demise that Perpetuity was playing—the beauty revolting against the universe tore apart the chains of physics and compressed the world around her as she dived through the air.

•

AnchoR charged forward inside the compressed world.

Normally, the eight floating orbs behind her functioned as small autonomous support units; however, AnchoR had them resonate with her Perpetual Gear which was raising their output so high that they began to volatilize. Under its influence, the muzzles of the eight orbs became a pseudo-booster spouting out invisible flames.

With the help of those eight powerful sources of propulsion, AnchoR accelerated. She charged towards the target at a speed unperceivable to machines, much less humans, as she entered effective range.

AnchoR was holding her giant sword with both hands before her as the edge of its blade lined with molecular gears began turning at an ultra-high speed.

Normally, those gears would be able to shred through anything regardless of how hard the object was, however, inside time that was nearly perfectly still—this little crevice between zero and one second—the gears weren't able to synchronize. If she forced them to do so anyway, they would instantaneously vaporize like the orbs she was using as boosters.

That was why— **AnchoR raised her sword, took her aim, and swung with all her might.** Relying on the endurance of her sword, her invisibly fast swing, and the natural laws of physics...

*—Go through— Nggggghhhha!*

"—!" With a grinding sound, the blade went through...

—No. My apologies, sound does not actually propagate inside this space— Thus, AnchoR relied on the pressure against her hands for feedback as she continued her attack.

Pointing her eight orbs towards the site of the incision—AnchoR "threw" them, and blazing forth, the orbs crashed into the incision point at a speed faster than even that of light.

The orbs released an enormous amount of energy as they did so, and disintegrating upon impact, their heat tore off the electromagnetic coating on the massive weapon's plating, vaporizing it.

With that, a hole large enough for someone to pass through finally opened, and AnchoR charged inside. Storming into the interior of the Yatsukahagi with considerable momentum behind her —*Ngh…!* —She crash landed as about twelve of the thirty-plus shock absorbers throughout her body broke.

As she felt her frame scream from all the fine parts throughout her body getting crushed— *My gyro-correctional control system —is still fine… That's good enough!* AnchoR paid no mind to the damage. Standing back up, she dashed—or rather, glided—through the insides of the Yatsukahagi, and shaking off the fetters of gravity, she leapt and even "landed" on **the wall** as she continued to glide.

—The instant she arrived at her first objective, her right foot broke from the immense heat-strain and impact of stopping. Her frame twisted as her shock absorbers burst in two.

—Various parts throughout her body were now melting away despite having had no trouble withstanding the heat from when she had demagnetized herself. By now, AnchoR was emanating heat far greater than any of the Curie temperatures of the parts in her body.

However, she ignored that as well. With her eyes on the barrier wall she was rapidly closing in on, AnchoR swung her giant sword. The slash that tore through spacetime itself instantly turned the barrier into plasma, vaporizing it. Before the plasma could scatter, AnchoR accelerated even further by kicking off against the wall as—again, she sensed her foot being damaged—

but ignored it all the same.

Inside the room in which she had arrived—she found 31 of the 1,033 coils that Naoto had mentioned. They were enormous cylinders made of spirals of fine coils producing a vast amount of electromagnetic energy.

*...ah ....aaaaAAAaaAAAAAAAAahhh!!* Letting out a soundless battle cry, AnchoR shook off the pain signals coming from the linked mechanisms in her arms—and mowed through everything in the room in a single strike.

"———"

The only human inside the weapon—the one and only organic heat source—didn't move a single bit. Rather, he couldn't move—he probably couldn't even perceive what was happening.

While inside Still Weight, AnchoR had no way of measuring the difference between the time outside and the time within her immediate vicinity. However, not even 0.24 second has passed—from the moment she severed the plating and charged inside, to now, when 809 coils had already been destroyed.

It would still take more than 0.3 tenths of a second for the first impact to propagate, Gennai's brain to perceive it, and for him to become aware of the signals of the shockwave passing throughout the nerves of his body.

"———"

AnchoR took yet another step forward—each time she did so, her manipulator took on further fatally irreversible damage. And just the same, with each and every other step—the heat from the impact caused yet another layer of her actuator to melt away.

Even so, AnchoR continued to swing her giant sword until her right arm was torn off from the recoil. It flew off from the elbow

down along with her giant sword and landed still clinging to the weapon's handle in the opposite direction of her swing. The blade had lodged itself in the wall to her side at a speed which exceeded even the enormous weapon's railgun.

However, AnchoR merely offhandedly removed her severed right hand from the handle of the blade and dislodged the sword with her remaining left—

*...Hah——AH, Aaaah—AAAAaaaaaaaaaaAAAAAAAAAHHH—!!*

—And swung again with all her might once more.

Explosions burst forth as space itself was torn. Due to the impact powerful enough to rip a hole through time, matter disappeared as a rift was formed. The marks of destruction rippled outward as heat and pressure washed away the wall along with everything else in the room behind it like a cleansing storm.

Light was generated from the intense heat as the impact invoked a frozen roar. Unable to withstand the backlash, AnchoR found herself slammed against the wall behind her. As the shockwave's vibrations scorched the sealed space around her, AnchoR realized that her gyro was so beat up that it couldn't even absorb that anymore.

—However, even so. AnchoR advanced to the next room like a revenant...

"———"

*...It hurts... so... much...* Her mental endurance had finally reached its limit.

She had been operating at a truly unobservable speed while all the while cleaving open the enormous weapon's plating at a speed faster than that of light. And she hadn't stopped there, nearly si-

multaneously, mere instants later, she was plowing through the interior of the weapon while mowing down everything in sight.

Upon destroying the 932nd coil, she finally began to feel her own demise coming on. Her gyro had already melted away. Her left leg had completely ceased functioning from the knee down, her right forearm had torn off earlier, and even the giant sword that had made an astonishing display of endurance had just now vaporized.

Her thought processors were in shambles. Her failed mechanisms had been squashed by the natural laws of the universe. AnchoR had lost practically all of her mobility; but even so, as she arrived at her goal—

***"Ah—AaaaaaaaAAAAAAaaAAAAHHH!!"***

She soundlessly screamed her defiance as she bashed the door with her remaining fist. Her powerful punch pierced through the door with a force that caused several coils in the room behind it to explode.

As the broken pieces paid their dues to gravity, she perceived her own scream and the noise of the destruction...

...And with that she came to realize—that she was no longer moving faster than real time.

*...It hurts, it hurts, it hurts, it hurts, it hurts, it hurts———so much... aggghhhhh! —Father, Mother, Big Sis, please, save me! I don't want to—* AnchoR's survival instinct cried out in a moment of weakness before her reason could check it. However, before she could waste time feeling ashamed, her reason rallied and prioritized coolly analyzing the situation.

*There's no longer any difference between my own temporal reference frame and that of my surroundings. In that case—how many seconds has it been since I began the attack? Or has it*

*been minutes by now?*

*There are still power coils that I haven't destroyed yet, and I have no idea just how many power coils I have to destroy for this weapon to stop—but if I want to be a hundred percent sure, I have to destroy them all—or else—everyone'll—*

"——ah——ah…aghhh." Not even her vocalizer was working at this point—she was near her limit. However, with neither the time nor the luxury to worry or hesitate, AnchoR crept along the floor towards the heat sources that were the remaining power coils.

Though it should be rather obvious—this was the first time that AnchoR had ever used Still Weight—a maneuver of demise. It was something that allowed her to fight with force to spare even when she had nearly zero power left. When push came to shove—it was literally her last resort.

—There was no way to actually know how many seconds she could stay in that mode upon activation. However, her understanding as a combat unit was telling her that despite it all, the current state of affairs was still preferable to the alternative.

That by operating in the Thirteenth Wheel, she had been able to do 18.2 times the damage she would have been able to otherwise. And that had she stayed at the Twelfth Wheel—she would have run out of power after only destroying the outer plating of the weapon.

However, AnchoR's heart fiercely howled— *None of that matters! …If I can't even destroy something like this… then… why, was I, even—ngh!!* She swung her fist as she lamented and felt her remaining arm being crushed. But in return, everything in her sight followed suit.

*—This isn't good enough! Even though you made respecting my free will the requirement for my Master Confirmation, if you*

*didn't even make me strong enough to protect those who would try to give it to me—then why, did you... e,ven... make... me?!*

*—Tell, me... why...*

AnchoR cursed her own creator as she continued to advance, even as the voice inside her heart screamed. She had lost both her arms at this point. Her left leg had melted and her remaining right leg was straggling. The total number of nuclear power reactors she had destroyed—was 1,008.

*.....just... twenty-five... more...*

—It was impossible. With all the power she had expended during Still Weight, opening up her armory now would be difficult.

Even if she could produce a weapon from her armory—she had no arms left to wield it with.

Nearly all her sensory mechanisms were malfunctioning— As noise mixed in with her distorted sight— *—?!* —Her infrared sensors that had barely survived her rampage picked up a massive heat source...

She was certain that she had just seen a clump of concentrated heat in an area around two hundred meters from where she was. Her mind quickly abandoned its despair as it reverted to a stoic, calculating, weapon.

*Assuming that the main cannon of this weapon fires by concentrating the energy generated by the coils in one place... If I destroy that concentrated heat source, I'll definitely at least be able to stop it from firing—!*

***—Brea, k!!*** AnchoR prayed through clenched teeth as she mercilessly pumped the full output of her Perpetual Gear under the Thirteenth Wheel into her half-broken right leg. She didn't worry about her landing. Like a cannonball, the only thing on her

mind was breaking through the wall before her.

As she launched herself—AnchoR realized something. The heat source in her sight had become completely still. In other words—her personal frame of time was expanding again as it pulled away from its surroundings once more.

—*This will probably be the last thing I ever do,* she thought as she let out a smile. With her remaining right leg, AnchoR accelerated through the gap in time.

—Her broken body flared up from the friction against space itself. Confirming that her body temperature had risen once again —she felt relieved. —*I was able to accelerate. Even after all I've put my body through, it's still listening to me.*

...This last spurt of hers was surely like how the light from a candle will conspicuously flicker before it burns out...

Her remaining right foot melted off from the impact of kicking a hole through spacetime, but her expanded consciousness perceived the wall as strangely far away somehow—as she collided with it.

Just like a cannonball indeed, AnchoR pierced right through the wall with her scorching heat and into the block behind it. However, she then became disoriented and lost control over her speed, as she helplessly crashed into the wall on the other end of the room.

Like a puppet that had had its strings cut, she dropped to the floor with enough force to bounce back up a little, but ultimately, her body fell prone...

Even so— *Not... yet...* Even after losing all her limbs, AnchoR still continued to function. Creaks sounded as she stiffly raised her neck to look at what was around her.

—She was inside a small hall that was reminiscent of a temple or a church. In the middle of this area buried in gears of various shapes and sizes, the floor bulged up greatly, forming a dome.

What was enshrined there was an enormous crystal cylinder made up of countless shafts, bearings, and spheres—its glass coils tracing a spiral that had the god of lightning imprisoned inside.

*...If, I... destroy, that...*

Rallying all of her remaining will, AnchoR began to move. She inched her way forward by jerking her torso pitifully like a slug.

*—It hurts. It hurts it hurts it hurtshurtshurtshurtshurts—*

As her thoughts were scrambled by the pain coming from her broken sensory mechanisms, anguish jarred her entire body. In agony, her mind came to focus on a single question:

*Why does an automaton like me—one made for combat no less—need a sense of pain...?*

And just as she asked herself that unhelpful question—

**—A shock ran through AnchoR's entire body as a hole bore through her.**

"...How unsightly. To think that you're supposed to be one of 'Y"s masterpieces, have you no shame?" The voice of an old man sounded from above her head.

*It's Gennai Hirayama* — She recognized with her hazy consciousness. However, at this point, she couldn't even turn to face him with her near-ruined body.

"Or is it that... surprisingly enough, electromagnetic technol-

ogy works on 'Y''s dolls as well?"

*I can't move.*

*I can't move can't move can't move, (error), (hang-up), (error), (error), (error—)*

"Hmm. That might just be the case, considering that you couldn't make it in time—I've already finished inputting the command to fire the main cannon."

(———Error.)

"It'll fire momentarily— It's your group's loss."

"____"

Gennai looked down at the legacy of "Y" convulsing on the ground. "Now then... if you would excuse my cliché, I figured that something like this might happen, so—"

As he spoke, he held up the pistol in his right hand. It was not a regular mechanical gun; it was equipped with electrodes.

"This is a portable railgun that I prepared for you legacies of 'Y.' ...I never thought it would actually be effective though. I suppose this just goes to show that it's always a good idea to at least try and prepare what one can."

With that, Gennai took aim as AnchoR continued to spasm. The muzzle of his portable railgun was pointed right at her head.

—*Pwoosh*. The bullet accelerated forward at hypersonic speed —leaving its sound behind in its wake.

•

"Linkage complete! Marie!"

“I’m done here too! Everyone, prepare to evacuate! We’re going to activate the bypass!”

—At seventy-three minutes and fifty-two seconds, Naoto and Marie finished seizing control of a grid that neighbored Akihabara.

It wasn’t the work of gods, but the work of man that transcended human limits. They had managed to put together a new bypass in this short amount of time in spite of the Pillar of Heaven having already been so heavily damaged.

Even if a detailed schematic was available for reference, just grasping its structure would surely have taken a normal clocksmith more than a week. But even so—the time limit had simply been too merciless.

“Ain’t no need for preparations! Our only option’s to show our pursuers our fine asses and jump down that hole! Hell, wanna say hi on the way out? They’ve just dropped by to throw us a going away party!” Vermouth yelled sarcastically. As he spoke, he sprayed a volley of bullets over the barricade.

Before him were older models of mobile weapons and various other armaments that the military had gotten their hands on. They’d been closing in on him in waves.

*Houko spoke like she wasn’t really expecting anything of them—but it seems like there’re still some soldiers with a backbone in the remnants of Tokyo’s military after all.* Marie thought.

They were a mishmash of imperial guards and units from other grids that had rushed over. They hadn’t even been properly rallied when they had come charging in, when it had been fifty-minutes since Naoto and Marie began work on the new bypass.

Normally, sending your forces into battle one after the another

in waves is a huge mistake, but— Because RyuZU and AnchoR were absent, it had been a tough fight to hold the position with just Vermouth in his cyborg body and Halter in the Black Tortoise.

Really, the two of them ought to be praised for having successfully held the dogged intruders back up till now. However, Naoto was—actually, all of them were feeling apprehensive.

It was already past the time limit—it was already two minutes past the earliest possible time that Naoto had determined the main cannon of the enormous weapon could refire…

—Indeed, it should now be the "earliest" possible time, this was what Naoto had speculated with his ears, after all. It could be that the cannon would take more than eighty minutes to recharge itself—but it was just as likely that it would fire at any moment now.

But, there was something that made Naoto even more anxious than that— "Damn it—AnchoR, RyuZU… I'm begging you guys, please be safe…"

It was possible that the reason the main cannon hadn't fired was thanks to AnchoR or RyuZU's sacrifice—perhaps both of them had laid down their lives, Naoto had no way of knowing. *The only thing I can do is pray that this two-minute delay doesn't turn out to be the most expensive two minutes of my life…*

Meanwhile, Marie had been rushing to finish the final adjustments. As she continued to do so, she yelled to Houko, "Listen! I'm gonna raise the temperature of Akihabara Grid's base to 2,000 degrees Celsius and the immediate area of that weapon to thirty thousand degrees alright?!"

—*Am I insane?* Her own words scared her more than anything. *But to be honest, even a temperature like that still feels*

*questionable as to whether it would actually be enough to destroy that enormous weapon—* Shaking her head, Marie dispelled her doubts.

"—The temperature-regulating mechanisms around the enormous weapon have already been put on standby, so it'll only take a moment for them to release their heat, but— It'll take about thirty seconds to transfer enough heat to Akihabara Grid's mechanisms to demagnetize them! Houko, after thirty seconds have passed use this console to stop the process. With that, the bypass will be discarded and the temperature will begin dropping back down."

"Yes—I understand." Houko nodded.

"Oy, Marie! You're still not done?! Hurry the hell up!" Naoto yelled impatiently.

"I know! I'm starting it right now—" Marie yelled back, but just as she was about to press enter—She wavered.

*It's true—I've felt it—the feeling of knowing something I shouldn't be able to know. I cannot deny seeing something I that shouldn't have been able to see.*

*...I had accepted that I wasn't a born genius, so I resolved to become one anyway. However, despite my success; no, precisely because of it—I'm still merely human.*

*...And yet, right now, my finger is resting on a button that if pressed, might lead to the destruction of the world...*

*...Is this really gonna be alright? Could I have made a mistake somewhere? Was I presumptuous in thinking that I could pull this off?*

*This is the first time I have ever taken on a job like this one. I had to rely solely on my intuition. The mechanisms of this tower*

*were like no other I've seen.*

*We haven't even tested it—hell, it's more likely that something like this will fail than work.*

*And yet—am I really going to press this button? If this goes wrong, Tokyo will go down and with it the entire country.*

*Down the line, it'll inflict fatal damage to the planet itself.*

*I could end up being the greatest mass-murderer in all of history—that's the kind of weight my fingertip is resting on.*

Marie's teeth clattered. Her fingertips went numb. Her brain was scorched by nervous excitement. She couldn't collect her thoughts. It was so bad that she felt like she might faint at any moment.

*—There shouldn't have been any mistakes. It should be fine.* No matter how forcefully she tried to make herself believe that, the fearful doubt wouldn't leave her mind once it made its way in.

Then, a question suddenly popped up in her head.

*—What made the ones executing this coup d'etat pull the trigger on enacting their plan? What could it have been that thrust them toward taking such a precarious action, one that could destroy the entire world?*

"...Oy Marie, hurry up. What are you squirming for... Ah, need to pee?"

*—Ah... so that's it.*

"This is the second time you've shown disregard for your life. I swear I'm gonna beat you to death after this—grrrr!!"

*—It was anger.*

Marie furiously smashed the enter key with her fist, and, at that moment—the Pillar of Heaven rumbled as if it were deeply groaning. Marie stood up, no longer caring to worry over whether they had succeeded.

*This should work. Akihabara Grid should be able to withstand the heat. At the very least, this is how "Y" solved the problem of magnetized mechanisms—those two automata prove that. In that case, this should be fine! If it's good enough for "Y," then it's good enough for me!*

Turning around, Marie found Naoto playing with the computer in merry spirits. "Alright—! Well then, y'all're bein' a bit of a nuisance so back off a bit 'kay ♪"

*Tap*. A brisk, satisfying keystroke was heard. Immediately after, the atmosphere beyond the barricade bellowed, jolting everything around it with the force of an explosion.

The tempestuous, raging wind floored the units of Tokyo's military as it vortexed into a localized whirlwind inside the passageway, causing the walls to shake and rumble as it blasted against the wall.

—It was an ultra-small, limited version of a downburst.

Then, another tap sounded.

"Everyone! We're gonna escape—through the hole in the floor —woah!!" At that moment, a fierce updraft gushed up through the giant hole in the floor.

Seeing that violent wind, Halter said, "...Oy Naoto. How're we gonna escape... through the hole in the floor again?"

"We're gonna jump, of course."

"Do we have parachutes?"

“Nope—that’s why I generated that wind.” As Naoto stood at the edge of the abyss, he measured the updraft blowing through. “If we free fall from here, we should be able to ride the wind and descend all the way down—probably.”

“...Probably?”

“We’ll be fine, relax. It’s all about your attitude. Don’t give up hope, old man.”

“...Seriously? I mean, I guess I should have asked how we were gonna retreat beforehand, but—still, you’ve gotta be joking,” Halter groaned. If he were in his original artificial body, he would surely have slapped his hand onto his bald head and started rubbing it in exasperation.

It was about sixty kilometers from here to the ground. Not even Vermouth and Halter could possibly land unscathed with their mechanical bodies, much less Naoto and Marie with their bodies of flesh. However, Vermouth lightly patted Halter’s unit before leaping through the air.

“Well, I’ll be going ahead! GeronimoOoooOOooOOOoooOooooOo——!!”

The pitch of his yelling voice bent downwards due to the Doppler Effect as Halter’s visual sensors clearly captured the powerful updraft breaking Vermouth’s fall. He was descending towards the ground as if he were gliding on the wind.

Similarly, Naoto had been listening carefully to hear Vermouth’s descent. “Great, looks like it works. A’ight then, I’m up next! I. Can. Flyyyyyyy!!”

Watching Naoto go, Halter followed, seeming to have resigned himself. With an internal sigh, he leapt into the center of the wind tunnel.

The last one remaining, Marie, turned towards her dear friend. “Well then—I’ll leave the rest to you, Houko.”

“—Right. Rest assured, I will frame you guys as the most heinous criminals on Earth,” Houko answered with a smile.

*—This is probably our final farewell,* Marie thought. *She’s the princess of a country and I’m a nefarious terrorist—there’ll be no way for us to directly meet ever again.*

*From now on, the two of us will forever walk parallel paths from each other. I don’t regret my decision, but I do feel a little—* Just as Marie’s expression turned cloudy, Houko held up her left hand for Marie to see. On her wrist was a silver watch…

“＿＿”

Marie smiled and began her charge. As she passed Houko, who was still holding up her left hand, Marie loudly slapped the palm of her dear friend with her own—as she leapt into the air and down the hole.

It was right after that, that the military broke through the barricade and charged inside.


Marie

•

“Wha—” Gennai let out a short cry of astonishment. The bullet that had been accelerated to hypersonic speed by electricity—had been stopped dead in its tracks. Two sharp scythes had caught the bullet.

“Obeying orders faithfully is the duty of a follower—”

The girl in a formal black dress announced singingly, black scythes flashing as she spoke. Immediately after—Gennai’s right hand, the one that had been holding the gun, was severed.

“...but never the less, looking after one’s younger sister so that she doesn’t push herself too hard is the duty of an elder sister,” —RyuZU said as she gracefully curtsied.

Gennai’s twisted face laid bare his amazement. In single moment, he had lost a hand. His expression was not due to pain. “—Impossible... Why didn’t it fire—?!” Gennai violently yelled, the hatred apparent on his face.

“Because the scheduled firing of the main cannon never went through,” RyuZU answered with a smile. “—I came after my younger sister through the new entrance she opened up—and along the way, I destroyed, I think, around eighteen power coils.

“Judging from how unsightly your face appears right now—truly an expression fully worthy of being displayed in a museum with the title of ‘The Fool,’ it appears that my actions have undoubtedly thrown a wrench in your plans—just knowing that puts me above cloud nine.”

“...Big... Sis... Wh...y,” AnchoR called out in a feeble, distorted voice.

Lowering her gaze, RyuZU found AnchoR perforated and limbless, and knit her brows at the sight. She then exhaled—and

swung one of her scythes with a swish.

*Bam!* The back of the black scythe pounded AnchoR's head once. Immediately after, AnchoR stopped melting away as her body returned to the eternal dream of a young girl.

"……it hurts… Wah…Big, Sis… hit me…" AnchoR tearfully cried as she writhed with her beaten up body and sobbed.

AnchoR hadn't noticed her own transformation. She hadn't noticed that RyuZU's black scythe had severed The Thirteenth Balance Wheel of Differences that had been linked to her Perpetual Gear, either.

RyuZU had forcefully disengaged her Still Weight mode— And, if RyuZU's aim had been just a little off, AnchoR would have ceased to operate for all eternity.

So as not to let her younger sister realize the dangerous bridge that she had just crossed, RyuZU coolly replied, "—I do believe I said that I would punish you if you did not intend to come back, yes?"

"Ah……augh….uuuu…" AnchoR meekly moaned, looking guilty.

RyuZU sweetly smiled upon seeing that, but immediately returned to a serious expression.

Wheezing while holding his bleeding wrist, Gennai groaned, "…So I couldn't win in the end huh…ngh…"

"Against whom? You have not lost to anyone." A glint of scorn surfaced in RyuZU's topaz eyes as she gracefully, but sardonically, curtsied. "If you think that a loser who had defeated himself from the very beginning ever had a chance against Master Naoto… My, I fear that such a grave delusion would be enough to tempt me to *downsize* you until you are a little more *portable*. "

She paused for a breath. “—Normally, I would have activated Mute Scream to chase after AnchoR, but in this case, there were two reasons why I could not do so. And because of this, I have ended up in the predicament of having to suffer your vulgar gaze, for which I very much expect your deepest apology.”

Gennai remained still, as if he couldn’t move. However, RyuZU paid that no mind as she crouched down by AnchoR’s side.

“The first reason is that I would not have been able to bring AnchoR back.”

Once AnchoR is in Still Weight, not even RyuZU’s Mute Scream can catch up to her. However, as AnchoR continued to disintegrate, her speed gradually dropped. If at that time, RyuZU were to touch AnchoR from within Mute Scream, she could have ended up destroying AnchoR from the force of objects in different axes of time colliding with one another.

As such, though she wasn’t showing it on her face—RyuZU had chased after AnchoR at full force immediately after she had begun her decent. Though she had headed straight after her younger sister—it still took her quite a bit of time to catch up.

“—And,” RyuZU continued, “the second reason is that I simply could not bring myself to be so merciful as to let you die without you even realizing it ♪.” As RyuZU broke into a wide grin, she sensed a change in the atmosphere. The ambient temperature was rapidly rising. “—It looks like your hard work paid off, AnchoR.”

“...huh...?”

RyuZU smiled. *So you have not realized it yet. Because of you, Master Naoto and the rest were not only able to survive—but to succeed. You should ask Master Naoto for lots of praise later.*

Having kept that thought to herself, RyuZU once more turned to face Gennai. “Now then… Mr. Clanky Old Bones. If possible, I would love nothing more than to literally stuff you inside this crucible and savor the sight as your flesh burns, your blood boils, and your eyes burst, until I reach my own thermal limits, but—”

RyuZU paused as she held AnchoR up in her arms. “Though it could not be further from my own inclinations, Master Naoto has decided that murder is bad for AnchoR’s upbringing. Further still, there is also a certain girl who has asked for the authority over your life and death.”

Punctuating that statement, RyuZU’s black scythes dashed forward. In a flash, all the weapons and devices that were on Gennai’s person were minced to shreds. Finishing, the back of the black scythe warped like a whip before bashing the back of Gennai’s head.

“…ngh?!” As Gennai fainted before he could even react, RyuZU deftly hoisted him up with her scythes.

“…I will have to clean these later… Even though I had taken as much precaution as I could by cutting off his hand as quickly as possible… they have still been sullied by a faint amount of his blood, skin, and oils… Well, at the very least he will not be squirming about now. That would feel even grosser,” RyuZU said to herself as she turned around.

Holding AnchoR gently in her arms and suspending the old man with her scythe, she retraced her steps at full speed.

“Oh, and in the case that I do not make it out fast enough, and you end up dying a horrible death by flames, please be understanding. Accidents happen, yes?”

And so, just a few seconds after RyuZU and her passengers left the area— **A sun was formed in the center of Akihabara Grid.**

Reaching two thousand degrees Celsius around its perimeter—and thirty thousand at its center, immense heat engulfed the enormous weapon along with the rest of Akihabara Grid. As the ground burned away, the magnetic charge present in all the clockwork in the grid was shorn away by flame.

# Epilogue / 00 : 00 / Saver

Underneath the moonlight, the sound of the ocean tides gently filled the area in Ariake Grid—Tokyo's port district that faced the Tokyo Bay. The artificial island known as Odaiba since antiquity, along with its port facilities that had originally been made to establish a defensive barrier in front of the heart of Tokyo, was aligned with the turning of Ariake Grid. It was turning in the opposite direction at exactly the same speed.

In one part of it, a shipyard filled with warehouses, was the place that Naoto and friends had designated as their rendezvous point after their mission was complete.

Presently, at that place— **"—Aaaaa~~nchoRRRR~~uuu————————uuuUH?!"** Naoto was screaming as if the world had come to an end. Of course he was, who could blame him? Before his eyes was AnchoR who was truly a shock to behold. In addition to being limbless, even her torso had scars on it.

Naoto tossed aside his luggage and sprung towards AnchoR, who had been placed on a large table to sleep. Marie also inadvertently gulped upon seeing AnchoR's state from behind Naoto.

*—Such terrible damage. No matter how one tries to downplay it—she's been totally wrecked. Normal automata in this condition would be scrapped without a question, just making a new one would be cheaper than the repairs—well, normal automata anyway.* Holding her breath, Marie shifted her gaze onto Naoto.

Naoto, who was touching AnchoR with trembling hands, lightly nodded. "...It'll be okay. Really, just barely, she hasn't been fatally damaged. I have AnchoR's structure memorized down to the placement of every single wire, so if it's me—and you... she can definitely be fixed... Haaaaah..."

“I see… that’s good to hear. Truly.”

As Naoto’s legs gave way in exhausted relief, similarly, Marie felt relieved from the bottom of her heart as well. Upon which, she inadvertently realized that she didn’t feel uncomfortable around the girl anymore. As Marie was trying to figure out why that was, Naoto raised his head and said to RyuZU, “…Thanks, RyuZU. For stopping AnchoR.”

RyuZU bowed elegantly. “I only did what a follower should do. And, if I were to add to that, what an elder sister should do for her younger sister who was abasing herself.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll take care of your injuries too, RyuZU. Being a big sister is tough isn’t it?”

—Naoto’s words made RyuZU catch her breath in astonishment. Not—because she was amazed that Naoto picked up that she herself had been considerably damaged from destroying the power coils in Yatsukahagi when she had gone to stop AnchoR—but rather, RyuZU was elated to see proof of her master, the absolute best that one could have, grow even further.

More so than knowing that she would be repaired, Naoto had just asserted that he would definitely repair her injuries himself. RyuZU bowed once again to express her joy.

Just then— “…I’m… so-rry…” AnchoR spoke feebly.

Hearing her intermittent, distorted voice made Naoto frown and Marie lower her gaze. Before either of them could say anything, AnchoR continued.

“…An…choR… could-n’t destroy, them all… even… though… that’s all, that AnchoR’s, good for…”

—Even though the only meaning in her existence was as a destroyer, an annihilator. She had acted on her own, betraying even

her own master's orders, and in the end—she couldn't even destroy all the things she needed to.

As Marie looked into her eyes—a thought reflexively popped into her head. Before her reason could come into play, she found her instinct yelling, *That's not true. The way you see yourself is definitely mistaken...!*

"……I want… an order…" AnchoR looked to be holding back tears as she looked at Naoto and Marie with her scarlet, wavering eyes.

Her voice and expression were akin to that of a child that had realized she had made a mistake that could not be undone—she was bewildered as to what she should do. What she wanted weren't directions or orders—but punishment. A way to atone.

Naoto immediately replied in a tone that suggested that he understood. "Yeah. Well then, here's my order, AnchoR—"

Naoto took a deep breath.

**"Puff out your chest—and say— 'I did my best so I want you to praise me.'"**

—AnchoR eyes widened. In her bewilderment, her scarlet eyes wandered and found RyuZU, who in response, simply closed her eyes as if to affirm Naoto's words. The hurt girl muttered between gasps, "…An-choR… did… her best…?"

"A'int that right! AnchoR's the hardest worker in the world!"

AnchoR wheezed. After a slight pause, she turned to look at Marie while asking in a trembling voice, "…Does, Mother… also… think it's okay for AnchoR… to ask, for praise?"

"—"

To those words, Marie obeyed the first impulse that came from the bottom of her heart and walked towards the little girl. As she did so, she realized something— *Being called "Mother" by this girl doesn't irk me anymore.*

Reaching down towards AnchoR, Marie gently caressed her face. It was the sensation of burnt artificial skin. Then, wrapping her arms around AnchoR's shoulders, Marie pulled her in and rocked her back and forth as one might a baby. She heard the creaking sound of AnchoR's spring as it wound up tightly.

*I'm disgusted with myself for thinking for even a single second that this poor child was nothing but a tool of terrible destruction. Such a young child successfully fought to protect us until she became this beat up of her own volition, and yet, she's questioning—honest to god, she's actually wondering whether it's fine for her to be praised. From her expression, it looks like she could break down at any moment.*

*...And you're telling me that this is just a doll without a soul? Give me a break! I'm sick of that kind of thinking!! The me who thought that should just go fucking die!!!*

"Thank you for working so hard, AnchoR... You really—did your best didn't you?"

*Though it pains me to admit it,* Marie thought with a bitter smile, *I feel like right now—I can somewhat understand why one might propose to an automaton like that pervert Naoto did to RyuZU.*

*They're just dolls. Mere algorithms—if one simply stops at those preconceptions and dismisses automata as such, then aren't humans also nothing but a calculator made of proteins and biological signals?*

*If a human wants to question whether automata have hearts*

*—then he should find the proof of a human heart first.*

"……Uuh…wahh…ngh—" AnchoR began to cry feebly in Marie's arms.

Naoto also joined in by patting her head. However, he then sternly narrowed his eyes. "—But also, AnchoR, you're gravely misunderstanding something. I do have to scold you a little bit for that."

"…huh? …eh?" AnchoR sniffled.

"You said that the only thing you can do is destroy. But that's not true at all."

Feeling confused, AnchoR remembered something— *"When you return, I imagine that Master Naoto will educate you on the side of yourself that you are not aware of."*

And, just as RyuZU had said, Naoto began, "AnchoR, you're a clever child capable of protecting everyone and bringing smiles to their faces along with your own. A girl like you can't be called violent no matter how powerful she is—rather, she's *strong*. "

—Violence versus strength. AnchoR blinked twice, seeming not to understand the difference between the two.

Marie suddenly recalled something upon hearing Naoto's words. "…The trident Trishula, the symbol of the power of the god of destruction, Shiva…"

*And as I recall… I'm sure that Naoto doesn't know this. He doesn't know it, but understood it anyway—or rather, he realized it.*

"—What the three hooks on Shiva's trident symbolize—are 'will,' 'wisdom,' —and 'action.' Only when all three of these traits come together can one rule the world as a force of justice as one

of The Holy Triad—as Shiva did… It's an old myth that used to be passed down in Asia."

"So that's why AnchoR can't exert her power except by her own will, right?"

"Ah…" AnchoR gasped as her eyes widened.

"Because she's a kind and clever child. Because her power to destroy is a power to *remediate* things. It is the same when repairing clockwork, before you begin, it's necessary to first correctly *disassemble* the device. That isn't violence—it's strength," Naoto said with a gentle smile. "RyuZU said so too, didn't she? You ought to listen to what your big sister says, you know? AnchoR is an anchor—a force to keep things steady. I'm sure that's why 'Y' gave you that name."

Hearing those words, AnchoR's eyes trembled and her lips quivered. She turned to face Marie, and timidly asked, "… AnchoR… isn't bad? Isn't Mother… afraid, of, AnchoR?"

—Immense shame washed over Marie. *So she knew. She saw through the fact that I've always been afraid of her… The wall that I had built around my heart in order to regard her as a product, a thing, because she's an automaton…*

Overcome by feeling, Marie kissed AnchoR's forehead, then her eyelids, her flushed cheeks, and her perky little nose, while all the saying in a voice trembling with emotion, "How! Could! I! Possibly! Be afraid of you…! AnchoR—!"



"——"

*Knock knock.*

"Hey Missy, did'ja know? Moviegoers'll get bored watching tear-jerking scenes if they go on for too long, no matter how quaint."

Having been rudely interrupted, Marie rubbed her teary eyes as she turned around with an expression that could belong to the devil himself. Vermouth had opened the door partway and stuck his head through before knocking on the wall.

"—So can we move on to the next scene already? A thrilling escape, perhaps? Like maybe how we're gonna escape from here, for example."

"Do you even need to ask? By boat. And, if this bores you, then scram."

"Fair enough, you've got me there. But I'll admit I was kinda hoping that we'd be waterwalking next, I mean, we just finished freaking skywalking, you know?! Well—hopefully after all that, our stunning conclusion won't end tragically with us being shot to shit aboard a ship that we took our sweet time getting to sail!" Vermouth laughed—but his eyes were dead serious.

*—It's been eight hours since we escaped from the Pillar of Heaven. The fact that we vicious terrorists have escaped should be common knowledge by now.*

*There's no doubt that the land routes have already been blockaded, but even sky routes and sea routes—actually, considering where that enormous weapon appeared from, even the deep underground layers have probably been blocked off with inspection points.*

*If a suspicious ship appears out in the open, it wouldn't be strange for it to be shot down without warning.*

However, Naoto answered Vermouth's question in Marie's place. "It'll be fine. In another~four to six minutes? A tornado will **coincidentally** occur in this area and we'll pass right through the eye of the storm."

"Ooh, now that's a sound escape plan. Who thought of it?"

"Who else but Naoto would think of something so preposterous?"

"Yeah, you're right, hahaah! I knew you wouldn't disappoint me kid! I really should stuff your butt up later as a reward—" As Vermouth was in the middle of his vulgar jesting, he was knocked over by RyuZU's scythe.

A short while after that, the shutter of the warehouse was raised as a white oceanic cruiser slowly came to dock. Its hull was quite large, boasting not only a kitchen along with its cabin rooms, but also a simple workshop inside. Upon the cruiser completing its docking nice and steady, two men disembarked onto dry land.

"...Ahh, humanoid bodies really feel the best after all."

"Hello there, Dr. Marie. Looks like we're a bit late. Sorry to have kept you waiting."

The ones who had come down from the ship were Halter, who had returned to a human-sized artificial body and Konrad.

Marie greeted the two of them. "Please, Dr. Konrad. Don't be. Really, you did so much for me this time... Though, at one point I nearly started to despise you because of some recent revelations, and to be honest, I still haven't let that go, but..." she said with an unamused stare.

However, Konrad simply smiled, letting her critical remarks go in one ear and out the other. “Not at all. The work was immensely stimulating and definitely something from which I profited as well.”

Marie smiled equivocally, then looked at Halter and remarked, “…Really though, I’m impressed that you were able to find a replacement artificial body for Halter.”

“Indeed. Due to the turbulent events this time around, this country was temporarily under de facto anarchy. And wouldn’t you know it, I was able to acquire quite a few items during that time, as it were,” Konrad cheerfully answered.

*“—Definitely something from which I profited.” I hope he isn’t just referring to things like this artificial body,* Marie thought, her smile stiffening. *However, it’s not like we could escape with Halter connected to that Black Tortoise, so I can’t really complain considering that I’m the one who made such an impossible request in first place.*

“I must say that this one feels a bit **cheap** compared to the one I had before though… this face too—I’d like to do something about it later,” Halter said as he rubbed his cheeks; his face looked completely different from before.

His face was slender and youthful and his physique looked a bit lanky as well, perhaps because his new body had less muscle gears. The only thing his new body had in common with his old one was the bald head.

On top of that, the only things about his appearance that were reminiscent of his old one were the sunglasses and his gray suit. It felt off, like someone was cosplaying Halter rather than actually being him.

“True I suppose.” Marie shrugged. “But any artificial body on the market right now will feel inferior when compared to an

eighth generation one of the Breguet Corporation, you know. You should be glad that you were able to obtain a body at all—also, isn't it better for you to keep your new face as it is? I mean, your old face has been all over the news."

"Nonsense. That face was something I worked hard to sculpt into what I calculated I should look like at my age if I still had a human face, you know. Like I'll just give it up now because it's the face of a criminal. Just what do you take the pride of a suave middle-aged man for?" Halter asked while stroking his bald head and sounding disgruntled.

Vermouth interjected from the side, "Hey, by the way… ain't there a replacement artificial body for me as well? I think I've lived long enough as a hermaphrodite."

"Why don't you just stay in that body for the rest of your life? I don't see the problem."

"Hey bitch—this may come as a surprise to you, but this body isn't even a true artificial body, you know?!" Vermouth shouted, then, finding himself looking down at his crotch, he added, "—Well, I'm not gonna lie, I'm very much pleased with this fine specimen dangling here. I wouldn't mind keeping it when it comes time to part with the rest—"

"Rest assured, Vermouth! I'll make sure to attach it to a wonderfully haphazard place on an astoundingly ugly artificial body for you! Thank you for reminding me just what sort of filth you truly are!!" Marie looked gleeful—like she might pounce on Vermouth at any moment to dismantle his entire body.

Averting her gaze, Vermouth surveyed their surroundings. "Hm~ well. So now that we've got our escape ship and now that we're finally gonna use it to get the hell out of here, can I ask one final question—?"

Vermouth looked towards a corner of the dock. Everyone fol-

lowed along to focus their gazes onto the old man who had been left aside until now—Gennai Hirayama, the true mastermind behind the chain of events this time, was simply sitting silently in a chair. He'd even been forced to crudely attend to his wounded wrist himself. Naoto's party hadn't even bothered to restrain him.

"...Hey princess, why's this geezer here?"

Vermouth and Halter were both exuding a dark, stone-cold, murderous intent. However...

"Eh? I told you guys that I would stuff him in a boiling crucible, didn't I? One of the steel drums around here should do the trick, let's see—" Naoto began to look around here or there for a suitable container.

Ignoring him, Marie replied, "I requested of RyuZU before we began the operation to try to capture the mastermind alive if possible."

Halter slapped his forehead loudly upon hearing that. Looking down at the girl who was still in her middle teens with an earnest expression, he said, "...Look here, princess. It's normal having qualms about killing someone, but you know that letting this guy live will just lead to further problems down the road don't you?"

Indeed—having a counter witness when they were trying to claim responsibility for this entire chain of events in order to become the world's convenient evil might be a problem. Fortunately—everyone in Shiga's ex-military aside from Gennai had already been killed, as Marie wouldn't have had the resolve to kill them herself.

And so—

"If we just kill this guy, everything'll be settled. Heck, want me to do it? Once you get used to erasing corpses without a trace, it's as easy as puffing on a cig. If you give me just ten minutes I can

let you decide among six different ways of killing him ranging from the merciful all the way to war crime."

*...So this is the mind of someone who's spent his entire life at war, huh.* Marie sighed to herself, feeling a slight chill run down her spine as she sized up the two men before her. "...It's true that I didn't feel completely comfortable letting him bake inside that weapon. I'd be lying if I said otherwise, but—" Marie turned and looked at Naoto with a serious expression.

Naoto had still been half-seriously—no, plenty-seriously looking around for a fitting steel container. Upon noticing Marie's gaze though, he turned around. "...Well, if you want me to be serious then I'll be serious, but—" He paused. "First of all, letting this gramps live is not a problem. I mean—someone will kill him even if we don't."

Marie looked confused by those words. Meanwhile, Halter, Vermouth, and even Konrad and RyuZU as well, looked like they easily agreed.

"—I see, true that. You have a point."

"If it became known that the remnants of Shiga's military had attempted a coup d'etat, we're not the only ones that would be inconvenienced."

"Whatever he testifies, he'll be made out to be one of us and sentenced to death in a rigged trial. And that'll be the end of that."

"I imagine that he will have his lips sealed much quicker than you say. There is no problem at all in letting him live for now."

Seeing the reactions of the three people and one machine to Naoto's words, Marie's face stiffened— *Why are such dark thoughts always the first thing that pops into their heads?*

Naoto continued to press the point. “If you’d like some additional reasons—well, the first is that he seemed to be after me in particular for some reason and I want to know why. The second is that if I had ordered AnchoR and RyuZU to leave him there, then I feel like I would have been ordering them to murder someone, and that didn’t sit right with me. And finally, if I had to give a third reason—”

Naoto paused as he looked down at the old man sitting in a chair. “I think there’s probably someone further up the food chain, y’know?”

*—What…?* As everyone frowned in skepticism, Halter came forward for all of them and asked, “True, there were some things that didn’t seem to fall into place, but—what’s your basis for claiming that?”

“Huh, I mean, just think about it. Isn’t it weird how someone like him who hates ‘Y’ so obsessively—purposefully chose not to use AnchoR-chan, one of ‘Y’’s legacies? Not only that, but why didn’t he even use the electromagnetic technology he’s so proud of to override her Master Confirmation? If he was truly calling the shots, don’t you think it would’ve been poetic for him to use his beloved electromagnetism to take control of AnchoR, a creation of ‘Y,’ and use her for his revenge?”

All present gulped at those words. It wasn’t just Marie who had overlooked that. It was a fact that even those used to the battlefield like Halter and Vermouth had overlooked.

*Had AnchoR been in perfect condition, it would have been a cakewalk for her to destroy the Yatsukahagi—of all the contradictory actions that this man took, wouldn’t letting AnchoR take the bait and pursue RyuZU who couldn’t even damage the weapon, be the most contradictory one—?*

Basking in their gazes, Gennai slowly lifted his head. Among all the features of his face such as his white hair, white beard, and

paper-white complexion, only his moss-green eyes were moist and glistening with enmity.

"—Indeed, impressive." Gennai's voice was dry and hoarse. "Truly, you were impressive to the very end, 'Y'—you loathsome god."

Naoto sighed, feeling fed up. "You're still goin' on about that huh… I have a name, it's Naoto Miura. Don't tell me that you really went on this rampage 'cuz menopause made you senile old man."

"If the world were destroyed because someone was in menopause there'd be a riot," Marie retorted with half-closed eyes. She then looked down at Gennai. "…You've called Naoto 'Y' the entire time. What's up with that?"

Upon that question, Gennai slowly raised his head. Seeing his dark, murky, green eyes look up at her, Marie inadvertently flinched. "—Marie Bell Breguet. The young genius clocksmith and the absolute treasure of the Breguets—to think that you wouldn't understand, what a disappointment you are…"

"What are you…" Marie began to mutter.

However, Gennai shifted his gaze elsewhere. He studied Halter, Vermouth, and Konrad in turn, saying, "…You lot should have been with 'Y' when it happened, yes? I can hardly believe that each and every one of you could be so dense as to not realize anything from seeing that absurdity, that magic he performed, first hand."

Lastly, looking into Naoto's eyes, he asserted, "—This boy is not human."

"No seriously, the hell are you sayin' you geezer," Naoto retorted outright.

Ignoring his protest, Gennai continued, "—You all should have seen it as well. The sight of this boy easily twisting and recreating this world. Do you seriously believe that someone capable of such a feat could be a mere human, a mere clocksmith?"

Marie gulped. Halter, Vermouth, and Konrad also put on stern expressions. They couldn't bring themselves to simply dismiss this old man's words as a joke after witnessing Naoto work in a manner that surpassed the domain of god.

"And, I have nothing but questions for this Clockwork Planet itself, as well. Because there is zero possible way that a human **could ever** have recreated the world with gears... ngh!"

As he remained in his chair, Gennai continued as his voice violently rose. "An impossible existence and his impossible technology! In the midst of my uncertainty as to whether this world even truly exists, I had thought that I must make known this despair and prove our mortal limits as man—I suppose you can call that my motive if it so pleases you."

Finishing his rant, Gennai fell back into his chair. He then lowered his gaze to his wounded wrist, where his right hand should be...

"...Well, things ended in my defeat though. ...I suppose it just means that in the end, the mediocrity that is man can't hope to defy a god. If you're going to kill me then hurry up with it. In the end, this world is nothing but an illusion, a fabrication that that arrogant god over there who claims to be human is showing us... I have no regrets whatsoever."

Gennai dispassionately offered them his life without remorse. His voice sounded dry, fatigued, and defeated.

"——"

*If, I had heard those words a few days ago—in Akihabara,*

*when everything had been broken by the electromagnetic pulse, I might have ended up agreeing with this old man.* Marie thought.

*...If it was during that despair, that loss of faith, when I sensed that everything in the world was an illusion, I might have.*

*—But, I know better now.*

*The feeling I felt back then wasn't something to fear.*

With that understanding and conviction, Marie declared, **"—Don't fuck with me."**

Stronger language than what she had planned to use flew right out of her mouth. Gennai raised his head and glared at Marie with his dark, murky eyes as if to challenge her. However, Marie didn't flinch this time.

*—It's true that the world is covered in illusion.*

This Clockwork Planet itself—had peeled off a thin layer of that illusion when it was made. And, as it were, Naoto Miura simply happened to hear the sounds of the world from one more layer deeper in. Marie now understood that principle well.

*—The world allows for contradictions.*

*Common sense, preconceptions, modern theories—those things are nothing but one layer upon all the layers of illusions blanketing the world.*

*At the very least, the universe as observed by the human eye is undoubtedly an incomplete picture and our study of physics a defective framework.*

*With that in mind, if I shift my perspective, both RyuZU's*

*Imaginary Gear and AnchoR's Perpetual Gear apparently operate without question. They both appear to be fully consistent with the nature of our universe.*

Inside the world that Marie had perceived back then—the one that Naoto had shown her, the world with its outermost layer of illusions peeled off—everything was simply natural.

*This world truly does exist as a fabrication—but by no means is it a fake conjured up by any sort of convenient magic.*

Even the modern theories behind clockwork technology that Marie had reasoned must be wrong weren't actually directly contradicted by anything in her newfound experience.

*The fine line between those two ways of understanding the world was simply so trivial that one could miss it actually being there.*

—That was precisely why Marie was being so assertive. That was precisely why she *could* be so assertive. And funnily enough, Marie's answer was much the same as a certain someone's who had said something very similar to Gennai on a different day.

"If you just want to sit there and drool out complaints after declaring yourself a loser then you can do just that. It's your freedom to believe what you want. But see—"

To those words, Gennai's eyes opened as wide as they could. Marie was sharply glaring into those dark, murky, moss-green eyes.

"The subject in your statement is far too encompassing—who gave you the right to represent all of humanity, huh?! So—" She paused for breath. "Don't lump us in with yourself. We won't ever give in to despair like you."

Marie's emerald eyes were filled to the brim with silent flames.

"Don't you dare think for a moment that a loser like yourself who gave up all on his own has any right to determine the limits of humanity."

Out of the corner of her eye, she could see that Naoto, who was standing next to her, was smiling.

Meanwhile, Gennai simply sighed a heavy sigh. "...I see. So 'Y' was two people all along." His lips twisted into a sneer as he faced down Naoto and Marie. "You two can sing the praises of man all you want but I'll never acknowledge it—bumping into boundaries is the true nature of humanity.

As if you two, who can easily manipulate the world without any acquaintance, much less understanding whatsoever of that fact, could ever possibly understand what it is to be called human."

His eyes were still murky as he stared them down.

"Being able to taste only the smallest of victories after an infinite number of pathetic and humiliating defeats... Playing dirty, using any and all means, reaching down into the abyss no matter how deep in filth and disgrace one sinks... *That* is what it means to be human—even if the victory achieved isn't even one's own."

Gennai paused for a breath. "Yes, for example— *that* person *there* —is truly human."

—Just then. Breaking the quiet that had descended over the dock where only their voices could be heard, a noise of immense volume began to resound.

"What's going on—?!" As Naoto and friends looked about their surroundings, they immediately discovered the cause. The resonance communication device that the dock was equipped with had suddenly turned on by itself—someone was forcing a connection from outside. And, before anyone could do anything, the line

was connected.

"Hahahah— Can I assume that you're referring to me by that? Mr. Gennai—"

•

—*Who is that?* All present wondered upon hearing the voice of the man from the transmission device.

Actually, Gennai was the one person who quietly smiled as he silently looked at the device. Seeing his reaction, Marie made a conjecture, however, before she could share it with the others, the man behind the voice revealed the answer: "Right, I suppose you could call me—the mastermind—behind the chain of events this time. Does that make things a little easier to understand?"

"—!!" Hearing that almost made Marie reflexively yell. He was the mastermind—the one pulling the strings behind Gennai—the existence that Naoto had suspected. However, Marie could hardly expect that such a person would contact them in this manner of his own accord.

Naoto's party couldn't hide their astonishment even if they tried. Meanwhile, the man behind the voice said in a carefree tone, "Ahh, right right! Would you mind opening the window for me before this shocking revelation paralyzes you completely?"

"...The window you say?" Halter parroted suspiciously.

"I promise that it's not a trap or anything! Come on, hurry! You'll end up missing it!" the imperviously carefree—but also thoroughly malicious voice urged.

...*This couldn't get any fishier*. Though she understood that, Marie exchanged glances with Naoto—who nodded. She then turned to the window by her side and undid the lock that had become tight from rust and pushed open the window.

The salty sea breeze brushed past Marie's face. However— "I don't really see anything noteworthy..."

Just as Marie muttered that.

—A thunderous roar tore through the night sky.

The sudden crash nearly made her lose her balance, but she quickly recovered and stuck her torso out the window to look up at the sky. The source of the thunderous roar—was **something that had broken the sound barrier** as it left behind a silver streak in the night sky.

Marie strained her eyes to make out the object that was flying off into the distance— *Tactical fighters?* Over twenty fighters were flying in formation through the dark, cloudless sky as they disappeared into the distance.

*Just where could they be... no, more pertinently— **They were fighters that I didn't recognize...?***

The moment that realization entered Marie's mind, the mastermind completed her thought: "So, did you see it? Amazing right? —What just flew past you is a new Vacheron product!"

Marie turned around and yelled in a startled voice, "The Vacherons'...?!"

—A moment later.

**—Flashes of light blinded the sky.**

Then, a few seconds after that, the sound of a gigantic explosion that completely and utterly dwarfed the earlier sonic boom that had rocked everything around them.

"That's right—they are one of the **anti-electromagnetic weapons** that I had prepared for just such an occasion! Their

target is the half-broken Yatsukahagi, but as of right now, the only ones who know that are myself and you guys!"

With that, Marie understood. *In other words, what I felt just now—was the sound of that enormous weapon being pulverized by the Vacherons' latest fighters.*

"This was the best presentation ever! I'm thankful for the co-operation of you all— Eh? What'd you say?" The voice paused, then immediately let out a malicious laugh. "Hahaha, let me thank you once more! It appears that, with just that brief demonstration, the Japanese government is already being flooded with inquiries from neighboring countries!"

"Y-ou...!!" Marie growled, her eyes looking threatening.

*To unveil an anti-electromagnetic weapon at a time like this, when the threat of electromagnetic weapons has just been publicly demonstrated—it's obvious what he's aiming for...*

*With this one play, the stock of the Vacheron Corporation that had crashed and remained in a slump will now fully recover all in one go...!*

*With this, even as the Japanese government cleans up the situation and begins the work of reconstruction, it won't be able to avoid intervention from corporate interests.*

*However, that implies that—* "I take it—that **this was the goal of you Vacherons from the very beginning!** " Marie shouted as she shook in indescribable fury.

*Anti-electromagnetic weapons? As if something like that could have just so happened to be in development and ever so conveniently completed today.*

*You had those fighters prepared for "just such an occasion"?*

*Yeah right—they're something that you prepared for this specific demonstration!*

*These guys had planned to manipulate the coup d'etat and instigate a crisis that they could then resolve from the very beginning. That is what those fighters were made for!*

*And their only reason in doing so? —Just to push their own products... Bastards!*

However, the mastermind nonchalantly replied as he tried to stifle his sneering laugh, "Hahahah, never! Though it's a great honor, you think far too much of me. I'm not capable of seeing the future.

This was simply me using one my of various imagined scenarios to my full advantage—though I will say—" He paused for a breath. "Even if I can't see the future, there was never any need, because you guys were still dancing in the palm of my hand this whole time, Hahahaha—!!"

*—This, guy...* Marie's body rapidly chilled as her mind had gone past fury—her fist was trembling in terror.

For all their actions—even that amazing miracle that they had pulled off in the end—to be used—however, Naoto sharply glared at the transmission device. "Don't go lying out your ass with that creepy voice of yours, old man."

"Oh ho—?"

*...A lie?* As Marie looked at Naoto, he continued, "As if you actually anticipated all of our actions up to now—we were in the palm of your hand? If giving us AnchoR-chan was a part of your plan, then we're dancing in a pretty generous hand."

*—That's true.* Marie gulped. *I almost let myself buy into the bluff of this self-proclaimed mastermind.*

*It's just as Naoto says. If he was the one who ordered AnchoR to escort Gennai's forces as a bodyguard, what reason could he have to purposefully gift her to us when he ought to know full well how ridiculously powerful she is?*

"...So you're more or less just someone who wants to start a war by making Tokyo collapse so that you can sell weapons—actually... that doesn't explain the whole story, you still have something up your sleeve..."

Naoto stopped himself and turned around to look at Marie, upon which Marie suddenly recalled what she had heard several weeks ago in Kyoto—from the mouth of a certain Technical Force officer that she had captured for interrogation.

*"—I heard that the incident in Amsterdam two years ago was instigated by you guys as well!!"*

*...The rumor of Meister Guild deliberately sabotaging core towers in order to analyze their technology is— Don't tell me...!*

Appalled, Halter cut in, muttering "...I see. In the case that the coup d'etat succeeds, your stock value as a collaborator in the underworld would rise, and in the case that it fails, you would be in the prime position to sell weapons that could counter the electromagnetic weapon that has been exposed to the public and others like it. And, if things went exceptionally well, you would have made Tokyo collapse so that you could analyze the technologies of its core towers and the Pillar of Heaven from the ruins, not to mention the fact that Tokyo's collapse could easily trigger a war, in which case you'd be swimming in business selling weapons—you're the very picture of a scumbag aren't you?"

"Hahaha, shall I just say that I'm honored to receive your praise!" the voice sneered in response.

Hearing his reaction, Marie was left astounded. ...*What's with this guy? Just how would one's mind have to be wired to be so*

*thoroughly corrupt? Where is this guy coming from with all this?*

—Suddenly, Marie had an epiphany. "You— You're not a Vacheron are you! —Who the hell are you?!" Shouting that epiphany triggered something in Marie as her rational mind followed through on the words of her intuition.

*This supposed mastermind is acting like he's an executive of the Vacheron Corporation—but there's no way that could be true.*

*The Five Great Corporations have immense influence, yes, but…*

*In the first place, clockwork technology could be considered the lifeline of this planet, it's its very foundation after all.*

*Our world's economy runs on clockwork. And because of that, one could argue that the power of the Five Great Corporations who own and profit from that technology is even greater than the IGMO.*

*However, those in a position to execute a grand scheme like this are extremely limited in number. I mean that in two ways.*

*First, such a person would have to have status equivalent to the heads of the Five Great Corporations—and second, he or she wouldn't have to mind the risk that such a grand, heinous deed could be exposed on their account utterly ruining them—in other words, such a person would have to be suicidally mad.*

At the very least, not even the Vacherons would be capable of deeds like purging cities and instigating wars for the sake of analyzing or seizing technology. Even if such things didn't actually bother the conscience of the executives at Vacheron—there's no way they would give such a plan the green light after taking into

account the risk of their scheme being exposed and its substantial consequences.

However, the self-proclaimed mastermind merely jested at Marie's query. "Hahaha— Who am I, huh? I've never even thought of that. After all, I don't get to introduce myself to others very often."

Before Marie could shout at him again, this time it was the mastermind who asked, "By the way, do you know what you guys are being called? In the twelve hours since you broadcasted the footage of you taking over the palace, there isn't a person left in the world at this point who doesn't know who you are—"

The mastermind snickered. "They're calling you the— 'Second Ypsilon,' as in, the second coming of 'Y' you know?! Their reason being that 'Y,' who once saved the world, has now come to destroy it! Man, what a truly cool name! Being nameless myself, I can't help but feel a little envious of you guys!"

"...However," the mastermind then continued in a calmer voice, "—in the end, 'Y' was just an incomplete 'X' —A relic really, wouldn't you agree? With that in mind, let me try giving myself a cooler name—"

The mastermind then took a dramatic pause, and when he opened his mouth again...

**"—I'm Omega, someone in the same business as you guys. Only I'm a *real* terrorist."**

Marie engraved that name into her heart. *—Omega. It's probably a half-assed name he chose just now but that doesn't matter*. Marie's very soul was telling her that he was the enemy whom they must defeat.

Oblivious to Marie's resolution, the mastermind continued jesting, "Well, feel free to go ahead and think of me as a member

of a cliche evil organization. Oh, and by the way, while it's true that having the Fourth taken by you guys was regrettable, in the end it's only one weapon. Now that I've seen that its advertised perpetual operation is nothing but false marketing, I no longer have any interest in it. If you're so enamored with that antique piece of trash then you can have it! Hahahahahahahaha—!"

Hearing "Omega" convulse with malicious laughter, Naoto shouted, "—Keep that grating voice of yours inside your damn mouth you bastard!!" Then, for some reason, he stared up at **the ceiling** and howled, "—Rather than babble garbage **from up there** , why don'tcha come down here and say it to my face! Ya goddamn coward!!"

—After a momentary pause...

"Pfft—" Omega laughed. Shrilly, as if his sides had split.

**"—Hahah, hahahahahahahahahahahahahahahaha-hah——————Whew!!"**

Sounding as though he were wiping tears from his eyes, Omega said, "I found it hard to believe, but I've just confirmed it firsthand, I see, you really can 'hear things' can't you **Mr. Naoto!** I mean, logically, that that had to be the case for you to have done everything you did up to now, but to think that such a power really exists— Man, the world truly is an interesting place isn't it, Mr. Gennai!"

Upon those words, Marie gasped. *Crap!* She'd realized it all too late. *The reason this guy deliberately made contact with us and talked for so long—! Was to discern the truth of our trump card, Naoto's ability!*

Omega merrily continued, "Sorry for having said such a mean thing, Mr. Naoto. You are truly interesting. I'd take the opportunity to study you before even a masterpiece like the Pillar of Heaven.

As an apology—I won't try to take the Fourth back from you. Though if I'm going to be honest, it's extremely painful for me to let you have it as I haven't had the time to figure out how her Perpetual Gear works yet. I sincerely apologize for my provocative words."

"Fuck off. AnchoR has been mine since the inception of the universe. Go to hell."

"Naoto! Why did you… ugh!" Marie shouted. *I get that you wanted to tell him off, but wasn't revealing your ability to him a mistake—?*

However— "…The hatch has been closed."

"Eh…?" Those sudden words out of Naoto made Marie shut her mouth.

Naoto continued to glare threateningly up at the ceiling as he said, "…He's in a large stealth bomber that's circling around about twenty thousand meters right above where we are. If it was a just a regular bomb, RyuZU could easily take care of it with Mute Scream, but from what I heard, it sounded like something that resonance cannon that AnchoR used."

Marie's eyes stretched wide open. "—A resonance cannon? What are you talking about, a resonance cannon couldn't possibly have a firing range of over twenty-thousand meters!!"

That was over three times the effective—no, the current theoretical limit. However— "Then it's gotta be something akin to a resonance cannon. What I can tell you for sure is what he's saying to us between the lines." There, Naoto paused. He was still angrily staring up at the ceiling.

**"'Where am I? If you answer correctly, I'll let you go. Otherwise, you're dead.' —"**

Marie gasped upon processing his words.

*That's absurd—* She almost spat that out reflexively, but she swallowed those words back down. *No matter how absurd, how unbelievable, it seems—if Naoto says so, then it must be true.*

*And, in that case, right now— We just escaped death by a hair's breadth—on account of this madman's "leniency."*

*Probably because—leaving us alive is more "convenient" for him as well.*

*Because he plans to use us—and there's nothing we can do about it.*

As if he had been patiently waiting for Marie to reach that conclusion, the mastermind sneered, "—Impressive. You're right on the money. I wouldn't expect any less from you, Mr. Naoto!"

"Toying, with us... ghh!!" Marie sharply knit her brows. Her voice was trembling. The intolerable humiliation was making her lose her cool.

*Just how long has it been since someone made such a fool out of me right to my face?*

The mastermind continued cheerily, as if he was savoring Marie's rage, "Well, having you guys around should make it easier for me to operate from the shadows after all! So, all you ladies and gentlemen in the grand international terrorist organization known as Second Ypsilon, I'd be extremely grateful if you would kindly do more flashy things in the future! But, before I go, I'm going to correct two misapprehensions you've made, alright Mr. Naoto Miura?"

Omega paused to clear the air. "First, having the Forth taken by you **really did fall within the scope of my plans** , okay? As the prevention of Kyoto's purge couldn't be explained without

**some sort of magic** being involved, I thought that I would prepare some bait of the highest quality to lure that magic out—Haha, I'm glad that you found it to your liking! True, it was a valuable asset, but investing it really paid off!"

Upon those words, a chill shook Marie's body as it ran down her spine.

*—In other words, that means that—he really did reel us in, just like Naoto said. Since when—from where—and until what point exactly was he pulling the strings?*

"And, the second is that—while it's true that I was posing a game of life or death to you guys, Mr. Naoto—"

Marie's chill became a clear and sudden fear of death upon hearing the words that followed...

"—I'm still perfectly fine with having everyone but the contestant who gave the correct answer die, you know?"

"—Shit. Get down—!!!" Naoto screamed.

Marie reflexively obeyed his order. She confirmed that Halter, Konrad and Vermouth did the same. Those who didn't were RyuZU, who adopted a combat posture and—Gennai, who was smiling.

A moment later, Gennai's head exploded.

"—wha?!" As skull fragments and blood splattered everywhere, the smell of rusted iron reached Marie's nose. A second later, the sound of a gun firing from afar rang out.

*...He was sniped!*

As Marie clenched her teeth, Naoto turned around in a fluster to see what had happened.

*This isn't good,* Marie thought, *the next target—*

"——"

"……?"

*They stopped—?*

•

On the roof of a certain skyscraper from which one could see all of Ariake Grid's port facilities…

"Haah… I never imagined that I'd survive. Looks look I shouldn't write off the virtues of my good luck… Well, I don't think there's any doubt that I worked far more than what I'm paid for though…"

As Karasawa quipped to himself, he gently twisted the tool he had thrust into the object. Upon which, the cracking sound of a fine part breaking sounded. After a few clattering sounds of disengaged gears spinning in neutral, the device that was the size of a motorcycle fell silent.

It was a long-barreled machine draped in a black cowl that gave off a dangerous air—it was an automated sniper rifle used for assassinations.

Karasawa had just destroyed the "assassin's" AI by thrusting a tool into a gap in its light armor plating while grumbling all the while, "…Rather, I should be saying that this kind of work is completely outside of my role and responsibilities… Well, I guess I could think of it as paying interest on the debt I incurred in the past. Most importantly, Dr. Marie appears to safe and sound as well, so why sweat the… ugh!"

As Karasawa let out a small groan, he held his abdomen as blood began to drip down between his fingers. "…Good grief, will

I be able to get worker's comp for this...? Haha, as if—— Sure is tough working for an organization that flouts labor standards."

Though Karasawa had narrowly managed to repel his assassin, he hadn't escaped unscathed. His right arm and several of his ribs were broken and that was merely in addition to the two bullets he had taken in the abdomen. By his own diagnosis, he was well worthy of being deemed a patient with severe injuries in need of at least a month's rehabilitation.

*The one silver lining is that my wounds aren't so bad that my only hope would be to become a cyborg... but if I don't treat them soon, my life's definitely gonna be in danger.*

Karasawa turned around while panting as heavily as one would expect. "I've gotta choose my next job... more carefully..."

*I've ended up finding out things that I shouldn't have, and though I managed to turn the tables on my assassin this time, if this keeps up not even my good luck will save me. I need to disappear ASAP—that, or I'm going to need protection from someone.*

*For the time being, the leads that look promising are... Right, how about that Japanese princess? I already know just how much fun a workplace can be when there's a beautiful and capable woman running things thanks to my time in Meister Guild.*

"As for Dr. Marie and the rest... Well, they should be fine. The enemy is a bunch of clowns who even let a weakling like me escape, after all. I'm sure Dr. Marie and her friends can overcome anything— Whoa there."

Pulling back his drifting consciousness, Karasawa smiled gently. Swallowing the clot of blood that had made its way up his throat, he said, "Ugh, shit, this is really bad... Before I worry about finding new work, I oughta... Let's see, the closest back-alley doctor should be... Ah, right. Well, let's get this over with."

Dragging his raggedy, wounded body, Karasawa disappeared into Tokyo's underworld without a trace.

•

Far off in the horizon, the sun was setting. Lying sprawled on a chair on the ship's deck, Marie was taking in the sea's reddish orange hue. The temperature was warm, and the sea breeze that brushed past in intervals felt refreshing.

Looking up through her sunglasses, she could see the silhouette of the Equatorial Spring that covered a large portion of her view of the burnt orange sky. As she tilted her head slightly to the side, her eyes found a man fishing by the edge of the ship. Marie called out to that person, "Halter, could you toss me a can of juice?"

"Sure thing, does orange juice sound fine?"

As Marie nodded, Halter took out a can of juice from the cooler by his feet and tossed it over his shoulder without turning around. Catching the can from its mid-air arc, Marie pulled the tab. A whoosh sounded.

As she enjoyed the sweet taste of the cool juice, Marie flipped the switch of the resonance radio on the side table next to her chair and found a news report which began to play from its speakers along with some noise.

"—Once again, regarding the Uprising of 2/8: As of right now, there are still no leads as to the whereabouts of the criminal group commonly known as Second Ypsilon. For those who are just tuning in, this is the name of the group who raided the palace, took Her Highness Houko Hoshimiya as a hostage, and seized control over the Pillar of Heaven on the tenth of February. Due to expert opinion agreeing that the enormous weapon utilized by the terrorists had possessed electromagnetic technology, the countries around the world have rushed to purchase the

newly released anti-electromagnetic weapons that the Vacheron Corporation had been developing…"

Marie snorted upon hearing the news that the female newscaster conveyed. "In the end, everything went as that son of a bitch wanted huh…"

"—Not only that, but with this development, quite a few countries in the world will now have access to technology to counter electromagnetic weapons—they've all basically implicitly affirmed that they very much do suspect each other of possessing something similar to "our" spider…"

Halter sighed while continuing to watch his line, he still had his back to her.

"…It's not a problem for now, but once the commotion from this latest incident dies down, this new development might eventually end up sparking something else somewhere. And, if even a single one of those sparks turns into a full-fledged conflict, our enemy's going to make a killing from it."

Sighing at Halter's words, Marie changed the channel on the radio. A conversation between commentators on a station from another region began to play.

"—In short, I believe that it was Princess Houko's courageous actions during the broadcast that ultimately led to the foiling of the terrorists' plot.

After all, if it weren't for her risking her life to make a plea to the military to disregard her own safety and prioritize subjugating the terrorists, Second Ypsilon wouldn't have felt pressured to immediately fire at the Pillar of Heaven to speed up their plans.

And, if they hadn't done that, their enormous weapon wouldn't have ended up self-destructing from overloading."

"—Regarding Princess Houko, I heard that she took the lead in handling the aftermath once she was freed by the military unit that had stormed inside, is that correct…?"

"—Yes, exactly. Not many people know this, but Princess Houko is a certified Geselle from her time studying abroad in Europe. I think it's safe to say that it was thanks to Her Highness assuming leadership of the imperial guard's Technical Force that the emergency repairs to the heavily damaged Pillar of Heaven's structure were able to narrowly succeed in making the entire system escape failure."

"Looks like that princess is doing well for herself, huh?" Halter said cheerfully.

Marie nodded. "Doesn't surprise me. Though she's usually restrained by her position, she's actually well-suited to be a leader." With that, Marie then began to reflect on the content of the news report she had heard at noon…

*—It was reported that Meister Guild had begun to survey the extent of the damage done to the Pillar of Heaven, and restoration work for the various grids that had been damaged were also proceeding smoothly with aid from the biggest players on the international stage.*

*As it stands, Houko is now practically being treated as the savior of the nation. She's expected to hold much more influence over the government in the future, as well. Though much of that is thanks to the ruling party having completely lost the trust of the populace.*

Her mood improving from imagining her friend's bright future, Marie continued, "And what an act she put on. …I'll admit, hearing her condemn me, a dear friend of hers, as a 'self-righteous, arrogant, egotist who must not be placated' made me a bit sad."

"—Ain't that more or less the truth?" The voice that came from above her head immediately dampened her mood again. Marie lethargically raised her body and turned around. "Hearing you say that makes me murderous rather than sad—Mr. Ringleader."

Naoto was wearing a comfortable attire of a Hawaiian shirt with shorts and sandals—as he stood with an exhausted expression on his face. RyuZU was standing slightly behind him at his side, while looking as unconcerned as usual in her formal attire.

Then— Seeing someone walk out of the cabin, Marie loosened her expression. "Ah, AnchoR! It's finally over huh?"

"Ah, Mother...!" AnchoR smiled back as she took her time walking over. Though she had lost all her limbs, and even her torso that remained had also been heavily damaged, she now had provisional limbs to use.

...*As expected of Naoto,* Marie thought with a hint of admiration.

In the first place, AnchoR had been basically totaled. Not to mention, the materials that had been used to make her were all custom-made parts—there was no way that a getaway cruiser like this would have the raw materials that'd be necessary to make serious repairs to her on hand.

As such, the arms and legs that AnchoR was using right now were equivalent to temporary prosthetics designed for automata. Marie had scrambled them together by disassembling the Black Tortoise that Halter had been using and salvaging its parts.

However, no matter how much Marie inspected and analyzed AnchoR's body, unlike for RyuZU whose blueprint she had memorized, in the end, only Naoto could truly grasp AnchoR's structure.

Even just implementing those artificial limbs that Marie had

made, and linking them up to AnchoR's various senses so that she could at least perform some basic movements—had required Naoto to spend the past half-month inside the cruiser's workshop.

However, in spite of Naoto's strenuous efforts—it seemed that he couldn't get her new limbs to fit her all that well after all. AnchoR was tottering as if she couldn't quite get her bearings.

Marie pouted. "—Took you long enough. Just how long were you planning to make her wait you punk."

"Buzz off. ...In the first place, what I wanted to do was truly repair her, not put a band-aid over things like this."

—Indeed, what he had done couldn't be called a repair. It had merely been first-aid, a stop-gap measure. However, even so, this was something that Naoto wouldn't have been capable of before. Though he had used his ears to repair something back to its original pristine state before, putting something together with imperfect substitutes was something new.

*—To be honest,* Marie thought, *I have no idea how he was even able to get those arms and legs working at all. In theory, what I made should have been flawless replacements, yes. I can attest to that.*

*But really, AnchoR's nanogears and pseudo-nerves had all become distorted by heat, some were even partially melted. Not a single part of her body was as it originally had been. There was even the damage from Gennai's shot as well, but even if that hadn't happened, the repairs should have been as difficult as could be.*

*And yet, Naoto was able to mend those distortions through brute-force. When we discovered that even her main cylinder had been damaged, things began to feel hopeless, but Naoto*

*overcame even that with some splendidly delicate precision repairs.*

*Of course, it took time. Half a month even with Naoto's ears and his newly awakened clocksmith skills. However, just how many years should these repairs have taken normally—?*

*Actually, would such a job have even been possible in the first place...?*

*And it's not like he even had cutting-edge equipment at his disposal. He did it all aboard a shabby cruiser swaying along the open sea. In a room that could be at best called a workspace, never a workshop.*

Marie herself didn't feel confident that she could have produced the same result given the same environment and the same amount of time— **not yet at least.**

Getting up from her long chair, Marie rushed to AnchoR's side and gently supported her awkward steps. AnchoR was wearing a white blouse that they had put over her small body like a dress. As Marie pinched a corner of AnchoR's blouse, Naoto cried out, "Hey, oy! Don't you take that off her! Her artificial skin'll—"

"Don't lump me together with a pervert like you— Now then, AnchoR, come this way. Let's rest with Mommy over there and enjoy the refreshing breeze."

"Okay, let's do that..." AnchoR nodded, smiling as Marie hugged AnchoR's shoulders and slowly guided AnchoR to the deck chair.

...Ever since half a month ago, Marie's attitude towards AnchoR had shifted. Marie had been tenderly doting on her with a smile that was drippingly sweet. However, there was someone who wasn't all too happy about that—

“Hey— Stop right there, oy!! You think I’ll just let you just nab my daughter away?!” Naoto suddenly yelled out.

“Huuuh?” Marie scoffed. “Like AnchoR could be left in the care of a pervert like you. Don’t worry, I’ve taken it upon myself to raise this child into a proper lady.”

“A lady?! Did you of all people just use that word?! Screw off, if she’s left to you, it’ll be the birth of another walking landmine!”

“And? If she’s left to you and RyuZU, it’ll just be the making of another pervert. Think calmly on which alternative is better for her future.”

“The hell? No matter how you look at it, having another Marie is far worse for the world— GAhhhhh I don’t want to imagine an AnchoR-chan like that!” Naoto held his head in agony as he imagined AnchoR becoming like Marie.

Ignoring his antics, Marie sat down on the deck chair with AnchoR in her lap. Naoto gasped upon the revelation and turned to whine to RyuZU, who was standing right next to him. “Ryuuuuuu-uuZU!! Marie snatched AnchoR away from us, you know?! What’s wrong with our justice system! Why does custody always go to the mother?!”

“With all due respect, Master Naoto, even if the universe were to be flipped upside-down, Mistress Marie could never be your wife. I will not allow it,” RyuZU replied with a cold gaze.

“Oooooohhhhh?! Of cooooooourse! How could I have forgotten! My wife is RyuZU!!! Wait, what?! Then this makes even less sense, why is Marie getting to challenge me over AnchoR’s custody?!”



“Again, with all due respect, Master Naoto, I have to ask: Are you dissatisfied with me as a wife in some way?”

“——Now hold on a minute there RyuZU, is it just me or are you taking Marie’s side in this?!” Naoto yelled.

RyuZU thought for a little while, then shook her head. “—Certainly not. I simply thought that if I am going to be cuckolded by my own little sister, then I might as well toss her out—so if you can promise me that that will never happen, then perhaps we could work something out.”

“What?! RyuZU, what are you even— We’re not on the same page here at all, are we?! —A, AnchoR?! Who’s better, me or that walking landmine over there next to you?!” Naoto cried out in desperation.

Marie countered by hugging AnchoR close and asking, “Of course I’m better! Right, AnchoR?”

“——ah, eh…” Caught in the middle of her parents’ spat, AnchoR made a troubled face.

Unable to stand watching this go on any longer, Halter cut in exasperatedly. “Oy, stop right there… Asking a child whether she likes Papa or Mama better? That’s downright awful. You’re both classic examples of a bad parent.”

““Don’t imply that we’re married!!”” Naoto and Marie screamed in unison.

Still making a troubled face, AnchoR opened her mouth extremely hesitantly. “…AnchoR likes, Father…”

“Heeeeeeellllll yeaaahhhhh—!”

“Wha—”

Naoto roared, pumping his fist triumphantly while Marie was left in visible shock. However— AnchoR continued with a carefree smile on her face, "...But, AnchoR likes Mother, the one who's with Father, too..."

""..""

"Father's, an amazing person. And when Mother's with him, she smiles... and AnchoR likes Mother when she's smiling."

""".....""

After a long silence, Naoto raised his head in determination. "—Alright, why don't we decide who's more fit to be AnchoR-chan's parent once and for all?"

"...Huh?"

"The one who repairs AnchoR and RyuZU back to their original state shall be awarded custody over AnchoR. No complaints about that right?!"

Marie smiled smugly. "Have you forgotten, Mr. Naoto? The parts that AnchoR was made with—and for that matter, RyuZU as well—were all exceptionally rare materials, yes? Gee, I wonder if you can obtain materials of the same grade when you don't even have the connections and influence that I~~~do~?"

"Pfft—I'll just show off in another way then. So, what do we need to do to get those materials on our hands?!"

Marie snorted snobbishly. "There's a chemical engineering plant on the level of those used for cutting-edge industrial research right in the Breguet Corporation's backyard. All I would have to do is ask and they'll send me the spare parts for RyuZU that we had made with atomic precision... b~ut—"

Her smug face suddenly froze.

“Crap—there aren’t any spare parts for AnchoR?! Ugh… now that it’s come to this, my only option is to raid my family’s weapons factory back home…!” Marie moaned as she bit her nails.

This time, Naoto was the one snorting with a smug smile. “That means we both have a fair shot! Alright, I’ve decided our next destination! We’re gonna raid the Breguet estate—wait, hold on. Why do we have to raid your house?”

As Naoto tilted his head with a blank stare, Marie made a face in disgusted amazement at his stupidity. “Do you seriously think that my father is such a happy-go-lucky fool that he’d simply say ‘Sure, of course,’ if I were to ask him something like, ‘Well, I know I’m an internationally wanted terrorist now, but could you please let me use the Breguets’ assets?!’

If the Breguet Corporation becomes suspected of aiding terrorists, it’d be a huge blow. It’s obvious that he’ll shoot me the moment I show my face! That’s why we’re gonna preempt that with a raid instead! By the way, we’ll also have to raid at least another one of the Five Great Corporations to make the attacks look indiscriminate. …Ah, yes, we might as well take this opportunity to raid the Vacherons. They’d serve perfectly—if not as a smoke screen, then as a punching bag for me to vent my anger.”

Naoto nodded and gave her a thumbs up. “Alright then, let’s go with that! AnchoR-chan, make sure you don’t miss any of Papa’s gallant actions when we get there!”

“Mama’s gonna drive just how great she is into this good-for-nothing’s brain, so make sure to watch closely okay AnchoR ♪ ?”

“…Hmm? …Okay!” AnchoR was completely lost by the sudden developments in the conversation—however, she simply smiled and nodded because it looked like her two parents were happily enjoying themselves.

Halter slapped his forehead. “Oy! More importantly, if you two really plan to go all the way to France on a scrappy boat like this, then I’d like to ask you to review our present location first… and what’s behind us as well while you’re at it.”

Marie let out a fed-up sigh, asking as she brushed AnchoR’s hair, “What… another pursuer? They’re so damn persistent… Seriously, who do these guys work for?”

They’d already been attacked three times in the last half month. Though they had successfully repelled those attacks without trouble, it’s understandable that they’d start getting tired of it after being attacked so relentlessly.

Halter’s response was as apathetic as Marie’s question. “Who knows… We’re in the Bay of Bengal right now—so take your pick from Myanmar, Malaysia, or Bangladesh.”

Marie turned around to see what was behind them. What she found were a high-speed destroyer and a group of small automaton boats trailing them in hot pursuit. The enemy ship and automatons appeared to be faster than them, they were getting closer and closer by the second.

“—Oh those guys, yeah, that’s the Thai Coast Guard. I’ve been chased by them before in the past,” Vermouth piped up as he bent over the guardrails on the deck.

“Oy oy… why is the Thai Coast Guard out here in these waters? We’re about to reach the Indian Ocean… This is definitely gonna turn into trouble…” Halter groaned as he ran a hand over his head.

“Trouble as in for us or for international politics?” Naoto asked blankly.

“Interna—”

“So, it’s irrelevant then,” Naoto immediately declared, upon which he booted up the thermobaric buster that they had salvaged from the Black Tortoise and affixed to the tail of their cruiser—but just then, “Oy Marie, I just thought of a good idea. Let’s commandeer that destroyer,” Naoto suddenly proposed, his face all smiles.

Halter groaned, “—Are you seriously thinking of getting across the Indian Ocean on a warship? That’d make us stand out far too much no matter how you look at it. It’d be like waving a big old flag to alert others of our presence.”

“Meh, it’s not like people have been having trouble finding us as it is. Besides, we’re not gonna sail across the Indian Ocean; we’re gonna dock at Thailand.”

Upon those words, Marie sank into thought while Halter knit his brows in even sharper doubt. Only Vermouth responded with a joyful smile. “I like the sound of that! The Thais’re a great people y’know~? The women are beautiful and meek; plus, they’ve even got another variety! I’m sure ‘Naoko-chan’ would be welcomed with wide open arms in Thailand no matter what he’s packing!” Vermouth laughed.

Marie sighed. “…Well, true, that’s not a bad idea. It pisses me off, but I have to admit that you’re on the ball, Naoto.”

“Oh ho? What’s that? You interested in the ladyboys Missy?”

“I mean that we can head for France by land if we make port in Thailand. Don’t lump me in with yourself, pervert,” Marie replied as she shot over a threatening gaze.

“…Taking a land route from Thailand? What’s your reasoning behind that?” Naoto asked, tilting his head.

Marie nodded, then said in a single breath, “I’m referring to Krung Thep Mahanakhon Amon Rattanakosin Mahinthara

Ayuthaya Mahadilok Phop Noppharat Ratchathani Burirom Udomratchaniwet Mahasathan Amon Piman Awatan Sathit Sakkathattiya Witsanukam Prasit."

Naoto furrowed his brows with a questioning look. "……Sorry, why are you chanting a curse again?"

"That's the official name of the Thai capital, Bangkok," Marie readily answered. "There was a time in the past when Bangkok—Thailand's multiple-grid metropolis—had fallen into dysfunction. At the time, Meister Guild had intervened and gotten Malaysia, Myanmar, Vietnam, and Bangladesh to sign a treaty to adjust their borders with Thailand so that Bangkok's grids could receive functional support from the grids of the neighboring countries."

"…Well, put simply, that led to Thailand's national borders turning into a colander that caused a number of black-market trade routes to grow. So, we should be able to find parts that we could use to repair AnchoR and RyuZU with before we head up north from there."

"—Man, I really don't get politics…"

"Well, in essence—" Marie declared with an exceptionally ferocious smile. "All you have to know is that we should sink all the automaton boats, knock all those aboard the destroyer unconscious, capture their ship, and nonchalantly sail it to dock at one of the Thai military's harbors."

*—Looks like Naoto's influence has taken its toll,* Halter thought. Of course, he would never say that aloud, he could only imagine what kind of reaction he would get if he did.

"Hahah! It might be tasteless of me to ask this now, but just to make sure, you're saying that we should play pirate in the face of this barrage of cannon shots, right?! Y'all understand just how well equipped that destroyer is, right?!" Vermouth shrilly yelled in excitement.

Naoto replied just as excitedly, “Six 15 centimeter autocannons, eighteen cruise missile silos, a hundred and twenty-one men aboard it, and twenty-eight aerial drones to top it off! —Easy peasy right?!”

“Yes, yes, I love it!! You’re totally insane!! Well then, I’ll be turning our ship around—let’s commence the attack!!” Vermouth yelled as he turned the cruiser’s steering wheel.

Paying no mind to the commotion, RyuZU spoke up, seeming to have suddenly recalled something. “By the way, Mistress Marie —I have something that I need to tell you.”

“—I’m getting nothing but bad feelings about this, but what?”

“Right.” RyuZU nodded. “No matter how much of a fuss you make, Mistress Marie, AnchoR’s master is Master Naoto. Because of that, AnchoR cannot be separated from Master Naoto beyond a certain threshold of distance, so keep that in mind.”

Hearing those words, Marie’s eyes widened as she gasped. Her vision shook, as the immense dismay nearly knocked her off her feet. *What?! So basically, If I want to own AnchoR—* “—It, It’d automatically mean that I’d have to stay together with this pervert?!” Marie cried out in despair.

Seeing the scene they were making, Halter retorted with a voice that sounded like he was truly fed up with everything from the bottom of his heart. “...Hey you guys. You seriously haven’t forgotten that all of us are internationally wanted terrorists now, right? We’re all gonna be stuck together from now on whether you guys like it or not.”

““—No way, I can’t believe that!!”” Naoto and Marie screamed in unison.

Halter sighed heavily. “...What I can’t believe is how stupid you two are, geez...” *You guys are beginning to make me feel like*

*the idiot for being the only one sweating bullets over the considerable fleet we're up against by ourselves.*

Halter then suddenly turned towards Vermouth, who was steering at the helm of the cruiser. "—Speaking of which, so just how long do you plan to tag along with us, greenhorn?"

"Geez Master! We're literally in the same boat here, is there really any need to be so cold, my cyborg brother?" Vermouth laughed flippantly. "Well, my intention is to go my own way once we set foot on land, but before I do, I'd like to ask you guys to return me to a proper artificial body. Abandoning me as I am is much too cruel isn't it?" Vermouth had pointed to his glamorous body as his blonde hair waved in the wind.

Halter silently nodded. *Gotta admit, I'd ask for the same thing in his position.*

"—And well, even after we part, if anything interesting ever happens, just know that I'll come running. I mean, this kid's antics are just too fun to pass up y'know—"

*I figured as much,* Halter thought as he shrugged his shoulders. He then kicked open the metal box sitting right next to him. *Thunk.* Inside the box was a bunch of treasure—as if. Rather, the box was stuffed with all kinds of ordinance ranging from small firearms to large artillery. Halter rummaged through the box and pulled out a large single-shot gear launcher and set it on his shoulder.

Seeming to have recalled something Naoto said, "Hey Marie, we should give a warning before attacking, if only as a formality, right?"

"I guess you're right. Let's see… I struggle a bit with my Thai, but…"

"Oh? I'm surprised to hear that Little Miss Genius actually has

something she's bad at. In that case, leave it to me," Vermouth teased.

Marie scowled. "So you can speak Thai?"

"I mentioned that they're a 'great people' didn't I? I'm an ex-spy you know? Don't look down on us."

"...Losing to you at something has gotta be the second most irritating thing in the world. Once we land I'll master the language immediately, right in front of your eyes."

"Feel free. —So? What should I tell them?"

"...Let's see. 'Please surrender your ship to us obediently without resistance. You'll all probably be court-martialed for having your destroyer taken from you by a single cruiser, but don't worry. We'll be sure to leave you all in such a pitiful state that if you just tell them that it was Second Ypsilon that did it, they'll let you off the hook'—something like that?"

"Okay, don't get wet seeing my lingual mastery now." Vermouth snickered before taking a deep breath. He then yelled into the cruiser's bullhorn in Thai:

**"Test test. Hey, you, the destroyer over there! You must be feeling pretty discontent being ridden by a pack of virgins right?! Well I'll make you moan with my top-notch hip-pounding so loud that you won't ever want another man inside you, so wet your deck as you wait for me! I'm coming all the way to your bridge! Those pathetic virgins aboard you can just plunge into the ocean while covering their shrinkage in shame!"**

—Immediately after, their cruiser was showered with a hail of cannonfire without warning. Marie hit the deck to the sound of the deafening bombardment as the impact of the shells hitting water caused columns of ocean to splash up all around their

cruiser. "...What did you tell them?" Marie asked suspiciously.

"I simply translated what you said for them," Vermouth replied with a straight face.

Halter let out a deeply-fatigued sigh as he nodded. "……Yeah, I'm sure you did... Seems like this greenhorn failed to properly convey his good faith to them. Well, I guess you can't really expect to convey something that wasn't there to begin with though."

"Hah haahh! Translating is hard y'know, Master!" Vermouth yelled in response, not a single shred of regret or remorse in his voice.

The barrage of cannonfire tore through the sky before dropping into the ocean water, producing violent waves that perilously rocked their cruiser. All the while, the sounds of the explosions were shaking the air all around them.

Despite how tense the situation was, Marie seemed to be enjoying yourself. "Last call! Vermouth, you take the helm! Approach the enemy vessel at max speed while evading its barrage! Halter, you're in charge of our rear! Sink the automata boats with that gear-launcher and that machine gun!"

Similarly, Naoto also gave out his orders. "RyuZU, once we get close enough for you to jump across, knock everyone aboard that destroyer out. AnchoR-chan, you sit back and watch as Papa gallantly commandeers the steering mechanism of that destroyer!"

"Certainly," RyuZU said as she bowed.

"...Father, Mother, do your best... hm!" AnchoR cheered with a smile.

•

...As Halter watched Marie and Naoto give out their orders, he

thought, *I wonder if Naoto and Marie have even noticed the complete and indisputable truth that—they're already equivalent to gods on this planet.*

*Can they truly be called human anymore? How they see themselves is irrelevant. Regardless of what they think, ordinary people who come to learn of their power will treat them as gods. Hence why we've already been given the moniker Second Ypsilon—or the second coming of "Y."*

*It's to be expected that the world won't leave them alone. There's no way that people would brush off physical gods who exist in reality, especially after seeing the miracles that they perform—Naoto and Marie have grown…*

*They practically broke into divine territory in a single leap and then went on to fly right over past it. It felt not only nostalgic, but exhilarating, to witness them realize such incredible feats that I myself had aspired to in my younger days.*

*But on the other hand, the tinge of unease that accompanied that excitement has also only continued to grow with each passing day. For me to feel this way must mean that, as expected—* "I guess I've gotten old…" Halter sighed as he muttered words that gave him a sense of deja vu.

He then turned towards the automaton wearing a formal black dress. She was readying herself to activate Mute Scream at any time, to end everything instantly as Naoto had instructed.

"Hey Missy. RyuZU."

"—I do believe I have already warned you not to address me so casually before, but yes, what is it?"

"Do you think that this too is something that 'The Gear of Fate' proscribed?"

In response to that, RyuZU turned quiet for a moment, then displayed an elegant smile. “Though I am not equipped with the functionality to measure such a thing—” RyuZU paused to turn her gaze ever so slightly upwards. There—her eyes found the Equatorial Spring turning in the sky far above.

“What way does that spring appear to be turning to you?” she asked.

“...Clockwise, I’m quite sure.”

“Is that so. However, if you head just a little further south from here and cross the equator before looking up again, surely you would answer counterclockwise.”

...Their cruiser was still shaking just as much as before. If even one shell of the shower of cannonfire they were under hit their ship, it would be blown to pieces; despite that, RyuZU continued as calmly as ever, as if she were looking up at a clear blue sky...

“There may be as many subjective truths as there are observers in the world—but even so, there is still one indisputable fact: That spring is turning. Is that not the only thing that truly matters?”

*...An automaton who can philosophize on the relative nature of reality.* Halter couldn’t help but question whether an automaton’s view on fate could apply to the human condition.

*But at the same time, she’s credible exactly because of who she is—RyuZU’s an automaton that can move inside Imaginary Time. She’s proof that even the supposedly indisputable reality known as Time is really nothing more than a subjective truth.*

*—Something that, no matter how it’s twisted, or how it’s bent, or even if it begins to turn in reverse—one cannot deny that it is still turning all the same. So, that’s what fate is.*

Right before his eyes were two idiot wonders with the power to change the world. They were currently having a grand old time in a hail of cannonfire.

"Quit diddle-daddling Halter! We need you to help as well! You should at least be able to operate some artillery even with that crappy body, no?!"

"There ain't much ammunition left for the thermobaric buster y'know old man! Do your damn job!"

"—Well, would you look at that. Perhaps you should get to work as they say, Mr. Junkbot."

*...Good grief.*

Halter couldn't help but laugh bitterly. "...Well, if this is the guidance of Lady Fate or whatever, I guess I'll go along with it." With that, Halter shouldered the gear launcher and aligned its sight on the target.

As he did so, he couldn't help but think of the day the world had ended—and had been reborn in gears. As he stood before History as witness to the second advent of that epic event he thought, *I guess no matter how old I become, I'll always be just another brat like those two*. Halter rubbed his slippery bald head with a tired smile, and gently pulled the trigger.

—Click, clack, click, clack.

The gears turned and turned.

Systematically, mechanically, inexorably.

They marked the march of time effortlessly just by fulfilling their function.

Even if a clock were to stop ticking, it wouldn't matter.

Even if the cogs of time became broken or twisted, they would surely simply continue to turn.

Systematically, mechanically, inexorably.

Click, clack, click, clack—

—The gears simply continued to turn in the direction that they ought to turn—

But as for just whose dreams had determined that they ought to turn that way, not even the gods could say...

# (Joint) Afterword

On a certain day of a certain month, at a certain location. The voice of Editor S— Excuse me—The Honorable Judge S resounded.

"The defendant, Tsubaki Himana—shall step forward."

The prosecutor—Kamiya—read out his charges: "The accused did nothing with the plot that I, Yuu Kamiya, had long since passed over to him at the beginning of the year for an entire six months—"

"Objection!" Himana shouted in defense of himself. He felt like he had heard the quote "A man who is his own lawyer has a fool for a client" in some foreign drama on TV before, but unfortunately, he had neither any allies present nor did he really have any basis to deny that he was a fool.

And so, he continued in a strong tone, "Your Honor! The prosecution is wantonly trying to slander my character! It's true that I had received something from him back at the start of the year, but you can't call a short memo that can fit on a single piece of A4-sized paper a plot! In addition," Himana paused to glare at Kamiya before continuing, "I strongly contend that Kamiya should also be charged if the purpose of this trial is to determine whose fault it was for the manuscript being delayed!"

Hearing the defendant's claim, the prosecutor shook his head and sighed as he offered his rebuttal. "Your Honor. With regards to the matter at hand, in the first place—the content of the third volume was originally intended to all fit in the second volume, and yet, here we are. From that fact alone, I believe it goes without saying that my plot outline for the third volume was more than elaborate enough."

“Objection, objection! The content that was originally intended to be put into the second volume was greatly altered all the way back when it was decided that the volume would be split into two! This was done in order to agree with the cliffhanger that I wrote for the end of the second volume! To suggest that the plot summary was already prepared is a blatant lie!”

“You were the one who changed the original plot! Take some damn responsibility and fix the plot holes that you created yourself!”

“You already told me that before! And when I did just that, the story ended up falling apart immediately! Do you deny it?!”

“Don’t admit your own incompetence so boldly!! Why can’t you just come up with alterations that don’t lead to plot holes?!”

“Hah— Your Honor, did you hear that! Kamiya was the one who told me that he’d leave the editing of the plot of Clockwork Planet to me. When I had asked him for help, he replied, ‘NG*L’s workload is killing me right now so ask me later.’ ...This was clearly a breach of contract—”

—The courtroom flared white-hot with drama. Claims were being thrown out from both sides! Alas, with whom does the fault rest?! What would be true justice?! Fully in swing, they continued to exchange lines in a heated debate *(the contents of which have been omitted) just like actors in a courtroom drama—!

“—Are you two done screwing around yet?”

““Yessir.””

Hearing the cold tone of The Honorable Judge S— Excuse me — Editor S, Kamiya and Himana immediately kneeled humbly onto the floor in unison. Matters like crime and punishment or who was right and who was wrong were all summarily answered with, “Both of you are guilty.”

It was an awful script. But well, one could argue that, at its core, a courtroom drama is nothing but— "I don't care about the fruitless blame game you two have been playing… More importantly," Editor S paused after declaring the pure and unadulterated truth as he took out the cover of the manuscript and pointed to one spot, "right here—why does it now say 'secondary author' instead of 'co-author'?"

—Author: Yuu Kamiya, Secondary Author: Tsubaki Himana

Himana looked away from the cover as he answered, "Ah— Well, you know how… you often hear about artists breaking up due to 'creative differences'?"

"Why are you spouting out lines like band members do when they're interviewed about a break up? What's with that air of newfound enlightenment?" Editor S quipped with an unamused glare.

To which Kamiya bravely replied—while inevitably turning in the other direction as he did so, "Creative differences, huh… now isn't that a convenient way to put it. It's been a nonstop cycle of me fixing all the plot holes that pop up ever since Tsubaki started writing volume one…

As this went on again and on again, before I knew it, I was the one coming up with the developments, the settings, and even the text itself down to every single line of dialogue… And ultimately even a considerable amount of the narration was my own, as well.

When I realized all this, I was shocked. It led me to think that if Tsubaki can be called a co-author, then we might as well add your name to the list of authors as well."

They then turned their eyes towards each other and began harmoniously in unison, "We had other candidates too, like 'Yuu Kamiya with Tsubaki Himana.'"

“Yeah, there was also ‘Kamiya featuring TSUBAKI’ and ‘Yuu Kamiya~with help from Tsubaki Himana~ haha~just kidding~!’ as well.”

“—Haaah, well, I do apologize but I’ll have to interrupt this report of past buffoonery that is somehow occurring with you two’s entirely serious faces. Anyway, I’ll pretend I didn’t hear that on account of you two having the sense not to choose any of those in the end. Though, if both of you agree that it was Mr. Kamiya who wrote practically all of this volume—then why not just remove Mr. Tsubaki from the list of authors altogether?”

“I would have loved to do that… but the problem is that I can’t say that Tsubaki **didn’t contribute anything either** ,” Kamiya continued with eyes like those of a dead fish as he continued to kneel on the cold floor. “Aside from offering interesting ideas, he almost completely rewrote the parts I wrote. But, I guess you can say that when the developments of the story become as grand and convoluted as they did in this volume, reining things in just ends up being my job, somehow.”

Hearing that, Himana gazed up at the heavens with exactly the same look in his eyes as he muttered, “Yeah, the volume could barely be called co-authored at that point. That’s why we came to the conclusion that for the future, if we can’t divide the work of each volume up exactly fifty-fifty, then there’s no choice for us but to finally accept that we’ll have to assign separate roles for one another.”

“In summary—” Kamiya began, and which Himana finished for him, “—we learned that things that haven’t been attempted aren’t that way because they haven’t been considered, but rather, it’s because those things have been considered a bad idea.”

“That can’t be true, there have been those who think of something and only realize that it’s impossible after attempting it as well. After all, I see two such people in front of me right now,” Editor S said in tired amazement as the two in front of him were

showing expressions of Zen-like peace.

He looked like he was having trouble coming up with the words to express himself as if a migraine had come on, but somehow managed to form coherent sentences in the end. “You two turned the manuscript in **way too late.** Could it be that the two of you are idiots?”

*—You’re just figuring that out now—?!* The two gasped in genuine shock; however, just as they were about to voice that thought, they swallowed the words back down upon noticing Editor S’s stabby gaze.

Editor S then sighed, looking worn-out as he asked to confirm, “...Umm, so just hypothetically, how would the two of you handle things if Mr. Tsubaki were the one who ended up doing most of the work for the next volume?”

“Eh? In that case it’d be just as you would expect.”

“We’d simply credit Yuu Kamiya as the secondary author next time then.”

“...What happened to the talk of assigning separate responsibilities to each other?” As Editor S rubbed his temples, the two answered with great pomp and circumstance and even with a certain sound effect added behind them for a little extra drama:

“Assigning separate roles to each other. It’s true that we did say that we would do that... buuuuut!”

“We didn’t go so far as to say~that we’ve decided~how we’ll divide those responsibilities up yet... diiiid we?”

Zawa... Zawa...*(Unintelligible muttering in the background that makes the ensuing silence of the three feel all the more tense...)

“Looook here now, you two. I’m about to slap both of you guys sideways, even being as kind and gentle a person as I am,” Editor S said with a smile, glancing back down at the manuscript in his hands. “...Well, fine. I don’t really mind as long as the manuscript is turned in on time. So, **where are things at for the fourth volume—** ”

—At that moment, a cold, strong wind blew right in his face. As he looked back up, there was no trace whatsoever remaining of the two who had just been there. They had left two stuffed animals behind in their seats, as if to suggest that the animals would take their place instead.

Facing that fact, Editor S sighed ve~ry deeply. “...If only they would show that kind of total unity in mind and spirit in their work as well...”




いつかやるぞやるぞと思いつつとうとうやってしまった
衝撃の謎の銀河美少女ナオコちゃん(歓喜

このキャラデザは3巻の内容を聞かされる前に
女装したらどんなかんじかなー？と
サラサラっと描いてしまったものである‥‥が

まさか今巻で本当にしてしまうとは衝撃の事実です(ニヤリ

# 参
## クロプラ設定資料

# The Third Clockwork Planet Design File: Naoko-chan

I had thought to myself that I'd definitely definitely do this one day and now I've finally done it...

The stunning mysterious galactic belle Naoko-chan (beaming face).

This character design is something I drew under a spell wondering, "Hmm, what would Naoto look like in drag?" before I was even informed of the contents of the third volume... but I never thought that it would actually happen in the story. I was shocked (smug grin).

**Top:**

Her jacket comes with a hood

**Background:**

Naoto (female symbol)

# クロプラ設定資料 肆



# 終焉機 Anchor

衝撃の大人モード
身長はリューズの少し下くらい

天使のようで悪魔のようなイメージ
戦闘力はラスボスより強い隠しボス(味方)

通称、シンプル・イズ・ヤベェ
開幕強制カンストダメージを叩き出す理不尽の権化(味方)

カワイク最強なイメージでデザインしました(味方)

# The Fourth Clockwork Planet Design File: Still Weight AnchoR

AnchoR in her stunning adult mode Her height is just a little shorter than RyuZU

I tried to make her look both angelic and demonic.

Her combat strength is like that of a hidden boss who's stronger than the last boss, but allied to the player instead.

Or as I like to call it, simply awesome.

An avatar of unfairness whose first strike is both unavoidable and does the maximum amount of damage that the game engine can handle while still in the cut scene.

I designed her with the image of a cute ultimate boss.

**Background:**

Still Weight AnchoR