
3
BLACK BULLET
THE DESTRUCTION OF THE WORLD BY FIRE
SHIDEN KANZAKI
ILLUSTRATION BY SAKI UKAI



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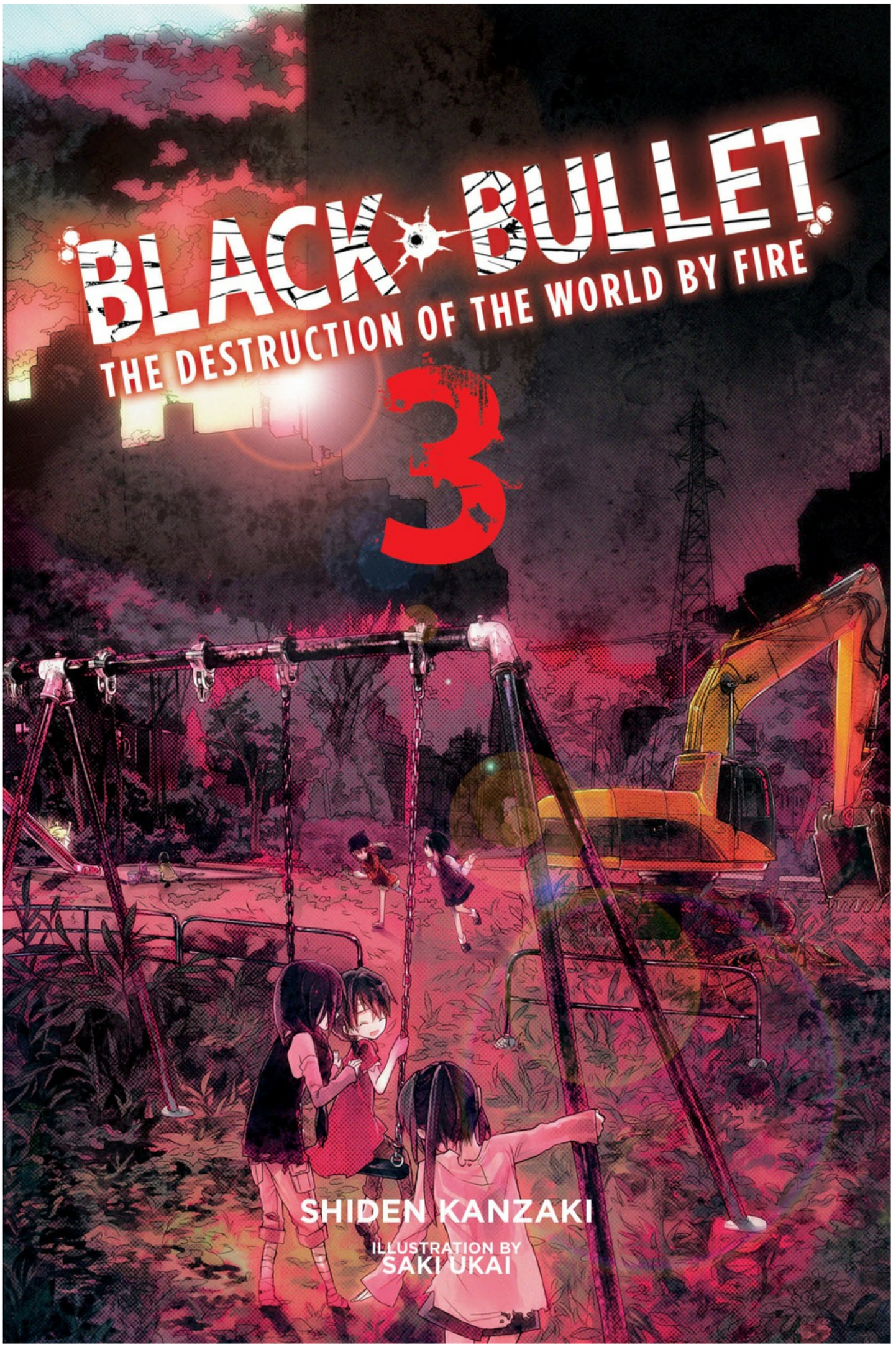
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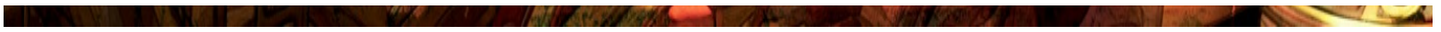

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THE DESTRUCTION OF THE WORLD BY FIRE
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SAKI UKAI




"YES! YES! YES! YES! YES! YES! YES! YES! YES!"
"I'M RENTARO SATOMI, AND I'LL BE YOUR TEACHER... DO YOU HAVE ANY QUESTIONS?"
RENTARO SATOMI
A high school student and employee of the Tendo Civil Security Agency, which is run by Kisara Tendo. He protects Tokyo Area with his Initiator partner, Enju.
KISARA TENDO
Both a student and the head of the Tendo Civil Security Agency at the same time, she is a former rich girl who has been forced into poverty. She's got godlike abilities with a sword, and Rentaro carries a serious torch for her.




YUZUKI KATAGIRI
Like Enju and Tina, she is one of the Cursed Children who has the Gastrea virus inside her body. She is prejudiced against Rentaro and calls him "Pervert!"
"WELL, WHAT CAN I SAY? LOOKS LIKE YOU'RE DOING WELL."
"HMPH, I DON'T NEED YOUR SARCASM, BOYO."
TAMAKI KATAGIRI
Promoter who is the president of the Katagiri Civil Security Agency. He and his younger sister, Yuzuki, get by with just the two of them in their agency, but they don't make much money.
Apple Tea




SHOMA NAGISAWA
A young man with deep ties to Rentaro and Kisara. He doesn't talk much and seems weak at first glance, but he's actually a very strong Promoter. He is paired with Midori Fuse.
"GIVE IT UP. THERE IS NO GLORY OR PRIDE TO BE HAD IN THIS FIGHT. IT'LL BE BORING WHETHER YOU WIN OR LOSE."
MIDORI FUSE
Shoma Nagisawa's partner. She is one of the Cursed Children and an Initiator. Very guarded and shy. Apparently, she has a secret hidden under her hat...



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VOLUME 3



BLACK BULLET

THE DESTRUCTION OF THE WORLD BY FIRE

3

SHIDEN KANZAKI

ILLUSTRATIONS BY SAKI UKAI

YEN ON

NEW YORK

PROLOGUE ALDEBARAN

There was nothing more tedious than patrolling on a hot and humid night. The man had already been walking for two hours, the rifle sling hanging from his shoulder digging in. Even if this was something that he did every day, he had long lost his ability to concentrate.

Sweat kept pouring out no matter how much he wiped with the towel around his neck, and although the undergrowth swayed occasionally with a small, viscous breeze, his skin under the thick cotton camouflage did not feel the slightest bit cooler. The smell of hot earth filled his nostrils.

He was alone, jungle boots crunching along the ground as he walked. Sergeant Yoshifusa Sato of the Ground Self-Defense Force was on patrol again today. This was the third time he had been made to go on patrol after losing a card game against his seniors.

As he walked, he hit his flickering flashlight to make it work properly. Finally, he hit it with all his strength and it suddenly turned on full blast. *All right*, he thought, shining the light on his surroundings.

Tokyo Area Outer District, District 40. Yoshifusa was patrolling at the border between heaven and hell of his cramped world. From his perspective, on his left-hand side, forest continued as far as his light could reach, and on his right-hand side was the face of a jet-black wall that stood straight up, blocking the way.

Yoshifusa stopped, looking at the sky for just a minute. But the wall towered over him, piercing the sky, and he, standing near its base, could not see the top. Of course, this wall did not really reach the heavens, but that didn’t matter to Yoshifusa, who was at most 180 centimeters tall.

In any case, it was outrageously large.

The Monolith. Standing 1.618 kilometers high and 1 kilometer wide, it was an enormous rectangular Varanium structure. It was a lump of metal that shone

deeper than the darkness.

Yes, it was more than 1.6 kilometers tall.

Low-flying clouds could come down to an altitude of six hundred meters, so at times, the Monolith pierced through the clouds. Even Japan's highest peak, Mount Fuji, was no more than 3.8 kilometers high: Two Monoliths on top of each other needed only a little more added to them to equal the sacred peak. Even its width—an entire kilometer—could easily take Yoshifusa fifteen minutes to walk.

Looking at something so outrageously large, it at times gave him the illusion of being lost in a land of giants. Who could easily accept that this was the work of man, not God? These Monoliths had been built every ten meters, stretching for hundreds of kilometers to surround Tokyo Area like the Great Wall of China. In a sense, they were as advanced as the ancient pyramids, and could be called a modern-day Tower of Babel.

Yoshifusa raised his arms and pointed his light at one end of the Monolith, and the ring of light drew up the stenciled words NO. 0032 from the darkness. The Monoliths could also be called a kind of curtain that protected mankind. Outside of them spread a terrible hell, with monsters that caused one to cower in fear clamoring around—monsters that used to be human.

Yoshifusa kept walking, and when he finally made it past the edge of the Monolith, he gazed silently at the darkness that spread into the outside world.

Yoshifusa once had a wife and son, but now they were probably living in eternal suffering on the other side as Gastrea. Or, they may have been reduced to beings who did not even care about that.

While he was lost in thought, there was a sudden rustling in the bushes, and he reflexively pointed the light in that direction. As he did so, something flew by in front of his eyes at high speed. Right before it plunged into the thicket, he was just barely able to tell that it had been a mouse. His heart beat loudly, and he gasped for a moment as he forgot how to breathe.

Yoshifusa shook his head. *This is stupid. What am I afraid of?* In the ten years since the Gastrea War, there had never been an instance of a non–Stage Five Gastrea successfully infiltrating the Monolith barrier.

Just as his line of thought shifted, a pungent stink suddenly reached his nostrils, and he covered his nose. It stank like a gutter. *Where in the world is it coming from…?* Just then, Yoshifusa heard the ragged panting of a carnivore above his head, and his whole body stiffened.

The type of sweat pouring out of him changed. Earlier, he had been sweating because of the heat and humidity, but now, it was because of extreme chills. He even had nausea from feeling completely alone. He took a deep breath to keep himself from panicking and slowly turned the light toward the sound.

A body, slimy and glittering, reflected the light that was projected onto Yoshifusa's retina. His light fell from his hands, and immediately after, he felt the strength leaving his legs. He almost fell to his knees.

"Wh…oa…"

There was a gigantic being about fifty meters directly above Yoshifusa, who was near the base of the Monolith. Its massive body spread throughout his field of vision, covering the sky, and it was clinging onto the Monolith. In the darkness, the silhouette of its thorax rose and fell. The breath it expelled gave off an intense heat while it made the air vibrate with a low-frequency sound. From where Yoshifusa stood, it was hard to grasp the scale of it, but it looked to be about as big as a jumbo jet.

"No way… Is that a Gastrea…?" It was impossible. How? When in the world did it get here? But the situation grew only stranger while he remained clueless.

Suddenly, the sound of a gunshot echoed in the night sky. Immediately after came a chain of angry roars and screams while gunshots continued intermittently. The assault had come from the self-defense-force residence directly in front of Yoshifusa—a place constructed near the inside wall of the Monolith where Yoshifusa and the others in the self-defense force lived.

"An enemy attack?" Yoshifusa stood stock-still, in a daze. He didn't think that there was something wrong with his head. However, with all the strange occurrences following one after another, he was unable to give his brain a reasonable interpretation.

Suddenly returning to his senses, he ran toward the residence hall with all his might, throwing his body against the door and rushing inside.

The bodies of his fellow squad members were being devoured by monsters.

The monsters were shaped like ants. However, they were no ordinary ants: Their bodies, which had been enlarged thanks to the Gastrea virus, came up to Yoshifusa's chest even when all their legs were on the ground. They were the giant-ant Gastrea, Model Ants.

The ants stopped their repulsive feast and pointed their heads toward the newcomer, *L*-shaped antenna and all. Dazed, Yoshifusa cried a desperate "Why?" for the nth time. Land Gastrea should not have been able to approach the Monolith. That established theory was being overturned in the most repulsive way possible before his eyes. The only thing he knew now was that he was in the midst of his worst nightmare.

"Get away from my friends…!" Shouldering his rifle, he quickly pulled the trigger. There was a sharp recoil on his shoulder and with a flash of the muzzle, the right eye of the ant next to him blew away, lodging sticky Gastrea bits into the ceiling. Yoshifusa was a diligent soldier; his movements were conditioned reflexes, and they were already after their next target. As consecutive rounds hit, the Gastrea let out dreadful screams. Even so, Yoshifusa showered them with a barrage of 5.56 millimeter bullets as he retreated.

I can win. Just as he thought that, chills suddenly shot down his spine. He reflexively jumped onto a rock and aimed upward. Through his scope, he saw an ant's brutal pincers scrape the spot where he had just been. Wondering what had happened, he lifted his face from the iron sight, and there, Yoshifusa froze with despair.

Before he knew it, he had been surrounded by a countless number of Model Ant Gastrea. There had to be more than a hundred of them. *What about the other squad members?* Yoshifusa mourned as he looked around. But the gunshots and screams had already stopped.

It looked like he was the only living, breathing human being left in this building. The Gastrea gave off a beastly smell, completely un-insectoid, as they opened their jaws, sticky with mucus. As the circle slowly closed in on him, he heard the pincers snapping with anticipation.

Yoshifusa closed his eyes. He had gone through mental simulations many

times of what he would do when this happened. He was tempted, but as an advance guard responsible for national security, he could not allow himself to become like his wife and child. Instead, Yoshifusa abandoned his rifle and pulled the pin of a hand grenade, hugging it tightly, entrusting his prayers to those who would come after him.

Someone, anyone, please do something. At this rate, Tokyo Area will be in trouble.

In District 1 of Tokyo Area, in the basement shelter of the Seitenshi's palace, the door of the situation room of the Japan National Security Council, or JNSC, opened roughly, and the Seitenshi hurried in. As she entered, the members of the Cabinet who were already assembled and her aide, Kikunojo Tendo, stood up all at once from the long desk they were sitting at.

The Seitenshi waved them back to their seats with a hand and gazed at Kikunojo sternly. "What is the situation?"

"Ma'am. Today, at 2130 hours, enemy Gastrea appeared in the vicinity of Monolith 32. Their number is unknown. We still do not know the details."

"Send observation satellites equipped with night imaging, unmanned drones, and nearby self-defense squads immediately. We must understand the situation as soon as possible."

"I thought you would say that, so I've already made the arrangements."

The Seitenshi rewarded his efforts with a nod.

The direct phone line rang just then and Daimon, the Minister of Defense, jumped for it. After exchanging a few clipped words with the person on the other end, he raised his head to the group. "The main body of the self-defense force that was sent out as support fought with Stage One Model Ant Gastrea. They just reported that they were able to annihilate them before they started a Pandemic."

Relief and joy took hold of the situation room.

"There is more," Minister Daimon continued, still holding the phone up to his ear. He grimaced for a moment, and then slowly turned a pale face toward the others.

“The advance troops who arrived before the main force… They’ve been destroyed by a giant Gastrea thought to be the boss of the Model Ants. The boss had already left by the time the main force arrived.”

Kikunojo frowned. “Already left, you said? It did not invade our borders?”

“No, there are pictures of the boss taken by one of the advance troops who was killed. Those pictures are being sent now—Here they come.”

An image was displayed abruptly on the gigantic electroluminescent panel in front of them. The Seitenshi narrowed her eyes. With the camera shake and dark lighting, it was not easy to make anything out in the blurry picture. The photographer must have been in a hurry, so he didn’t use a flash. In the midst of the darkness, the even darker Monolith could be seen faintly. There was a giant Gastrea hanging onto it, its silhouette terrifying enough to cause chills even though it was frustratingly hard to see.

Eventually, the second image was displayed. This one was also too dark. However, it struck something somewhere in the Seitenshi’s memory. Where had she seen this Gastrea before…?

The instant the third image was displayed, the situation room broke out in a frenzy. The Seitenshi’s eyes widened as far as they could go, glued to the panel. The third image was completely different from the other two. A searchlight from the ground had hit the Gastrea, and just its head floated out of the darkness. The repulsive Gastrea was a being that the Cabinet members present could not forget even if they wanted to.

“The Gastrea with the ability to corrode Varanium…the Stage Four, Aldebaran……” The Seitenshi said the name of the infamous Gastrea quietly, rubbing her arms. If this Gastrea encountered the self-defense force, the main force would not get off easy.

However, why was it here? How did it get past the Monoliths…? No matter how much she thought about it, she could not come up with a clear answer. All she could say was that something unbelievable was about to happen in Tokyo Area.

The Gastrea in the picture was wiggling its mouthparts, doing something to the Monolith.

The Seitenshi stood up from her chair and waved her hands. “Investigate the Monolith Aldebaran was on, Monolith 32, right away. Call Varanium experts and have them inspect it. Also, contact the ministries involved to have them give preference to the supercomputer CPU for the analysis. Everyone, this is going to be a long day.”



After that, time flowed slowly but steadily.

As time went on, those in the situation room received reports from the investigation team that mixed fact and fiction together. It was hard to tell how many hours had passed, but right around when the night sky was starting to lighten, decisive evidence was finally displayed. The panel in front of them held pictures that had been taken by an unmanned surveillance aircraft.

The pictures were zoomed-in images of the Monolith near where the Stage Four Gastrea had been. The first picture focused on a white stain about thirty centimeters in diameter that was shaped like mold. In the second picture, the white object had spread to about a meter in diameter. In the third, fourth, and fifth pictures, the white object slowly spread across the whole Monolith.

The characteristic bleaching. It completely matched up with the content of reports on Aldebaran when it appeared in the past. There was no reason to doubt it any longer.

“Lady Seitenshi.” Kikunojo looked at her solemnly.

“Yes, it is the Varanium corrosion fluid, isn’t it?” she replied.

Just then, an analyst flew into the room carrying a bundle of documents, his face turning pale. “The results of the supercomputer calculations are here! It is impossible to separate the corrosion fluid from the Monolith. At this rate, the bleaching will take over the whole thing in a week, and then Monolith 32 will completely lose its ability to give off a magnetic field and collapse!”

“What will happen once it collapses?”

“From the Pandemic induced by Gastrea rushing in through the break in the line, seventy percent of the citizens of Tokyo Area will die within two days, and the rest will follow within four days. It will be the end of Tokyo Area.”

“Th-that’s impossible! Redo your calculations!” the Chief Cabinet Secretary howled.

“We redid them over and over! We can’t believe it either!” The angry analyst forgot his manners and threw the bundle of documents in his hands at the Chief Cabinet Secretary. The documents made a paper blizzard that danced around

the basement situation room. The room suddenly became quiet, and no one moved a muscle.

The analyst took a deep breath with his shoulders and returned to his senses, looking down in embarrassment.

The Seitenshi pulled the rosary around her neck toward her and held it close, both hands shaking. If this couldn't be called hopeless, then what could? Even the Cabinet members, who had been making a fuss at the beginning, entreatingly waited for the Seitenshi to speak.

She took a slow breath. Especially at times like this, she had to be strong. She stuck out her chest and raised her face with dignity. "Everyone, let us think of a countermeasure while we are still in control of the situation. We must stop the spread of fear and maintain order as much as possible. If we abandon our reason now, it will turn into chaos that we will have no chance of controlling. Capital functions will be paralyzed, and it will become a state of anarchy. After that will be the demise of Tokyo Area. At the very least, we must avoid losing without putting up a fight."

The Seitenshi turned to her aide. "Kikunojo, I believe Tokyo Area has an extradeep underground shelter for times like this. How many citizens can the shelter accommodate?"

"Approximately thirty percent, I believe," he answered. "But even if we stuff as many provisions in as we can and hole up, if help doesn't come within two months, it's all over."

"It's better than not doing anything at all. Please create a system to select thirty percent of the citizens immediately."

The Chief Cabinet Secretary hurriedly interrupted. "Your excellency, we should immediately start sending citizens to other Areas using aircraft guarded by civil officers."

Kikunojo shook his head. "That's pointless. It is akin to trying to scoop all the water from a giant urn with a ladle. We would not be able to save even one thousandth of the citizens."

"Then what about taking a sea route?"

“There are Gastrea that live in the ocean. Aegis-class cruisers and aircraft carriers might be better, but high-class ferries would just end up feeding the Gastrea.”

“Then what are you saying we should do?!”

The Seitenshi looked sidelong at the Chief Cabinet Secretary and quietly cut him off. “Kikunojo, how long will it take to make a replacement Monolith?”

“It will take at least ten days,” said Kikunojo. “It will definitely not make it. It would be better to think of another way—”

The Seitenshi cut him off. “Then begin production of a replacement Monolith immediately.”

Kikunojo looked surprised, but then looked down and said, “As you wish,” bowing low. “What should we tell the media?”

“Summon the reporters’ club and tell them everything. Let’s ask for their cooperation after that. Even they should not want Tokyo Area to fall into a panic.”

“Even if the reporters’ club is on our side, it would be impossible to restrict the information online.”

“Even so, we should be able to buy some time. Either way, as the bleaching advances, the bleached Monolith will be visible even from far away. If we can just last until then, that will be enough.”

“Then…”

Understanding Kikunojo’s hesitation, the Seitenshi nodded. “Yes, in the three days between the Monolith’s collapse and the completion of the replacement, Tokyo Area must be defended to the bitter end. Kikunojo, it will be an all-out war. Mobilize the self-defense force at Monolith 32.”

“We will also need to ask for help from the civil officers…,” Kikunojo added. “I will gather as many as I can. I shall not let personal feelings get in the way during a time like this.”

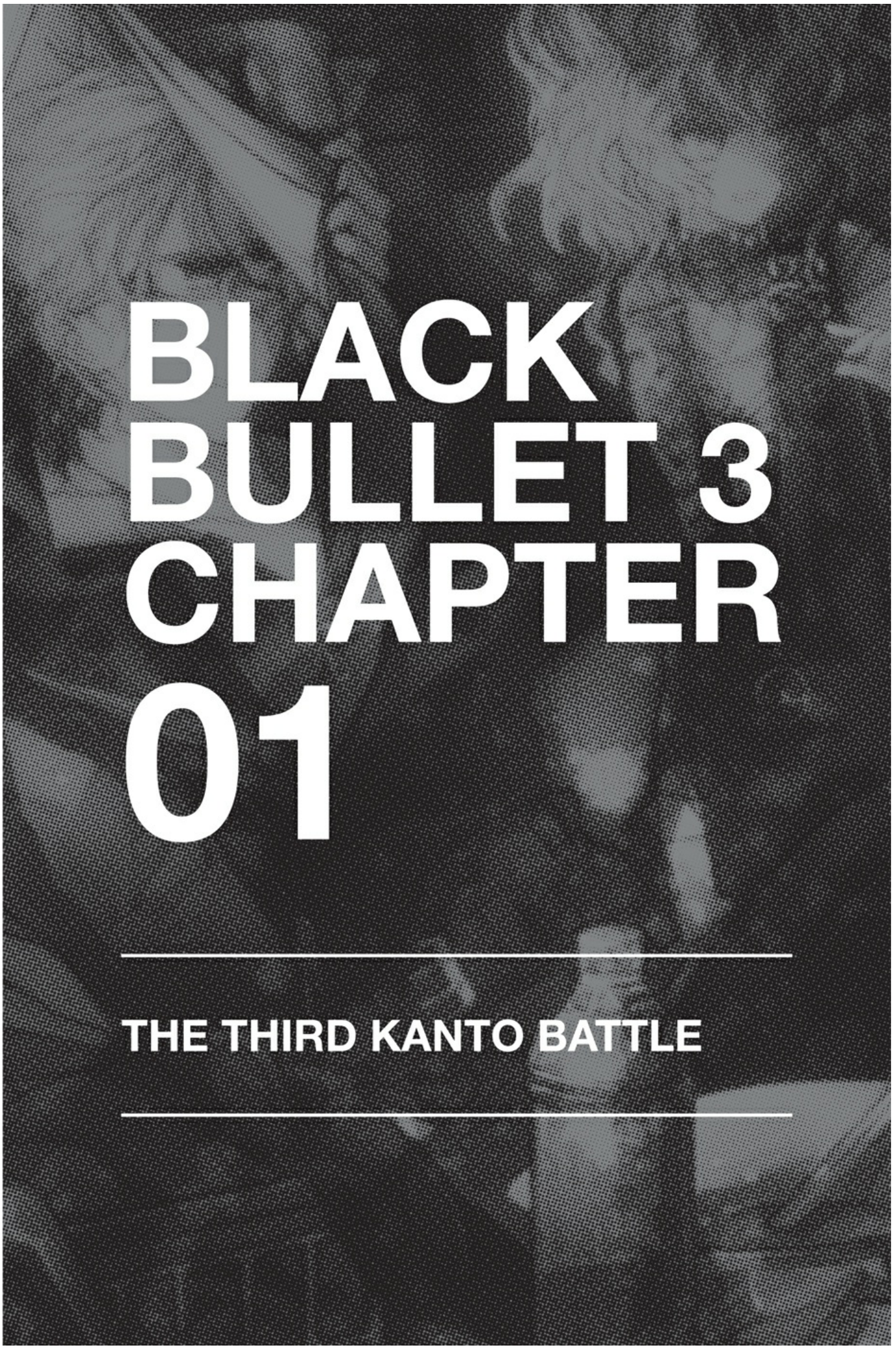
Now that he mentioned it, the Seitenshi recalled that Kikunojo did not like the Cursed Children.

Kikunojo continued. “Lady Seitenshi, with all due respect, I would ask that you also call in civil officers that you trust.” Kikunojo stopped talking for a moment and stared into her eyes, then continued. “Call in the civil officer you trust the most.”

“The civil officer that I trust most…?”

The Seitenshi closed her eyes. After a while, she opened them, slowly.

She had decided.



BLACK BULLET 3 CHAPTER 01

THE THIRD KANTO BATTLE

BLACK BULLET 3

CHAPTER 01

THE THIRD KANTO BATTLE

1

There was a blackboard behind Rentaro Satomi. Directly above that was the sun. At his feet was grass. And in front of him were those things he didn't like—kids. There were a lot of them, too.

Looking next to him, he saw a nervous girl dressed in an all-black sailor-style school uniform. It was Kisara Tendo, and she stood at attention without moving, her jaw tight.

Rentaro looked forward again with uninspired eyes. The kids looked at the pair without even trying to hide their curiosity. They sat directly on the grass with their knees bent, and instead of desks, they had long pieces of cut planks, on top of which they had spread their pencils, erasers, and notebooks.

Rentaro poked Kisara's side with his elbow and said in a low voice, "Which one of us should introduce ourselves first?"

"Y-you start, Satomi," Kisara replied, voice thin and shaky. "I'm so nervous, my heart feels like it's going to leap out of my mouth."

Though it was a pain, Rentaro trudged forward one step, scratching the back of his head and looking at the faces of the kids one by one. "Um, I'm Rentaro Satomi, and I'll be your teacher starting from today. Nice to meet you." He raised his hand slightly in greeting, but the kids did not show any reaction and just stared at him. It seemed as if they were telling him to say something else.

“My hobby is observing bugs and gathering plants. I like microorganisms, too.”

Silence.

“I can also fight using Tendo Martial Arts, I guess.”

Silence.

He paused. “Do you have any questions?” he asked finally.

He was suddenly met with a chorus of “Yes!” as every member of the class raised their hands in vigorous unison. Their wild energy was overwhelming.

At a loss and wondering why it had turned out this way, Rentaro looked up at the sky. There were only a few clouds in the blue. There was no wind, and an aircraft left a trail as it roared past in the sky. Covering the sun with the palm of his hand, he narrowed his eyes. It looked like today would be hot, too.

Tokyo Area Outer District, District 39. Rentaro and the others were in the outdoor classroom.

“You can do it, Mr. Satomi!” a lazy voice called out suddenly from behind the students.

Rentaro looked in that direction resentfully and saw a man sitting in a folding chair, beaming as he waved his wooden cane around. The man was not even 160 centimeters tall, and his lightly tanned skin had deep wrinkles from years of hardships. He had round glasses perched on top of his nose. He was just past middle age, the self-appointed guardian of the Manhole Children who lived in the Outer District. His name was Matsuzaki, and during the Kagetane Hiruko terrorist incident, he had taken care of Enju for a while.

However, still wondering why they were doing this, Rentaro tilted his head and looked at Enju Aihara, who was mixed in with the kids, smiling and waving at him. Next to her, Tina Sprout was sleeping boldly, prostrate on the table from homeroom.

“I would like you and Miss Tendo to teach the Outer District children.” Matsuzaki had broached the subject a few days after Rentaro enrolled Enju in the Outer District elementary school.

During the Kagetane Hiruko terrorist incident, Enju was exposed as one of the Cursed Children who had the Gastrea factor in her body, and she was inevitably expelled from the elementary school she attended at the time. It became a pressing matter for Rentaro to find her a new elementary school, but at the same time, it was a delicate problem, and Rentaro and Kisara proceeded carefully.

In the end, they agreed that they could disregard everything but Enju's comfort, so they transferred her to the Outer District's outdoor classroom, known officially as Tokyo Area District 39 Third Temporary Elementary School.

Because that was on the horizon, Rentaro and Kisara were baffled. "Why do you want us to be teachers?" Rentaro asked.

Matsuzaki did not lose his smile. "Well, when you get to be an old man like me, your ways of teaching also get old. I want to bring in some new blood. New teachers won't come here to the Outer Districts, and as you can see, this school that I'm running on a half-volunteer basis will fall over if you blow on it. So, I thought it would be nice to let current students like yourselves take control of the teacher's pointer for a while."

Kisara, concerned, folded her hands. "We have school as well, you know."

"Yes, so even if it's only on the weekends when you have time, will you please come?"

Rentaro and Kisara exchanged a glance, nonplussed.

Returning to his senses upon hearing their boisterous chorus of "Yes!" Rentaro saw the mountain of swords that were the girls' raised hands as their attack continued. The twenty female students wore tattered clothes, and they looked dirty. He wasn't sure of the last time any of them had bathed. That was to be expected, though, since all the students were Cursed Children girls who had been abandoned.

Rentaro felt uneasy. He wasn't fit to take on the important task of teaching and leading other people. Yet, these were doubts taking over. He shook his head; this kind of thinking would do him no good. Closing his eyes and taking a deep breath, he shouted from his stomach:

“All right, kiddos! Your teacher will answer all of your questions! First, you over there—”

“Yes, Teacher! Is it true that you are living with Enju and thinking of marriage in the future?”

He groaned.

For her part, Enju shouted angrily, “It’s true!”

Rentaro held his head. *You be quiet*.

“There’s no way that’s true. She’s a freeloader. Okay, next.”

“Should we call you Mr. Satomi or Mr. Rentaro?”

Was that all? he thought, feeling relieved. Rentaro waved his hand quickly in front of his face. “You can call me what you want.”

“Pervert!”

“Lolita complex!”

“Unfortunate face!”

“I’ll beat you all up, you little twits!”

For some reason, the students all started laughing at that. After that, he fielded a few more questions, but the kids were having fun laughing, and Rentaro was soon worn out.

“Now, I’ll switch with the other teacher.” Rentaro handed the floor over to Kisara, haggard after the consecutive-question punches. As they passed each other, he whispered in her ear, “They’re tough.”

Kisara moved forward with the stiff movements of a robot. “I-I’m Kisara Tendo. Um, I…”

“Teacher! Enju said your boobs are that big even though you don’t use any padding. Is that true?”

“Huh?” said Kisara.

“Teacher! Enju said your boobs are so big, you can’t see your feet. Is that true?”

“What?!” Kisara turned red and cringed, trying to hide her chest. Finally, she glared sharply at Rentaro.

“S-Satomi, do something!”

She was asking the impossible. As a guy, he couldn’t intervene in a conversation like that.

Enju, whose prank had succeeded, covered her mouth with her hand and snickered. Enju had transferred a few days before Rentaro and Kisara, and she already had the class in the palm of her hand. She had amazing adaptive abilities, as usual.

“Miss Kisara! Are you and Mr. Rentaro going out? Are you getting married?”

Kisara yelled, red-faced, “We are not going out! And we are *not* getting married!”

Enju pumped her fist in triumph as Rentaro suffered a grave injury to his heart.

“Excuse me, Miss Tendo…” Old Matsuzaki beckoned diffidently at Kisara and whispered something in her ear. As soon as she heard what he said, Kisara looked back at Matsuzaki, surprised.

Next, Matsuzaki beckoned diffidently at a student saying, “Kyoko,” and a girl stood up, looking down; she was clearly embarrassed as she walked to where Kisara and Matsuzaki were.

Rentaro stood by idly as the circumstances passed him by. What in the world were those girls up to? The girl named Kyoko whispered into Kisara’s ear.

“What? That’s early. You got it when you were ten? That’s two years earlier that me…” Kisara lowered her voice and this time, she whispered in the girl’s ear.

The girl who had looked like she would be crushed by anxiety at first slowly began to look relieved.

Finally, Kisara put a hand on each of the girl’s shoulders. “It’s something that all girls will have, so it’s nothing to be worried about. Let’s go shopping together sometime. I’ll teach you a few things then.”

The girl beamed and gave a big nod. “I love you, Miss Kisara! I look forward to working with you!” Saying that, she hastily returned to her seat.

“Satomi…” Kisara’s body trembled, and her voice was stifled as she looked down.

“Wh-what is it…?” said Rentaro nervously.

“Satomi, come here for a sec!” As soon as she said that, she pulled Rentaro’s sleeve and dragged him to the ruins where the students could not see them. Had he said something that had offended his prideful boss? Thinking that there was a possibility that she would shake him down, Rentaro made a cross in front of his chest.

However, the next instant, Kisara started hopping, her face all smiles. “Hey! Did you hear that, Satomi? She said she loved me! She said she loved me!” Kisara squealed, covering her mouth with both hands and blushing, hugging her chest. “What should I do? I was going for the ‘kind but cool Miss Kisara,’ but look at me now. I can’t look like this in front of everyone.”

“Do you even like kids, Kisara?” Rentaro asked. “What do you like about those things? They’re just noisy, aren’t they?”

Kisara huffily put a hand on her hip. “It must be nice to be you, Satomi. No matter where you go, kids like you! You wouldn’t understand what it feels like to be hated by kids the way I am.”

“Kids don’t like me,” said Rentaro.

“They don’t?”

“They don’t. Kisara, imagine a pack of mini hyenas living in the savanna.”

“M-mini hyenas?”

“That’s right. Now imagine there’s a herd of gnu passing in front of the pack of mini hyenas. When that happens, hyenas look for the weakest individual and then attack it with a pack of thirty to eighty, all hunting together as a group. Those kids have sniffed out that I’m the weakest and are attacking me as a group. They don’t like me.”

“Is that really what it is?” Kisara did not look satisfied, but she slapped her

cheeks and made her face look sharp. Pronouncing, “Come on, we should probably head back,” she turned on her heel and went back to where the students were. Then, standing on the rough-hewn teacher’s platform, she brushed her long, jet-black hair back. “Are there any kids left with questions for me?”

“Yes, Teacher! Is the uniform you’re wearing for Miwa Girls Academy?”

“Oh my, you sure know a lot. It is a pretty famous high school, but does everyone know about it?”

Apparently, other than the girl who asked the question, no one knew what the school was, and they all shook their heads.

“Well, do you all know who the Lady Seitenshi is?”

This time, almost all the girls in the class nodded.

“That pretty princess, right?”

“The leader of the nation, right?”

“That’s right, the Lady Seitenshi is also enrolled in Miwa Girls Academy. Although, she’s been so busy with government affairs that she hasn’t come to school once.”

The children raised their voices in wonder, and one of the girls raised her hand apologetically. “I’ve never seen the Lady Seitenshi before.”

“Oh my…”

“The Lady Seitenshi looks like that!” Enju stood up, pointing.

Rentaro looked in disbelief in the direction Enju was pointing, and then almost leaped into the air. On the shoulder of the road about twenty meters past the meadow, the Seitenshi herself descended from inside a parked limousine with a lace parasol in her hand, walking straight toward him.

With her absolute beauty, she was clothed in her white ceremonial clothes that looked like a wedding dress. There was no mistaking it: This was the real thing. But why was she in the Outer District?

The Seitenshi cast a sideways look at Rentaro as she swept past him and went

to stand in front of the students, smiling as she waved her hand gently. “Good afternoon, everyone. Are you having fun studying?”

The students were frozen with their mouths hanging slightly open.

“Huh?” The only person who spoke was Tina, who had been sleeping until now and had just woken up.

Finally, the Seitenshi turned around and looked straight at Rentaro and Kisara. “Satomi, President Tendo, we are in an emergency situation that could mean life or death for this country. I have a favor to ask of you.”

2

Inside Happy Building 3F—the Tendo Civil Security Agency offices—a heavy silence had fallen. Rentaro and Kisara sat on the love-seat sofa in the reception area, with a glass table between them and the Seitenshi, who sat facing them. Before her, a tea stem floated in her cup of roasted green tea, swaying idly.

Rentaro and Kisara had just finished listening to the Seitenshi’s explanation. The contents were hard to believe.

The clear tinkling of the wind chime sounded out of place as it echoed through the room.

Rentaro wiped the uncomfortable sweat from his face. His temple, which he was pressing down on, was throbbing hotly. He shook his head softly as he lifted his face. “Lady Seitenshi, let me make sure I understand what you’ve said. In six days, a Monolith will be destroyed, Gastrea will rush in, and Tokyo will be annihilated by a Pandemic, right?”

“If we do not counter, that is what will happen,” she agreed.

Rentaro looked at the pictures spread out on the glass table: those of the bleached Monolith, and the Gastrea head so repulsive he wanted to look away. “The news yesterday said that the Gastrea that approached the Monolith were immediately driven away…”

“We have told the media the situation and have their cooperation.”

“People who believe in freedom of speech would be shocked to hear that.”

“I do not think you wish for Tokyo Area to stop functioning right now either, Satomi. Please allow me to control the information that does not need to be known, the information that will only be poisonous to society.”

“Dictators say exactly the same thing.”

“H-hey, Satomi?” said Kisara, trying to stop him.

The Seitenshi said, “It’s fine,” and shook her head softly. “Either way, in a few days, the bleaching of the Monolith will be visible even from far away. Right now, under the command of Aldebaran, Gastrea are gathering outside the Monolith. We predict that there could be up to two thousand of them in the end.”

“Two thousand?! You must be kidding!” blurted Kisara.

Rentaro gave a heavy nod in agreement. “This is rash. We’ll be killed. We’ll all be annihilated.”

“We are doing everything we can to make sure that doesn’t happen.”

Rentaro put a hand to his chin. “But…why Aldebaran?”

The Seitenshi shook her head slowly. “I do not know, either. We are investigating that now.”

“What? What do you mean?” Kisara asked, confused.

“Kisara, how much do you know about Aldebaran?”

“Let’s see… If I remember correctly, it’s a Stage Four Gastrea that we knew about pretty early on, and when Gastrea were running rampant ten years ago, it focused on wreaking havoc in Asia, right?”

“Do you know why it was given its distinct code name?”

“I…I don’t know…”

“Aldebaran is an old Gastrea that always appeared with the Stage Five known as Taurus. Taurus is a strange Stage Five that acts with a group, and Aldebaran could be called its right-hand man. That’s why it was given the code name Aldebaran, after the brightest star in the Taurus constellation.”

“But Satomi, isn’t Taurus…?”

The Seitenshi answered Kisara’s unfinished question. “You’re right. Of the eleven Zodiac Gastrea, three are confirmed to be destroyed. The first is the Scorpion that Satomi defeated; the second is Virgo, which was defeated by the current IP Rank 2 Initiator; and the last was the Taurus corps, once feared as invincible, which was destroyed by the strongest and number-one ranked Initiator in the world. But the most important thing is that Aldebaran is a Stage Four, not a Stage Five.”

Kisara covered her mouth as she let out a gasp.

“Yes, Kisara: Other than the Zodiacs, all Gastrea are affected by the magnetic fields generated by the Monoliths, so they shouldn’t be able to get past the Monoliths.”

“But, Aldebaran retreated after hanging onto a Monolith, injecting Varanium corrosion fluid,” Kisara muttered.

“Yes, that is the mystery.”

Kisara was deep in thought.

“But…” Rentaro frowned and looked at the Seitenshi. “I don’t know about that, but the ant incident was definitely a diversion.”

“A diversion?” The Seitenshi’s eyes were panicked, but after a moment turned to deep thought. “Satomi, that’s unthinkable. Stage Ones cannot invade through the Monoliths; Gastrea that cannot enter cannot be used as a diversion.”

“Lady Seitenshi, do you know about the self-sacrifice of ants? There is a type of ant in South America that plugs up holes in the nest once it gets dark. When they do that, there are always some worker ants left outside who work to plug the hole from the outside. By the next morning, all of those ants are dead. In other words, in order to protect the network of their nest, they carry out their duties as sacrificial pawns.”

“You think the Model Ants that attacked the self-defense force facilities were acting as such?”

“That’s the only explanation for it. Even if I allow that the Stage Four could possibly hang on to the Monolith, ultimately, there’s no way that the Stage One would be able to invade.”

Just by being carriers of the Gastrea virus, the Cursed Children started to feel sick and faint if they approached the Monoliths. Even if the self-defense force had not annihilated the Model Ants, they would have probably died from weakness from the effects of the magnetic field.

Rentaro continued. “In other words, they charged the Monolith in order to buy time for Aldebaran to grab onto the Monolith and inject Varanium corrosion fluid into it. They knew that they would die.”

“That’s a very…*systematic* way of acting. They’re being led in a way that hasn’t been seen before.” The Seitenshi groaned as she thought aloud. After a while, she lifted her face. “Satomi, your theory is extremely useful. You truly are amazing. Even though many Gastrea experts have been putting their heads together to figure out why Model Ants would be piercing the Monoliths, you’ve figured it out in a second.”

“That’s because Satomi is kind of obsessed,” noted Kisara.

“Ugh, don’t say that…,” Rentaro rebutted.

The Seitenshi looked at the slouching young man with a curious expression on her face. “Satomi, do you know a lot about insects?”

“Not just insects, but about animals in general. I mean, I liked Fabre’s *Souvenirs Entomologiques*, and it kind of continued from there…”

“I see… You didn’t have any friends, so the insects were your friends, right?”

“Why do people automatically assume I have no friends if I know about bugs?!” Rentaro saw the edge of the Seitenshi’s lips twitch for a second, and he realized something: The mood was so dark she was distracting them with jokes.

“Lady Seitenshi, what do you want me to do?” Rentaro sighed.

She quietly lifted her tea to her mouth. The wind chime tinkled, and in that pause, the sound of the air conditioner echoed through the room. “I want you to form an adjuvant, Satomi.”

“An adjuvant?” He saw Kisara’s body stiffen next to him. Apparently, Kisara knew what that meant. “Kisara, what’s that?” he asked her.

She looked at him with an expression of shock. “Wait, Satomi, you don’t know what the adjuvant system is? Didn’t you get a lecture on it when you were getting your civil officer license?”

“I don’t know. I slept through most of the lectures.”

“I can’t believe you!” Kisara hid her face in her palm. “During emergency operations, the government can make use of civil officers by grouping them—like the self-defense force. An ‘adjuvant’ refers to a team system, with squads composed of civil officers.”

“Team system? You mean you want me to form a fighting team?”

“That’s right,” the Seitenshi nodded. “An adjuvant fights under a commander, who is in charge of the team leaders. In other words, it is a completely different system from the one used during the Kagetane Hiruko terrorist incident. Currently, in order to organize large-scale squads of civil officers, we are reaching out to leading civil security agencies. I would like you to become a team leader, too, by gathering members to fight in the decisive battle against the Gastrea.

“Satomi, no matter how much we hurry, the production and transportation of the replacement Monolith will take nine days. I would like you and your squad to intercept all the Gastrea that will invade in the three days between when the Monolith is destroyed and when the replacement is put in place.”

The Seitenshi folded her hands in her lap.

“I understand that you must be confused by the suddenness of it all. But please, Satomi, for the sake of the country, will you lend me your strength just this once?”

3

Things had gotten bad.

Rentaro hurried home, his hands in his pockets and eyes downcast. The moon shone in the sky, and the dazzling streetlights cast his shadows dancing across the paving stones, while cheerful jazz music leaked out of a store somewhere in the distance. Hearing it, Rentaro paused and turned his head.

The area around Happy Building—the building that Tendo Civil Security Agency was a tenant of—turned into a street full of bars at night. The night tribe of drunk men staggering with their neckties around their foreheads, thin dogs nosing about the trash, and people passing out flyers for their establishments became a thick crowd.

Normally, Rentaro wouldn't even pay attention to them, but tonight, he gazed upon them for quite some time. The scene was completely normal—it didn't look as if Tokyo Area was going to be annihilated in six days. He wondered if the Seitenshi tricked him; if he was just being made to play along with a bad joke.

But this was just an attempt on his part to embrace plausible deniability. He shook his head and rebuked himself. That straitlaced national leader would not lie about nor fabricate something of this level.

What a pain.

He glared in the direction of the faraway Monolith, but of course, it was too dark to see it. The ever-standing wall that had protected people for ten years… the strongest, most reliable wall, built from the knowledge of mankind: The Monolith. It was going to be destroyed. In six days, it would definitely be destroyed.

Rentaro realized that he was starting to feel on edge and turned onto the road that led home.

The fact that the Seitenshi came to see him directly probably meant that she had high hopes for him. It was a big improvement from the arrogant attitude she had held during the terrorist incident. Even so, he could not give the Seitenshi an immediate answer when she offered him the job. This job was just too dangerous.

Besides, how could civil officers who were all show-offs form a team and fight? If it weren't under these conditions, he would want to tell her not to be ridiculous. She shouldn't expect such a prideful group to work cooperatively.

Even when her commander gave his order, the best they could probably do was fight separately, on their own.

And looking at the facts of the Monolith attack, the enemy Gastrea corps was undoubtedly a highly organized system. In a team battle, it didn't matter how specialized each individual was, as evidenced by many recent battles in history.

The tepid night wind blew from his chin to his neck, and the soles of his shoes hit the stone pavement rhythmically.

What should he tell Enju? With the Kagetane Hiruko terrorist attack and the Seitenshi assassination attempt still fresh in their minds, could he tell Enju to risk her life again? She was still a child, only ten years old.

Before he knew it, he was standing in front of their run-down apartment. Scratching his tired face, he climbed up the metal stairs that creaked with rust and turned the knob of the door.

Suddenly, he was accosted by two pointed blades pushed against his chest.

There were two magical girls standing in the doorway.

More precisely, there were two girls dressed in costumes from the Ako samurai magical girl cartoon, *Tenchu Girls*. Looking closely, Rentaro could see that the weapons were toys called Stick Blades, fake swords that had magic-wand handles.

"Are we really going to do it, Enju?" Tina, who was dressed as Tenchu Pink, said uncertainly.

Enju, dressed as Tenchu Red, puffed her chest. "What are you saying? This will make those things called 'men' yours in a second. All right, Tina. Let's do it just like we rehearsed."



With a quiet, “Ready, set, go—!” the two girls turned flirtatious and announced in unison, “We’ll give your heart divine Tenchu punishment!”

Everything Rentaro had worried about today seemed foolish all at once. That was right—Tina was sleeping over today.

Rentaro put a floor cushion down next to the low table in the living room and sat down. Looking at the clock, he saw that it was past 7 p.m. He turned on the TV but was too concerned about the goings-on behind him to focus on it. In the kitchen, he saw the two girls excitedly swinging something shaped like a cotton swab.

“We will cook today so that you should quietly be waited on, Rentaro!” It had been some time since Enju had sat him down and said that, earlier in the evening.

It was not just because Rentaro’s usual spot in the kitchen had been taken that he was unable to sit calmly. *What is it with their clothes, anyway?* At his seated eye level, Rentaro saw two pieces of cloth that were so short they could barely be called skirts fluttering on their hips.

Rentaro wasn’t sure who the target audience for the anime that mixed and matched Ako samurai and magical girls was, but it was probably the generation of innocent girls, with the addition of adults with impure spirits that could not be called innocent by any means. Rentaro got that feeling from the flashes of underwear he glimpsed under the skirts of Tenchu Red and Tenchu Pink.

Rentaro put his hand in his chin, and before he knew it, he was staring at the cooking team. Tina’s face, covered in flour, was full of energy, unlike the soundly sleeping countenance she had this morning. Thanks to the Owl Factor in her body, she was extremely nocturnal. Who would believe that out of the 240,000 civil officer pairs in the world, she ranked in the top hundred? That she was an assassin who could hit a target over a kilometer away and deliver the finishing blow?

In the midst of their hustling and bustling, a fragrant smell wafted toward him, and soon Enju and Tina returned to him with their hands under a large plate. Looking at the large dish placed on the table, Rentaro let out an involuntary sound of awe.

It was a gigantic pizza that was almost extralarge. The rich smell of bubbling cheese covering a bright red layer of pizza sauce made his stomach growl. The toppings were simple, with just salami and mushroom. There was nothing to criticize about it.

“Come, Rentaro. We made this with everything we have. Please eat it,” said Tina.

Looking sideways at Tina, who was covered with flour from the dough, Rentaro brought a slice to his mouth. The full-bodied flavor of the slightly burnt parts of the cheese, along with the juices from the salami, seemed to mix with the dough to give it a crispy texture as the bite spread through his mouth.

Enju and Tina didn’t blink as they stared sideways at Rentaro, giving a suggestive cough.

“Yup, it’s good,” he said.

“You think so?” Tina’s eyes crinkled as she smiled.

Rentaro laughed teasingly as he gave Enju a sideways glance. “You get especially high points for not adding honey cake or steamed cheese bread into the crust.”

The girl leaped to her feet. “I-I know not to add that now!”

“Enju, you want to feed that kind of food to Rentaro?” Tina sighed.

Rentaro turned to face Tina. “No, it’s just that the girls around me have a knack for catastrophic cooking, so I had been about to give up on you, too, but this was delicious. But why did you make pizza?”

Tina put the palms of her hands together and smiled softly. “Pizza and Pepsi are traditional foods from my country, America.” (Tina’s words would have made an Italian very angry.)

“Hey, Tina, I have a favor to ask. Will you cook for Kisara like that, too? If I leave her alone, all she eats are frozen dinners from the convenience store.”

“Then, next time, I’ll make anchovy pizza.”

“What? No, I mean, you can make other food.”

“Then, I’ll make carbonara pizza.”

“I said, something else.”

“Marinara pizza.”

“Why is it all pizza?”

“I only know how to make pizza, you know.”

“Seriously?”

Tina was a pizza machine. Rentaro sighed.

Tina Sprout. She was the criminal behind the Seitenshi assassination attempt, but she was also under probation thanks to that very same Seitenshi, so she was currently living as a freeloader with Kisara. It had only been about a month since the incident, but Enju had no problem treating her as a friend, and Kisara had no problem treating her like a little sister.

Rentaro could not suppress a wry smile, thinking of the irony of that fate. At one point, both Enju and Kisara had fought against Tina with their lives on the line. When he asked how they could change their minds so easily, they both said unanimously, “There’s no need to bear a grudge after the fight,” which honestly bewildered Rentaro.

Was that really how it was? He didn’t understand it.

“Tina, by the way, those clothes…”

When Tina looked down at the Tenchu Pink clothes covered with frills, she looked awkwardly embarrassed. “Is it…cute…?” she asked.

“You know about *Tenchu Girls*?”

“Yes, Enju let me watch the whole first season the other day.”

“How was it?”

“It was quintessential Japanimation.”

“You think it’s that good?”

Tina sidled up next to Rentaro and suddenly grabbed his arm, leaning her head against his shoulder. She was a soft weight, with her sleek platinum blond

hair giving off the nice, light scent characteristic of girls. “I am grateful to you, Rentaro. I’m living a dreamlike life I definitely would not have been able to experience if I had remained with Professor Rand. I always wanted a big brother like you, you know.” She paused for a moment and looked up at Rentaro through her lashes. “Can I call you ‘Big Brother’?”

Rentaro’s heart skipped and he looked away, scratching his cheek. With Kisara and Enju, the Tendo Civil Security Agency sure wasn’t lacking in beautiful girls, he muttered to himself.

“You can’t, Tina! You’re not allowed to get a head start!” Enju stood hurriedly and squeezed between Rentaro and Tina, looking at Rentaro like she was about to bite. “You, too, Rentaro! You looked lovestruck and careless just now, even though you never look happy when I press my bosom against you!”

Rentaro scratched the back of his head. “You scrape against me like a washboard, and it hurts.”

Enju stamped her feet in frustration then and there. “What?! I, too, will become one with elite breasts one day! So you should just endure it for now!”

What the heck are “elite breasts”…?

Just then, Tina erased the expression from her face and stood up quickly, looking at Enju. “Enju, I do not want to make a surprise attack, so I will tell you clearly right now: I am serious about Big Brother. I will not let you or President Tendo have him.”

Enju looked like she had been stabbed in the back by a comrade in arms. “T-Tina…? B-but, you said we should work together to defeat the Great-Breasted Queen, Kisara, whom we faced…”

Tina shook her head slightly. “That’s what I believed at first, too. It’s true that President Tendo’s resilient breasts are a threat. In terms of *Gundam*, she would be Big Zam. However, there is only one Big Brother. Even if we were able to steal him from President Tendo, after that, there would be a bloody battle between you and me. In that case, I would rather not have any allies from the start.”

Enju widened her eyes in shock and earnestly gripped the fabric on her chest.

The letters C.B. were written on a pin arranged there. “Then, what about the anti-boob organization we formed, *Counter Breasts*?”

Tina shook her head again. “Today, we will disband.”

Tina tore off the C.B. pin on her chest and threw it to the ground, stepping on it with her heel.

“Whoaaaaaa! Wh-what are you doing, Tina? After we went through all the trouble to make it!” Enju fell at Tina’s feet in tears and hugged the pin close.

Tina snickered coldly, gazing down at Enju. “Besides, look. I have a bigger chest than you do.”

“T-Tina. You traitor! Homewrecker! Female panther! Female cat!” Enju screamed.

It was hard to believe that this was a conversation between two ten-year-old children. Rentaro sighed as he watched the political violence of the Counter Breasts as their internal rift started. In any case, Tina appeared to be getting along in the Tendo Civil Security Agency just fine.

The warm night air floated through the eight-tatami-mat room. It was filled with the medicinal smell of mosquito repellant, but outside the window, Rentaro could hear the reserved chirping of bell crickets and pine crickets.

It was past 10 p.m., and it had been a while since they turned off the lights. Rentaro’s eyes were already used to the darkness. He was deep in thought as he lay in the middle futon between Enju and Tina, gazing at the complex wood grain in the ceiling.

As they ate, during the height of their feast, Rentaro tried explaining to the two of them about the collapse of the Monolith and the worst-case scenario of the Gastrea invasion after that. As expected, the two of them paled for a second, but then Enju retorted angrily, without a moment’s delay: “We will fight as well! It’ll be fine as long as we do something, right?”

“Enju, are you…okay with that…?” *You might die, you know*, he started to say. Enju and Tina had experienced battling against the Gastrea many times as civil officers. He did not think that they misread the threat that a faction of two thousand Gastrea would be.

“Big Brother,” Tina said as she stepped forward. She had a stern look on her face. “The Initiator ranked ninety-eighth by the International Initiator Supervision Organization, Tina Sprout, once fought the one thousandth–ranked Rentaro Satomi and lost. She died once. The life I’m living now is without a doubt my second life. Please use it as you wish.”

Rentaro was taken aback both by Tina looking up to him and by Enju’s dignified eyes. Rebelling against death, or resigned to living—where did the core of their strength come from? Even he and Kisara, who were closer to being adults than the two of them, could not come to an immediate decision after hearing the Seitenshi’s request.

Rentaro shook his head. “Very well. I will definitely tell Kisara of your determination.”

He found Enju snoring on the futon to his right as his consciousness came back to him. The silence hurt his ears. The sound of the clock’s second hand ticking away seemed louder than usual in his ears.

“Big Brother, are you awake?” He heard a voice that sounded like the buzz of a mosquito. It was Tina.

Rentaro tried to sound as calm as he could. “You can’t sleep?”

“Yeah.”

It wasn’t surprising. With the nocturnal animal factor in her, this was when she would have been the most active.

“Will you talk to me for a little bit?” she asked.

“Yeah, sure.”

“I thought it over, and I was thinking of taking sleeping pills at night to change my sleep cycle so I can wake up in the morning.”

“You don’t have to force yourself.”

“No, I want to. Because I want to live in the same time as you, Enju, and President Tendo.”

After hearing her say that, it would be unfair to stop her.

She continued. “I said so during dinner, as well, but I am grateful to you, Rentaro. The Tendo Civil Security Agency is warm and comfortable, and I want to stay here forever. I’m the happiest I have ever been in my life.”

Tina’s words were becoming more and more passionate. Rentaro hesitated, but he opened his mouth slowly. “Tina, there’s just one thing I think I should tell you. This life will probably not continue for long.”

“Is it about Aldebaran? Then, you don’t have to worry.”

“That’s not it.” Wind blew outside, and the window shook. Then the wind was completely gone, and there was the sound of leaves rustling against each other.

“Is it about…Enju’s body’s corrosion rate…?”

Rentaro looked sideways at the girl in question. She had kicked off her blanket and was sleeping with her underwear displayed for all to see. She made a small sound and turned a little. “There’s that, too,” he said.

“Is there something else, as well?”

Rentaro put both hands behind his head and looked at the ceiling. “That’s right, Tina, this concerns you now, too. Tina, why do you think Kisara and I started the Tendo Civil Security Agency in the first place?”

Tina didn’t seem to understand where the question was going, and he could almost see a question mark appear on top of her head. “To defeat Gastrea and protect the peace of the citizens, right?”

“In other words, you’re saying it was in the spirit of justice? Unfortunately, that’s not the case. We became civil officers purely for revenge. My arm, leg, and eye were eaten by Gastrea, and Kisara’s parents were killed by them, too. That’s why we started the agency: with hatred, and the desire to get revenge by annihilating all the Gastrea in the world. Like most of the rest of the Stolen Generation, I also hated the Cursed Children, so I really didn’t want to partner up with an Initiator, and if that Initiator had done something strange, I would have shot and killed her on the spot. But the one who came was Enju, who had been betrayed by humans many times before, and she had even colder eyes than we did.”

In the darkness, he could hear Tina holding her breath. She probably couldn’t

believe that the Tendo Civil Security Agency now was the same as the bloodthirsty Tendo Civil Security Agency back then. “You were able to reach the state you’re in now just a year after that?” she asked.

“That’s right. First, Enju and I changed. And then that spread to Kisara. But that’s all it is.”

Tina responded with silence, thinking in the darkness. “I would like to hear more about that. May I ask President Tendo about it, too?”

“No.” Before he knew it, he had thrown off his covers and gotten close to Tina. Surprised, he put his hand to his mouth and shook his head slowly. “I’m sorry… But don’t touch Kisara’s past.”

As he looked at Tina, who was tilting her head, he saw panic in her eyes. “Tina, what’s the Kisara you know like?”

“She’s…kind, of course, good at her job, broad-minded, and cool.”

“Then you should definitely not talk to her about the past.”

“Why not?”

“Because she’ll turn into a different Kisara than the one you know.”

“What?”

Rentaro exhaled slowly through his nose and closed his eyes. His sleepiness was mostly gone.

“Tina, the three of us each have our own goals. I want to know the truth about my parents’ deaths, Enju Aihara is looking for her birth parents—and Kisara Tendo lives to kill the people who killed her family.”

Tina trembled and pulled her blanket up to her shoulders. “No way… President Tendo is…”

“Tina, I’ll tell you more later. As much as I remember about my parents. Why Enju’s last name is *Aihara*. Kisara’s regret. But go to sleep for today.” Rentaro put his hand on top of Tina’s head.

Tina was silent for a while, but then finally lifted her gaze. “Then, please let me use your arm as a pillow.”

“What?!” He had no idea why that warranted a “Then.”

Without Rentaro’s consent, Tina crawled into his blankets. When he reluctantly offered his left arm as a pillow, Tina happily put her head on it and started sniffing his sleeve. Wondering what she was doing with a bitter smile, he let his gaze return to the ceiling. He wouldn’t be able to fall asleep for a while, anyway. That’s what he thought, but strangely, the warmth of a body next to him was comforting. His eyelids grew heavy, and he finally went under.

Light flickered behind his eyes. A gentle breeze, filled with the fresh scent of morning air, blew over the back of his neck and his shoulders. Something swayed in the wind, causing a fluttering sound. Opening his eyes slightly, Rentaro lifted his head. The wind came in from a crack in the window, which was blowing the curtains, which in turn was causing the light to flicker. But it looked like it would be a nice day, along with yesterday. Getting up and looking at the clock, he saw that it was 6 a.m.

Enju, a morning person, was already out of bed. When she noticed Rentaro, she raised a hand as she swung her pigtails. “Are you awake, Rentaro?! I’m making the morning coffee.”

Just then, as if Enju’s words had given a signal, the teapot whistled, and the TV announced that it was six o’clock with up-tempo music as a new program started. The morning became noisy all at once.

“Hey, Satomi? I’m coming in.” Just as he heard the voice outside the door, there was the sound of the spare key being inserted roughly into the lock, and Kisara appeared in her black sailor school uniform, looking angry with a hand on her hip. “All right, I’ll have you return Tina now.”

Rentaro pleaded as he smoothed the stray hairs from his bedhead. “What do you mean, ‘return’? It’s not like I stole her.”

“You might as well have. Yesterday, I was lonely sleeping by myself. Recently, I haven’t been able to sleep without cuddling Tina. So return her immediately. Besides, I’m worried that you’ll do something weird to her.”

“I wouldn’t do anything like that.”

“By the way, where is Tina?” Enju asked.

At the question, Rentaro and Kisara looked around, but they saw no sign of the girl anywhere in the eight-tatami-mat room. Just then, something shifted in Rentaro's blankets near his groin. Rentaro looked up at the ceiling and prayed. *No way, give me a break here.*

But his prayer was in vain, and Tina crawled out from under his blankets, rubbing her eyes sleepily. The sweatpants she had been wearing had come off along with her underwear, and all she wore was the dress shirt he had lent her as pajamas.

Not noticing Enju and Kisara, who had been stunned speechless, Tina looked at Rentaro's face and tried earnestly to smile with her sleepy eyes. "Good morning, Big Brother. Last night was fun. You were so desperate, and there were scary parts, too, but I'm glad you taught me a lot of different things."

Kisara paled and looked at Rentaro, pulling out her cell phone with shaking hands. "I-I'm going to report you…to the police…"

"Wait! Wait a minute! I just talked to the night version of Tina! That's all!" Rentaro said.

"What do you mean, 'night version of Tina,' you perv! You're the worst! I can't believe you! Tina is only ten years old!"

Enju screamed, looking like she was about to cry. "Tina got ahead of me!"

Kisara pushed some buttons on her cell phone and yelled, "Oh, hello? Is this the police?"

Just as it seemed like Rentaro was about to start a life on the run, from behind them they heard someone say with a sigh, "*The Cursed Children have finally started even this, huh?*" and everyone stopped in their tracks.

Behind them was the TV that had been left on. But because his senses were honed to expect biased news about the Cursed Children based on what was regularly broadcast, it was almost animal instinct that told Rentaro the news would not be good.

Looking back fearfully, he saw on the TV that a reporter at the scene was talking with a commentator in the studio. The reporter held the mike with both hands and seemed to look right at Rentaro. The caption in the upper right

corner of the screen said in harsh brush strokes, VIOLENT ACT BY ONE OF THE CURSED CHILDREN! ACTIVIST MURDERED!!!

The room froze, and Rentaro's temple pulsed with burning pain. Tensions had already mounted to the point where there was no doubt about who the perpetrator was.

According to the reporter, the Tokyo Area branch chief of a secret anti-Children organization with almost one hundred thousand members in Japan was found dead in a park a few kilometers north of his home in Tokyo Area District 2. The park was a gathering spot for young delinquents, so at first, it was thought to be their doing, but that was not the case. According to the eyewitness report, the man was attacked by a group of children who looked like they were from the Outer District, and in the heat of the fight, he hit his head on the handrail near the stairs. His skull was cracked, and he died at the hospital he was brought to due to a cerebral contusion. Before he died, he was also confirmed to have traumatic cuts.

The Pureblood Japan Association was a large organization said to have many politicians and influential people from different Areas. The chairman was subsequently reported as harshly denouncing the savagery and brutality of the case.

The female reporter was polite. She kept to the broadcast codes and continued speaking respectfully. However, the words she used dripped with contempt for the Cursed Children.

Rentaro shook his head softly. "Kisara!"

Kisara had turned pale with her eyes open wide and was hugging his body. "This is bad, Satomi… This will greatly change public opinion."

Kisara's misgivings soon turned to reality. The Seitenshi's measure that was going through the House of Councillors that would respect the basic human rights of the Cursed Children, the New Gastrea Law, was rejected. In its place, a newly prepared measure on "the reevaluation of the danger of transmission of the Gastrea virus from the Children to humans and countermeasures against it" was efficiently submitted and passed through the lower house of the Diet.

This measure was popularly known as the Family Register Revocation Law,

and the moment this measure went into effect, Enju and the others had their family registration and citizenship taken away, losing all protection under the Japanese Constitution. It was an extremely cruel law.

4

“I see, then there aren’t any particular problems there, huh? ……Yeah, I know. Sorry for the trouble. I owe you one…… Yeah, okay, I’m hanging up.” Rentaro pushed the END CALL button and sighed, moving off the wall he was leaning on.

“All right!” he yelled, lifting his head and looking with gloomy eyes at the field the soccer and baseball clubs were sharing as they ran around cheerfully. Rentaro was in front of the sports field of Magata High School. There were only four days left until the Monolith would be destroyed. That news still had not been made public, and Tokyo Area maintained a temporary peace. But when that was made public, this peaceful scene…

Rentaro stuffed his hands into his pockets, hunched his shoulders, and walked out of the shadows of the school building. When he did, the scorching sun shone down on him, and he longed for the shade of the trees. He pulled at his uniform to send some cool air to his chest, but the sweat pouring out of him showed no sign of stopping. He couldn’t believe they could do club activities under this blazing sun.

As he neared the statue in front of the school, he noticed a small crowd of people there and stopped in surprise for a moment, but as he got closer, he realized that it was nothing he needed to worry about.

“It’s a foreigner!”

“Her hair’s so smooth and pretty!”

“I want to touch it!”

“Her eyes are blue!”

“She’s like a doll!”

When Rentaro forcibly slipped through the opening in the crowd with

difficulty and got to the front, he saw an uncomfortable Tina standing in the middle of the curious stares.

"Oh, do you want some candy?" and then more slowly, "*Do you eat candy?*" A group of three girls nervously offered Tina wrapped candies, representing the group.

"I do not want any."

"She talked!" they exclaimed.

Of course she can talk. "Sorry I'm late," Rentaro said aloud, using a loud voice on purpose, waving his hand as he got closer.

"Big Brother!" Tina rushed over to him and hugged him around the waist with both arms.

"Big Brother?" the three girls exclaimed in unison. Looking at the little chorus, Rentaro thought he had seen them before somewhere and then suddenly realized that they were his classmates. He couldn't remember their names, though.

"Satomi, don't you keep another young girl at home, too? Did you get another one?"

"I don't *keep* her, she's a freeloader!"

"Hey, introduce me to this girl."

Everyone in the crowd around them seemed to be murmuring the same thing. Everyone wanted to meet Tina.

Rentaro sighed. He couldn't stay here. "Tina, let's go." Without waiting for a response, he pulled Tina's hand and ignored the cries of, "Hey, wait!" from the female students trying to stop them. He escaped with haste.

"They were interesting."

"Sorry I was late. How was school?"

"Today was fun, too." Tina looked shyly at Rentaro. "Did you call Mr. Matsuzaki?"

He glanced at Tina, who was walking next to him. Thinking there was no use

hiding it, he nodded. “Yeah, I did.”

A few days had passed since the news report, but rather than calming down, the situation had turned into an even bigger deal. The Stolen Generation finally had a target for their anger, and their actions were quick, and their grudges deep. There was criticism against the Seitenshi, a supporter of the Children, and demonstrations at the Seitenshi’s palace. The news gathered fervor, and groups that had been dying down—like the anti-Children citizens group and ones even more extreme—instead increased their activities.

There were even groups that started interfering with the Outer District, which had been left alone by silent agreement before, so Rentaro could not just stand by quietly. And so, whenever he had a free moment, he would call Matsuzaki to ask about the conditions in the Outer District, because based on the report, it could directly affect the safety of Enju and Tina, who were going to school out there.

Rentaro and Tina went to Magata Station together, and Rentaro inserted coins into the ticket machine and bought two tickets. In the short time before the change and tickets were spit out, Rentaro glanced at Tina, who gazed at the train map as if everything she looked at was strange.

Tina had started addressing her nocturnal sleep cycle the day after sleeping over at Rentaro’s house. Even though it was the middle of the day, she did not seem sleepy at all, so she must have achieved some success.

Rentaro asked himself if he should tell her. Earlier, when he saw Tina surrounded by a crowd of people at the statue in front of the school, his heart almost stopped for a moment with worry.

In the past, he had seen a similar sight. Back then, it was Enju who had been surrounded, and it was because she had been exposed as one of the Children with the Gastrea virus inside her and was about to be expelled from school.

Rentaro did not know how Initiators were treated in America, but he knew they were not worshipped as gods. Which meant that even Tina must understand that she needed to hide her red eyes. It wasn’t something worth mentioning specifically, but because of the current situation, he couldn’t help but feel anxious.

“Rentaro, what is the matter?” Before he knew it, Tina was looking up at him with a wondering look on her face.

“Oh, it’s nothing,” he said.

The train going into the city wasn’t especially crowded or empty. Letting Tina have the seat he got, Rentaro grabbed the strap in front of it. His body swayed a little from the inertia of the train as the departure bell rang noisily. He allowed his body to move with the slight vibrations from the train tracks.

He raised his eyes casually, only to feel uncomfortable. A train ad with the caption VIOLENT ACT BY RED-EYES!!! ARE THESE GIRLS TURNING INTO GASTREA INSIDE TOWN LIMITS?! came into view. Rentaro quietly slipped his body sideways so that the ad would not enter Tina’s line of sight. If only the world could become a place where he didn’t have to do something like this, sooner rather than later…

“By the way, where are we going now?” Tina asked.

As they got off the train and walked into the throng of people in the city, Rentaro lifted his face from the GPS on his cell phone and looked at Tina next to him. “Didn’t I tell you? We’re going to invite some civil officers.”

“Invite?”

“I think I told you about this before, but adjuvants fight in teams. That’s why we need to gather people who will team up with us first.” Rentaro felt around in his pocket and pulled out the slip of paper Kisara had given him. On it was a list of names and addresses, and the top fifteen had already been crossed out. This was the list of possible adjuvants that Rentaro and Kisara had put their knowledge together to come up with.

Rentaro glared at the sixteenth name on the list. “Right now, we’re heading to a place called the Katagiri Civil Security Agency. I met them on the field once. They’re a small agency like us, run by siblings. Can’t say much about their personality, but they’re definitely strong.”

Tina gave him a dubious look in return. “You can’t say much about their personality…?”

“Yeah, you know. They’re kind of weird. But they’re definitely strong.”

“But why did you bring me?”

“Because otherwise I won’t have a chance to show you around Tokyo Area.”

Tina’s look turned to one of surprise and she looked down shyly. “A date with Big Brother,” she murmured passionately. Rentaro tried his best not to hear.

A lot of people were sitting at the edge of the bronze fountain in front of the station, and there were fresh leaves above them giving shade with their deep glossy color. There were sweet smells coming from the ice cream shop they passed, mixed with the fresh smell of summer coming from the watermelons near the entrance of the supermarket and the strong cinnamon scent from the fried bread store. They wafted over together and stimulated his nostrils.

Tina entwined both arms around Rentaro’s and cheerfully passed the department store. For some reason, Tina looked so funny acting like a new wife with her chin stuck up in the air as she walked that Rentaro let out a small laugh. He was chided with an angry look.

He wished that this time would continue forever. He really wanted to enjoy the time he could spend with Tina. But a part of him knew in his heart that this was all an illusion. The incident with the Family Register Revocation Law the other day definitely woke up the feelings of hatred Tokyo Area citizens had for Gastrea. He needed to be ready for the kind gazes those around him had for Tina to turn into ice once it was revealed that Tina carried something in her body that a normal girl definitely would not have.

As they approached a five-road junction in the middle of the city, Rentaro suddenly heard singing and stopped. It was the characteristic soprano of a young girl, and a hymn at that. Turning his head toward the sound, he soon realized that it was coming from the wide pedestrian bridge above. He could have just ignored it and continued on, but for some reason, Rentaro was extremely curious about the voice and urged Tina up the stairs of the pedestrian bridge. There was a rush mat spread out near the middle of it, and the voice was coming from there. It seemed different from a street performance, somehow. As he got closer and realized what it was, Rentaro soon regretted coming.

The singer was a beggar girl clad in rags. Even though she had good features,

they were stained, and the cape she wore was greasy, giving an overall shabby impression. The girl held out a beggar's bowl with both hands and sang at the people who were heading to the road. On a piece of scrap wood next to her were the words, "I am one of the Cursed Children from the Outer District. I need money to feed my little sister. Please give what you can." Standing in front of her, even though it was rude to say so of a girl, he could smell body odor.

Rentaro became worried that Tina would be shocked, but she was unexpectedly calm. She just looked on with solemn eyes. There were surely slums in her country, as well, so other countries must have been in a similar situation as Tokyo Area.

"Hey, you…," said Rentaro.

"Yes?" The girl stopped singing and smiled, lifting her face, and Rentaro thought something was strange. The girl's eyelids were still closed. He suspected that she was blind, but soon realized that wasn't it. The Cursed Children were protected from disease thanks to the Gastrea virus. "Hey, what happened to your eyes?"

"Oh." The girl gently rubbed around her two eyes. "They were mutilated by the lead that was poured into them."

Rentaro was speechless. Was this part of the beggar business? Where they try to make people feel sorry for them by having their eyes mutilated or doing something cruel to paralyze their arms or legs so that they could get money? Was that something that could be overlooked in this wide world?

The girl seemed to sense Rentaro's hesitation with her skin and shook her head gently. "This wasn't done to me by someone else. I did it to myself."

"Why…?"

"Because I couldn't think of another way to feed my little sister… And because the mother who abandoned us hated my red eyes."

Rentaro muttered inwardly, had a bitter taste in his mouth. *Gastrea shock.* The eyes that shone red and were the same in all Gastrea. During the war, there were people traumatized by fear from seeing them, and the red eyes became the trigger for attacks of convulsions or cramps or other symptoms. It became

the most widespread disease of society after the Gastrea War.

In cases where one of the Cursed Children was born to a family where someone had Gastrea shock, the family circumstances usually ended in tragedy.

“How can you smile?” Tina asked the girl hesitatingly.

Rentaro wanted to know, too. The girl seemed to smile persistently in the face of unimaginable adversity. Although this was a word used very rarely for a girl of ten, she was like a saint.

The girl did not answer the question but quietly stretched her hands out to Tina. Tina was surprised at first, but once she realized the girl meant no harm, Tina let her do as she wished.

In place of her unseeing eyes, the girl’s hands traced Tina’s features, from her hair and face to her neck, collarbone, and shoulders, brushing over them, until finally the girl lifted her face slowly. “Are you one of the Cursed Children, too?”

Rentaro looked around him hurriedly in surprise. The people coming and going on the pedestrian bridge passed quickly with indifference, and there was no sign of anyone finding fault with what she said.

“How did you know…?” said Tina, dumbfounded.

Facing Tina, the girl’s smile grew bigger. “You’re pretty. I’ll bet the boys can’t leave you alone, right?”

Tina glanced for a second at Rentaro before saying, “That is not true,” shaking her head dejectedly.

“You know, I can’t live without depending on others, so I naturally learned to smile. Besides, I don’t know what face to make other than this anymore.” After the girl’s face twisted in a bitter smile, she said, “But,” and slouched her shoulders a little. “Recently, I have been hit more and have had dirty words yelled at me more often, which is a little painful. Did something happen?”

Just then, a passerby threw something metallic into her metal bowl. The girl smiled softly and quietly made a deep bow.

Rentaro looked at the pull tab of a canned drink that had been thrown into her bowl and felt disgusted. He glared at the snickering man wearing a double-

breasted suit, but the man soon disappeared from view.

Rentaro slouched and looked at Tina. “Actually,” he started, and he and Tina proceeded to tell the girl the circumstances of the murder of a civilian by Cursed Children.

“I see, something like that happened…” The girl nodded meekly.

“That’s why you shouldn’t beg in the Inner Districts until this settles down. Everyone’s bloodthirsty, so it’s dangerous for you to be here.”

Then, the girl stammered for the first time. “But…”

Rentaro put his hands on the girl’s shoulders and looked directly at her. “Promise me.”

The girl squirmed indecisively but finally faced Rentaro and said, “Okay” loudly.

Rentaro exhaled through his nose. He could rest easy for now. Rentaro put his hand in his wallet and pulled out a bill, putting it in the girl’s hand. “Is that enough?”

The girl took the bill and put it between her fingers. After rubbing it slowly, she lifted it to her nose and breathed in the smell deeply through her nostrils. “Wow, this much? Thank you!” As if to thank him, the girl crossed her hands in front of her chest and lifted her chin, then started singing low and quiet. When her voice eventually grew louder and went higher, the solemn and clear soprano pushed back the tumult of the city and spread gently through the air.

She was singing “Amazing Grace.”

Rentaro quietly put his hands on Tina’s shoulders to urge her on, leaving quietly so that the girl would not notice. After putting enough distance between them, Rentaro looked back a little, reluctantly.

The voice singing a blessing continued. But for some reason, it sounded a little sad.

Going through two more thoroughfares and into an alley, it seemed like they had arrived at another world; like the deep ocean where the light of the sun did not reach. The smell of perspiring grease, rust, and mold thriving in the humid twilight drifted through the narrow confines. When Rentaro pushed open the building's iron door, creaking and thick with rust, he entered, but he couldn't shake the feeling that something was wrong with the GPS on his phone.

However, he realized too soon that his feeling was wrong. After climbing the stairs of the run-down building with no elevator, he was at his destination.

Even the sun, which was shining brightly when he left school, was now slanted, and threw orange light onto the ground. From somewhere off-site was the clang of heavy construction equipment, ringing hollowly through the building like the rumble of distant thunder.

Rentaro and Tina stood for a while before the door that was beyond worn out and practically at "dilapidated." The wall that was probably originally white was a completely different color, and there was graffiti on the lacquer in all directions.

"Is this really the place?" Tina asked in shock.

Rentaro, who could just barely make out the sign that said KATAGIRI CIVIL SECURITY AGENCY, responded with a "Probably."

From the information he got beforehand about how there were only two officers, Rentaro had predicted that it was not a large agency, but he had never imagined that he would find a civil security agency shabbier than his own employer in the entire universe.

There was no doorbell, so he knocked on the door, yelling "Hey!" a few times, but there was no response.

Just as he was about to go home, an energetic voice suddenly called out, "Oh, Rentaro Satomi the Pervert!"

Turning to look, Rentaro saw a blond girl appear at the stairs they had just climbed up. Suddenly, she leapt back and bared her teeth, starting to growl.

He knew this face. She was clad from head to toe in black pleather with a choker collar and engineer boots. Her dyed-blond hair was split in the middle

and tied on each side. In the midst of all that punk fashion, the bright red backpack she carried looked extremely out of place. It looked like she had just gotten home from school.

“Little Sister Katagiri, huh?” he shot back.

“It’s Yuzuki, Rentaro Satomi! Fuck you! Don’t come near me, you letch! I’m gonna catch your pervy-ness!”

Oh yeah, this was what she was like, he recalled with a touch of irritation, but getting angry here would be just what she wanted, so he chanted quietly to himself, *Calm down, calm down*. “It’s been a while, Little Sister Katagiri. Haven’t seen you since the manhunt three months ago, huh?”

Yuzuki crossed her arms, feigning boredom. “Hmph, you were just a lowly low-ranking civil officer back then, but now you’re the savior of Tokyo Area who defeated a Zodiac, huh? What do you want? Don’t tell me you came to rub it in? If that’s why you’re here, then you can turn right around and go home, you letch.”

“That’s not why I’m here. I came because I have work for your brother.”

“We don’t need work from a perv!”

Rentaro looked at the decrepit hallway and office door and knocked on the wall. The vibration made a corner of the plaster fall off. “Wouldn’t it be better to at least hear what I have to say?”

Yuzuki looked annoyed as she pulled out the key from the back of her choker and put it in the door, stealing a look at Rentaro as she opened the door. “Big Bro! You have a guest!”

Following the girl inside, he was first overwhelmed by the choking *smell*. All families had their own smell that permeated everything, but the Katagiri Civil Security Agency’s was the smell of a cloth that had wiped up milk and was dried in the shade. Scattered around the reception area were empty containers of instant noodles and junk food. There were shed clothes scattered everywhere, a hanging plant dangling from the ceiling, and tall piles of comics. From floor to ceiling, it was so messy that it seemed like it was done on purpose to make visitors shrink back.

Just then, something moved a little. Rentaro looked to see a sleeping man sitting on a stool with his combat boots resting on the table.

“Yo, Bro! Wake up!” said Yuzuki, shaking him.

“What is it, my sweet?” said the man in a sleepy voice, pulling off the adult magazine covering his face and glancing at Rentaro. Then, he uttered “Whoa…” and put the magazine back on his face.

“Hey, you! What do you mean, ‘Whoa…’?”

“Try to understand, boy. Right after I wake up, a guy with a face so unfortunate that I feel like I’ll be cursed just by looking at it is standing right there. For a second, I thought the Grim Reaper had come for me.” So saying, he grunted and jumped out of the chair.

Because of Rentaro’s height, he had to look up at the man just a little. He wore black cargo pants, a field jacket, and amber sunglasses. He had dark blond hair like his little sister, but with earrings and half-finger gloves. With his muscular build, he gave off an overbearing air. The words *I am an American* printed on his jacket were in such bad taste that the American girl next to Rentaro was clearly annoyed.

Tamaki Katagiri. Even though he wore clothes that looked like they belonged to a thug, he was the president of the Katagiri Civil Security Agency.

Rentaro looked around the messy office with distaste. “Well, what can I say? Looks like you’re doing well.”

“*Hmph*, I don’t need your sarcasm, boyo.” Tamaki looked appraisingly at Rentaro and then flopped back into his president’s chair. “It’s been a while. What do you want?”

Rentaro scratched the back of his head. “Actually—”

“Shall I take a guess? The Monolith’s motherfucking destruction is drawing near, so you have no choice but to form an adjuvant, so you’re going around asking people to join you, but they’ve turned you down everywhere else, so you had no choice but to come here. Right?”

Rentaro had nothing to say in response. He had gotten it exactly right.

Rentaro thought back on the fifteen crossed-out names on the list of possible adjuvants and almost let out a sigh. In the two days since he informed the Seitenshi that he would accept the job, he had gone around knocking on the doors of various civil security agencies to gather strong allies, but his progress could not be called satisfactory by any means.

Some got really angry, others had unpleasant expressions on their faces that looked like they had been insulted, he was turned away at the door of some, and there were even some others who just stole the advance and then ran away. He was at the end of his rope.

Tamaki crossed his arms and looked so triumphantly proud that Rentaro couldn't say anything in response. "Well, it's only natural. Upstart brats like you are hated by civil officers around Japan."

"Shut up," Rentaro said sulkily, but he had to agree with Tamaki on the inside.

Rentaro and Enju's IP Rank had been 123,452 just a few months ago. Among the civil officers, they were no better than the middle zone, who could neither hurt nor help. As a civil officer like that who had two consecutive and amazing successes, in short time he had risen to a rank of 300.

Because he had risen in social status by his own abilities, Rentaro had also accumulated a number of interested stakeholders. But this was natural to any era, and, similarly, had the effect that most of the other civil officers disliked him. On top of that, another factor that made him hated was the fact that he was a sixteen-year-old high school student. Obviously, there were not many high schoolers who were constantly risking their lives as civil officers. The average age of a Promoter was around twenty-eight. And generally speaking, Japanese culture valued years of experience over anything else, so from child to adult, those living beings called Japanese tended to stick to the outdated way of thinking that they did not want to take orders from someone younger than them.

With just the combination of his age and the increased stakeholders, it was more than enough to make all fifteen of the civil security agencies he had visited before this turn him down spectacularly.

Tamaki shifted in his seat, and the springs of his chair creaked. "Well, how

much prey are we talking?”

Rentaro said, “It hasn’t been put on the news yet, but there are two thousand. The head of the enemy is Aldebaran.”

Yuzuki’s eyes widened, and Tamaki raised his sunglasses and rubbed the corner of his eye. “The exit is that way. Hey, Yuzuki, the visitor’s going home now.”

“I’m not done talking yet!”

“Stupid, idiotic boy. That’s called a suicide mission. It’s like a praying mantis threating a horse carriage by raising its front legs. It’s beyond pathetic. It’s funny.”

“If we don’t do anything, then it’s over for Tokyo Area. You two will die, too.”

“That news hasn’t been spread past the civil officers, right? If that’s the case, then the smartest thing to do would be to get my hands on some plane tickets to escape Tokyo.”

“Then you guys can laugh cheerfully from another Area with a beer in one hand as you watch the Tokyo Area citizens who didn’t have time to run away get killed by the Gastrea.”

Tamaki didn’t say anything.

“If we had the assistance of civil officers like you two, we’d have the strength of a hundred men. Please lend me your strength, Katagiri.”

Tamaki silently stood up from the chair and started to circle Rentaro menacingly. “The most important thing for us in deciding whether or not we take a job is if the returns outweigh the risks. That thing called Aldebaran is a monster of a Gastrea. The story of how it turned three cities into ruins with Taurus is famous. I don’t know how many civil officers the government is planning on trying to scrape together, but there’s obviously a slim chance that we’ll make it back alive. What is the government prepared to give us for that?”

Rentaro hesitated. “A promotion in rank and reasonable pay, I suppose. Of course, we can give you a little, as well—”

“Motherfucker,” Tamaki interrupted. “That’s all I can say. I can only take it as

an insult that they expect us to risk our lives for something like that.”

“If you’re not happy with that, I can talk it over with the Lady Seitenshi to see if she can raise the pay and rank promotion.”

“You don’t understand it at all, boyo. It’s not about money.”

“Then—” Rentaro lifted his face and looked straight at Tamaki. “What do you think about fighting for my sake?”

Tamaki looked taken aback for a second, then met Yuzuki’s eyes. The next instant, the two of them started laughing, holding their stomachs. Tina couldn’t help herself and stepped forward to get closer to them, but Rentaro kept her back with his hand.

“You say interesting things, brat. You’ve changed in the short time since I last saw you.” Tamaki shrugged his shoulders. “There’s one thing I forgot to say. I won’t work under someone weaker than me.”

“Then…,” said Rentaro.

“Yeah, that’s right.” Tamaki stuck out a fist, baring his canines with a carnivore’s smile. “If you can beat me, then I’ll think about joining your adjuvant. If you’re a man, then prove to us that you’ve got balls.”

The battle was to be held at a public gym that they rented out near the Katagiri Civil Security Agency. Or rather, Tamaki marched in and said, “Scram! Kids should go home and play games!” to the good citizens who were exercising there, quickly chasing them away.

Gym No. 3, which Tamaki had obtained, was smaller than both Gym No. 1 and Gym No. 2, but it was still twenty meters long on each side and had a high ceiling. Spectators who were now gathered at the entrance clamored and shouted as they watched the takeover with interest. It wasn’t every day that they got to watch a skirmish between civil officers.

Rentaro and Tina faced off against the Katagiri siblings, putting distance between them and looking at their equipment. The older brother, Tamaki, had a gauntlet wrapped with showy chains over his half-finger gloves, and at his hip was an automatic revolver, a Mateba Unica. Since they were in a public place, they probably wanted to avoid gunfire, but Rentaro and Tina would have to be

careful of the gauntlet.

In contrast to that, taking a loose stance was the unarmed Yuzuki. If Rentaro's memory served him right, then the Gastrea factor inside her body was…"I'll tell you my name, Rentaro Satomi! With an IP Rank of 1,850, I'm the Model Spider Yuzuki Katagiri!"

That's right, she had the spider factor. Rentaro didn't have any pleasant memories with Model Spiders.

"And I'm Tamaki Katagiri, with the same IP Rank of 1,850."

Realizing that there were high-ranking civil officers in a public gym on the outskirts of town, the spectators gulped. Tamaki waved a practiced hand at the spectators before turning toward Rentaro and snorting. "Hey, kiddo. I thought your Initiator was a noisy little bunny girl? Are you planning on taking us on with an impromptu pair?"

"Yes, and we will win." It was Tina who spoke. She too slid into a calm, relaxed stance.

Rentaro looked at her without being able to laugh off Tamaki's ridicule. Tina was a long-distance type Initiator who specialized in night sniping. However, right now, Tina's hands did not carry a sniper rifle, and it was not a dark night where she could draw out her full potential, either.

Tina seemed to understand his concerns and smiled. "Do not worry, Big Brother. If we're going to do this, let us win." Tina stared ahead and continued. "Besides, I think this is a good opportunity. Because not only can we see their power, but I can also display my strength for you, too. I want you to know what I can do."

Tina lifted her forearms, and from her loose sleeves, three round, fist-size objects tumbled out. Right before the Bits touched the ground, they floated up gently, acting like living, conscious beings as they flew around Tina, tracing geometric patterns in the air.

Shenfield—It was the thought-drive interface used by the neurochip buried in her brain.

"Formation Delta, and maintain autonomous trajectory Foxtrot." Tina made a

horizontal sweeping motion with her hands and the Bits started flying in triangles as they spread out and rotated above her head, which caused a stir among the spectators. Tina then pulled out a black glove from her pocket and put it on her right hand. Apparently, she only had one glove, and on her wrist, there were two small metal rings that shook at the edge of the glove.

Rentaro was curious about her equipment, but he didn't have time to ask her about it.

Tina looked at the Katagiri siblings. "I'll tell you my name. I am Model Owl, Tina Sprout. I have no rank because it was revoked. Please be gentle with me."

"H-hey, what're those weird things flying around you?" Tamaki asked.

"W-wait, what do you mean, your rank was revoked…?" Yuzuki asked fearfully. Rentaro understood her unease. She must have started to realize a little that Tina was no ordinary Initiator.

Having one's rank revoked was a pretty severe punishment among the many punishments a civil officer could receive. People who became civil officers in the first place were generally a bloodthirsty bunch, with many would-be yakuza and people who liked violence and fighting. Therefore, having a death or two in skirmishes between civil officers was no big deal. If their licenses were taken away every time something like that happened, there would soon be no civil officers to protect Tokyo Area; so unless they committed a serious crime like injuring a civilian, the current situation was that a certain level of violence was tolerated.

The demon, Kagetane Hiruko, and his partner, whom Rentaro had faced off against before, were truly atrocious psychotic killers. In the end, their licenses were taken away, and their rank was frozen, but to put it another way, it took killing as much as they did before civil officers received such a severe punishment.

Yuzuki was probably wondering what Tina did that made her receive the punishment to have her rank revoked. And it wasn't like Tina could say with all the spectators milling around that she was the one who attempted to assassinate the Seitenshi.

Tamaki and Yuzuki closed rank and stuck out their fists, their eyes sharply

narrowed. Rentaro could understand the sudden seriousness.



They had changed their perception of Tina Sprout. The temperature of the air in the gymnasium dropped, and it was filled with intent to kill.

Rentaro crouched and took on the Tendo Martial Arts Indestructible Stance. It was one focused on defense, allowing the user to shift quickly to evade or counter. Rentaro continued looking forward as he spoke to Tina next to him. “Tina, let me tell you now—those guys won’t be beaten easily. I’ve never fought against them before, but if we let our guard down, we’ll probably be beaten in a second.”

“I know. I will take the Initiator. Big Brother, please take the Promoter.”

Feeling goose bumps, Rentaro got close to Tina, and they beckoned together, provoking the Katagiri siblings. Tina’s and Yuzuki’s eyes blazed bright red at the same time as they released their power.

“Let’s dance, boy!” At Tamaki’s words, the siblings charged them side by side. It was a straightforward attack without any underhandedness to reflect the character of the siblings—or so Rentaro thought. Suddenly, Yuzuki jumped on Tamaki’s shoulder and leapt upward, flying high over Rentaro and Tina. Her trail sparkled with light.

What was that? Rentaro had no time to resolve the question in his mind as Yuzuki landed on the ground at his back. Realizing they were surrounded, Rentaro narrowed his eyes. “Tina!”

“Okay!” said Tina. In the midst of the confusion, Rentaro and Tina quickly stood back to back.

Yuzuki and Tamaki kept a fixed distance away as they started circling Rentaro and Tina. It was as if they were two sharks, tenaciously circling their prey, instilling fear as they waited to sink their jaws into them.

Rentaro and Tina also changed positions as they matched the slow movements of the Katagiri siblings. Through their shirts, he could feel the heat of Tina’s body and the damp sweat on her back in response to the slowly mounting pressure. They would certainly be at a disadvantage in a long fight. An impromptu pair would start to unravel the minute they started feeling nervous.

In order to pick a fight with the brother, Rentaro dove forward and shortened

the distance between them in an instant. It was a test: Tendo Martial Arts First Style, Number 8—

"Come on!" Tamaki swung an arm that was about as big as Rentaro's thigh and Rentaro matched his movement. "*Homura Ka*—!"

"Ahhh!"

The meeting of Rentaro's and Tamaki's fists sent shock waves across the entire gym. The heavy blow sent numbing tingles up Rentaro's artificial arm, and he shut one eye without thinking.

In Tamaki's style of killing, he definitely did not have the skillful technique Rentaro had. However, the difference in their physique and muscle strength was enough to be a deciding factor in their fight. In addition, the attack power of the knuckledusters hanging from Tamaki's fists was undervalued.

However, at this point, Rentaro was still misreading the threat of the Promoter named Tamaki Katagiri.

Rentaro then noticed Tamaki's knuckledusters and guiderail—or something that looked like the grooved chain of a bike—moving. *Wait, were those even knuckledusters?* Seeing the compact power unit on the back of his hand, Rentaro got chills down his spine. *I see, that's a—*

Tamaki grinned, and Rentaro hurriedly tried to pull his fist back, but it was too late. With a sudden explosive sound, the chain that looked like a knuckleduster started to rotate, and when their fists met, it shaved off part of Rentaro's fist.

"Arghhh!" Rentaro's brain registered the seething pain, and he stumbled forward. Looking at his right fist, he saw that the artificial skin had been completely shaved off, and the Super-Varanium inside was peeking through. Since he hadn't cut his pain nerves before the fight, a wave of injury so intense left his mind feeling spent. If he had used his real left fist, his hand would have been a terrible sight. Rentaro lifted his face and gritted his teeth as he looked at Tamaki. What Tamaki had on his hand was a grinder, a rotating file. No, there was a more precise name for it as a weapon—"A Varanium chain saw, huh…?"

"That's right! Took you long enough to notice, boyo." Both of Tamaki's fists buzzed like a nest of angry bees. "But you were hiding the hardware inside you

from me, too. Now we're even."

Rentaro quietly hid his exposed Super-Varanium fist from the eyes of the spectators. Tamaki's fist could be swung in defense in addition to the obvious offensive attack. Even so, if Rentaro did not attack, the situation would just get worse. *What should I do? What should I do?*

"All right, I'm coming!!" Tamaki shouted.

With a terrible, rotating buzzing sound, the two fists rushed at him. Rentaro stepped backward and escaped three punches by a hair, only to have Tamaki's combat boots fly upward, kicking at him with the heel. As Rentaro blinked, he saw that there were chains wrapped closely in the pattern of Tamaki's boots, and Rentaro felt chills again. *Jeez, you've gotta be kidding me—*

Rentaro cut off the pain sensors at the same time the chain on the bottom of Tamaki's boots started making a violent sound. He immediately threw up his artificial right arm and left leg in defense. A second later, his artificial skin and his uniform were completely shaved off, and the sound of Varanium on Varanium rang metallically through the whole gymnasium.

Rentaro had been thrown back, but for some reason, he did not fall to the ground. Instead, he was suddenly caught by something soft and flexible behind his back. It felt like a boxing glove. He was shocked when he looked behind him. Wrapped around his back were sparkling threads of light.

It was spider silk.

In the back of his mind, an image of Yuzuki flying over him earlier with a thin trail of light behind her overlapped with what he saw. She probably had the ability to create a territory by putting up invisible strings in the spaces where she walked. Earlier, when they surrounded and encircled Rentaro and Tina, she had already completed her preparations.

At that, another suspicion raised its head: *Why wasn't Tamaki accidentally caught by the invisible threads?* As he thought this, the existence of Tamaki's amber sunglasses suddenly passed through the back of his mind. Perhaps there was some sort of special treatment applied to them—a treatment that would allow him to see the invisible threads…

Rentaro finally understood the way these siblings fought. As his sister created a territory to drive the prey into, Tamaki used his chain saw with its immense attack power to violently fell their opponents. It was a bad joke that a pair using such an elaborate strategy had not gotten any further than IP Rank 1,850.

At that moment, a dark shadow crossed Rentaro's body. It was Tamaki, swinging his fists with that horrifyingly metallic sound. Rentaro twisted his body desperately, but that made the threads around him stretch more, and the more he panicked, the worse his situation became.

He used all the tension in his body in one instant to crouch and evaded Tamaki's fist in the nick of time. A veering whir passed by his ear, and he shivered like a block of ice had been slipped down his back. Lifting his leg reflexively, he stopped the fist that came at him with the sole of his right shoe. The chain saw buzzed and sparked as it played the rubber, but Rentaro bore it, gritting his teeth.

Tamaki, certain that he would win, stepped back for a moment, twisted his body around and added a circular motion as he lifted his leg to plow a kick into Rentaro. Along the way, the chain started rotating with a roar. This was bad. "Die, ya bastardddd!"

Rentaro fired the cartridge in his leg. *Bam!* From his right leg, the cartridge shot out with the sound and force of an explosion. With the tremendous kickback, he was able to tear through the threads and ducked under Tamaki's kick; he braked with his left and darted directly behind Tamaki.

"Wha…?!" Tamaki exclaimed.

Rentaro wasted no time in hitting his calves with a hard blow. Tamaki couldn't bear it and let out a groan as he fell to his knees. Rentaro looked at him contemptuously and raised his right leg high, then held it for a moment directly above his head.

Tendo Martial Arts Second Style, Number 4—

"*Inzen Jokahanameishi!*" Rentaro's heel fell with the speed of a guillotine and hit the back of Tamaki's head. There was a roar, and his face sank into the floor of the gym.

Feeling victorious, Rentaro exhaled, then calmed his breathing and his heart. The spectators were speechless. Rentaro came out of his stance, scratched the back of his head, and looked down at Tamaki.

Did I kill him? he wondered. *Well, Tamaki was trying to kill me*. He exhaled through his nose. Tamaki had yelled, "Die, ya bastardddd!" at the end, while obviously coming at Rentaro with the intent to kill, so it was legitimate self-defense, and there was a crowd to witness it.

Just as Rentaro thought he saw Tamaki's body twitch, Tamaki put both hands on the ground to push his face off the floor and drew near Rentaro with an expression of rage. "Bastard! You were seriously trying to kill me with that last hit, weren't you? If it hadn't been me, I woulda died, ya know!"

"What, you're alive?" drawled Rentaro.

"Is that bad?"

Even as he cracked jokes, Rentaro was astonished at Tamaki's combat abilities. He couldn't believe he was forced to use his cartridge in public.

Tamaki Katagiri—putting his low speech and strange actions aside, Rentaro definitely wanted him in his adjuvant.

"Hey, kid, the girls' fight looks like it'll be settled soon, too."

Following Tamaki's gaze, he saw that Tina and Yuzuki's match was also reaching its climax. Using the high-speed maneuvers characteristic of Initiators, Yuzuki tried to dazzle Tina as she flew, freely turning as she pleased. In contrast, Tina took the stance of an ancient martial arts master and closed her eyes, not moving a muscle. Not paying any attention to Yuzuki's feints, Tina precisely dodged only the real attacks that occasionally came.

Rentaro soon noticed the trick of how Tina evaded the attacks. Shenfield, which was spinning as it traced an equilateral triangle above her head, was busily responding to Yuzuki's high-speed maneuvers with its camera eye. Even with Yuzuki's speed, three Shenfields locked onto her at the same time made it impossible for her to lose them. Meanwhile, Tina could read Yuzuki's location coordinates that Shenfield was sending to her wirelessly, and so dodge her attacks with the least amount of movement necessary.

With that, it was like she had eyes in all directions. No wonder she was able to defeat the Initiator with specialized leg strength, Enju Aihara. It could be said that the godlike Initiator formerly ranked 98th was living up to her reputation.

“Huh, the fight’s over,” announced Tamaki, grinning mischievously with his arms crossed as he stood next to Rentaro.

“Tina’s going to win, right?” Rentaro huffed.

“Idiot. Look at this.”

Rentaro let out a cry as he looked at the amber world through the cracked sunglasses Tamaki handed him. A vast number of threads were hung throughout the girls’ battlefield. Tina had been forced so far into the middle of the spider web that she barely had room to move. Yuzuki had not been flying around randomly. Every time she kicked the ground or jumped about on the wall, she was expanding her territory, definitely chasing Tina into a corner.

This was bad.

Yuzuki seemed to think the time was ripe and made an enormous leap into the air, sticking to the ceiling of the gymnasium that was probably twenty meters high. A spiderweb immediately formed at her feet, and, hanging upside down, she looked down at Tina and yelled, “Hey, you! You’ve realized what my ability is by now, right? Surrender. You have no chance of winning. Because if you just move your neck a little, you’ll be caught in my net.”

Looking at Tina holding her stance soundlessly with her eyes closed, Yuzuki revealed her annoyance for the first time. “I see… Then don’t blame me if you get hurt.” Yuzuki’s voice turned cold, and she bent her knees, storing up as much spring as she could. She was filled with a thirst for blood.

Yuzuki kicked off the ceiling with an explosive sound that made the building tremble. A cannon fast–drop attack using the physical strength of an Initiator with the addition of the acceleration of gravity was heading straight for Tina.

Instantly, Tina opened a piercing eye and waved the black glove on her right hand. She stuck her left forefinger and middle finger into the metal rings on the glove on her right hand and pulled hard, and threads of some kind came out.

Piano strings? Rentaro wondered.

Tina used her teeth and fingers to form something like a cat's cradle with the piano strings that had been stored in her glove and met Yuzuki's attack. Yuzuki and Tina clashed, and the floor exploded. The spectators screamed as the ground shook with a tremor so severe it made even standing dangerous. Rentaro immediately covered his face, but pieces of the floor and shock waves hit his body, making him gasp for breath.

After the intense ringing in his ears stopped, he opened his eyes a little and saw a thick cloud of dust swirling around. *Where was Tina? Where was Yuzuki?* Rentaro wiped his sweaty palms on his pants and held his breath as he watched the center of the explosion attentively. Finally, the dust settled, and the two girls were revealed. Rentaro was left spellbound by the sight that was before him.

Tina was on the bottom, and her neck was held down by Yuzuki's hand, ready to strike. If Yuzuki pushed just a little more, she could probably break Tina's neck. However, the outcome of the match was determined by the almost cruel difference in their abilities.

Layers of piano strings were wrapped around that hand of Yuzuki's that pinned down Tina; she couldn't move even a single finger. In addition, the piano strings were wrapped around both her arms and legs, and even her neck, until she was caught in her own threads and hung like a marionette. It was hard to describe the strange sight of a girl who had the Spider Factor inside her caught in a web of string.

Tina had fixed the positions of the beginning and end of the string with her left hand and her teeth, and if she pulled the string with her teeth, then Yuzuki's head would likely fall off in a second. Yuzuki was frozen like a statue with both eyes open wide. No, she was not even allowed to close her eyes. Just a few millimeters in front of her eyeballs were Tina's fingers.

Tina made a "scissors" shape with her freed right hand and placed them right at Yuzuki's two eyeballs. Of course, if Tina pushed even a little with her fingers, there was no reason for Yuzuki's eyeballs to remain unharmed.

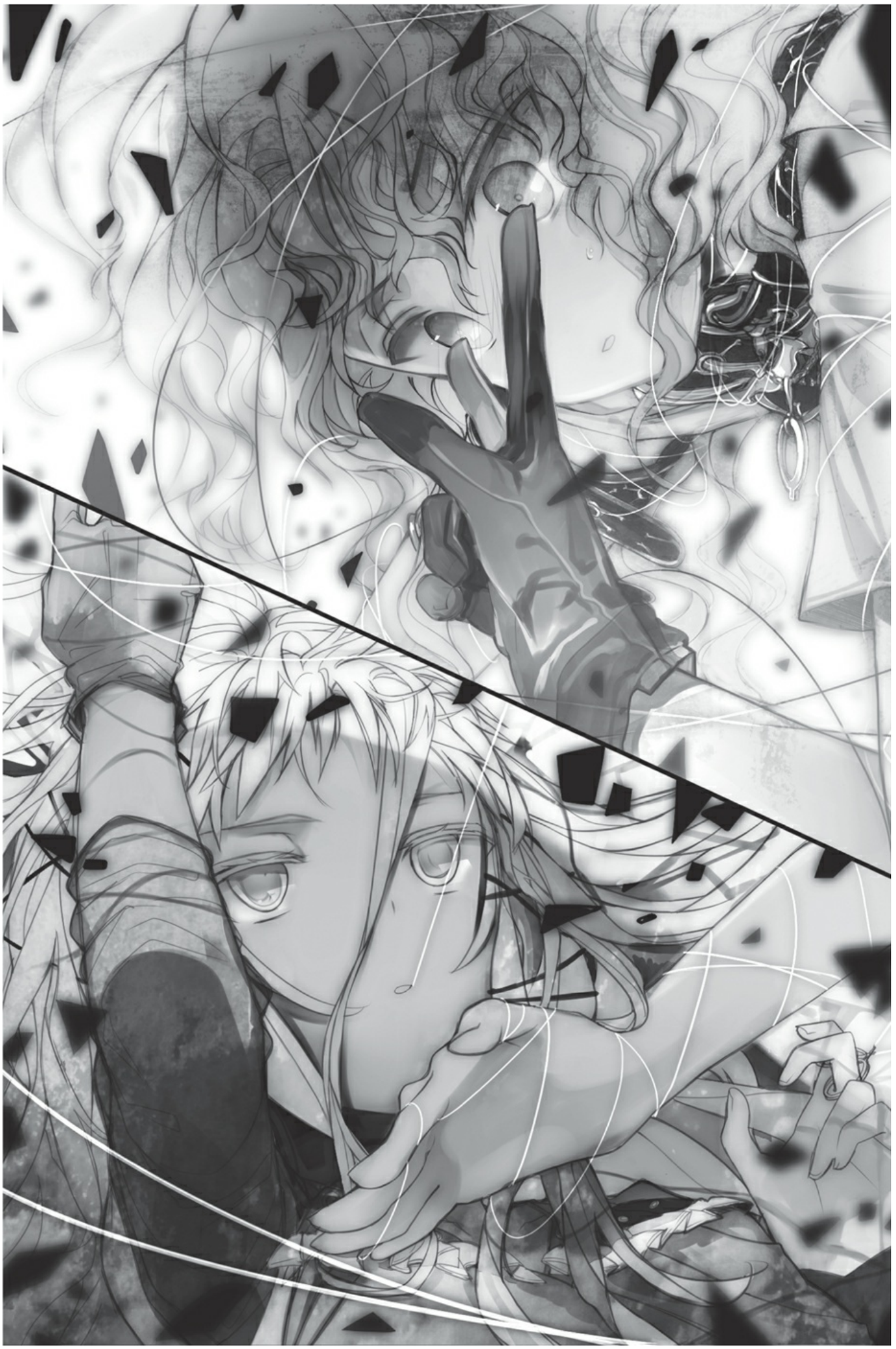
Not just Rentaro, but Tamaki and all the other spectators were spellbound. No one had considered that Tina would be able to win from behind, so their

brains couldn’t process what had happened from the time the ground exploded to when the match was decided.

Only Shenfield spun with joy at its master’s victory, and eventually retreated under the hem of Tina’s dress.

Tina slowly removed her fingers from in front of Yuzuki’s eyes and released the strings. After watching them writhe on the ground like the cord of a vacuum cleaner as they rewound themselves, Tina finally stood up, removed the glove, and returned it to her pocket.

While considering this show of force, Rentaro thought back on the many techniques Tina Sprout had shown him. The piano strings in her glove were definitely a weapon used for assassinations. He had seen it in an old film before: The target enters a bathroom stall, and the assassin drops the string from the stall next to it, wraps it around the target’s throat, and strangles the target using the basics of a shoulder throw. It was a cruel technique, but it was still more elegant than poking out someone’s eyeballs.



Rentaro could not help but feel the depth and darkness of the gap that stretched between him and Tina. Tina was clearly made of something different from the others in the Tendo CSA. Too, she was not limited to just the Tendo Martial Arts that Rentaro and Kisara studied; she could be said to have trained her mind in the spirit of everything and anything that could be called *martial arts*. She was probably the most extreme example of the Shaolin Kung Fu teaching that said, “Justice is helpless without power, and power without justice is violence.” Yet, no matter what part of martial arts one looked at, biting or poking out someone’s eyes fell under the category of evil and abusive.

However, Tina the former assassin was probably never asked to do anything other than destroy a human body in the most efficient way possible. Just imagining how she wandered through the underground society where killing and betrayal ran rampant made Rentaro’s chest hurt. Tina probably never knew what it felt like to have fun as a girl, or be happy.

Rentaro remembered again how Sumire Muroto had said, “Those with ranks under a hundred have sold their souls to the devil. It’s no exaggeration to call them monsters.” *If I’m aiming to be in the top ranks, then I’ll have to fight against guys like this, huh…?* Thinking that, Rentaro’s consciousness returned to the gym.

He looked on pityingly at Yuzuki’s back as she lay on the ground with both hands on the floor, her confidence shattered, showing no sign of trying to stand up.

“Please stand up, Yuzuki.” It was Tina.

Yuzuki looked for a while at Tina’s outstretched hand but finally shook her head in self-derision. “You’re strong, aren’t you? Having someone like me in your adjuvant will only cause you problems.”

This time, it was Tina’s turn to smile as she shook her head. “That is not true. I was formerly ranked 98th. For you to have me cornered to that point is something I think you can be proud of. You were much stronger than I imagined, Yuzuki.”

“Ni…ninety-eighth?!” Yuzuki’s eyes were open so wide they looked like they would burst.

Looking at Yuzuki, Tina stretched out her hand again, stronger this time, and smiled prettily. “I ask you as well, Miss Yuzuki Katagiri: Please join Big Brother’s adjuvant.”

Yuzuki looked down for a moment but finally grasped Tina’s hand firmly and stood up. Then, unexpectedly, Yuzuki was overcome with emotion and hugged Tina’s head, all smiles. “I love you, Tina! You were superstrong and supercool! Marry me!”

Embarrassed and baffled, Tina flapped her arms. She probably wasn’t used to someone expressing affection so straightforward and openly.

Next to Rentaro, Tamaki was watching the scene intently, dumbfounded. “Yuzuki can’t make friends at school because she doesn’t want anyone to see her eyes. But look at how happy she looks…”

Rentaro’s mouth started to smile spontaneously. “Then, we pass?”

Tamaki returned to himself suddenly, then finally gave a big nod and stretched out his right hand. “Very admirable, Rentaro Satomi. We, the Katagiri Civil Security Agency, are at your service.”

“I’m counting on you.” Rentaro grasped Tamaki’s hand and shook it hard. When their eyes met, they both smiled wryly, a little embarrassed. There was a clap, and when Rentaro turned his head to look, one of the spectators was clapping his hands for the brave fight of the civil officers. Another person followed suit, and then another, until even those who hated them and discriminated against them seemed to be worn down by the persistence of their fellows, and came to clap as well. The sound swelled until the applause seemed to wrap the gym in a never-ending thunder.

6

The hot sunlight faded and night fell, but thick, damp air still wrapped around them. They passed by the receptionist at the university hospital and walked down the halls that smelled of medicine. Wearily, Rentaro looked next to him. “Sorry, Tina, I’m sure you’re tired, but just be patient for a little longer.”

“It’s fine. I’m just happy I can be with you, Big Brother.” Tina looked down once before raising her face again. “I thought I needed to meet Dr. Muroto soon, anyway. I was nervous meeting her alone, so having you with me is reassuring.”

“You know about Doc?”

“Yes, I heard about her from the Professor.” “The Professor” was probably Tina’s former Promoter, Ain Rand. Tina was originally paired with him. However, when she failed her mission, he readily abandoned her. Ever since then, there was no sign of Rand contacting Tina, but Rentaro wondered how Tina felt about that. Because of the subject matter, it was hard to find the right time to bring it up, but he would be lying if he said he wasn’t curious.

“I have heard that she is no exception to the geniuses who are eccentric and hard to deal with,” said Tina.

“It’s nothing that simple, you know.”

“Huh?”

Passing by the demon monuments meant to keep people away, they carefully made their way down the damp, moldy stairs, careful not to miss a step. Its ominous atmosphere, like that of a haunted house, made unease creep up on Tina until she clung to Rentaro’s clothes. But before long, the sound of his shoes on the green ceramic floor tile echoed around the basement chamber. The uncertain light of the bare lightbulb hanging from the ceiling lit the room only dimly. Scattered all over a table was a collection of gory horror movies, and on the shelves were Gastrea fetuses in formaldehyde. Complicated numerical equations covered the blackboard on the far side. Rentaro could see morgue drawers on the walls to the left and right.

Looking around the messy expanse, Rentaro did not find Sumire. It was so quiet his ears strained, and the only sound was the slight hum of the incandescent lightbulb. And there was the peaceful smell of death, too. “Hey, Doc, where are you?” Rentaro called out.

There was a slick sound, and then a ghost wearing a white lab coat appeared from the darkness behind Tina, already bending over her.

“Eeeeeeek!” Tina’s piercing screech sounded like that of a strange bird; she ran behind Rentaro’s back with lightning speed.

“B-big Brother. Wh-wh…! Wh-wh…! What is that?!”

“That’s Doc. But—” Rentaro followed Tina’s pointed finger and folded his arms.

Sumire was lying on the tiles after being shaken off by Tina and stayed there, twitching on the ground, showing no sign of getting up. Eventually, the woman turned a feeble expression on Rentaro and said, her voice cracking, “Do you… have something to eat, Rentaro?”

“Food?” Rentaro echoed lightly. But then a lightbulb went off in his head, and he slapped Tina’s back.

When they had left the Katagiri Civil Security Agency, Tina had already become fast friends with Yuzuki, and Yuzuki had given her a parting gift for it. Tina looked at Rentaro uncertainly, then took out the dried persimmons from the daypack on her back, fearfully walked forward and put them down, then hastily retreated.

Sumire snatched up the packet without looking at what was inside, then turned her back to them as she gulped it down greedily. Over the sound of the wrapper ripping, she complained, “What, dried persimmons?” and clicked her tongue without a trace of remorse.

Tina looked on in disbelief at Sumire, then shifted her gaze to Rentaro. “This is one of the greatest minds in the world?”

“Um…… Yeah, well.” Rentaro found himself unable to reply immediately.

When Sumire finally returned to her senses, she stood with a shout, spreading her arms benevolently as she walked toward them. “Oh my, you saved me. My gratitude, Rentaro. I almost died.”

“What happened?”

“Well, my stockpile of food ran out, and I was going to ask you to buy some more, but then I realized that I had lost my cell phone. It’s a sad story.”

“To collapse with hunger is something Kisara would do.”

Sumire waved her hand in front of her face. “Please don’t put me in the same group as that pauper. I have more money than I know what to do with. I just don’t go outside.”

“You come out of the basement for Enju’s regular checkups.”

“Oh yeah, that. I offer incense and prostrate myself, then sit in lotus position and meditate for twenty-four hours while reading the Koran before I can finally go outside for half a day.”

Rentaro was utterly stunned and highly disgusted. “Do you really hate going outside that much?”

“Of course. Think about it carefully. Outside is a world that stinks with the smell of gaudy women’s perfume mixed with the smell of old men’s body odor. That’s not something you can just endure. It makes me want to turn all the people other than myself into dust.”

“Am I included in that?”

“Just looking at your unfortunate face makes me depressed, so I immediately want you to turn to dust and I pray for it every three hours, but my prayers aren’t getting answered.”

It was then that Sumire seemed to notice Tina and raised her eyebrows. She leaned over and put her face close to Tina’s, only to stand up and gaze sadly at Rentaro. “Rentaro… You finally did it, huh? I’m going to tell you this at least—You’ll be in the slammer for a long time.”

“I didn’t kidnap her!”

“And she’s a blond little girl, huh? Have you been playing so many adult games that you’ve gone off the deep end?”

“That’s you!”

Tina looked stiff as she took a step forward. “My name is Tina Sprout, Dr. Muroto. I have heard a lot about you from the Professor.”

“Oh, so you’re the one who was with Ain… What did that idiot say about me?”

Tina hesitated a little and stole a glance at Rentaro. “He called you the biggest pervert of all time.”

“Hmph, the next time you see him, tell him this: Then *you* are the most stubborn person in the world.”

“So you and Ain Rand didn’t get along after all, Doc?” said Rentaro.

Sumire laughed and spread her arms. “Of course not. We’re such good friends that the minute I see his face, it makes me want to spit on it.”

It appeared to be an extremely dangerous relationship.

“Oh, I forgot to introduce myself, huh, Tina? I’m Sumire. I know it’s sudden, but I love you. I want us to love each other in the dissecting room.”

Tina looked at Rentaro, on the verge of tears. “Big Brother, what is wrong with this person?”

Rentaro shook his head. “Doc doesn’t care if a corpse is male or female. She’ll take anything.”

“What?!”

Rentaro looked at Sumire exasperatedly. “Doc, someday, you’ll turn into a murderer just to procure a corpse.”

“Oh, I didn’t think of that possibility. Thanks. What? I want to see your suffering face, so I’ll do *that* to Enju or Kisara first.” She laughed maniacally.

“When you say it, it doesn’t sound like a joke, so stop it!”

“Why don’t I wear a jacket made of human skin and dance around?”

“I’m telling you, that’s scary! Are you really a doctor?”

“Of course. I’ve read the Hippocratic oath, too. ‘First, I will abstain from fraud and corruption and abstain from doing harm to others. Second, even if asked and permissible, I will abstain from using medicine or conducting surgery to commit a crime.’ See?”

Rentaro was silent.

“In the first place, if I wanted to make a quick buck, I could just do the opposite of what that says. In that sense, it is a valuable document.”

Sumire stopped talking for a moment and smiled, looking at Tina. “By the way, Tina, has he teased you in a strange way? Like in a sexual way?”

Tina looked back angrily. “Big Brother would not do such a thing.”

“Oh? What do you think you know about Rentaro here? He’s groped young girls’ bottoms in passing a hundred times. He’s snuck into an elementary school and stolen stool and urine tests a thousand times. He’s the level of pervert that the Vatican wonders if he’s possessed by a demon, and they should either send an exorcist or worry over him every day.

“You should look in an English-Japanese dictionary. Next to the borrowed word *tsunami* is the word *satomi*. The definition should be ‘an uncommonly advanced political deviant.’ Speaking of grandmaster class perv, *Satomi*, he’s kind of famous around the world, and it’s said that for his supreme pervertedness, within thirty minutes of his death, he will be made into a saint as a real dynasty warrior of the *yokozuna* class.”

Tina paled and looked at Rentaro, stepping backward and shaking her head softly. “I had no idea you were such an important person. I have been very rude to you up until now…”

Why was Tina being so polite *now*?

“Hey, wait a minute, Doc! Stop messing around!” *Why are you so passionate about obliterating my standing in society?*

Sumire seemed satisfied after thoroughly making a fool of Rentaro and guffawed loudly, going to the cupboard and starting to make coffee as usual. Over the sound of the electric mill grinding, she urged them to sit, proclaiming, “You guys sit over there somewhere.”

Rentaro and Tina took a hard look at the equation that had overflowed from the board onto the wall as they sat down on the stools.

“Doc, what’s this?” Rentaro asked.

“A Millennium Prize problem called the Twin Prime Conjecture. It seemed interesting, so I tried solving it. I sent it to the International Congress of Mathematicians. If it’s correct, I’ll get some pocket money from this, too.”

“Really? I don’t really get it, but it’s pretty amazing.”

“Not really.” Just then, Sumire looked as if some realization had come to her

and she glanced at Rentaro. “Oh yeah, I almost forgot—just yesterday or the day before, Shoma came to visit me.”

Reflexively, Rentaro pushed his seat back with a screech and stood up. “He did?! Why? What’s he doing these days, anyway?”

“Now, now, calm down. Here, have some coffee.”

The scent of coffee from the heat-resistant table drew him reluctantly back down.

“He was actually looking for you, but after I said you weren’t here, he left without hearing what I had to say. He still doesn’t talk much—*or* listen to what people have to say. He hasn’t changed.”

“Shoma was…” Rentaro put his hand on his chin, thinking.

A reserved voice interrupted from next to him. “Big Brother, who is this Shoma person?”

“Hmm? Oh, that’s right. There’s no way you’d know. Tina, have you heard from Kisara about the Tendo techniques I use?”

“The Tendo Style, wasn’t it? About how President Tendo is a master of its sword-drawing techniques, and that you have a *shodan*, the introductory level black belt ranking?”

Rentaro nodded once. “His name is Shoma Nagisawa. He’s my senior, a disciple who made it to eighth *dan* in the Tendo Martial Arts, and the leading disciple of the Tendo Style. Honestly, it’s kind of nostalgic…”

“Do you respect him?”

Rentaro looked at Tina, surprised. Putting his hand on his chin again, he put the pieces of his memory back together and tried putting it into words.

“I guess…you could call it that. He was so strong that I simply couldn’t beat him. Sukekiyo Tendo had his eye on Shoma for an assistant instructor, but one day, Shoma just quit the dojo out of the blue without saying why. I was really sad. More like, I felt betrayed… Yeah, I hadn’t really thought about it before, but I probably did respect him.”

The conversation died with that, and in order to cover the silence, Rentaro

sipped the strong, bitter coffee. What in the world did Shoma come looking for *him* for?

Tina looked apologetically at Sumire. “I have a favor to ask, Doctor.”

“What is it?”

“In regards to the maintenance of Shenfield—”

Sumire seemed to understand everything with that, and waved her hand in front of her face, looking annoyed. “Well, if Ain could do it, there’s no reason why I can’t. I have to do maintenance on Rentaro’s artificial arm, anyway. Adding one more person isn’t a problem.”

Tina gave a courteous bow, but she still seemed to have something to say. Sneaking a look at her profile, Rentaro tried his best to act calm as he said, “Tina, say everything you want to say. If you plan on staying at the Tendo Civil Security Agency from now on, then don’t hide anything from us.”

That seemed to do the trick, and Tina straightened and lifted her chin, looking at Rentaro and then Sumire one at a time. “I will have a pursuer coming after me soon.”

The atmosphere in the basement lab tensed.

Sumire crossed her arms and sat back deep in her chair, which creaked. “Ain?”

“Yes, Doc,” said Tina.

“But Tina, there doesn’t seem to be any movement from that Rand guy at all,” interjected Rentaro.

Tina shook her head. “I’m sure he’s just in a hurry. The Professor probably never thought that I would not commit suicide but would surrender to the enemy instead… But after he finishes getting ready, it’ll be a different story. The Professor likes loyalty and hates betrayal. Once the Professor hears that I am living peacefully in Tokyo Area, he will definitely come to eliminate me.”

“Wait a minute. If Rand were to try to eliminate you, how would he do it?”

Tina was one of the Cursed Children and a mechanized soldier of the American version of the New Humanity Creation Project, known as NEXT—an

Initiator with unlimited potential. Her skill was real, and even Rentaro had been brought to his knees by its pressure once. To readily think of coming after someone like this would make this Rand guy an idiot who acted without thinking of the consequences. Unless…

"What if there are other Initiators who were made into NEXT soldiers?"

"Are there?!" At this, even Sumire paled, but Tina just nodded gravely.

"As far as I know, there are five. They are all a generation after me. I am the first Hybrid the Professor created…"

"Hybrid?"

"An Initiator who is one of the Cursed Children but has the abilities of a mechanized soldier at the same time. The Professor used family records he got illegally to form contracts with all the girls. And all the girls have combat abilities at least as good as mine, if not better."

Tina paused then, looking Rentaro straight in the eye. "Rank 100, also known as 'Giga Hedgehog,' Ashley Springsteen. Rank 95, 'Meteorfall' Irene Spencer. Rank 88, 'Fer-de-Lance' Faye Kronmiller. Rank 70, 'Blood Creek' Louise Zelazny. And Rank 21, 'Pluto' Rita Salisbury. Among them, the leader, Rita, surpasses me in every way."

There was no way to listen to this without shivering. Ain Rand's passion in creating the ultimate warrior and his total insanity probably surpassed Sumire's.

"I'm sure you know this already, but Initiators and Promoters ranked in the top 100 get nicknames out of respect and awe. I was also known as 'Silent Killer' in the past," said Tina.

"'Silent…Killer'…," murmured Rentaro. If those girls were to band together and come at them, it was possible that Tokyo Area would sustain enough damage to be completely destroyed. And the leader had an IP Rank of 21… The current Rentaro didn't stand a chance against her.

Looking sideways at Tina, he suddenly felt a pang in his heart. Tina may have been friends with those five girls. Rentaro suspected as much, looking at her melancholy profile.

Sumire's eyes, which were half-covered by her bangs, narrowed sharply. "Tina, what are you thinking?"

"Shouldn't I leave the Tendo Civil Security Agency after all? If I stay, I will just cause trouble for everyone." Tina shook her head hard. "Tina Sprout died once already. I couldn't stand to cause trouble to those who allowed me to live a second life—President Tendo, Enju, and Big Brother."

After a brief moment, Rentaro's and Sumire's eyes met.

"Idiot," said Rentaro.

"You're not very smart, are you?" said Sumire at the same time.

"Huh?" Tina froze with her mouth open.

Going toward her, Rentaro put his hand on her head and tousled it hard. "Kisara, Enju, and I aren't so weak that you need to worry about us! You're just a kid. Don't hold back."

Sumire also pointed at Rentaro, grinning broadly.

"Tina, to give you a liberal translation of what Rentaro just said, it's 'You're an important part of my plan to create a harem of little girls, so I won't let you get away. Also little girls' sides are delicious, lick, lick,' so yeah, that's what he meant."

Tina gave Rentaro a pitying look. "Just what is the root of your attachment to ten-year-old girls?"

"Isn't it obvious that they're all lies Doc made up?!" Rentaro shouted.

Sumire held her stomach, laughing.

Rentaro glared at the woman. "Ah…damn it," he sighed, scratching his head vigorously. "Hey, Tina. I have one question. You don't hate the Tendo Civil Security Agency, do you?"

Tina shook her head so hard it looked like it would fall off.

"And it's not that you don't want to stay with us?"

She shook her head again.

Rentaro closed his eyes and exhaled deeply. "Then, there's no problem. Kisara

and I will figure out the hard stuff, so you should just go do your homework or something."

Rentaro opened one eye to see how Tina was taking this. She still looked like she was about to object halfheartedly, squirming.

Rentaro put his hands on the girl's shoulders and enunciated each syllable clearly: "Don't worry. I will become stronger, too."

That seemed to do the trick. Tina smiled, looking a little embarrassed, and then nodded obediently. After a moment, she bowed deeply, too. "If you would be so kind. Thank you for taking care of me."

Rentaro exchanged a quick look with Sumire. It looked like they could relax for now. Jeez, she was a handful in a different way from Enju. Although that was part of what Rentaro loved about her.

Sumire spread her arms calmly. "Tina, sorry, but I need to talk about some grown-up stuff with Rentaro right now. Will you give us a minute?"

Seeing Tina's eyes waver uneasily, Rentaro gave her a small nod. "Can you get back to Kisara's place by yourself?" he asked her.

"I'll be fine," she replied. After exchanging a few more words, Tina bowed deeply once more at the door and then left the basement room without another look.

Rentaro watched her leave for a long time.

"She's a good kid," said Sumire.

"Yeah. Kisara took her in, and she has a good eye for people," said Rentaro.

Sumire put her elbows on the desk and her chin in her hands, grinning. "You're doing a good job of increasing the number of young girls around you."

She had to make it sound so bad.

Sumire tapped the top of the desk with her index finger. "How's it going, Rentaro, really? Do you feel any sexual charm from Enju or Tina?"

Rentaro said angrily, "Stop it. They're only ten."

"You're just saying that for appearance's sake." Sumire was looking at him

without moving. Apparently, it was a serious question.

Rentaro shifted his gaze brusquely and scratched the back of his head. “They’re cute. I do think *that*. And sometimes they’ll do something that makes my heart skip. Is that good enough for you?”

“I’m glad you’re being honest. By the way, Rentaro, do you know this fairy tale?”

Fairy tale?

Sumire recrossed her legs and tilted her head, staring at the ceiling with a faraway look in her eyes. “There once was a whale whose body was so big that he was alienated from his friends. After wandering around by himself for a while, he finally saw something he thought was another whale—a submarine—and fell in love.”

“A submarine?”

“That’s right. The submarine tried to chase the whale away, but the whale became completely attached to it and wouldn’t leave. The whale earnestly tried various approaches on the submarine.”

Rentaro didn’t say anything.

“And then finally, during the war, an enemy destroyer ship was seen. When the submarine tried to submerge, the whale protected the submarine from a depth charge with his life and died. The whole surface of the ocean was dyed red with the whale’s blood, but even so, the whale was happy that he could protect the one he loved.”

Rentaro paused. “Doc, what are you trying to say?”

“Rentaro, whales and submarines are different things. When they come together, there can’t be a happy ending.”

“Enju is human. She’s human, no different from you and me.”

“I know what you’re trying to say. But you should also understand that people who feel that way are in the minority. And maybe you shouldn’t support it so much.”

Rentaro shook his head slowly. “That’s impossible, Doc. I can’t think of a life

without Enju and Tina anymore.”

“But they will fall like leaves one day. Rentaro, don’t chase after falling leaves. The lifespan of Cursed Children is bound by the shackles of the corrosion rate of their body, which they cannot be freed from.”

Rentaro gritted his teeth and looked away from Sumire. “Doc, it’s not that I’m running away. I will definitely talk to Enju about this. But please don’t pursue it right now. It’s not like I know how to bring it up with her, either.”

“It’s really the doctor’s job to tell them, though…”

“Please don’t. When she finds out, I will definitely be the one who told her.”

Sumire shrugged her shoulders. “Well, if that’s what you’ve decided, I won’t interfere. By the way, did you know, Rentaro, that Cursed Children can breed with normal humans?”

“Theoretically speaking, right?”

“No, it’s happened.”

“What…do you mean?”

“Do you know about the custom of child marriage? There are actually a lot of countries where girls get married when they’re still children.”

“No, but the law……” One way or another, all civilized nations should have had some sort of law forbidding the marriage of girls until their bodies were matured.

“What are you going on about? In the Middle East, in countries where rape crimes are rampant, girls lose their virginity just by walking outside. And generally, in those countries, no one will take a girl who’s damaged goods as a bride, so in order to prevent that from happening, parents will secretly marry their daughters off before they even understand what’s going on around them. And the Guinness World Record for youngest person to give birth is five years old. It’s not strange for one of the Cursed Children somewhere around the world to have already experienced giving birth.”

“But wouldn’t the Cursed Children fight back? No one would want that, right? To be married off to some weird guy before you know it?” Besides, the girls

were part of the New Humanity, with powers that far surpassed those of regular humans. If they faced a situation they didn't want to be in, they should have the power to break out of it with their own hands.

Sumire recrossed her legs in her chair. "Rentaro, do you know how elephants are trained?"

"Elephants? No…"

"When the elephants are still young, their legs are wrapped with a strong chain with the other end of the chain fixed to a stake. The young elephant will cry and go wild, but it won't be able to break free. Eventually, that elephant gives up. And once it learns that it can't get away, it's all over. Even if it grows up to become an adult and gets stronger, if it has a thin hemp rope tied to its leg, it won't try to move one step from that place."

Rentaro suddenly looked at himself in the full-length mirror at one end of the basement room. A scary Rentaro, eyes narrowed, stared back at him. "Doc, what're you trying to say…?"

"Try changing *elephant* for *Cursed Children*. Unfortunately, the story you thought up of the Cursed Children fighting for their own freedom is like the pipe dream of a child who doesn't know the realities of the world yet. In countries where women already have low status, women are treated as trophies taken by victors of war, not as humans. Then, add the additional factor of Cursed Children to the list of things to be discriminated against. Those girls aren't human anymore. They're livestock. And even if they're raped while being cut up, they don't die easily. They're pretty fun toys for perverts to play with."

"Stop."

"No, I won't stop. I haven't said anything until now, but I hate people like you who don't face reality. Have you ever seen one of the Cursed Children cut up by blades and hung with a rope, rotting, with flies swarming around her at eight years old? How about the heroic expression twisted by agony of a six-year-old who had ruptured organs after being forced into sexual relations with a piglike man? There's still more—"

Suddenly, the shrill sound of something shattering to pieces echoed around the basement room. There was a dull pain in Rentaro's hand, and when he

looked at it, he slowly realized that his left hand had moved on its own and broken the mirror he was looking at. Fragments were piercing his fist, and lines of blood dripped onto the tile that covered the ground.

“Stop! It’s making me sick!” he shouted.

“Rentaro, it’s not like you believe that the Children outside of Tokyo Area are living heavenly lives, right? Thinking that you can solve all their problems is arrogant. Even the strong acts of discrimination against the Children in Tokyo Area are happening because they’re *supposed* to happen. Everything has a reason and a consequence.”

Rentaro finally understood where Sumire was going with her charade. “Are you saying that foreign Initiators have it much worse, so it can’t be helped if Enju and Tina get dirty words thrown at them or are stepped on?”

“If you take the argument to the extreme, that’s exactly it. Since it’s you, you’re probably worrying about useless things and thinking about something stupid.”

“Let me say this, Doc. I hate people like you, who act so cold.”

“You are powerless, Rentaro. If you really want to change the world, then you shouldn’t have left the Tendo family, which controls the politics and economics of this country from behind the scenes.”

“I…” Was he wrong? The next words wouldn’t come out, and his breathing was quick and shallow. He shook his head once and closed his eyes, forcing his heart and breathing to calm, searching for Sumire’s meaning.

“Then, I will drive off the Gastrea from this world as a civil officer in the place of those politicians,” he said finally. “There’s no way there’s only one way to change the world, right? Tokyo Area is small. Without the civil officer guards, aircraft can’t fly, and because of the dangers of marine Gastrea, we can’t really swim in the ocean, either. I want to give Enju the freedom to look around at a wide world. Doc, I will reform the world for Enju’s sake. That’s why I’ll defeat them. Even all of the Stage Five Gastrea.”

Sumire was frozen, her mouth slightly open. But in a moment she looked up at the ceiling, slapped her forehead, and burst out laughing. “I see, so that’s

how you took it. ‘All the Stage Five,’ huh? Well, I’ve lost. Leaving aside whether or not you can do it, that was well said, Rentaro.” Her laughing suddenly cut off and she sat back down in her chair, eyeing him with a smile on her face. “You’re different from me after all. You’re so bright, it’s blinding.”

“That’s not true. Doc, you’re—”

Sumire shook her head gently. “No, I’m no good. Once humans think they know something well, they start looking at only the useless stuff. I’m more suited to this dark basement, after all. I can’t walk under the light of the sun.”

Rentaro didn’t speak.

“Rentaro, do you know what the most beautiful thing in the universe is?”

“No… What is it?”

“From the Buddhist worldview, it’s said to be the flower of the sacred *ren* lotus. In other words, it’s you. *Ren*taro. Your soul is beautiful.”

Rentaro felt a knot in his chest and looked at Sumire, at a loss for words. Coming from Sumire’s roundabout personality, this could be said to be the greatest praise.

“Doc……”

Sumire stood and spread both arms. “As you are right now, it’s probably okay if I showed you *that.*”

There it is, he thought, and braced himself. In the first place, Rentaro did not come to Sumire’s lab today to watch Tina and the doctor meet each other.

With last month’s Seitenshi assassination case, he had defeated the sniper who had an ingenious plan and saved the Seitenshi. For his services, Rentaro had been promoted to IP Rank 300, and he had risen to a Level 5 top secret–information access key. He was far from the Level 12 access key that was given to those within the top ten IP Ranks, but even so, there might be details about his parents or the Gastrea War that he could find out with his newly opened levels of access, so he had entrusted his access key to Sumire and had her look into the details for him.

He guessed from Sumire’s sharp words until now that she was trying to

prepare him for what she was about to show him; she always did things in such a roundabout way. Before he knew it, the palms of his hands started sweating, and he wiped them on the cuffs of his pants. The hairs on the back of his neck were standing on end.

Sumire pulled out a disc from the top of her desk and inserted it into her laptop. Pointing a remote control at the wall, she pushed a button and a screen Rentaro had seen before slid down, connecting wirelessly to the projector. It was probably what Sumire used for her hobby of watching movies. Sumire started to do something with her back turned toward him, and then snuck a glance at him and laughed with meaning. “I hesitate in uploading this information to the cloud. It’s that kind of information. There’s pretty shocking stuff in there, too.”

Rentaro held his breath and waited for Sumire to finish what she was doing.

“First, this.”

Suddenly, a picture was brought up on the screen. The large image was covered with small writing, and Rentaro squinted as he leaned over. It looked like it went back twenty years, counting back from the current year of 2031.

Rentaro read over it and scowled. The items from the year 2021, when the Gastrea War broke out, until the end of the war were mostly blacked out. Taking the mouse from Sumire, Rentaro clicked on the blacked-out parts and got an error sound accompanied by the message “Access Key Level Too Low.”

“Have you noticed, Rentaro?”

“Yeah…” Rentaro nodded as he glared at the chart. The chronological tables of recent history everyone, including Rentaro, studied at school did not have these black lines in them. This was because the items themselves were completely erased from public view.

In the history textbook used at Rentaro’s school, Magata High School, there were surprisingly few pages that touched on the Gastrea War. He had heard that the documents relating to it had been lost in the fires during a period of confusion during the war, and many of the data centers that housed servers had been destroyed, so there were no accurate records left. That was the reasoning given, anyway.

When he had first heard that, he had nodded in agreement. That was because ten years ago, in 2021, the world population, which was in a glorious spring and had grown to almost eight billion people, was slaughtered until less than ten percent were left.

However—

Rentaro glared at the blacked-out chronology once more and tapped his foot in irritation. The message “Access Key Level Too Low” meant that as long as he had the right access key, he could open the censored parts and see the truth. In other words, the public reason given by the government that documents had been destroyed during the Gastrea War was a flat-out lie. But why was the government hiding the details of the War? Or…what was under those black lines that was so bad it had to be hidden?

“Rentaro, look at this.” Sumire approached the screen, extending a pointer and indicating one side of the display.

When Rentaro looked closely and double-clicked the words to enlarge them, parts of the words that had been blacked out were revealed and turned red. Apparently, this was the information that could be revealed with a Level 5 access key.

He skimmed it and saw that most of it was the war history. There was the Gastrea Legion’s fight against the self-defense force in the Kanto Battle and the Second Kanto Battle, and the recent Fox-Hunting incident where Tokyo Area almost broke out in a Pandemic. There was also what was declared the most beautiful destruction in the world where poisonous butterfly scales caused group hallucinations in the Morphe Butterfly Incident, and the Kagetane Hiruko Terrorist Incident, which of course was hard for Rentaro to forget. All these names were still too fresh in his memory to be called nostalgic.

Jumping to the items on military affairs, the Stairway to Heaven Project and the New Humanity Creation Project—which were thought of by the general public as an urban legend—were both evidenced here as truly extant. Rentaro tried going to the detail screen of the New Humanity Creation Project, but there was nothing more than what Rentaro already knew written there. *That was only to be expected*, Rentaro thought, crossing his arms. If he wanted to know

more about the New Humanity Creation Project, instead of fishing for information in documents, it would be faster to just ask the head of the Japan branch of the project, who was standing in front of him. He would get more details, too.

Rentaro input all the information into his brain at once and fell into a slightly excited state. He felt his pulse quicken.

“Rentaro, the problem is this.” The words were so small that if Sumire had not used the pointer, he would have almost missed reading them. There it was.

It was as if his spine was struck by lightning, and his eyes opened wide.

“On a certain day, in a certain month, in the year 2021, Seven Stars Village was annihilated.”

Rentaro’s body felt numb, and he couldn’t move an inch. His throat was dry. “Doc…is Seven Stars Village…?”

Sumire nodded gravely. Rentaro and Sumire both knew the name *Seven Stars*.

The Inheritance of the Seven Stars—It was hard to forget the key item of the Kagetane Hiruko Terrorist Incident that had rocked Rentaro’s fate. Rentaro had chased down the mastermind, Kikunojo Tendo, but not even he could figure out why the mysterious item was a catalyst that could call out the Zodiac Gastrea Scorpion.

The duralumin case the Inheritance of the Seven Stars was in contained a broken tricycle…

His instincts screamed to not get involved with this case. Rentaro was sure that once he knew the truth, he wouldn’t be able to run away and would be screaming until the end of the world. That almost certain premonition ran through the back of his head.

“Strangely, this is the only account of Seven Stars Village. Looking around on maps online, Seven Stars Village had been erased from all of them. It was hard to find this, you know.” Saying that, she threw a thick book of maps on the desk in front of Rentaro. It was dirty and faded from the sun and ragged with tears, but Rentaro could just barely make out the words *Atlas of Japan 2020*. This was a map of Japan from before the Gastrea War.

Rentaro turned the pages with shaking hands. Sumire had marked it with a tab, so he didn't have to go through the trouble of looking for the exact spot.

It looked like Seven Stars Village was in the northern part of Old Nagano prefecture. It was somewhat near the boundary with Old Toyama prefecture, at the foot of the three-thousand-meter mountains that made up the Hida mountain range. Of course, not just Seven Stars Village, but all of Nagano prefecture had turned into Unexplored Territory long ago, so it was not possible to approach it sans preparation.

Anyway, Rentaro carved the location of Seven Stars Village deep into his heart.

"There's one more thing. This one is a video. I acquired this in a remarkable way." Sumire raised her head as she operated the laptop. "A government worker uploaded it by accident. Whoever it was noticed right away and deleted it, but it was still cached. The file was corrupted, but I used some software to restore it. Thanks to that, the video is rough. Normally, you would need a Level 10 access key to see this data."

"Level 10?" If he remembered correctly, Level 10 was for those with an IP Rank in the top thirty. Rentaro now could barely dream of having an IP Rank of 30.

Sumire's unusually serious eyes were staring at Rentaro. "This is the really bad one. Proceed with caution. This is the Ardi File."

Ardi File?

Just as he opened his mouth to ask, Sumire double-clicked the mouse. Suddenly, the screen turned black, and there was sound like the breathing of a monster. The sound and video skipped and there was a loud noise artifact that repeated from the bad video quality, making the strange breathing seem even more eerie. He knew it was impossible, but Rentaro even felt like there was a nasty smell coming from the video.

It looked like it was recorded on something of handycam size, and the photographer was trembling terribly.

Rentaro licked his upper lip nervously and couldn't decide if he wanted to

stare at the screen so he wouldn't miss a single word, or run away desperately out of the basement room the second he was given permission to. However, the video that was filled with noise suddenly became clear.

As soon as that happened, Rentaro's whole body stiffened.

Some *thing* had been put on top of an operating table and was looking at him with its enlarged right eye. Its whole body was covered in bandages, and if it didn't just barely retain a human shape, then Rentaro would not have been able to identify what it was.

Its left shoulder was gigantic, and its left arm was shriveled awkwardly as if the shoulder had stolen all its nutrients. There was a third leg at the crotch by its right thigh, and its sternum was enlarged. Even worse was its face. Only its completely red right eye was swollen, suppressing its left eye and nose and other organs, and drool dangled from its uneven yellow teeth, making a large stain on the sheets of the operating table. There were a large number of tubes going through its arms, legs, eyes, genitals, and everything, and the wiring on the operating table looked like a bundle of spaghetti.

Rentaro's knees felt weak, and he put his hands on the table at once to stop himself from falling over, but when he put his hands on the table, glass test tubes were pushed off and fell to the ground, breaking one by one.

"Rentaro, are you all right?" Sumire approached him uneasily, giving gentle commands with her hands.

The back of his right eye throbbed with pain. He bore it and forced himself to look. Seeing the bulge of the chest, and not seeing the bulge of the male genitalia, Rentaro discovered that it was female.

He hadn't noticed the words DEVIL VIRUS coming onto the screen. The monster was panting and staring at the person behind the camera with its red eye. The person behind the camera took a long shot of the monster from the front, as if it was their job, and then without warning, it was cut off.

It hadn't even been a whole minute, had it? But to Rentaro, it had seemed like an eternity. Rentaro desperately rubbed his upper arms and just then became aware that he was holding back a feeling of nausea. "Doc, what was that…?"

Sumire shook her head silently. “I don’t know, either. But since it’s called *Ardi File*, that’s probably the *Ardi*.”

“Ardi……?”

Because the beast’s whole body was wrapped in bandages, he couldn’t see the color of its skin, let alone whether or not it was human. The only things on the screen were the operating table and the machines around it. Because of the bright white light shining down from something that looked like a halogen light, he had assumed it was an operating table, but he had immediately lost confidence in his abilities of perception given his reaction after.

“*Ardi* was likely a code name. Probably taken from *Ardipithecus ramidus*. Rentaro, have you ever heard of how our ancestors came from Africa?”

“No……,” Rentaro said. “By ‘we,’ do you mean the Japanese people?”

“No, not only Japanese people, but Americans and other Asians and Europeans, too. Ten years ago, the world was about to reach a population of eight billion, and it was said that mankind had branched out from a single woman born in Africa. This was seen in mitochondria, but it is only passed down through the female family line.”

“Only female… Does that have anything to do with why the Cursed Children are all female?”

“I don’t know. But the African woman who was the origin of the mitochondria was given the name Mitochondria Eve, based on the Bible. And getting back to the point, currently, the oldest fossil of mankind ever excavated is a 4.1-million-year-old *ramidus* ape-man, in other words, *Ardi. Ardi* does not equal Mitochondria Eve, but *Ardi* and Mitochondria Eve have both been called ‘mankind’s first woman’ before. But anyway, neither is scientifically the oldest.”

“‘Mankind’s first woman’…? Then, Doc, what was *that*?!” Rentaro pressed Sumire for an answer.

Sumire nodded. “That person’s eyes were red. That was probably the first ever infected, mankind’s first Gastrea.”

The strength left Rentaro’s entire body, and before he knew it, he had slouched down onto the stool. There was a mountain of things he shouldn’t

have thought about. However, there was something he just had to ask Sumire before he forgot about it. “Doc, you saw the words *Devil Virus* on the bottom right, didn’t you? That’s the Gastrea virus, right?”

“Well, that makes sense if you think about it.”

“But why is it called the Devil’s Virus?”

This time, it was Sumire’s turn to tilt her head in question. “Probably because it acted like a devil?”

“Then, wouldn’t *demon* or *Satan* work, too? No, wait. That’s not right…” Rentaro put a hand to his chin as he gathered the questions lurking in his mind. “Why didn’t they tell the world about it as *Devil Virus*? How did we come to call it the Gastrea virus?”

Sumire didn’t seem to quite understand his question. “Does there need to be a reason? I think it’s common for names to change when they go into widespread use among the population.” She didn’t seem to have any doubts about the phrase *Devil Virus*.

The more Rentaro thought about it, the less he understood. *What was happening? Why did something like this—*

Rentaro’s cell phone buzzed. The name on the screen read *Kisara*.

“*Satomi, did you see the news?*” Her voice, however tense it was, still made a part of him feel unconsciously relieved; it blew away the otherworldly atmosphere that had wrapped itself around him. He felt like it had pulled him out of hell.

However, that was short-lived. “*Satomi, it’s started*,” she continued. “*The Monolith’s bleaching has been spotted! It looks like it can’t be hidden any longer.*”

Rentaro kept the phone on his ear and said in a low voice, “Doc, turn on the TV.”

Sumire quickly operated a nearby device and soon the picture from the TV was projected onto the large screen. There was no need to change the channel; all the stations were probably broadcasting the same breaking news.

The video was aerial footage from a news helicopter. The rotors were noisy, and the female reporter's voice sounded far away, but there was no doubt about what she was trying to say.

From the close-up of Monolith 32, they could see what looked like stains of white mold all over the Monolith. The corrosion fluid injected by Gastrea Aldebaran had finally eaten away at the enormous barrier, enough so that it could be seen from afar.

The video changed again, this time to show recorded footage. Rentaro groaned involuntarily. A helicopter flying above the Unexplored Territory was recording the mass of Gastrea that had gathered in the dense forest. The black mountain of them that could be seen from between the trees were of varying shapes and sizes. Of course, they weren't limited to land-dwelling units. Bird and insect aerial units that could fly could also be seen. It looked like there were already close to a thousand of them. Perhaps in response to the approaching news helicopter, the Gastrea on the ground looked up, and they roared together in a bone-chilling wail filled with resentment and hatred.

Then, suddenly, the recorded footage was interrupted, and it went back to the live broadcast. Abruptly, on the top half of the screen, an IN MEMORIAM reel came on with headshots and names. Apparently, the news crew that went to film the concentration of Gastrea had been unable to return.

"The people of Tokyo Area are in a state of panic. Everyone is waiting for the government to act as soon as possible." Even though it hadn't even begun yet, the captions on screen were already calling it the Third Kanto Battle.

Sumire hadn't known what was going on, and she was frozen with her eyes wide.

Even after turning off the TV, the image of the gathering of Gastrea facing the sky and howling remained burned into Rentaro's brain. *Why are you coming for us? Do you really hate mankind that much?* Rentaro slowly let out the breath he had been holding.

There were four days left until the Monolith collapsed. He needed to gather his force as soon as possible.

7

“Rentaro, is this good?” With a hammer in one hand, Enju leaned over and waved at him, all smiles.

“A little deeper, please,” said Rentaro.

“Got it!” With dangerous enthusiasm, Enju hammered the pegs that fixed the four corners of the structure they were building.

As Rentaro watched Enju nervously, he took two poles, put them through canvas sleeves, and crossed them. Once Enju saw he was ready, their eyes met, and they pulled it up together with a shout.

There was a loud flap, and then the two-person tent was standing over the thin undergrowth.

“Oh, it’s up, it’s up! That’s brilliant, Rentaro!” Enju hopped around, making her pigtails bounce.

Rentaro looked at the sun shining down on them from the middle of the sky and wiped the sweat on his brow, then shifted his gaze to the tent with a grim expression on his face. The tent they had just put up was not much to look at, with visible stains and traces of repairs (and even though it was already the year 2031, it was still made of heavy canvas).

Looking around them, he saw several eight-meter-square squad tents and the tent for the frontline headquarters in the distance, made of the newest GORE-TEX. They were probably all government-issued goods from the self-defense force. Compared to that, their tent was taken from the Satomi family closet, and they were just lucky that it hadn’t gotten moldy.

Rentaro lifted his face and looked at the Monolith that filled his vision.

Tokyo Area, District 40. Ten kilometers before Monolith 32. That was where the frontline headquarters for the civil officer troops had been placed.

Rentaro sighed. The reason they had not received government equipment was simple. It was solely because their civil officer squad was not fully formed yet. The civil officer registration area he had gone to in the morning was an open tent like those used for sports festivals and funerals. Rentaro and the

others had headed over in high spirits, ready to join the troop and fight some Gastrea, but they were met with the curt, “Rejected.”

Apparently, the smallest unit used in civil officer troop tactical strategy was a squad—in other words, because they would move as adjuvants, those who did not form an adjuvant group were not allowed to participate.

The smallest possible adjuvant was three pairs, or six people. In other words, even with the Katagiri siblings, not only did Rentaro still need at least one more pair before he would be recognized as an adjuvant, but he was also being completely left out of the tactical arrangements.

Tina probably couldn’t participate in combat since she was a criminal who had received a heavy penalty from the government. And it was unfair to expect Kisara to provide much combat power since she had chronic kidney disease.

After the Seitenshi approached him directly to take this job, he couldn’t face her with, “I couldn’t find enough members.” His own feelings on edge from impatience, he rocked back and forth slightly with irritation. He needed to get another pair to join them so he could register as soon as possible.

Rentaro turned back to Enju. “Enju, do you want to put the things we brought into the tent and go toward the middle of the camp?”

“Recruiting?” Seeing Enju’s eyes glitter, Rentaro grimaced.

“It’s not as fun as you think it is, you know.”

“Then, I will *make* it amusing!”

I give up. He was going to have to take drastic measures.

Enju trotted ahead, beckoning him forward to the tune of “Rentaro, hurry!”

Rentaro shook his head and pointed his feet toward the frontline headquarters. District 40, where they were camped, was adjacent to District 39, Enju’s hometown. It was no exception to the rule of the Outer Districts in that it was run-down. However, once the military got there, it looked completely different.

As he neared the camp’s nexus, the first thing he noticed was the smell of fermented alcohol. Under the open tents that were put up everywhere, even

though the sun was still high, an ill-bred Promoter was downing drink and grumbling.

Next came the smell of gunpowder smoke. Among the rough voices, there was the occasional ear-splitting sound of gunfire. A salesman was selling Varanium weapons, giving his pitch about how powerful his stock was as he let civil officers test them.

There were other food and drink stalls, performers, moneylenders, and a variety of other rough stores that were more than street stalls but less than festival stands all in a row, and in the middle, when they got to the main street, it was so crowded that it was hard to even pass through. Rentaro felt like he would get drunk on all the humanity.

Rentaro held Enju's hand so they wouldn't get separated and quickly escaped to a side street pulling her along. He found a stump between a gun shop and a fortune-teller and sat down, loosened his necktie, and gazed up at the sky. The sun continued to shine high in the middle of the blue, and there was the continuous sound of cicadas chirping. It made him feel like he was being steamed alive in his completely black uniform. "Damn it, there are so many people."

"I like this festival-like atmosphere," commented Enju.

"Festival? Do you realize that the fate of Tokyo Area is at stake?"

Just then, there was the sound of a female voice snickering beside them. Next to them was a fortune-teller wearing a robe that looked far too hot for this weather, with various gold and silver accessories on her arms. She wore clothes that looked like the chador worn by women from Islamic countries, and her mouth was covered with a cloth. Before her, a crystal ball was laid out under the simple canopy of the tent.

"Oh, excuse me. Your Initiator is very energetic, isn't she?" It was a clear, high voice. She sounded very young.

Rentaro looked toward the people coming and going on the street, and after going back and forth about it in his head, he asked the fortune-teller a question that had been lurking in the back of his mind. "Hey. How can you all be so calm? You never thought to run away or anything?"



A lot had happened last night. First of all, the spokesman from the Seitenshi's office had officially announced the scenario about the collapse of Monolith 32. The reactions were pretty much what they had expected.

The extradeep underground shelters the Seitenshi had prepared could only hold thirty percent of the citizens of Tokyo Area, and those people were chosen randomly by computer and contacted that day.

The problem was the remaining seventy percent of the population. They vented their uneasiness and confusion on the Seitenshi, and when they found out that Cursed Children were included in that thirty percent, many people strongly opposed it. Demonstrations and rallies were quickly organized, and there was a strong group that took the position that there was something wrong with the selection process and demanded a reselection. Among them, there were even bloody organizations formed that wanted to kill the Cursed Children by brute force and steal their winning spots.

To Rentaro, these groups were extremely dangerous. Naturally, this was because they would attack the Cursed Children, but once they realized that they did not have enough spots for all their members, it was also possible that they could quickly change into an organization that attacked the general public.

Those with a little more foresight had bought out the plane tickets to other areas and were running away. Tickets to Osaka and Sendai Areas were sold out within minutes after the government press conference, and a single ticket had jumped up in price and was currently selling for as much as someone's life savings in auctions and on the black market. The Seitenshi's office encouraged evacuation to other areas, but there was an overwhelming shortage of spots.

All of Tokyo Area was wrapped in panic. If things got out of control, and it got past the level that could be taken care of by the police and vigilante groups, then it was possible it would turn into a state of anarchy.

Of course, the criticism was focused on the Seitenshi. It started with hackneyed criticisms like that she was covering things up or that she was incompetent, and continued with calling her a whore or gossiping about her femininity.

Since she would probably receive the same criticism once Aldebaran

appeared and the truth was announced, as someone who had been studying to be a politician in the Tendo family, Rentaro thought the Seitenshi's response was correct. Right after announcing the worst-case scenario for when the Monolith collapsed, her press office announced a best-case scenario at the same time that reversed it.

They announced that they were manufacturing a replacement Monolith and attempting to construct a Monolith on-site. The Seitenshi's office promised that they would finish preparing the replacement Monolith three days after the collapse of Monolith 32, and they provided detailed paperwork to prove it. And so, it was announced that for three days after the collapse of the Monolith, Tokyo Area would be protected by the mighty self-defense force that had proved itself time and time again during the Second Kanto Battle, and the rear guard would be made of the civil officer troops.

This announcement was somewhat effective, and it was able to absorb some of the shock received by Tokyo Area. The draft of the speech had been polished carefully, and as usual, the Seitenshi's eye contact and breath placement were perfect—she had to have practiced it many times. She had done a good job preparing so much in only a few days.

The media criticism of the Seitenshi showed no signs of slowing, as usual, but the Seitenshi was completely indifferent to her own pain, so even if she were spit on, she would stand firm and smile and pay no heed. The problem was, she had a tendency to be too sensitive to the pain of others.

"Satomi, I cannot bear to have more seeds of sadness sown in this world…" During the previous incident involving the assassination attempt on her, she had said this to him plaintively. There was no way Rentaro could think that that was just a random remark she made. If she were a real saint whose heart was pained more by the hurt of others than her own, then there was no way she would tolerate the plan failing. Because if they failed, then the lives of all the residents of Tokyo Area who could not run away in time would be lost.

But apparently, the other countries had decided that the plan proposed by Tokyo Area was hopeless. At the Tokyo Area stock market, there was an avalanche of panicked selling that started at the morning trading session and continued until the close of the afternoon session, and it was estimated that

taking into consideration the possibility of Tokyo Area disappearing from the map, a limit down was unavoidable for all stocks in the exchange. After the Great War, this actualized as Gastrea Risk, which further complicated the monetary economy.

Currently, there were few factors that could be looked at optimistically. Yet even so, the day after the Seitenshi's announcement, gun dealers and liquor stores, and even the fortune-teller in front of him weren't running away, but had come to the Outer District and were solemnly doing business. Rentaro couldn't understand it.

The fortune-teller narrowed her eyes and smiled. "It's simple. I'm betting that you civil officers will win."

Rentaro was astonished and stood with his mouth gaping.

The fortune-teller continued. "That's why I came here to do fortune-telling: So I could lift the spirits of the civil officers. Usually, there are bad fortunes mixed in, too, but starting from today, I've made it so that only good fortunes will come out. I'm sure the gods will agree that it's fine to have days like this occasionally. Oh, and don't tell anyone about this," she chuckled.

Rentaro and Enju looked at each other. Enju smiled, and before he knew it, Rentaro also found himself smiling. "Then, please tell our fortune."

"Sure, no problem." So saying, she faced the crystal ball and did some quick fortune-telling movements. In no time she was looking at them. "Now, young man in the black, you two are looking for people to join your adjuvant, right?"

Rentaro raised an eyebrow. "How did you know?"

"How, I wonder?"

Rentaro realized that the fortune-teller must have been watching them since before Rentaro started talking to her.

"Don't worry. I'm sure you two will meet wonderful companions. Please continue forward without giving up."

"Thanks. It makes me feel better to hear that from someone else."

The fortune-teller put her hand to her mouth and smiled. "No problem.

You're welcome."

"My turn, my turn, my turn, my turn!" Enju raised her hand and drew closer to the fortune-teller. "I wish for you to tell my fortune, as well!"

"Miss, what would you like me to look at?"

Enju put her hands on her hips and stuck out her chest, exhaling through her nose. "My breasts. I wish to be bigger than Kisara. If possible, I'd like a bust of about a hundred and twenty centimeters."

"A hundred…and twenty…?" At those words that showed no fear of the gods, even the fortune-teller was speechless, and after looking at Enju's flat chest, the fortune-teller looked at Rentaro, perplexed.

Rentaro shook his head quickly. *Don't look at me…*

"Well… Don't dreams come true if you believe?" The fortune-teller took care of it with a vague general statement. And then, without a pause, she stood up, saying, "Oh, right! I just remembered something I have to do," and hastily folded up her store and ran away.

Enju's eyes sparkled as she looked at Rentaro. "Rentaro, did you hear that? I will be a hundred and twenty centimeters, she said! After I'm a hundred and twenty centimeters, I'll let you feel them every day!"

"Um…well… I'll wait without getting my hopes up. Look, more important, we have to make an adjuvant! An adjuvant!" Forcefully changing the subject, Rentaro patted the side of the stump he was sitting on. Enju sat down quietly and looked at the large street in front of them, uncharacteristically serious.

Rentaro also slapped his cheeks with both hands to get back his fighting spirit and evaluated the civil officer Initiators and Promoters coming and going on the street. The metallic sound of swords and shields hitting armor mixed with a cloud of dust being kicked up by the comings and goings of the crowd, leaving their throats dry and scratchy.

The civil officers were wearing many different kinds of outfits, from battle dress uniforms to tactical vests in military style with interlocking attachment MOLLE; to western-style armor, plate mail, helmets, gauntlets, and armored jackets. There were also many different kinds of weapons, from MINIMI

machine guns to Galil assault rifles and Magnum revolvers. He also saw halberds, war hammers, *shamshirs*, and the great claymore swords that Scotland was so proud of. It was as if they had gotten lost in the waiting room of the ancient Roman Colosseum.

“It feels like we’re in the waiting room of the world’s greatest martial arts tournament, huh?” Sitting next to him swinging her legs, Enju echoed his thoughts suddenly.

What they all had in common was that their weapons were made of Varanium, so their sword blades and striking edges were all black. Individuals who had been taken over by the Gastrea virus had a wide variety of abilities, so there were many different ways to deal with them. Another way to put it would be to say that there were as many different ways for civil officers to fight as there were types of Gastrea.

“Are all of them people we can get to join us?” Enju asked.

“No, most of them are probably already part of another party,” Rentaro lamented. “But there are people who aren’t, too. You could say that this is where the guys who missed being part of an adjuvant are putting up their hopes at getting one last chance.”

“About how many more people do you wish to have join us, Rentaro? Is having one more pair enough?”

Rentaro fixed his gaze on the road in front of him. Just then, a covered Humvee made its way slowly down the wide street. “About that, Enju… I’d like to have five pairs with a total of ten people, including us.”

“You want that many?”

“Yeah, there are a few reasons for that. I think that’s just the right number if we compromise between the limit of how many people I can lead and the number of people we need to minimize blind spots in the party.”

“Then, we must work hard to bring in many new companions, huh?”

“Yeah, I’m counting on you, partner.”

After a while, Enju pulled on the edge of his clothes and pointed out a pair.

“Rentaro, how about them?”

Looking in the direction Enju was pointing, Rentaro saw a heavily armed civil officer pair. The Initiator’s weapon was a long spear, and the Promoter was carrying a rifle made by the Knight’s Armament Company. But what Rentaro focused on was their defensive armament, the body armor that covered them. “No, those guys are no good.”

Enju looked confused. “Why not?”

“Look at their bodies. They have armor close around their necks, head, and even their elbows and knees. Amateurs who don’t want to die have the tendency to focus on defense. But when fighting Gastrea, that can be fatal. You understand, don’t you, Enju?”

Enju scowled uncharacteristically and crossed her arms. “Certainly for us Initiators, rather than increasing our defense, it would be more logical to lighten the load on our bodies to make it easier to run away with our speed.”

“Right, you get a hundred percent for that answer. That’s exactly it. You could say the same thing for Promoters. Anyway, since Gastrea are bigger and stronger, one big hit from them would mean the end for a human, so in actuality, the more lightly equipped guys have a higher chance of survival.”

“I see. Then, those who are equipped more lightly are stronger? Understood. Then, next, we should find someone like that to join us, right?” There was hardly a pause before Enju yelled, “Found someone!” and restlessly ran toward a new pair.

One look at the Promoter, and Rentaro almost jumped in surprise. He was a head taller than Rentaro himself, and he wasn’t just lightly equipped—he was half-naked, wearing only underpants. On top of that, his face was covered with a mask. On his shoulder he had a spiked club like those carried by demons in folktales, and he was extremely muscular. Rentaro wondered if there was a reason why he looked like the weapons dealer in *Dragon Quest*.

He already had the fiercely individualistic Katagiri siblings on his team. If he added a beast like that to his team, there was no doubt the direction his adjuvant would take. He definitely wanted to keep that from happening. Rentaro watched the progression of events nervously, and after some heated

discussion, the Promoter shooed her away with his hand.

Enju came back with her shoulders slumped and pigtails drooping. “They refused…”

“R-really.” Rentaro breathed a sigh of relief where she couldn’t hear.

After that, they spent a few hours talking to civil officers who appeared strong, but as he expected, they did not get a favorable result. Most people were already part of an adjuvant, and the civil officers who weren’t were not satisfied with Rentaro’s proposed payment or were too prideful to follow the orders of a man who was younger than them, and other similar reasons.

Even Enju, who proudly worked hard to invite people at first, lost her smile after being refused three times, looked like she was about to cry after being refused seven times, and looked pitiful and dejected after being refused ten times.

The sun had gotten low, and Rentaro’s and Enju’s shadows became darker and longer. But just as Rentaro thought they should stop for the day, things took an abrupt turn. A scream roared from afar, and the people coming and going stopped in their tracks. Then, commotion spread through the crowd like fire.

Rentaro pricked up his ears to see if he could hear what was going on and overheard stuff like, “There’s a fight between civil officers!”

“One of the pairs charged at the other without knowing the difference in their abilities.”

“That was stupid.”

He looked Enju in the eye and nodded. Jogging toward the scream, he soon figured out where a crowd had gathered and pushed his way through to the middle with simple words of apology. When he emerged in the middle of the donut of people and his vision opened up, he was suddenly met with something far beyond what he could have ever imagined in front of him. Rentaro involuntarily put a hand over his mouth. “Enju, don’t come over here!”

But it was too late. Next to him, Enju was frozen with both eyes open wide.

Damn it. Rentaro leaned in all too quickly to check if the pair was breathing and find a pulse. Using his thumb and forefinger, he even forced their eyelids open to check their pupils.

Rentaro closed his eyes. Finally, he looked at Enju and shook his head. “It’s no use, they’re dead.”

As Rentaro stood and looked over the scene of the murder again, there was no way he could not be horrified. There was blood splattered everywhere. He could even see blood on the roof of a tent ten meters away.

The dead piled on top of each other were an Initiator and a Promoter. Rentaro and Enju had both seen the two victims before.

“Rentaro, are not these people…?” Enju started.

“Yeah, there’s no doubt,” said Rentaro. “They’re the heavily armored pair you were going to talk to first, Enju.” They seemed unused to fighting, but because they were wearing equipment that emphasized defense, Rentaro had never thought that they would be killed in a scuffle with other civil officers. But—

The Promoter’s face was frozen in an expression more fearful than Rentaro could have imagined, and his eyes were wide open. The iron-filled stink of blood seemed to get stronger as it followed his nostrils around, and he had to shoo away the swarms of black flies that came at them.

Rentaro swallowed his feeling of not wanting to touch the dead body again and bent over to investigate once more. The Promoter’s ceramic plate armor—which looked to be the thickness of Type IIIA++ based on the National Institute of Justice (NIJ) standards for the ballistic resistance of body armor—was cut clean in two, and he had a long horizontal slash across his stomach. The Initiator lost her life from a single diagonal slash that started near her neck.

What sword was it that created this nightmare? Rentaro stood and looked around at his surroundings. “Is there anyone who saw what happened?”

“C-could you be Rentaro Satomi?” A small, skinny man stepped forward, trembling with fear.

Rentaro didn’t respond right away. “What if I am?”

“Uh… Y-you… Never mind, it was my mistake. Forget about it.”

“Huh? What do you want?”

“I said, forget about it!” the man said, sounding irritated, and then he turned and left before Rentaro could stop him.

Rentaro felt more and more like he didn’t know what was going on. What was with that reaction? Why was *his* name important?

“Heeeey, there’s a fight over here, too!” a loud voice yelled suddenly, and all the civil officers gathered around Rentaro turned in that direction. The civil officers moved forward as one.

“Rentaro!” Enju shouted.

“Yeah, let’s go, too. It could be the guy who did this.” Rentaro asked a nearby shop owner to take care of the aftermath of the incident and pushed down his impatient feelings as he went over to where the voice was.

There was a crowd gathered at a meadow a little ways away from the market street. The crowd was more spread out than the donut-shaped crowd from earlier, so he didn’t have to push through this time. He made his way easily to a spot where he could see what was transpiring.

The battle had not even begun yet. But seeing two pairs facing off, Rentaro gulped involuntarily.

What’s going on*?*

Slightly closer to Rentaro was a short and stout giant with a Mohawk. Next to him was an Initiator with old eyes who was accompanying him. The Promoter in the pair farther away from him was tall and slender, wearing a long coat with a visor above his eyes. The Initiator next to him was wearing a skirt with a long jacket and a pointed black hat with a wide brim. She seemed to be aware of the eyes on her and cowered, moving restlessly.

Looking at the red-faced man with the Mohawk, Rentaro frowned. It looked like there was alcohol in him. “Hey, you beanpole. Do you know who I am? I’ve robbed and murdered twelve people. I’ve been sentenced to death in three different countries. I’m the wanted man, Brick Nigel,” the man with the

Mohawk shouted in a vulgar, thick voice and waved his Abakan assault rifle around.

Facing him, the man with the visor and coat shook his head calmly. “It’s not like I said you were weak. I’m sure you’re strong.”

“Then, why won’t you drink my liquor?!”

“I’m under no obligation to drink with you.”

Angrily, the Mohawk’s veins popped. He jerked his chin at the Initiator by his side, and the Initiator wordlessly twisted her body as she raised a spear. It was a throwing javelin.

Something tugged on Rentaro’s sleeve. It was Enju, looking uneasy. “Why has no one noticed, Rentaro?”

Rentaro realized what she was trying to say and looked at her in wonder. “You’ve noticed?”

“Of course I have. There is too big a difference in skill in this fight!”

In front of him, in the midst of a high tide of nervousness and wild enthusiasm, the man with the visor and coat narrowed his eyes. “Give it up. There is no glory or pride to be had in this fight. It’ll be boring whether you win or lose.”

But these words only served to fan Mohawk’s flames of wrath. “Shuuuuuuuttttt uuuuupppppp! Heeeeeyyyyy!” He sighted the Abakan and set it to full auto, ready to gouge holes in the grass and turn the other pair into Swiss cheese.

But just before he could, his two opponents disappeared.

Mohawk looked up. Rentaro followed his gaze and was taken aback. The Initiator had lent the Promoter a shoulder, and the two were flying high in the sky. Just then, the Initiator cut her partner loose, and the man in the coat fell ten meters in front of the enemy girl.

Rentaro was astonished. The Promoter was going to face off against the Initiator? No way. “Look—”

—*out!* Before he could finish, a number of things happened.

The girl with the javelin saw her chance and started to run up, allowing her body to turn with centrifugal force as she readied her throw. But before the thrust, her cells expanded with a popping sound. By the time Rentaro realized that she was an Initiator with specialized muscle strength, it was too late. She took one last step, breaking the ground apart and throwing her javelin at great speed.

The javelin chasing the speed of sound spiraled with a roaring wind, heading straight for its target to turn the man in the coat into smithereens. There was no reason to doubt that, so when the man did the unthinkable and stretched an arm out in front of him to parry, Rentaro's eyes widened.

Immediately afterward, the sound of an explosion rang out, and the tip of the javelin clashed with the man's arm. There, Rentaro saw something he found hard to believe: The javelin that had been going as fast as a cannonball changed its course slightly, and the next instant, it flew in a completely different direction. It had been deflected successfully.

Rentaro wondered how the girl felt when she saw that, but he lost his chance to ask her. Between the girl who fell forward after throwing the javelin and the man in the coat who used as little movement as possible to deflect it, there was way too big a difference in how long their moves put them out of commission.

In no time, the man had closed in on the girl, the hem of his long coat fluttering in the air as he filled the girl's line of sight. The next instant, there was a heavy thud as he slammed the heel of his hand into her chin.

The threatening regenerative abilities of Initiators had just two weak points. This meant that of the two, the heart and the brain, he had shaken up the brain, giving her a concussion in the blink of an eye—and making her pass out.

There was no time to sigh in admiration of his amazing skill, though. The other fight was also nearing its end. The girl in the hat moved to draw the gunfire of Mohawk, who was firing blindly as he swung his rifle back and forth. The instant the gun ran out of bullets, the girl kicked off the ground and engaged with the man. Instantly, the man's rifle was cut to pieces and dropped to the ground. Mohawk was dumbfounded and fell to his knees, looking up with froth spewing from his mouth as he too passed out.

It was so spellbinding that for a second the entire place was silent. The Initiator looked shyly at the ground, and as she gave an extremely polite bow to the audience, cheers exploded.

It was like a fight between a child and an adult. In contrast to the Mohawk man and his partner, who had been going for the man in the coat as a kill from the start, the man in the coat and his Initiator aimed for the much more difficult result of putting their opponents out of commission, and on top of that, they succeeded. In addition, the girl in the hat was obviously an Initiator of the same type as Enju with specialized speed.

“Enju, that girl in the hat. What did she do when she defeated the Mohawk?” It had happened too fast for Rentaro to catch with his kinetic vision.

“It was probably her nails,” said Enju.

“Nails?”

“Yes. Her nails grew extremely long in an instant and then shrunk again.”

Which also narrowed down which Gastrea factor she had. Rentaro’s eyes were both staring at the man receiving applause from the middle of the circle. There was no doubt about what he was seeing anymore.

Rentaro walked into the middle of the ring and called out, “Hey!” to the team’s back. When the man turned and saw who it was, his expression turned grim. He walked over to Rentaro silently.

“R-Rentaro!” Enju’s panicked voice made a commotion behind him, but he didn’t halt his advance.

The instant they were close enough for their fists to touch, Rentaro’s right hand and the man in the coat’s right arm were brought up at the same time. The people around them expected tragedy and gulped, but the next instant, Rentaro and the man’s arms locked in joy at their reunion.

“Huh?” Enju and the Initiator in the hat both lifted their voices at the same.

Rentaro looked over his fellow Promoter. There was no strength in the man’s eyes, and it seemed like he was going to start laughing awkwardly. “The move that made the Initiator with the throwing javelin faint was Sanda Tama Kirin,

wasn’t it? You haven’t gotten weaker at all, have you, Shoma, bro?”

“It’s been too long, Satomi. I’ve heard rumors about what you’ve been doing. Have you been working hard?” This man had never been one to show his emotions, but even his lips relaxed slightly at this.

Enju, who had come up alongside Rentaro, had her mouth gaping open and her eyes open wide.

Rentaro put his arm around the man’s shoulders and looked at Enju. “Let me introduce you, Enju. This is the eighth *dan* of the Tendo Martial Arts, Shoma Nagisawa. He’s my senior in the Tendo Style.”



8

In a squad tent wide enough for ten people to sleep, one that had tent flaps on four sides and a roof, it was spacious enough to give a slight sense of freedom. It was a world of difference from the old tent they had brought with them. Rentaro stood in the middle of the space and gave a big stretch. He was finally recognized as an adjuvant; there was no way he wasn't happy. He had just gone back to the registration booth again and told them that he had the minimum six officers required and officially completed the adjuvant registration.

Shoma had also wanted to team up with Rentaro, and happened to be looking for him to do so; Rentaro was moved by the coincidence. However, at the same time, someone as strong as Shoma would have been in great demand, so Rentaro had asked him, "Why did you want to join my team?"

"Ever since I heard rumors that you had defeated the Scorpion, I was thinking that I wanted to fight by your side someday. I might be unworthy, but I thought at least the strength of an eighth *dan* Tendo Martial Artist had to be of use in some way. Let's work together again like we did in the dojo in the past. Let me in on your conspiracy, too." It was inevitable after this was said to him.

The girl in the pointy hat had also introduced herself. Her name was Midori Fuse, and she was a Model Cat Initiator. She was a conspicuous speed specialist and also had the ability to retract her nails. It was pretty much as Rentaro had expected.

"Oh, this is pretty nice! *Viva* freedom!"

Turning around toward the voice, Rentaro saw Tamaki coming in late, followed by a slightly shy Yuzuki, who was looking down. Beyond them was Shoma, with Midori hiding behind him, followed by Enju.

"It's like a secret hideout!" announced Enju excitedly. Rentaro chided her to sit down, and everyone followed suit, making a loose circle.

Tamaki came to sit cross-legged and cheerfully slapped his knee. "All right!

Now that we've got six people in our adjuvant, let's go around and do some simple introductions—"

"Wait, before we do that, there's something I'd like to ask," Shoma interrupted. Shoma looked at Rentaro with enigmatic eyes. It was the sort of thing that someone who had not known him for very long might have misunderstood, thinking Shoma had contempt for them based on not being able to see his emotions or hear the intonation in his voice.

"Of course, you're the one who gathered the members, so you should be the leader of our squad, Satomi. It's based on that that I want to ask—are you planning on fighting with the six of us? Or do you still intend to gather more?"

Rentaro's eyes met Enju's, and then he conferred to Shoma his earlier plan to have five teams with ten people total.

Tamaki put his chin on his elbow and said indifferently, "Oh? Two more pairs, huh?"

"No, one more pair."

Suddenly, a dignified female voice rang out through the tent, and everyone looked in its direction. Rentaro was taken aback and rose to his feet reflexively. He did not expect the people standing there at all.

Standing in the red light of the setting sun at the entrance of the tent were Kisara in her black sailor school uniform and Tina with her blond hair tied up, sparkling in the evening sunlight. Kisara suddenly flipped her black hair and quickly stepped inside, and before Rentaro could open his mouth, she quietly went to the middle of the circle and knelt formally. The sweet fragrance of Kisara's hair spread gently throughout the tent.

Kisara quickly raised the black scabbard of the murderous blade Yukikage and prepared to draw it with a clear ringing sound. "Tendo Style swordswoman, Promoter Kisara Tendo, and NEXT-enhanced sniper, Initiator Tina Sprout. The two abovementioned persons have come to pay a visit to join Rentaro Satomi's adjuvant."

"Huh?" Rentaro raised his voice hysterically. Sticking out one hand and saying, "Hold on, time out," he put his other hand to his temple and desperately fought

against a headache. “Wait! W-wait a minute. What do you mean, Promoter and Initiator?! N-no, more important, isn’t Tina’s rank still revoked because of her punishment?”

“I talked over Tina’s rank revocation directly with the Lady Seitenshi to have her retract the punishment. Right now, we’re at a critical moment that will determine if Tokyo Area survives or not, so honestly, they’re in a situation where they’ll take any help they can get, you know? I thought if we negotiated well, we’d be able to get Tina’s punishment taken away, and it went just as I expected.”

Then, what Kisara had just said was neither a joke nor a misunderstanding…

Kisara chuckled. “That’s how it is. I just finished registering with the International Initiator Supervision Organization. Tina and I will start at an IP Rank of 9200. Tina’s in a new pair, so she’ll temporarily have a huge drop in rank, but I’m sure her actual ability is a little higher.”

It wasn’t just “a little.” The sniper with the ingenious plan who once fought Rentaro had achieved an IP Rank of 98 on her own without taking into account the combat ability of her partner, Ain Rand. Adding a devilish swordswoman who was a Tendo Martial Arts Sword Drawing initiate as a Promoter would mean their actual combat ability was…

Realizing that he was getting overwhelmed, Rentaro quickly regained his senses and said, “Come here for a sec,” and pulled Kisara into a corner of the tent. In an irritated voice, Rentaro said, “Kisara, you can’t do this. You should think about yourself a little. Don’t tell me you’ve forgotten why you were relegated to doing office work?”

Kisara sulked and pouted, saying, “If you’re talking about my dialysis treatment, I already went today. And even while we’re fighting, I’ll go when I get a chance.” Kisara stopped talking for a moment and put both hands on her hips, glaring determinedly at Rentaro. “So, Satomi, let me join your adjuvant, too. This is an order from your boss.”

“Of course I can’t do that! What if something were to happen to you? Do you know how I would feel—”

She cut him off. “Why can’t you realize that I feel the same way?”

“Huh?”

“When you’re in danger, all I can do is pray. I don’t want that.”

Rentaro was dumbfounded, taken completely off guard.

Kisara straightened and bore her gaze into him. “Please, Satomi. If I start to drag you down, you can abandon me.”

He couldn’t win. Rentaro closed his eyes, exhaled from his nose, and put both hands on Kisara’s shoulders. “I won’t let that happen. I’ll protect you, Kisara. So don’t worry.”

“S-Satomi…?” Kisara’s cheeks turned bright red, and she suddenly bent forward and slumped her shoulders. “Jeez, what are you saying such embarrassing things for, idiot…… Hey…shoulders…they hurt… Don’t…push me… into the…tent… Jeez, you idiot.”

Rentaro’s heart pounded at the rare sight of an innocent Kisara. “K-K-Kisara! I, a-actually, I have always… Huh?”

Just then, there was a discreet cough from next to them, and when Rentaro slid his gaze to it, he saw Tina looking sullen, narrowing her eyes ill-humoredly, saying, “Excuse me,” and looking pointedly toward the center of the tent.

Feeling eyes on him, Rentaro suddenly came back to his senses and realized that there were five pairs of eyes staring at them. Rentaro and Kisara separated hurriedly, both of their cheeks turning red as they cleared their throats and went back to the circle in the middle of the tent.

“Um… So, well, uh… Anyway, we have some new teammates, Kisara Tendo and Tina Sprout.” Rentaro pushed the two of them forward softly.

“My name is Tina Sprout. I look forward to working with you,” said Tina.

“I’m Kisara Tendo. By the way, I’m also Satomi here’s boss. I’m counting on you all,” added Kisara.

“It’s been a while, Kisara,” finished Shoma.

At first, Kisara narrowed her eyes at his gentle voice, but her suspicion soon turned to surprise. “No way. Shoma?!”

“Anyway, you’re my disciple senior, so is it bad that I addressed you casually by your first name?”

Kisara waved her hand in front of her face. “It’s fine, we’ve known each other for a long time. Wow, this takes me back.” However, then Kisara shifted her gaze and lowered her tone of voice. “Hey, Shoma, why did you quit the dojo suddenly? We were really worried, you know. Now that I think about it, why are you suddenly a civil officer now…?”

Rentaro felt bad but casually backed up Kisara, adding, “I was surprised, too.” Shoma didn’t seem like he wanted to talk about the past, but it had been a shock when Shoma, who the master had his eye on, suddenly quit the dojo, and Rentaro would be lying if he said he wasn’t curious about how Shoma ended up becoming a civil officer.

“I wasn’t cut out for it,” Shoma said. “That’s all it was.”

Rentaro’s and Kisara’s eyes met. “Sorry, Shoma, bro,” said Rentaro.

“It’s fine.” Shoma said only that, resolutely, forcing the conversation to a close.

Rentaro deeply regretted probing. Within the extraordinary prodigy that Rentaro and Kisara had once been jealous of spread a dark despair. However, there was one more thing Rentaro had to ask him. “The pair that was cut down on the street—was that your doing, Shoma?”

“What are you talking about?” he asked.

Rentaro sighed with relief and rubbed his chest, shaking his head. “Never mind, don’t worry about it.” Then, suddenly shifting his gaze toward Tamaki, he saw that Tamaki was staring at Kisara, his mouth gaping open.

Yuzuki looked worried and poked Tamaki in the ribs. “What’s the matter, Tamaki?”

“……Yuzuki, it’s a goddess. My goddess is here,” he muttered.

His partner frowned. “Um, Tamaki…is your head feeling okay?”

Suddenly, Tamaki sprang up and went with amazing speed to kneel in front of Kisara. “So lovely, so dignified, so beautiful! On top of that, you’re the boss of

the civil officer who defeated the Scorpion. Please, let me call you my angel!”

Kisara tossed her hair and put her hands on her hips, saying haughtily, “It would be problematic for you to call me that.”

“Then at least let me call you ‘ma’am’!”

“Well, I guess that would be okay…”

Tamaki smiled complacently and rubbed his hands together. “Ma’am, shall I massage your shoulders? Or would you like me to prepare a chair for you?”

“Well, I’m hungry, so go buy me some melon bread. Oh, I only like the ones with hard cookie crusts.”

“Gladly!” Tamaki looked like he was being repelled as he flew out of the tent at full speed, and his back looked small in no time.

Rentaro looked disgustedly at Kisara, but Kisara was beaming as she put her palms together in front of her chest. “Look, look, Satomi! I’ve found a new wallet!” Kisara said it with a smile, carefree.

Rentaro scratched his head vigorously, and then put his hands together and gathered everyone’s attention. “Since we have a lot of new faces, I think some introductions are in order.”

When Tamaki returned happily with a piece of melon bread in one hand, they quietly started the introductions. It probably came as a surprise to no one that Tamaki, who liked being the center of attention more than anyone, was most eager to go first.

The chain saws that were powered by small motors embedded in his gloves and shoes were received most unfavorably by their teammates.

Enju covered her ears and shouted, “They’re too loud!”

And Shoma spat, “These are illogical weapons,” and promptly lost interest.

Dejected, Tamaki drew the Mateba gun from his hip and shouted, “This is my *big Magnum*!” This time, the squad of female soldiers threw rocks at him. His little sister, Yuzuki, turned red with embarrassment and covered her face with both hands.

Next was Yuzuki. She went outside and found two ordinary beech trees, bridging the tops with invisible threads and crossing easily from one side to the other. With cheers and applause erupting around her, the simple-minded Yuzuki bragged, “Well, this is what you get when you mess with me,” and was soon displaying the peak of her ability.

“Hey, we can see your underwear from down here,” Rentaro pointed out. The next instant, there was a high-speed kick that passed through where his neck had just been, and it gave him goose bumps down his spine.

Yuzuki bared her teeth. “Die, you pervert! Die, you Lolita-complex bastard!” flared up at him. If Enju hadn’t practically pinned Yuzuki’s arms to her sides, Rentaro would have been honest to goodness killed.

Real spiders exuded silk from places called spinnerets, but it looked like Yuzuki could exude silk from the tips of her fingers on both hands. A spider’s spinneret was located around where the buttocks or urethra of a human were. As a biology maniac, he was tempted to ask, “Can you produce silk from your anus?” but he had to be prepared to lose his life for that privilege.

Next, it was his turn. He didn’t want to, but he could not hide his abilities from the teammates he would soon be fighting with side by side, so he gave a simple demonstration of what his artificial eye could do and finished quickly. Even with just that, Tamaki, Yuzuki, and Midori, who were seeing it for the first time, were all astounded.

Next was Enju, who stuck out her chest cheerfully and said, “It is my turn at last.” They went outside, and Enju pointed at a single cedar tree standing about five hundred meters away and then released her power. She touched the cedar and came back in seconds.

“She’s even faster than me…” Midori sighed, looking crestfallen.

Enju and Yuzuki, who seemed to have similar personalities to begin with, hit it off almost immediately. Enju and Tina were also friends already, and so were Tina and Yuzuki, so the three of them became a trio in the blink of an eye.

The problem was the remaining Initiator. In short, Midori’s self-introduction was a fracas. Midori was nervous and stiff as she made her way to the front and bowed deeply. “M-m-my name is Midori Fuse. I-I am a Model Cat Initiator, and

my special ability is scent divination!”

Scent divination?

“And my IP Rank with Shoma is 970.”

There were sighs of awe from those present. When they were able to overpower their combat opponents without killing them, Rentaro already kind of suspected a high rank, but it was amazing that they were ranked within the top thousand.

Next, Midori showed everyone her ability to retract her nails. Seeing strong nails extend suddenly about 1.5 times the length of her fingers made Rentaro gulp involuntarily.

“You don’t release those nails as far as they can go, do you?” Kisara asked, looking interested.

Midori saw that someone understood her well and broke into a smile for the first time. “You’re right!”

“What do you mean?” Rentaro asked.

Kisara stuck out an index finger proudly. “Satomi, when fighting with weapons, it’s advantageous to keep your opponent from knowing the reach of your attack; in other words, it’s very important to keep your opponent from being able to figure out the distance. You can put pressure on your opponent mentally that way.”

“Really…” He kind of understood, but kind of didn’t.

Next, Enju stuck her hand straight in the air to ask a question. “Are you able to use magic?”

“Magic?” Rentaro repeated back at her dubiously.

“That’s right. I mean, Rentaro, she *is* wearing a hat like a witch, so she must be able to use magic.” Apparently, she was talking about the pointed hat Midori wore.

The instant her hat was pointed out, Midori became startled for some reason. Shoma shook his head at his partner and admonished her, saying, “Don’t hide anything from your friends.” That seemed to be the last straw, and Midori

slowly put her hands on her hat and pulled it off.

Inside the tent, a quiet astonishment spread. On her head, pushing through her hair and pointing straight toward the sky, were two cat-shaped ears. At first, Rentaro wondered if they were fake, but after a while, they folded based on her will, and it dispersed that doubt.

Midori must have been self-conscious about them and hurriedly put her hat back on.

Enju looked at Rentaro as if bewitched. “Is such a thing possible, Rentaro?”

“Yeah, when the Gastrea genes that are mixed in manifest themselves, there are cases where the animal genes are so strong that even the skeletal structure changes. There aren’t many, but they exist. Of the Initiators with bird-type Gastrea genes, there are apparently some who even have wings.”

“I wish I could fly, too…” Tina, who had owl genes, murmured her regret.

The two mischievous girls, Enju and Yuzuki, grinned and tiptoed stealthily behind Midori without her noticing. As Rentaro watched, wondering what they were doing, the two of them whispered, “One, two, three!” and of all things, they pulled down Midori’s skirt as hard as they could. The underwear she was wearing came clean off with the skirt, and in an instant, Rentaro’s vision became filled with a large amount of flesh. To put it concisely, the bottom half of Midori’s body was as bare as a baby’s bottom.

“Neooooooooooooowww!” Midori pulled her long jacket to hide the affected areas and then collapsed starting with her knees.

“Wh-what are you two doing?” Rentaro demanded.

The dumbfounded Enju and Yuzuki did not respond for a while, but finally Enju slowly lifted her gaze and said, “We wanted to check to see if she had a tail, too…”

“I do not have a tail,” Midori said, and then started crying.

Enju and Yuzuki probably just wanted to be friends with Midori. They never thought that they would hurt her feelings, and Enju, having lost her chance to give back the underwear, held them in her fist, nervously pacing back and forth.

Finally, she came in front of Rentaro and said, “Here,” holding out the underwear to him and looking depressed.

“Wait, what do you mean ‘Here’?! It won’t do any good giving it to me!”

Shoma looked at Rentaro pityingly. “Satomi, have you finally…”

“‘Finally’ what?! I don’t have a Lolita complex!”

And so ended the fracas that was Midori’s self-introduction, and then Shoma, Kisara, and Tina also took turns introducing themselves.

Shoma used the Tendo Martial Arts to cut a tree in half, trunk and all. Kisara showed a sword-drawing slashing attack to cut a boulder ten meters away with a loud reverberation. Tina released Shenfield and shot through a target two kilometers away in one shot with a Barrett antitank rifle, scaring those around her out of their wits.

And so, everyone gave a quick display of the techniques they could use, and Rentaro realized an interesting commonality shared by each pair. It was obvious that Rentaro and Enju were both close-combat specialists to the extreme. If they stayed that way, they would have no way of fighting against mid-to long-range opponents, so as a last resort, Rentaro had started carrying around a pistol. It made them just barely able to also deal with mid-range opponents.

It appeared that the Katagiri siblings and Shoma pair fought with a similar combat ideology. Yuzuki’s spider silk was one of the best abilities for creating a territory, but even so, in order to seal the opponents movements, Yuzuki had to deliver a finishing blow, so it was probably categorized as close range. Her older brother, Tamaki, was also a close-range type, so in order to make up for their weak point, he owned a handgun. The same was true for the Shoma pair (earlier, Shoma had shown them a Sig P226 X-Five gun).

From that point of view, only the Kisara-Tina pair had a different combat ideology. Kisara could attack anything within range of her sword-drawing attack, and had a gun for self-defense. She was a mid-range specialist Promoter. In contrast, Tina was best at long-range fighting, but she could use pretty much any firearm and was an all-rounder.

What should he do in order to draw out the full potential of everyone?

Rentaro was lost in thought when suddenly a man's voice interrupted, "Excuse me," next to Rentaro. When he looked, he saw a civilian type of self-defense force official salute and then take a step toward them. "All civil officers who will be participating in the operation must report to the front of the front line headquarters at 1930 hours. This is a summons from Troop Commander Nagamasa Gado."

9

The sun went down, and their surroundings were enveloped in darkness. In front of the frontline HQ was a simple tiered platform, torches on each corner driving back the black.

Listening to the sound of branches popping, Rentaro turned to gaze at his colleagues, who were bustling silently. Rentaro wondered how many of those gathering here were civil officers. It looked like there were around five hundred pairs, but he wasn't sure if a thousand officers was a reasonable number to go up against two thousand Gastrea.

After a time, a pair appeared onstage and the crowd made an uproar.

"IP Rank 275, Nagamasa Gado, huh…?" Rentaro had seen him on TV many times before, so he knew there was no mistake.

He was bald with a goatee, a Promoter with a soldier's disposition. It was true that he was old for a Promoter, since they were usually between their twenties, thirties, or forties, but no one seeing his discerning eyes, his aura overflowing with confidence, and his straight back could call him a worn-out old geezer. No, people called him the Couragous Wizened Hero.

Next to him was his Initiator, who accompanied him like a shadow. If Rentaro remembered correctly, her name was Asaka Mibu. She had straight black hair like Kisara, but her presence was faint, and she seemed to be a quiet girl. For some reason, her eyes were always shut tight. It did not seem appropriate to call a ten-year-old girl this, but she seemed like Gado's wife. What drew Rentaro's gaze above all was the equipment they had.

“An armor-type exoskeleton, huh…,” sighed Tina, who was on one side of him.

It was no wonder: Along with combat armor glowing red, Asaka had a light blue cape, and Gado had a cape with the corps’ flag on it. Of course, it was not simply armor that was grossly out of date.

“Rentaro, what is an ‘ek-so-skeleton’?” Enju asked.

Rentaro thought about how to answer Enju’s question in a way that would be easiest to understand. “Enju, have you heard of *powered suits*? They’re suits that increase the wearer’s physical strength and defense when worn. Twenty years ago—around the early 2010s, in order for exoskeletons to protect against rifle bullets, the armor was so thick it was hard to move in them, which meant the battery didn’t last long, and they couldn’t be mass produced. There was nothing good about them. But thanks to high-tech materials like Varanium alloy and carbon nanotubes, they were able to be implemented like hers. What Gado and Asaka have on is the latest model from Shiba Heavy Industries. It raises all the basic specs, from physical strength to armor.”

“I wish to have armor as well!”

Troubled, Rentaro frowned. He tried imagining Enju wearing an armor-type exoskeleton, but rather than her wearing the armor, the image of the armor wearing her was stronger. Though, imagining Enju drowning in the armor was cute at least.

But that wasn’t the point. “Impossible. It’s way too expensive.”

Enju became crestfallen, pigtails and all. “Too expensive, is it…?”

“Yeah, to put it bluntly, we couldn’t buy it even if we saved up both our salaries for ten years.”

“Then! I will inquire about getting it from Miori for free!”

Hey, come on… She seemed to give it up half as a joke, but Enju’s eyes looked pretty serious, and Rentaro’s face stiffened. During the Seitenshi assassination attempt, Rentaro didn’t know what Sumire had said to Enju, but ever since, she started mumbling “Zone” more often, and she seemed a little strange. He was sure that her complete loss against Tina, whom she was supposed to have the advantage over, also had an effect.

It wasn’t that he didn’t understand her impatience, but for her to disregard her own physical and mental strength and be attracted to the easy answer of an exoskeleton was not something he welcomed as her guardian. *I need to find time to talk to Enju about this…*

“Thank you for gathering, brave ladies and gentlemen!”

Lifting his head in surprise at the sudden shout that reached his ears, Rentaro saw Gado raise his fist on the stage.

“I am your troop commander, Nagamasa Gado. You are the chosen ones who will save Tokyo Area. I am proud to fight alongside you all.” Gado took a breath and slowly surveyed the gathered troops.



Not even the rowdy Promoters jeered or snorted with one look from Gado. If Rentaro had been standing up onstage, it would have been vastly different.

“I’m sure you know that Gastrea are an enemy that increase exponentially via a virus, but as long as you know how to deal with them, there is nothing to be afraid of. You all also know that Tokyo Area is facing an unprecedented crisis. And there is no one who can reverse that situation but us. Kill them! The abominable Gastrea killed your fathers, mothers, friends, families, and lovers! It is your duty as civil officers to kill as many of them as you can. The defeated can be forgotten. The present history is made by winners. No one pities the losers.”

Gado tightened his fist and hit the stage as hard as he could. “We will win! We will win and make history! And our names will be written in the history books. We will overcome the Gastrea and fight without drawing back. Make your nation, your descendants, the spirits of those who died defending the country proud! Let’s kill them!”

A cheer rose loud enough to make the ground shake. Renataro was dumbfounded at the speech, buried as he was by the cheers around him. The content was extreme, but Gado probably took into consideration the bloodlust of the Promoters and thought something simple like this would be easier to understand.

Rentaro rarely respected his superiors, but he had no choice but to recognize that Gado was shrewd and able. So long as this man stood at the head of the civil officer corps, there was no need to worry that they would be steered wrong.

Next, Gado moved on to explain the specifics of the plan they would carry out with the self-defense force for the Third Kanto Battle. However, unlike the general policy part of Gado’s speech, the more Rentaro listened to the explanation, the more puzzled he got.

Currently, their battle formation had Monolith 32 between the Gastrea corps and the combined self-defense and civil officer forces, with the two sides glaring at each other. The start of the battle was predicted to be the same time as when the Monolith collapsed. It was fine up to that point. However, the problem was how Gado was saying the civil officers would be used.

Rentaro had heard before this started that the civils would be under the command of the self-defense force, but he thought they would follow behind as the decisive rear guard and trample the Gastrea.

Rentaro glanced behind him and spotted the camp lights of the self-defense force near Monolith 32 deep into the darkness. They were too far away; if the civil officer troops were really expected to be used as a decisive force, then they should have been deployed closer to the self-defense force. It was as if they were trying to keep bad blood at a distance, deploying the self-defense force and civil officer troops separately. But having the two forces a kilometer or two apart would be ineffective.

At this rate, even if the self-defense force wanted the support of the civil officer troops, in the time between the request for help and when the civil officers rushed to the scene, the battle would already be decided.

This was like the self-defense force was keeping the civil officer squads at a distance on purpose. Rentaro thought as much and then shook his head softly. They really were trying to keep them apart.

Across the country, civil officers were hated for the most part. From the police organizations' perspective, civil officers were thorns in their sides, territory thieves who overstepped their jurisdictions and intruded on the scene. From the SDF's perspective, civil officers ended up interfering with the duty of defending the country, which the SDF had taken on. It wasn't surprising that they wouldn't like civil officers in the slightest. In this scenario, COs were probably called the decisive backup in name only, but were really meant to do nothing. The SDF was most likely going to attempt a settlement without them.

It looked like Rentaro was not the only one to realize this. There were a considerable number of Promoters who looked disappointed after hearing Gado's explanation. Gado himself realized as well, of course, and tried to pass on the information as calmly as possible, but he could not completely conceal his disappointment and resentment in the space between breaths.

After finishing a cursory explanation, Gado said with a glare, "Does anyone have any questions?"

Rentaro looked around him, but no one seemed to have any questions, so he

raised his own hand.

Next to him, Kisara said, “Hey, Satomi!” and poked him with an elbow. Apparently, she was afraid that he would pick a fight.

“You over there,” said Gado. “You’re young, aren’t you? Who are you?”

“IP Rank 300, Rentaro Satomi,” said Rentaro.

There was a small stir from those around him.

“Oh, you’re the one…,” said Gado with realization. “I welcome you. I will take anyone who can lend their strength right now.”

“Hey, what did your explanation just now mean?” Rentaro asked.

Gado looked embarrassed at the directness of the question. “We have been ordered to prepare ourselves and stand by in the rear until we receive other orders from the self-defense force. That’s all.”

“Then, why don’t we just withdraw the troops to the Flame of Return ten kilometers away? If we’re there, we can use the natural fortress of the dilapidated buildings with a lot of places to hide, which would give us an advantage in guerilla warfare. Over here, it’s all open fields with too good a view. You know that we civil officers aren’t good at fighting on fields, right? Then—”

Gado cut him off. “I know what you want to say. However, if we fall back that far, we will not be able to respond to the self-defense force’s support request promptly.”

“Do you really believe something like that will come?”

Gado did not say anything, but his eyes flashed, and Rentaro and Gado glared at each other wordlessly. The commotion around them had gotten so rowdy that it was out of control. Suddenly, Gado seemed to remember something and started to speak, but he ignored Rentaro’s question and instead gave a quick rundown of the next day’s schedule, and then hurriedly left with his Initiator in tow.

After everyone returned in groups to their squad tents, Kisara put both hands on her hips as if to slow herself down, and when it apparently wasn’t enough,

she opened her mouth angrily. “Jeez! You scared me. You did snap at him after all! Can you be in the presence of someone important without flaring up at them?”

Rentaro scratched his head hard. “It’s not like I snapped at him. I was just trying to resolve the doubt in my mind.”

Help came from an unexpected source. “I agree with Satomi,” said Shoma. “Something was off about Commander Gado. If Satomi hadn’t asked, I would have.”

“Wait, Shoma. Satomi is my employee. Will you please not spoil him?”

“But if I think about the self-defense force taking them all down, it seems kind of anticlimactic,” said Tamaki.

“It’s fine, isn’t it, Tamaki?” said Yuzuki. “It’d be fine if we got through this without anything happening. Because then everyone can go home safely.”

Listening to the Katagiri siblings talk, Rentaro mumbled, “I hope that’s the case…”

“What is it, boyo? There something you wanna say?” interjected Tamaki.

Rentaro shook his head hurriedly. “There wasn’t any deep meaning behind it or anything…”

Sensing that the air was growing dark between them, Kisara tried to smooth things over. “I know! Since we were actually able to form an adjuvant, wanna do something for good luck?”

The other seven looked at each other. No one had any objections.

Rentaro and the others went outside and took some branches from their allotment of firewood, making a pile and lighting the portable fuel. In no time, red flames stretched up and heat warmed their skin. They gazed at the tongues of fire for a while in silence, stealing fleeting glances at each other. The faces of those around the bonfire glowed red in the darkness, and from the treetops came the sound of late-summer insects. It was a strange and wondrous atmosphere.

What would happen to them from now on? Would they really be able to fight

to the end without losing anyone?

Rentaro pulled his XD gun from his hip and raised it over his head, holding it aloft over the flames, and looked around him. “Everyone, thanks for being willing to help out someone like me. In the three days between the collapse of the Monolith and the arrival of the replacement Monolith, let’s fight through together with all our strength.”

“Jeez, you’re overreacting.” Smiling to hide her embarrassment, Kisara drew the Yukikage from her hip and crossed it above Rentaro’s XD.

“My life is yours, Big Brother. For your sake, I will do anything.” Tina lifted her sniper rifle and crossed it over Rentaro’s and Kisara’s.

“Jeez, Tina, you’re too serious. Just what’s so great about this perv?” Yuzuki grumbled, stretching her arm to cross the others.

“Hey, hey, hey, Rentaro Satomi. Be grateful for this strength I’m lending ya!” Tamaki added his Mateba.

“It’s a great responsibility, huh, Satomi?” Suppressing a chuckle, Shoma raised his Sig gun.

“I-I think Leader Satomi is a good leader!” Midori released her nails and lifted them up.

“Everyone…” Rentaro was at a loss for words for a moment.

Then, suddenly he felt something heavy on both shoulders and stumbled forward. Enju had jumped on Rentaro’s shoulders and sat so she was riding them. “We have gathered all these strong people. We will definitely win!” Enju lifted her small and graceful hand, and from eight directions, eight hearts crossed.

Enju smiled as she led the others in a cheer. “All right, everyone, let’s work hard together! Hey, hey—”

Enju’s voice seemed far from his ears as Rentaro thought. In the end, Rentaro was unable to get their last pair.

He was most worried that the Gastrea Aldebaran had appeared near the Monolith, which normal Gastrea would not go near; and that it had

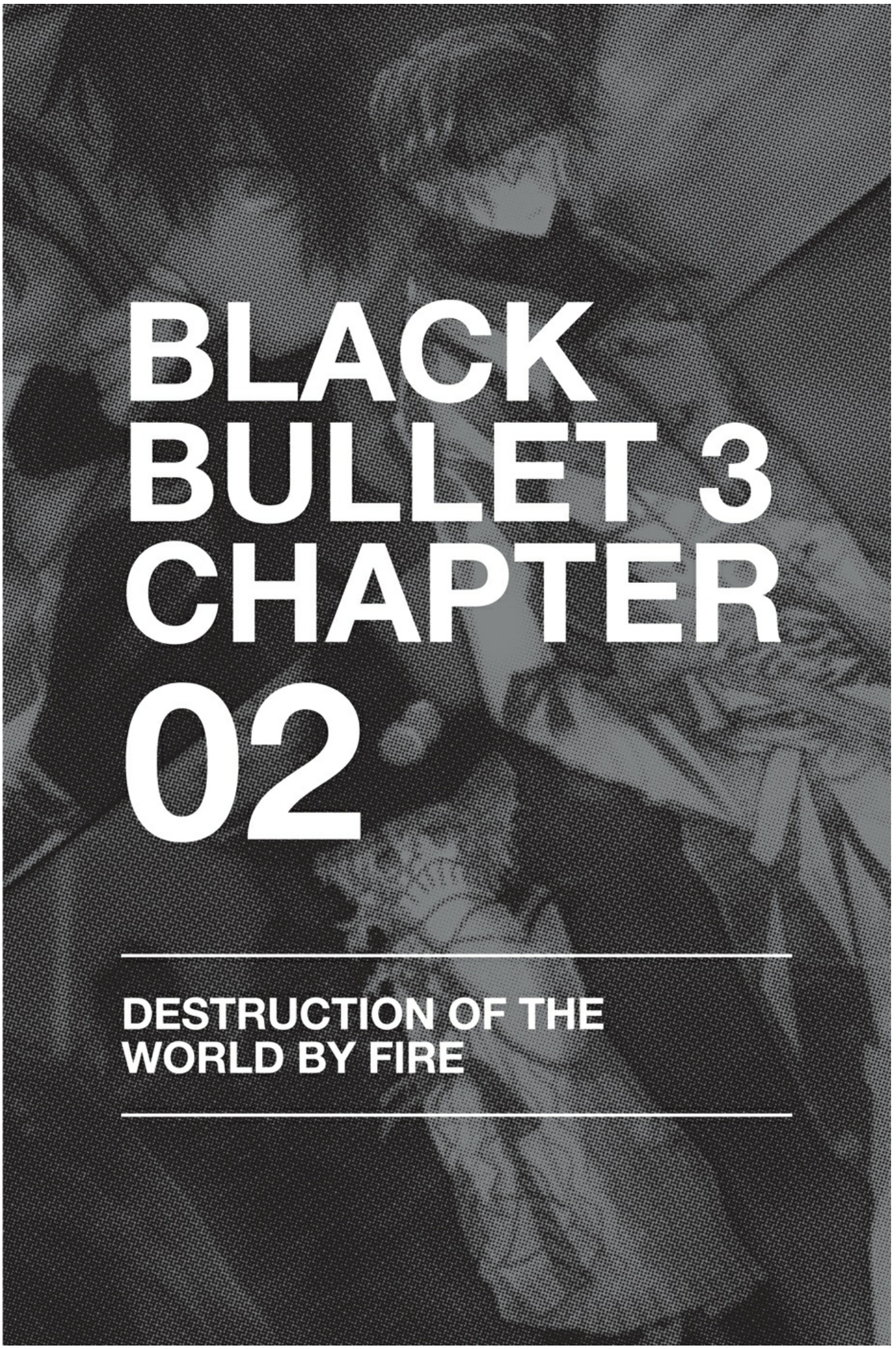
accomplished the feat of invading and withdrawing as it pleased.

There was also the problem of the corpses that had been cut down on the main street. It wasn't Kisara. She hadn't arrived yet at the time, and she had no reason to do something like that in the first place.

He had a mountain of vague worries. He also had a mountain of specific mysteries to concern himself with. However, he had to move forward. The huddle the eight of them were in dipped inwardly, and the next instant, it bounced up toward the sky.

"—Ho!!!" They chorused together.

The shouts of eight voices echoed through the night sky, and the smoke beacon celebrating the formation of their adjuvant rose high.



BLACK BULLET 3
CHAPTER 02

DESTRUCTION OF THE WORLD BY FIRE

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DESTRUCTION OF THE WORLD BY FIRE

1

“It’s time. Stop.” Rentaro pushed the stopwatch, and groans of people relaxing could be heard here and there.

“Ahh….”

“Whoa…”

Kisara clapped her hands. “Okay, pass your answer sheets to the front!”

The students of the outdoor classroom calmly passed their papers forward. The foremost student represented the others and handed the papers to Rentaro. He bundled the stiff, low-quality papers together on the crude table, put them in his bag, and then lifted his head.

“How was it?” he asked them.

He was met with reproaches of “I couldn’t do it!” and “It was hard!”

Kisara, who made the questions, looked conflicted, but after noticing the smiling Enju and prim Tina, it looked like at least a couple of them had passed.

Rentaro had checked the questions ahead of time, but multiplying two-digit numbers together looked to still be a little too hard for the children of the Outer District. Rentaro had known before he enrolled Enju, but it looked like he had no choice but to say that the children of the Outer District were at a lower academic level than normal ten-year-olds. However, that did not mean that the IQ of the children of the Outer District was lower.

In fact, Rentaro and Kisara were the ones who were surprised at how quickly they absorbed new information. Generally, grades were determined by the total value of three main parameters: memory, critical thinking to apply things memorized, and interest. Rentaro, who had a vast difference in his grades for biology and history even though they were both memorization subjects, was painfully aware that he could not underestimate the power of interest.

Like an Italian artist once said, eating against one's will is injurious to health, and study without interest makes the memory retain nothing it takes in. Of course, the Outer District had few recreations, so to the girls, even studying seemed to be fun, and that was a big part of it. However, even though Rentaro had not known them for very long, he felt like outside of that, they also knew that studying was something that would be beneficial to their futures.

Rentaro tilted his head and squinted at the rays of sunlight shining down on them. Conversely, what about himself? His earliest memories were of burned fields after the Great Gastrea War, of collapsed homes and buildings, people crying and shouting, black smoke that stung his eyes, and the stink of decay.

After everything had been taken away from him, the empty Rentaro was able to stand again after being filled with hatred. Hatred became the fuel that drove his body, and it had provided temporary relief.

But in the end, that was nothing more than a stopgap measure. Eventually, he ran out of fuel, of course, and he came to see everything as meaningless, finally losing his ability to keep up his enthusiasm for study and dropping out of school. Even so, he had been praised as a prodigy and whatnot when he was young.

To Rentaro, the students in front of him were dazzling. He was sure these girls were the hope of Tokyo Area. Rentaro found this personal opinion an unyielding one, even if everyone else in the world chanted opposition. But Rentaro shook his head and pushed back the sentiment. He had other things to do at present. "Please pass these handouts around," and distributed sheaves to the front row of pupils.

Once the handouts were passed around, the students looked at each other with unconcealed confusion. One student raised her hand nervously to speak

for the class. “Mr. Rentaro, what does this ‘Future Dream’ mean…?”

Rentaro put both hands on his hips and exhaled through his nose. “It’s just as it says. Write about what you want to be in the future.”

The students looked like they were not quite satisfied with this explanation. Apparently, they had never done this kind of recreation before. This was supposed to be a break after the test, but he might have made them more confused instead.

Oh no. He looked up at the sky, scratching the back of his head. “Well, if you don’t want to do it, then—”

There were scritching sounds, and when he looked at the girls, they were already giving the papers their full attention, pencils moving intently.

So you will *do it*. Rentaro sighed as he looked at the students, and asked himself why they were spending the precious time they had left in the Outer District’s outdoor classroom.

There were less than three days left before the collapse of the Monolith.

Currently, Rentaro and the others were sleeping in the civil officer squad tent, and he and Kisara had told their high schools by phone that they would be taking a temporary absence. His homeroom teacher had accepted it silently and said, “Do your best,” with casual insistence.

Under Commander Gado, they had standard training in the morning, but it was all in the classroom, learning about simple formations and the different types and meanings of signal flares. *Well*, he thought, *that was only natural*. There was a limit to how much training they could do in the remaining three days, and they weren’t expecting something as organized as the SDF, which had been training for years, from civil officers who were “just a bunch of ruffians.” The fact that they had the whole afternoon off was further proof of how low the expectations were for them.

So Rentaro, Kisara, Enju, and Tina chose to spend the rest of their time in the outdoor classroom. It may have been that part of their hearts wanted that peace of mind. Rentaro had heard that routine work like this helped to lessen stress. He was sure that that was the reason why he was here, too.

Just then, Enju called out, “I’m finished!” and stood up, excitedly turning in the paper to Rentaro. It read: “My future dream is to become Rentaro’s wife and kiss him as much as I want every day.” Underneath the scrawl was a sketch of a strange-looking monster face with large googly eyes. *Is this supposed to be me?* he thought.

“You do something similar every day already, don’t you?” he said.

Enju laughed and locked her hands behind her back as she returned to her seat. “Then, I am happy every day.”

Rentaro smiled wryly and returned back to his interrupted thoughts. On the other hand, there were big changes happening in the city. The large underground shelter that had been made after the Great War had been opened, and thirty percent of the residents of Tokyo Area who were chosen by lottery were already starting to be evacuated by block. Naturally, even within families, there were those who had been chosen and those who had not, and there were embraces and promises to reunite seen all over the place.

The remaining seventy percent were completely divided into two types. The first type believed that the mixed troops of the SDF and COs would be victorious and tried to maintain normal societal operations. The second type believed that the troops would lose.

The latter were escaping overseas, even selling off their household goods at low prices to scrape together enough money to buy the aircraft tickets that had suddenly jumped in price. Those that could not do even this were going around town crushed with despair, struggling to do whatever they could to forge or steal shelter spots.

Public order was disrupted mainly by the second type of people, and riots broke out as a result. Vigilante groups organized and strengthen patrols, but the current situation was that it was not nearly enough compared to the number of riots breaking out.

All of Tokyo Area was being torn apart by fear and worry. However, Rentaro thought their unease was justified.

A person’s mental state was able to stay calm because of ignorance. If people were able to count on their fingers the number of days until their deaths, they

would not be able to sleep peacefully.

Whether they were aware of it or not, people expected each day to proceed according to plan. However, currently, the kind veil of ignorance had been lifted, and the truth had been exposed to all the residents of Tokyo Area. The truth said this: “Your lives will come abruptly to an end in three days, and it is possible that you will be eaten alive.”

Large parts of the population became depressed in each district, and the whole town was still. But even so, the days passed solemnly.

The cool fresh air touched his skin, and he tilted his head. Rentaro gazed at the blue sky that seemed to stretch forever and then looked back at the students scribbling away silently as they sat on the grass. Rentaro thought that the outdoor classroom where he was teaching seemed to be isolated from the worry and confusion, and time passed gently. For a moment, he succumbed to those strong feelings.

However, of course, the Outer District was not such a leisurely place that it could hold onto that tranquility for long. The triggers of violence that were building up in the whole area had not yet reached the Outer District. However, it was probably just a matter of time.

Rentaro prayed. He prayed that it would pass away without anything happening.

Just then, there was another voice that announced, “I’m finished.” Tina stood up and brought her paper to him.

Her paper said, “My future dream is to become Big Brother’s wife and kiss him as much as I want every day.” Rentaro froze, mouth agape.

When he lifted his gaze to Tina, she blushed with embarrassment and ducked her head. “C-can’t I?”

Rentaro didn’t know what to say and was mumbling something ambiguous when the stopwatch went off. Rentaro clapped his hands to tell everyone to stop and then collected the papers.

“All right, that’s it for today’s—” As he was trying to end the class, he stopped before the last word.

The children were all staring at their desks with gloomy faces. For the girls, the fact that they still had classes to attend had allowed them to stop thinking about the destruction they faced and had probably saved them mentally, at least until now.

Rentaro crossed his arms and thought for a moment. “Hey, Miss Kisara, how much do you have in your wallet right now?”

“Huh? What do you mean?” Kisara asked, confused.

“Just tell me.”

Kisara opened her worn-out coin purse and made a sour face, then held up three fingers. If she had that much, combined with what he had in his wallet, they should have enough for round-trip train tickets.

Rentaro nodded once and faced forward, shouting from his gut. “All right! We’re going on a field trip, so raise your hands if you want to go!”

With the excited and restlessly moving girls in the lead, Rentaro and the others changed trains, got off at District 14, and followed the signs from the station. As they got closer to their destination, there was more forest, and the peaceful smell got stronger; even the chatter of the students turned to wonder. In the forest with knotty roots echoed the chirps of cuckoos, and the sunlight sparkled as it filtered in between the branches of the trees. After they passed the forest of light, there was a large group of abandoned buildings standing in front of them.

The glass of the windows was cracked, and the buildings themselves were slanting; in the place of people, it had become nesting grounds for different species of birds. But in their golden age, these were proud to be some of the few intelligent buildings in Japan. There was a small park, too, courtyard-size, around the building. This was the only part that was well taken care of, and it did not have the shadowlike atmosphere of most abandoned buildings.

When Rentaro’s group got to the center, Rentaro walked up the steps and stopped in front of the monument that came up to his chest. On the top half was written in large letters: FLAME OF RETURN.

“Mr. Rentaro, what’s this…?”

Looking back to answer his student's question, Rentaro glanced at each student in turn as he started to talk. "Do any of you know about the Second Kanto Battle?"

All the girls shook their heads at once.

Rentaro put his hand on the monument and rubbed its rugged metallic skin. Even in the summer, it felt cool to the touch against Rentaro's hand. "There were two Kanto Battles in the past. The first time, it was during the war ten years ago. In what is now called the Outer District, the SDF clashed with Gastrea, and it suffered a crushing defeat."

"They lost?" Enju asked, her eyes wide.

Rentaro nodded. "That's right. And so, the self-defense force was forced to regroup by retreating to old Saitama, and they lost a lot of ground. If they had won that battle, the current Tokyo Area would have been much, much bigger. And the Second Kanto Battle happened right where you're standing now."

There was a stir, and the students looked at each other. "Did they lose again?" one of the girls asked.

Rentaro shook his head. "No; this time, they won."

Sighs of relief swept among the girls.

"In fact, it's because they forced back the war front and put up the Monolith blockade that Tokyo Area has the shape it does now."

Tina raised her hand. "Why were they suddenly able to win if they lost the first time?"

"That's a good question. The first time, it was still early in the Great Gastrea War, so mankind did not yet understand what the organisms called Gastrea were. Even if they wounded the Gastrea with normal weapons, if they hit anything other than the brain or heart, the Gastrea were able to recover."

The girls smiled bitterly. The fact was that with the Gastrea factors inside their bodies, they were probably better acquainted than him with the self-regenerative abilities.

"Are you saying that the second time, they had more information?"

“That’s right. Using the surviving communication networks, information was shared around the world. By that time, the fact that that Gastrea showed a strong aversion to Varanium was already so widespread, it was considered a self-evident truth. That’s why by adding Varanium to tank gun bullets, they were even able to kill Gastrea with hard shells with one hit. This *Flame of Return* has two meanings—one, to commemorate the day we won the war, and two, as a memorial to the souls of those who lost their lives during the Gastrea battles up to that point. Actually, this monument was made by melting two thousand guns used during the Second Kanto Battle.”

As one the girls breathed an awed, “Really?”

Having such a great audience, Rentaro congratulated himself a little and asked, “Do you know what the Genan Festival is?”

They all raised their hands. “I know! It’s that pretty festival where the sky shines with lights, right?”

It was Rentaro’s turn to be impressed. The lights must have been bright enough to be seen even from the Outer District. “That’s right. People make small palm-size balloons, and then when night falls, everyone releases them at once, so some of you may have seen it before. The balloons are supposed to be filled with thanks to the people who died fighting in the Gastrea War, and the festival started after the Second Kanto Battle.”

There, Rentaro suddenly realized something and lifted his eyes to count in his head. “There are five days left before this year’s Genan Festival, huh?” After he said that, he looked back at the children.

For some reason, they all looked downcast with their shoulders slumped. “Mr. Rentaro… Are we going to die? Will we be able to live…to see the next Genan Festival…?”

Rentaro exhaled from his nose and put his hand on the student with chestnut brown hair. “Dummy. You still don’t know why we came here for our field trip?”

“Huh?”

Rentaro looked at each and every one of his students. “The fact is, I brought you here today because I wanted you to know about the Second Kanto Battle. I

think you already know that the fight that will start after the Monolith collapses will be called the Third Kanto Battle. But even after the Monolith falls, the self-defense force that won the Second Kanto Battle will be protecting us, so you won't be dying."

One of the students looked at Rentaro nervously. "Mr. Rentaro, is that really true?"

"Yeah, it's true."

"But the self-defense force's missiles and planes crashed, didn't they?"

Startled, Rentaro started to say, "How did you know that?" but shook his head almost immediately after. Even these girls would be naturally greedy for information if their lives were at stake.

Rentaro put his hand on his chin and considered. Last night, he had called the Seitenshi to ask about the effect of the lynching of a regular person by the Cursed Children on the Outer District. At the time, she had told him something baffling.

In the first place, when he had seen the report of the gathering of Gastrea, he thought that if the Gastrea were concentrated in one place, then it was the perfect chance to get them all at once with a missile or other weapon of mass destruction. And apparently, Rentaro was not the only one to think that. Timing their movements with the mass of Gastrea, an Aegis cruiser in the water, under orders from the JNSC, fired a precision-guided munition—a Tomahawk missile. However, what was baffling was that there was no confirmation that the missile had hit its mark before its signal completely disappeared.

Before they even had a chance to be puzzled, two fighter aircraft, the treasure of the self-defense force, sent missiles from the air to hit the targets, but these gave a last indistinct scream before communication was lost.

The last one even Rentaro knew. It was the TV news crew that was lost after broadcasting live from the Unexplored Territory the other day. From a picture taken by an unmanned aerial vehicle from high above, apparently, they had been able to find the wreckage of the two fighter aircraft and the news helicopter.

The news helicopter had been cut cleanly in two and then mangled, and the fighter aircraft had been made into perfect cross sections with their wings sheared off. The Tomahawk missile had not been found yet, but the Seitenshi predicted that it would be found in a shape beyond what they could imagine before long.

As he listened, Rentaro rubbed his upper arms unconsciously with the chills crawling up his spine. In other words, nothing that had gone to the mass of Gastrea had returned safely. But was it because of Aldebaran, as well, or…?

“We also have no idea what happened,” said the Seitenshi. “I have heard that you know about the habits of Gastrea, Satomi. I’m sorry, but with our shortage of personnel, we would even want the opinion of a civilian like you. Do you have any idea what might be going on?”

Rentaro was bewildered. If it had just been the helicopter, then it would have been reasonable to deduce that a strong flying Gastrea caught it and tore it apart. However, fighter jets that could fly at supersonic speeds and cruise missiles that were even faster than that had been shot down, so this was no ordinary situation.

Japan’s airborne self-defense force had been one of the organizations to suffer the most losses in the Great Gastrea War ten years ago, but that was why the surviving pilots had had plenty of real combat experience and were called some of the most powerful in the world. For Gastrea up to Stage Three, unless things went very wrong, it was hard to think that they would fall behind.

But considering further… What if it was a peregrine falcon–type Gastrea? It was the fastest bird on earth and could reach speeds of up to three hundred kilometers per hour in nature.

Rentaro thought that much and then shook his head. No. The fighter aircraft that had been found had their wings cut off cleanly, according to the Seitenshi. It was too hard for even a peregrine falcon Gastrea to slice off wings made of a tough metal alloy.

In the first place, if a Gastrea that flew at almost the speed of sound came into contact with a fighter aircraft, neither would be able to leave unscathed. If that was the case, then it would be hard to explain why there were no Gastrea

corpses at the scene.

Since the Seitenshi was counting on him, he wanted to solve this for her somehow, but he didn't have the slightest idea. However, there was already a suspicion in the corner of his mind, and it had put down roots.

Just then, Kisara poked him with her elbow, and the students all looked at him together with strangely uneasy expressions. Wondering just how long he had been lost in thought, Rentaro hurriedly cleared his throat. "The fighter aircraft getting shot down and losing the missile is no more than a rumor. Miss Kisara and I will both be fighting on the front lines as civil officers. You all can stop worrying."

"You guys are fighting, too?" a student asked.

"Yeah."

The children looked at each other and finally started to look a little relieved.

Thinking it was a suitable time, Rentaro put one hand on the *Flame of Return* and considered the students. "I'm sure you know about the lynching of the regular person by the Cursed Children—"

The second he brought up that topic, the students' expressions clouded over. One girl lifted her face to speak for everyone. "It…wasn't us, you know."

"I know. But there's something I want you all to hear. There's the saying that all humans are born equal—" Rentaro closed his eyes and exhaled. "That saying is a lie."

"Huh?" questioned a bunch of different voices.

When Rentaro opened his eyes, he looked at his pupils one by one. "A crime committed by one of the Stolen Generation is judged as a crime by that one person, but a crime committed by one of the Cursed Children has an impact on all of you. I want you all to know this, too. Humans are not born equal at all."

"Then…" He heard a hoarse voice, and one of the students asked, shaking, "Then…what are we supposed to do?"

"Bear it. And don't even think about getting even. Right now, I think all you can do is bear it for a while. No matter how bad the cards you were dealt, you

must make a hand out of those and win somehow. This is the same for all of you." Rentaro scratched the back of his head. "Th-that's why, well, even if it's something that can't be helped, since I've become your teacher, I'll teach you a bunch of stuff, if you'll have me—"

"Everyone, gather round!" one of the students shouted, and in no time, the twenty students huddled with their foreheads touching and started whispering to each other. After a while, the students started to steal glances toward Rentaro, and Rentaro watched uncomfortably as he heard a voice say, "That teacher's pretty good."

"Wh-what's that about?" he asked Kisara, who was standing next to him.

Kisara put her hand to her chin. "Who knows?"

Finally, they finished their discussion and the students adjourned with solemn faces, only to make an *Okay* symbol with their hands. "Mr. Rentaro, you pass."

"Wh-what?" Rentaro stammered.

"It means we like you."

"I-I see."

"There are five of us who would like to date you with marriage in mind."

Rentaro didn't say anything.

"I am one of those five."

There was an even longer pause.

Kisara pointed at herself, looking like she was about to cry. "Wh-what about me?"

"We haven't decided about you yet, Miss Kisara."

"What?!"

Finally, the students swarmed around them with shrill voices and pulled both of Rentaro's hands. Pulled along, Rentaro looked up at the sky and gave a big sigh.

2

By the time Rentaro and Kisara took the children back to District 39 and returned to the squad tent with Enju and Tina, it was already dusk. All four lined up at the field kitchen to get food, then went back to the tent and sat in a circle.

From the smell of spices that wafted toward them, Rentaro had already somewhat guessed that today's meal was curry. Since he didn't expect much from the taste, it ended up being better than he expected. That itself left a strong impression, but it helped that his stomach was empty. He cleaned his plate in no time. To the members of Tendo Civil Security Agency, who were always in needy circumstances, today's food was a happy miscalculation.

After the meal, the Initiators had their corrosion-inhibiting injection. Kisara announced, "I'm going to the restroom," and similarly took her bag and walked aimlessly somewhere. She probably didn't want to be seen taking her chronic diabetes' insulin shot.

When Kisara finally came back, inside the tent, in the dim light of the camp lantern, everyone had spread out the foodstuffs and junk food they brought from home and were letting loose.

They told stories of Gastrea they had bravely defeated, as well as encounters and eyewitness accounts of mysterious Gastrea. Tamaki, who was old enough to drink, had beer and enthusiastically sang songs he composed himself, his face red.

Strangely enough, even though it hadn't even been two days yet, living crowded together in a tent like this, it was like they had been friends for years.

Rentaro also let loose a little, shaking a can of cola and spraying it at Tamaki, but in general he was coldly observing the situation.

Everyone was relaxed and laughing, which was unusual for them. However, it was likely that this was their only chance to play around. Everyone was probably this relaxed because they were afraid. The others had probably also noticed this, but there was no one who dared to say it out loud.

Finally, when Enju started to rub her eyes sleepily, that was everyone's signal

to break up for the day. The half tent that Rentaro brought and didn't end up needing was reappropriated by Kisara and Tina.

Tamaki didn't even try to hide his ulterior motives when he said, "Ma'am, you should sleep in the same tent as us."

Kisara stuck out her tongue in reply and blushed as she snuck a sideways glance at Rentaro. "I don't want Satomi to do something weird to me while I'm sleeping…," she replied, and turned away in a huff.

Tina's face made it obvious that she wanted to sleep in the big tent, but when Kisara said, "Tina, you're not going to betray me, too, are you?" Tina lost to peer pressure and let herself be persuaded to go to the other tent.

A little while after turning out the light, Enju, Yuzuki, and Tamaki soon fell asleep and started snoring, Enju and Yuzuki holding each other. A little ways away from Rentaro, Midori was sleeping in a very proper position. And Rentaro thought Shoma was awake, but he seemed to be sleeping sitting up and cross-legged, leaning on the wall of the tent.

Just me, huh? Rentaro sighed, gazing at the curtains of the tent fluttering in the wind. His mind wandered to the conversation with his students during the day. Even if it had been to calm the hearts of children fraught with worry, it pricked his conscience a little that he had lied and said, "We have the self-defense force, so it'll be fine," without any basis for that statement.

Truth be told, he was worried, too.

In the self-defense force that had won the Second Kanto Battle, aside from the traditional conservatives, there were also the war advocates who wanted to open up the Monoliths and decisively get rid of the Gastrea. They had recently gained power, and lately, it appeared that these men and women did not even obey the commands of the Seitenshi.

The man named Takuto Yasuwaki, whom Rentaro had met and had intense confrontations with during the Seitenshi assassination attempt, was one of those in the war advocacy group that had been created after the Second Kanto War. And he had heard that the group camped out in front of the Monolith were all of the same type as Yasuwaki. If they underestimated Aldebaran's strength, then that could come back and turn into a crisis for Tokyo Area.

Rentaro held at bay his uneasiness that wouldn't go away and took a deep breath, praying that he was worrying needlessly.

Just then, a voice that sounded like the buzz of a mosquito entered the tent. "Satomi, are you awake?"

Rentaro slowly lifted his eyelids. "Kisara?"

"Yeah, do you want to go for a walk?" Her voice came from outside the tent. Rentaro got up quietly to keep from waking Enju next to him and went out of the squad tent.

Yesterday, it had been hot and humid and hard to sleep, so he had braced himself, but the wind that hit his skin didn't feel especially hot or cold and was instead a comfortable temperature. The undergrowth swayed with a rustling sound in time to the sound of the insects, and in the midst of that stood Kisara, holding down her hair to protect it from the wind. For some reason, Kisara's smile showed both loneliness and embarrassment. "Did I wake you?"

Rentaro shook his head. "How far are we going?"

"Let's see." Kisara kept her hands clasped behind her and spun around, looking at the sky. "Let's go to Monolith 32."

"That's a little far." After a moment's thought, he suddenly had the brilliant idea of taking Kisara to the frontline headquarters.

Seeing a sentry standing on watch next to the motorcycle parking area, he saluted. "Commander Gado asked me to take a message," he said smoothly.

Three minutes later, Rentaro had the keys to a motorcycle in his hands. Taking the helmet off the Kawasaki motorcycle with a sidecar he had chosen, he handed it to Kisara, who took it in astonishment, then finally gave up and shook her head, fastening the buckle under her chin.

"Do you remember how to drive?" she asked.

"I haven't driven since getting my civil officer license, so it's been about a year. But I'm sure it'll be fine." He turned the key in the ignition and started off. At first, he had a hard time with the rough, unpaved roads, but eventually, his hands remembered what to do, and the rest of the time passed quickly.

After about twenty minutes, they saw the front line facilities of the self-defense force. Rentaro casually passed through the base, but in fact, he was burning the whole of the facilities into his memory.

The troops were probably composed of foot soldiers called the Infantry Brigade. He could only estimate the number of people based on the scale of the facilities, but there were probably around six thousand. There were armored vehicles and tanks lined up in rows and a missile silo. The sentry was holding a Shiba Heavy Weapons Type 21 rifle; he was well equipped and seemed to be in high spirits. This was the full strength of the SDF…

Rentaro slowed the motorcycle at the side of the Monolith and suddenly felt all signs of life disappear. They were probably trying to stay away from the Monolith to protect themselves from the fragments and mineral dust produced by its collapse.

Cutting through the wind on the motorcycle, Rentaro lifted his gaze and thought, *It can't be helped*. The Monolith stood sternly in front of them to protect Tokyo Area, but it would soon succumb to its incurable disease and be stained white, falling to pieces. Even just looking at it was horrifying, and it was human nature to not want to be caught up in that.

Twenty meters in front of the Monolith, Rentaro stopped the motorcycle and told Kisara, "We're here."

She took off her helmet and shook her head. Her beautiful black hair, which sparkled even in the dark night, fell to her waist in waves. "Thanks for driving," she said, and started walking briskly to the Monolith.

"H-hey, Kisara!" He was about to say it was dangerous, but since Kisara didn't show any sign of stopping, he scratched his head and, left with no other choice, followed behind her.

She went all the way to the base of the Monolith and stretched out a hand to touch the Monolith through the clamp on its side. "Satomi, try this."

Rentaro couldn't tell what Kisara was trying to say but went to stand by her dubiously, attempting a light touch of the Monolith. He'd felt a Monolith many times in the past; he remembered them being smooth and cold. However, the sensation Rentaro felt on the palm of his hand was completely different from

what he had remembered from the past. This was dry and crumbling; it felt like crushing dried leaves. He thought it was some kind of mistake and reached his hand up to run it down the side. When he did, the pieces that came off the surface fell into a pile at his feet.

He didn’t speak.



“It’s terrible, isn’t it?” said Kisara. “It’s still okay because the corrosion hasn’t reached the inside yet, but…to think that corrosion fluid can do this to Varanium…”

“The Monolith…will really collapse, huh?” Rentaro tilted his head and looked up at the tip of the Monolith that thrust into the sky, lost in his complicated feelings.

In the past, science fiction author Arthur C. Clarke defined the stone monoliths that appeared in his story as objects installed by God to stimulate mankind’s evolution. If that were the case, had mankind been able to learn anything important from the Gastrea War and evolve to a higher dimension? Thinking about it that way, was the destruction that spread out before him related to the death of God?

He shook his head. *Stop, you’re just avoiding the issue.* The only thing he could say was that the Monolith was definitely going to collapse. And he needed to hold back the death that would result from that in order to connect to the future of the world.

Kisara stepped back as she looked up at the Monolith. “Hey, Satomi, do you know how Monoliths are made?”

“Now that you mention it…I’ve never seen it in person. Since we say that Monoliths are *assembled*, I’d say the parts are all brought to the location and __”

Kisara looked at Rentaro with an expression that seemed to express her disgust. “Idiot. With an answer like that, I can’t even give you partial credit. The answer is, well, it would be easier if you imagined how ancient pyramids were built.”

“Pyramids?”

“Pyramids were built by taking cut stone blocks and using special tools to stack them on top of each other, right? Monoliths are also made from masses of blocks. Those are flown in with transport aircrafts or helicopters and stacked onto each other at the site. Of course, if they were just stacked, they’d quickly be blown over by the wind, so they’re stuck together by adhesive stronger than

the stuff used in military aircraft and spaceships.”

“Then this is made of piles of blocks? I can’t see where they’re joined, though.”

“That’s because the precision of Japan’s Monoliths is considered top class even among the rest of the world.” Kisara boldly stuck a finger in the air. “It starts with a hundred meters.” She slid the finger she lifted and pointed at the Monolith. “When this Monolith 32 collapses, the initial construction will stack blocks up to a hundred meters high. With that, normal Gastrea won’t be able to come in anymore. After that, they’ll continue building for about a month until it reaches its final height of 1.6 kilometers. Satomi, you might not remember this, but after the War, the Monoliths didn’t start out this tall.”

Rentaro shook his head silently. He did remember. The Monoliths after the Great War were a lot shorter. The endless fear of the Gastrea made humans create gigantic walls that were 1.9 kilometers high. “How long will it take to build it up to a hundred meters?” he asked.

“If the materials and transport vehicles are all here, then it would take about half a day.”

“That fast?”

“Well, yeah. It’s not an individual or a company, but the Tokyo Area government that’s hiring all the general contractors to build this. Of the ten days it all takes, most of the time is spent making the Varanium the right shape. Well, in the end, even if it’s restored to 1.6 kilometers, that still doesn’t prevent the flying Gastrea from wandering in from a high altitude, though—”

“That’s not all, is it? There will still be those Gastrea who run away from freak shows, research institutions, and collectors with unusual tastes, and those who run into the area protected by Monoliths with infected body fluids, and…”

“Initiators whose corrosion rates went above fifty percent.”

“Wait a minute, Kisara. Don’t you think this is weird? In the first place, why is the government trying to rebuild a Monolith here? Even if they desperately built a Monolith, if Aldebaran came to inject Varanium corrosion fluid again, it’d be all over, right?” He paused. “Wait, that’s not it.” Rentaro tried to put into

words the doubts that were lurking in his mind. “Why hasn’t Aldebaran attacked any other Monoliths? Rather than attacking one place, wouldn’t it be more efficient to attack a number of different places at the same time to create a hole?”

“That’s it. That’s the problem.” Kisara thrust her index finger at him. “Somehow, after observing for the past few days, the government has come to the conclusion that Aldebaran can’t attack other Monoliths. And in reality, Aldebaran hasn’t interfered with any other Monoliths.”

“Is there a reason for that?”

“The government looks like they have some theories, but in truth, they don’t actually know. Hey, Satomi, since the two of us are here together, do you want to try reasoning it out?”

Rentaro nodded silently. Ever since Rentaro heard the explanation of the contents of the job directly from the Seitenshi herself, he had doubts about the indifference toward other Monoliths held by Aldebaran, which was no more than a Stage Four Gastrea. It was reassuring to be thinking about this with Kisara, whose knowledge and insight surpassed his.

Kisara held up three fingers to show him. “I have three hypotheses. The first is, when Aldebaran attacked Monolith 32, it used up all its strength and then needed to rest for a long time.”

Rentaro put his hand on his chin. That was possible. If Aldebaran was a normal Gastrea, then just coming near Varanium electromagnetic waves would be enough to make it waste away. However—“It’s already been four days since that first incident, right? Wouldn’t it have recovered by now?”

“No, there are individual differences, so we can’t necessarily rule that out. My second hypothesis is that because of where it’s situated, the Monolith’s effects are lessened.”

Rentaro looked around them, but there were just plains as far as the eye could see. “Is there any difference between this place and the adjoining Monoliths 31 and 33?”

Kisara raised her eyebrows and crossed her arms. “You could say they’re

exactly the same.”

“Is it possible that there’s something buried under ground?”

Kisara shook her head. “Before the Monoliths are built, they do a simple soil test, so it’s hard to believe.”

“Then that’s not it.”

“Right, so the third hypothesis is, Aldebaran is not very smart, so it did not think of attacking multiple Monoliths at the same time.”

“That’s not it.” Rentaro could deny that promptly; it was the least likely. “That guy even used the loyal ant Gastrea to stall for time in order to attack this place. Aldebaran is smart, provokingly so.”

“That’s true.” Even though she had come up with this explanation, she did not seem to put much faith in it and withdrew it easily, folding her arms again.

“But thanks to you, I’ve been able to organize my thoughts,” said Rentaro. “I have one more conjecture.” Rentaro looked up at the top of the Monolith that was being cruelly bleached. “What if there was some sort of problem with this Monolith in particular?”

Kisara gasped and put a hand to her mouth. “But that’s…”

“But if that’s the case, that would give a reason for why this Monolith was targeted and the others were not.”

Kisara put a hand to her chin. “That’s true… You’re right… I didn’t think of that.” Kisara looked straight at Rentaro. “I’ll try looking into this Monolith a little more.”

“Please do.”

To discuss this further without waiting for the results of her research would just be piling inference on top of inference, so it was not constructive. His wise childhood friend also seemed to realize this, and she stopped the conversation with a “Yeah,” and gave a big stretch. She went to the sloped meadow and lay down facing the sky, patting the grass with her hand as she looked at him. “Satomi, why don’t you come lay down next to me?”

Suddenly, his heart gave a big leap.

“R-right.” Rentaro told himself to keep Kisara from suspecting that his heart was pounding inside and moved awkwardly to lie down next to her. There was a rustling sound, and the smell of warm earth reached his nostrils. Looking quietly next to him, he saw Kisara’s white arm stretched out on the grass, her pretty thigh and the line of her body, and the bulge of her chest pushing up the fabric of her clothes.

“Hey, Satomi, look at the sky! Look!”

Rentaro had only been looking at Kisara, so he didn’t look at the sky until she told him to, but when he did, he let out an involuntary exclamation of wonder. In the clear summer night sky with no moon, the Milky Way twinkled. There were so many stars that it was hard to find the Big Dipper. “Wow…” he breathed. “Amazing. That’s all I can say.”

“We live in the middle of all the lights in Tokyo Area. Because of them, the light of the stars is drowned out. Even though they’re actually this beautiful.”

Stealing another glance at Kisara’s profile, he saw that she had her mouth open slightly, her eyes fixed on the stars with a childlike expression on her face. *You’re even more beautiful, you know.* If he could speak the words that welled from his chest, it would be so much easier to figure out his relationship with her.

Employee and boss, childhood friends, foster brother and younger sister born only a few months apart, student of the Tendo Style and senior disciple. Adjuvant leader and member. There were a lot of words that could be used to describe them, but none of them hit the mark.

For some reason, her left hand stretched out on the grass seemed far away. If he could just muster the courage, it would have been possible for him to gently cover it with his palm. Rentaro shook his head softly. “Kisara, do you know what light pollution is?”

“Light pollution?”

“Yeah, pollution caused by light.” Still lying down, Rentaro wrote the words out in the air for her. “Just as you say, the lights from the city are man-made, so they’re not good for natural organisms. It can be so bright that it can even be seen from man-made satellites.”

“Really?”

“Birds will fly in circles around the searchlight of a lighthouse until they finally fall from exhaustion. Bats and mice have also become easier to see by their predators because of the light, so they’ve become more cautious. Migratory birds think that the day is longer and eat for longer, making them too fat. Just-hatched baby sea turtles look for the ocean based on the reflection of light, so some get confused and end up going not to the ocean but to a hill. And fireflies who look for their mates using light can’t find their lovers because of the artificial lights leaking out.”

Glancing next to him, he saw that Kisara was looking at him with a faint smile. “Am I boring you?” he asked.

“No, not at all,” she said. “I think it’s wonderful.”

Rentaro paused for a moment. “Hey, Kisara, why did you ask me to come to a place like this with you? You should be able to tell me now, right?”

Kisara gazed at the stars in silence.

Rentaro looked at her profile and asked as quietly as he could. “Are you scared? Of the Monolith collapsing?”

She shook her head quietly. “Saying something like this might be inconsiderate, but right now, I’m so happy it’s scaring me.”

“Happy?”

“Yeah, I’m really happy right now. Even though we keep hearing about the Monolith collapsing, it still hasn’t sunk in yet.”

“I…get that.”

“And at the Tendo Civil Security Agency, we have Enju, and Tina, and you. We’re like a family. We aren’t making money at all, as usual, but we have enough to survive.”

“Tina said she was happy right now, too, you know. I’m sure Enju is, too.”

“What about you?” she asked.

“I am too, of course.”

Kisara closed her eyes quietly. “Recently, I’ve been having this dream.”

“A dream?”

“Yeah. When I come to, I’m on a bridge surrounded by the morning mist as far as the eye can see. I don’t know how I got there or why I’m there, but I just know that I have to move forward. So I move forward in one direction on the bridge, but there’s no one there. Eventually, the bridge ends abruptly and my body is swallowed up by this black swamplike thing. I just watch it silently until finally even my head goes under, but eventually, I figure out how to breathe and eventually feel better.”

Rentaro didn’t say anything.

“When I wake up in the morning and look in the mirror, I realize that my face is streaked with tears, and after that, I kept seeing the same dream over and over, so I started to think about it. And then I realized.”

Looking next to him, his eyes met Kisara’s. Kisara looked like she was about to be crushed with worry, and her eyes were wet.

“I realized that I was crying because I understood that this happiness had to end someday.” Kisara shook her head with delicate eyes. “I killed them. I killed everyone in the world.”

“Idiot.” Rentaro put his hand on top of Kisara’s and squeezed it. She was warm and slightly sweaty. “You’ve become overly sensitive without realizing it. Don’t worry. Neither Enju, nor Tina, nor I will disappear.”

“Yeah… You’re right.”

Looking sideways at her, he saw a slight hint of relief on her face, but in Rentaro’s heart, slight ripples were spreading. During puberty, people saw a lot of different dreams, so it might not have been worth mentioning or making a fuss about, but when interpreting dreams, bridges were important metaphors that connected this world from the next, and the present to the future. And swamps represented wicked feelings or spite, envy, or jealousy, and the color black also had similar meanings.

Generally, people who dreamed that they sank into swamps were very stressed and struggled to get out, but even when Kisara realized she was

sinking, she was unimpressed and accepted it, which was somewhat eerie.

What did that mean?

Rentaro suddenly shook his head to clear it of the thoughts he was having. *No way, what am I thinking?* Whatever he was thinking definitely didn't apply to Kisara.

"Satomi?" she said.

"Huh? What? Oh, what's wrong?"

Suddenly, Kisara lifted her left hand and tapped her watch. "Today will end in five minutes. And then we will be one day closer to the collapse of the Monolith."

"I-it'll be fine. I-I'll protect you, Kisara."

Kisara looked a little surprised but immediately turned bashful and smiled back at him. "Thank you, Satomi."

Rentaro felt his cheeks grow hot and looked away. And then the second hand went around the dial four times, and the countdown began. "Ten, nine, eight, seven, six, five, four—"

Rentaro felt a squeeze from the hand he was holding, and Kisara's nails dug into his skin a little.

And then, the next moment, Japan entered the next day. Rentaro let out the breath he had been holding. The Milky Way still hung above them, unchanging.

There were two days left until the collapse of the Monolith.

3

After sleeping for two nights in a tent in District 40, Rentaro had gotten used to life there. However, Tina and Midori, who seemed more delicate, could not really stand the rugged floor of the tent and sleeping bags, and complained lightly.

Under Gado's command, this morning they were making barbed wire and

sandbags and setting concrete blocks normally used to stop tanks in the areas where they predicted Gastrea would enter. The remaining time was spent in the classroom reviewing what they went over the day before, and as a final top off they were given details about the punishments for disobeying orders directly from Gado himself.

Apparently, Gado was pretty nervous about the civil officers not being able to agree on a course of action, so he was trying to prevent that by implementing a harsh punishment. *Well, that was only natural*, Rentaro thought. Even if the civil officers were a bunch of show-offs, if just one person turned and ran when the Gastrea attacked, it would have an effect on everyone's morale. If he was the commander, he would want to eliminate those rotten eggs who thought of themselves before everything else to the detriment of the group as soon as possible. He had no objections to Gado's way of doing things.

After they were dismissed, Rentaro dropped off Enju, Tina, and Kisara at the outdoor classroom, changed trains, and got off at Magata City. Sadly, even though Rentaro had brought a tent with him, he had completely forgotten to bring a change of clothes and underwear. Enju had already run out of underwear and was currently renting Tina's. Himself aside, as Enju's guardian he couldn't make her do something so crass.

Therefore, "Mr. Rentaro" was taking a day off today. When he got off at Magata City and started walking around, he immediately felt tension in the air and stopped. The first thing that met his eyes were the large amount of flyers covering the ground that looked like they had been blown over by the wind. Picking one up, he saw that there were conspiracy theories written on them, like "Don't forgive the tyrannical government! The government had already decided all who would be evacuated to the shelters from the start!"

Now that he thought about it, it had been two days since he had been home to Magata City, but in those two days, the city had turned into this. Near the concourse, there was an old man with white hair and a white beard, outfitted like someone homeless, standing on a wooden crate yelling in a high voice about the destruction of the world and the new hope that would come after that. Normally, no one would pay any attention to such incoherency, but Rentaro could see many cheering him on.

The bottoms of Rentaro's shoes crunched as he walked through the shopping arcade in front of the station. Display windows had been destroyed and looted. A little while later, Rentaro passed a truck with looted goods on it and was shocked when he realized that the driver had a vigilante group armband around his arm. So even those who had previously maintained society had become accomplices to criminality. He had heard about it on the news, but the situation was worse than he had imagined.

There were few people walking around outside. Naturally, evacuation had already started for this block. It was easy to forget when in the Outer Districts, but right now, the whole city-state of Tokyo Area was in an emergency evacuation.

While he was thinking this, he reached his apartment. It was still peaceful around here, but it would probably be caught up in the looting soon. Thinking that, he stuffed necessities and consumables into his overnight bag, not letting his hand stop. When he finally lifted his swollen bag, he felt its weight at the base of his arm.

Standing at the entrance to lock the door, he gazed at the eight-tatami-mat room with a swell of emotion—it was possible that he wouldn't return to this room again. But Rentaro brushed off the sentiment and pushed the sadly creaking door shut. He inserted the key and twisted the lock, shutting away the room and his memories. The next time he came, it would be to unlock it with Enju.

Putting the bag on his shoulder, he got on the train to head back to District 40. Even though there were not many people inside the train car, it was tense with the feeling of forcibly repressed panic. It was suffocating.

Looking for an escape for his eyes, he noticed a hanging advertisement near the roof. The headline of the handwritten ad said, BLOOD RETRIBUTION AGAINST THE CURSED CHILDREN! LYNCHING IN DISTRICT 3!!! The deterioration of public order had gathered in the easiest place for it to be vomited out.

The image of a certain girl recalled itself to his mind, and his heart skipped. *No way*. He shook his head, but the idea wouldn't leave once it had taken root. Rentaro wasn't able to contain himself, and stuck his hand in the closing door to

get off the train.

Rentaro had gotten off at the District 9 station he had stopped by when he visited the Katagiri Civil Security Agency. Moving through the sparse pedestrians as he rushed out of the station, he pushed aside a couple and overtook an elderly walker as he strode with impatient steps. He couldn't explain why he was in such a hurry, but he didn't falter either.

Finally, he approached a five-road junction and climbed up the steps of a wide pedestrian bridge. She shouldn't be here. That's what he told himself over and over. She had promised.

He heard clamoring from above and felt murderous intent prickling on his skin; he could see a crowd of people. Panting, Rentaro dashed up the steps, and everything came into view. He saw a rush mat spread near the middle, and the metal bowl the girl had used was knocked over, with coins spilled out on the ground. There she was: Lying facedown on the ground was the caped girl. Around her was a band of grown adults. There were eight, in a wide range of ages from twenties to forties.

"What are you doing?!" Rentaro rushed over in front of the waif.

The fallen girl used her left had to try to push herself up with all her might and looked at Rentaro with her unseeing eyes. "That voice…are you that civil officer from before…?"

The girl had scratches all over her face, and the wound on her right arm that she was pushing down on had a spreading bloodstain that showed no sign of regenerating. Surprisingly, the girl's smile did not go out even after all this.

"Damn it, what a disgusting brat!" Facing front, Rentaro saw that the oldest man in front of him was holding a Varanium switchblade dripping with blood, his face twisted with hatred. It was a thin knife with a blade about twelve centimeters long; it was too short to fight off a Gastrea, so it was hard to think of what it could be used for other than to deliver a fatal wound to one of the Cursed Children.

The beggar girl shook her head, still bent over on the ground. "I'm sorry, Mr. Civil Officer. Even though I promised…I deserve what I got, but I, I just…"

“It’s fine. I get it. Don’t talk.”

Just then, the middle-aged man with the knife took a step forward out of rage. He had a wide forehead and was plump, with flesh sagging underneath his chin. If he smiled, he probably would have looked very kind. Rentaro was shocked that even someone who seemed good would commit an act of violence against a defenseless girl.

“Move!” the man yelled. “That girl mixed in with the rest of us with an innocent look on her face and attacked when she found a chance. She’s worse than the Gastrea! We have to eliminate the Cursed Children from the city!”

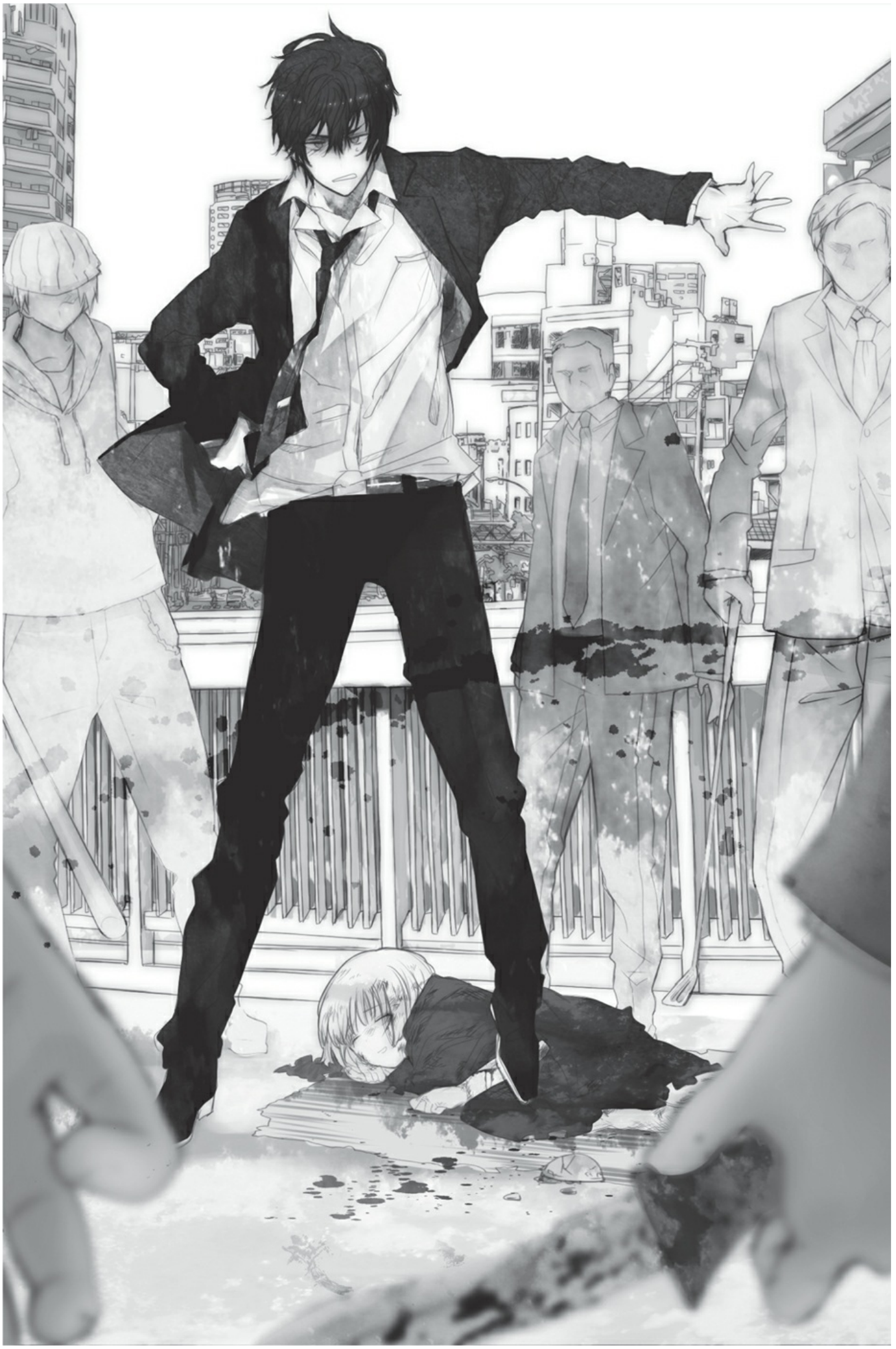
Rentaro knew the reason for the man’s thoughtless anger. In short, this crowd was scared. Ever since that news, they were afraid of the Cursed Children coming after them for revenge.

Rentaro closed his eyes and drew his XD gun from his belt. Then, lifting his arm, he fired one shot into the sky. The kickback roiled through his arm and the gun’s explosion roared into the sky. The agitated men stopped in surprise.

“I’m a civil officer.” Rentaro very calmly took his license out of his breast pocket and held it in front of the men. Quietly, he said, “Try taking one more step closer. Next time, I’ll shoot you.”

Facing the men, who were stirring nervously, Rentaro continued. “You’re not done yet?” The men snuck glances at one another for a while, but it was obvious that they had lost their spirit. The middle-aged man in front turned on his heel and spat, “The ones you civil officers are protecting are those brats after all, huh?”

The good-for-nothings snuck spiteful glances back at him and finally retreated like an ocean wave. As Rentaro looked around, the onlookers around them also hurriedly scattered.



Why was everyone afraid of them? Even though they were desperately protecting Tokyo Area, why were all the looks at them of spite or fear?

Outside, there were two thousand Gastrea. Inside, there were violent people who discriminated against them. Even though this was the time for the whole Area to come together as one…

“Excuse me…” Looking back, the girl was standing with a smile of gratitude mixed with remorse. Rentaro looked at the girl’s blood dripping onto the ground and silently took out a handkerchief from the inside pocket of his uniform, applying pressure to the wound as he bandaged it. The wounds that had not been applied by the Varanium knife were already on their way to healing naturally.

After the first-aid treatment was completed, she seemed to calm down somewhat, and the girl lifted her face gently, suddenly stretching out her hand toward him. Rentaro pulled away for a second, but she did not seem to mean him any harm, so he let her brush her hands over his face and shoulder.

“I remember your voice and face, Mr. Civil Officer.” The girl smiled more deeply and blushed. “You’re my type.”

“Idiot. You don’t have to thank me. Just get out of here right now. Try coming here again, and next time, I’ll be the one to hurt you! Got it?”

He meant to scold her, but the girl did not seem the least bit afraid. She just kept smiling and picking up money, rolling up her rush mat and putting it under her arm, thanking him over and over. “Please allow me to thank you one day when I have time.”

“Don’t come!”

The beggar girl waved her hand at the busy street as she left.

Rentaro pressed his temple with his left hand. *Damn it, does she really get it?* But he was glad he made it in the nick of time to save her. As he turned on his heel with that sense of satisfaction, something suddenly gave him the chills.

Behind him, there was nothing particularly out of the ordinary. The wind blew on Rentaro’s cheek and then blew away.

As he rode the train, he couldn't get the eyes of the crowd out of his head.

4

A little while after he got back to the tent, Enju came back from the outdoor classroom along with Tina and Kisara. "I have returned!"

"How was school?" Rentaro asked.

Enju couldn't contain her excitement and flapped her arms. "Today was fun, too. Kisara wasn't popular at all."

"Huh? Kisara?"

Tina looked confused. "Big Brother, you are very popular. When President Tendo said you were off today and that she would be teaching all day, there was a lot of booing…"

When he looked at the woman, she turned away in indignation. "Miss Kisara is not popular at all!" she parroted.

"Well…I like Miss Kisara?" he offered.

"Stop trying to console me."

Then what am I supposed to say?

As Rentaro floundered, a voice interrupted them with, "Ma'am." It was Tamaki. "While you were gone, a strange man came by and brought this—" He pulled out a sealed manila envelope from his chest.

"Oh, that was fast. They finished looking into it, huh?" Kisara gave Tamaki a curt "Thanks" and took the envelope, unsealing it carefully.

"Kisara, what is that?" Rentaro asked.

"Remember, Satomi? You said yesterday that maybe there was a problem with the Monolith, right? I got someone to look into it."

Kisara twitched as she read over the few pages of materials in the envelope. She crumpled the papers in her hand, and her fingers trembled and turned

white.

Rentaro could tell something was strange. Wondering what was going on, he snuck a look at Kisara's face—and he almost died from shock. "H-hey, Kisara…?"

"I'm going outside for a minute."

"Hey!" Rentaro's words were left behind as Kisara quickly turned and left.

He had no time to hesitate. Stumbling, Rentaro quickly pulled on his shoes and rushed outside the tent, looking around. He didn't have to look for long to find Kisara walking in front of him, heading toward another party that was sitting around a campfire. Without saying a word, she threw the documents into the fire.

The people sitting around the campsite looked up in surprise, but their intruder walked away without a word after making sure the documents were aflame.

After it was obvious she wasn't coming back, Rentaro ran to the fire pit, pushing the people around it out of the way. There it was. Without a moment's hesitation, Rentaro stuck his right arm into the conflagration. He hadn't thought to cut off the pain sensors in his arm, and he gritted his teeth in pain.

Even so, Rentaro's arm remembered what it had to do. Sticking his arm into the depths of the brightly burning flames, when he finally passed his limit and had to pull his arm out, his smoking artificial arm was grasping a half-burned piece of paper.

"H-hey, what are you guys doing?" Ignoring the bewilderment of the neighboring party, Rentaro apologized silently to Kisara and unfolded the scrap of paper.

He groaned involuntarily and staggered a few steps. *What is this? Why…was this name…?* Rentaro followed Kisara's back with his eyes, and seeing that she was far away, looked back at the scrap of paper that now sported blackened edges. It appeared to be the end of the document.

As stated above, Monolith 32 appears to be a young Monolith built near the end of the Great Gastrea War. The order for the Monolith to be built was placed by the party of the current vice minister of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism, Kazumitsu

Kazumitsu Tendo. The grandson of Kikunojo Tendo and one of Kisara's much older brothers. In the past, when Rentaro had lived in the Tendo residence, Kazumitsu had also still lived there, so Rentaro saw him many times.

Why was Kazumitsu's name here?

It was hard to deduce the rest of the document's contents from the excerpt. However—

Rentaro's shoulders shook. In the back of his mind, he recalled the profile of Kisara's face he had seen earlier in the tent. She had been sneering. She had on her revenge face, one that she would never show in front of the girls.

5

The wind was blowing strong the next morning, making the curtains of the tent flutter. The weather wasn't bad, but the clouds drifting in the sky were passing by at great speeds.

"You're going today, too?" Tamaki stood by the doorway to see them off, but he looked more solemn than usual.

"Yeah," said Rentaro.

"Why do you still have to go to school at a time like this? I don't get it," said Yuzuki, furiously combing down her blond hair.

Next to her, Enju raised her hand energetically and answered, "It's *because* it's a time like this!"

"Huh?" Yuzuki sounded like she truly couldn't understand.

Rentaro thought she had a point. He also wasn't confident that he could explain his actions to other people.

From the adjacent two-person tent, there were the sounds of hurried morning preparations. When Rentaro went to wake its residents this morning, Kisara and Tina were both still sound asleep. The two of them seemed to have

trouble falling asleep the night before and finally slept, but only when the sky was already turning light.

Rentaro looked up behind him and gazed at the bleached Monolith. There was one day left.

Gado had decided to let everyone have the whole day free. Apparently, because today was the last day, he intended for everyone to enjoy it. It was true that if they didn't see their loved ones now, it was possible that they would never see each other in this world again.

And Rentaro naturally chose to spend his last free day as Mr. Rentaro. It was a strange feeling, though. At first, he had been forced to do it against his will, and he hadn't planned on getting into it that much.

Tamaki looked at him with an even more dubious expression. "Won't this just increase your regrets?"

"Maybe, but I need to at least say good-bye."

"Well, as long as you get it, just make sure you don't come back all gloomy."

"What about you guys?"

This time, the Katagiri siblings looked at each other. Tamaki shrugged. "I guess I'll eat something delicious to prepare for tomorrow and then go to sleep."

"You guys don't have anything else to do?"

"Our family and extended relatives were almost entirely killed by the Gastrea. There's no one to say good-bye to."

Rentaro regretted his question, and paused before his next question, considering it. "Did you guys become civil officers to get revenge on the Gastrea?"

Tamaki put both hands behind his head. "Hmm, I wonder. I don't think about really tedious stuff like that."

"But I can't believe you can just not think about it—"

Tamaki cut him off. "The guys who bring grudges to fights with Gastrea are the ones who die early."

Rentaro felt like he had suddenly been stabbed in the chest. Tamaki pushed up the bridge of his sunglasses with his middle finger, as if he didn't want Rentaro to see his sharp eyes peaking out from over the top. "Well, if I had to say, I'd say I was fighting for someone's smile. All right, my sweet, shall we go back to sleep to prepare for tomorrow?"

Yuzuki must have been sleepy, because she just nodded in agreement and somehow the two of them made it over to their sleeping bags.

Rentaro had mixed feelings after catching a glimpse of Tamaki's expression, but he forced himself to switch gears. Sticking his head into the tent, he called out to Shoma, who was in the corner of the tent taking apart his gun and cleaning it. "What'll you do today, Bro?"

Shoma shrugged and looked at Midori next to him. "We're planning to start training in a little bit. 'Cause it'll be problematic if my body doesn't move when I need it to."

Both the Katagiri siblings and Shoma pair had simple plans. Well, from their point of view, Rentaro and the others going to school without a care might have seemed like they were unaware of the looming danger.

But just then, Tina rushed out of the smaller tent and said with an apologetic expression, "Please go on ahead." She followed it with a bow.

He gave an amicable wave to show he understood and guided Enju forward with a hand on the back of her shoulders. If they left now, even if they got there in the shortest amount of time, they would still be quite late.

And so, the last day started quietly.

Rentaro bought tickets for District 39, and they got on the train. On the trains between the Outer Districts early in the morning there were almost no passengers, and it wasn't that hard to find a train car that was completely empty.

Turning their backs toward the orange sunlight shining from the east, they sat next to each other on the red velvet seats. As the train left the station, their bodies swayed and the hanging straps quivered. Finally, the train car accelerated slowly, and there was the rhythmical vibration of the train passing

over the tracks. The shape of the shadows changed by the second, and moved from left to right.

Rentaro's back, which had absorbed the morning sunlight, was nice and warm. It was hard to believe that today might be Tokyo Area's last. Once tomorrow came, they would be fighting a decisive battle against two thousand Gastrea, led by Aldebaran, a force that would be unimaginably strong. It was sure to be a fierce battle unlike anything Rentaro and the others had ever experienced before; there was no guarantee that Rentaro or Enju would be alive to breathe after these next battles.

Because they both understood this implicitly, the early morning air seemed fraught with tension. Because of how short the time they had left was, even this casual time seemed like something irreplaceable, a halo that made the world sparkle.

"Enju, are you having fun at school?" Rentaro asked.

She narrowed her eyes and rubbed her head against Rentaro's chest comfortably. The girl smelled sweet, like sunlight. "Yes, I am having so much fun. Thank you, Rentaro."

"If you're having fun, it's because you're working hard."

Enju lifted her head and shook it, still clinging to Rentaro's chest. "I know that you and Kisara secretly stayed up at night looking for the best school for me to attend while tapping on the calculator."

Rentaro was taken aback. "You were watching?"

Seeing Enju smile wryly, Rentaro had mixed feelings. He didn't really want a child to know about this kind of real-life cost-benefit analysis.

"I am grateful to you, Rentaro…," said Enju. "And I guess I'm a little grateful to Kisara, too."

Putting his arm around the pouting Enju, he hugged her to his chest. "It was worth the hard work, then."

Enju's upturned eyes blinked and wavered with unease as she looked at him. "Rentaro, is it not fun for you to be a teacher, after all?"

“Well…” Rentaro looked at the groups of ruins passing by the window. Most of the buildings had collapsed, and only the sky was vast. “I’m having fun.”

“What?”

Once he admitted it, he felt the worry lift from his chest. The next words he spoke came out pretty honestly. “No matter what started it, I’m having fun right now. It’s because of you, Enju. Thanks.”

At first Enju’s eyes widened, but then slowly her expression changed to a smile, and she hugged Rentaro’s arm, overcome with emotion.

Rentaro was about to protest, but seeing the charming expression on Enju’s face, he held his tongue and let her hold him. The sound of the train shunting along the rails and ties was softly buried in silence, and time passed peacefully.

Rentaro didn’t know how much time had passed when it was announced that the train had reached District 39, and he urged the reluctant Enju to get off. When they left the station, wind came from below that seemed to roll up and push at their backs. Walking with the girl on the already familiar streets in front of the station, their view was soon filled with ruined buildings.

As they walked, he collected his thoughts. Today’s classroom would probably also be full of kids from the Outer Districts. But since today might be the last day, he decided he’d talk about hope and happiness.

After they walked for a while, Rentaro saw a mountain of trash blocking their way. Once they got past that, the open meadow would be spread out in front of them. And as long as they had a blackboard and students, it didn’t matter where they were—it was a classroom.

The closer Rentaro got to their destination, the more nervous he got. But for some reason, it wasn’t a comfortable nervousness but an ominous premonition. Just then, Rentaro noticed an unpleasant smell and covered his mouth and nose with his hand.

Was it the smell of something burning? Why? When he saw a police officer from afar, Rentaro’s heart skipped. The whole area was cordoned off with caution tape. That was exactly the place Rentaro and the others used for their outdoor classroom. Even though he had no idea why the policeman was there,

all his hairs stood on end nervously.

The eyes of the hoodlums from the city flashed through his mind. "*The ones you civil officers are protecting are those brats after all, huh?*"

As the distance between them shrunk to ten meters, the policeman also noticed them and walked over.

"Enju, stay here…," Rentaro whispered.

"R-Rentaro?"

Leaving Enju, Rentaro went to face the officer and exchanged a few words. There was sadness in his face. Finally, the man opened his mouth. His words were few, and cruel.

The blood drained from Rentaro's face. The things around him faded into oblivion, and the scene twisted. He didn't hear anything else the officer had to say. He even forgot to thank the officer as he turned around and returned to Enju.

When Enju saw his face, she froze. Fearfully touching his face with his hands, he felt his dried-out skin and tense muscles. "Enju, let's go home. You don't have to go to school today."

"Wh-why? Why all of a sudden—?"

Rentaro didn't say anything.

"Then, early tomorrow morning for just a little bit…"

"You don't have to go tomorrow, either."

Enju gasped. "Then, then, after we finish fighting—"

"You don't have to go the day after, or the day after that, or the day after that." Rentaro put both hands on Enju's shoulders and met her eyes. "Enju, listen to me calmly—"

His nails almost dug into her shoulders. He couldn't meet her eyes and looked down. "A bomb exploded in our class. Because of that news report."

6

Rentaro followed along as he was taken through the gloomy building with moldy black concrete and was made to wait in front of the door. He lifted his eyes to read the words on the sign over and over and tried to reconnect with the reality that he had lost, but he couldn't focus, and his thoughts were disordered and fragmented.

Finally, the door opened, and a police officer in his late thirties appeared wearing white nitrile rubber gloves, and he beckoned Rentaro listlessly. It would have been nice if it had been Inspector Tadashima, whose face he knew, but it appeared to be a different jurisdiction. Rentaro made a silent bow and went inside.

It was a concrete room with an area of about six tatami mats. The lighting was dim, and it smelled of incense. The inside was full of stretchers covered with white cloths, and because it was summer, a sour smell was mixed in. There were a total of nine inside. There were apparently more in the room next door.

Rentaro shook his head. He just wanted to yell at them to stop messing around. There was no way this was reality. *Just let me wake up from this ridiculous dream right now.* He was overcome with the desire to yell that out. However, no matter how long he waited, the nightmare would not end.

The inspector with the tired eyes spread his arms perfunctorily. "Well, it's great that you can confirm these. It's kind of soon but take a look." Saying that, he roughly flipped back the first white sheet.

As he did so, the cloying smell of blood spread, and Rentaro gagged and covered his mouth, squeezing his eyes shut. The body in front of Rentaro forced him to confront the reality that he had been half avoiding. He would be having nightmares every night for a while and did his best to swallow his nausea.

After he calmed his heaving stomach, the first thing he heard was the sound of the air conditioner running. Rentaro shook his head desperately with his hand still covering his mouth. "This is terrible… I can't believe something like this happened…"

"In order to increase its destructive power, a large amount of Varanium

fragments were stuffed inside. It was terrible. The victims were Children who didn't belong to any family registers, much less have IDs. You'll have to verify their identities."

"What about Mr. Matsuzaki?"

"Oh, that old man? He's fine, but he's laid up in bed from the shock."

Rentaro turned his head and, looking over the depressing number of stretchers around him, took a pair of rubber gloves selflessly.

Had *all* of these been his students? There was no way. Yet his instincts told him that if he didn't do something, the despair would swallow him up whole, and freeze his feet to the floor. However, that feeling was soon overwritten by hellish despair. Every time Rentaro lifted a sheet, his eyes encountered a new hell.

He girded his breaking heart and carefully told the names of the girls one by one to the inspector next to him, who was taking notes with a binder in one hand. It was surprisingly similar to the morning roll call.

He wondered how the perpetrators felt right now. Were they holding their stomachs and laughing because they were successful? Were they satisfied? Or did they feel the slightest bit of remorse?

When the long hand on the clock made about one circle, the hellish torture finally ended. He was so completely exhausted that he could barely stand.

Signing the documents and turning his back on the voice that said, "Good work," he went outside, dragging his feet until he came to sit in the waiting room. He wanted to fall asleep then and there.

Just then, a "Let go!" ripped through the hall. In front of him, he saw Enju struggling desperately as she was held down by two police officers. Shaken for a moment, Rentaro took a deep breath to calm his heart and walked briskly over to the girl, a stern expression on his face. "Why did you come here? I told you to go home!"

"I want to see Micchan! I promised Sasana I'd show her *Tenchu Girls* next time!" Enju yelled.

“Enju, you understand, right? They’re already—”

“It’s a lie! They’re all lies!”

Enju, you… Rentaro closed his eyes and rebuked his half-flinching heart. He knew what he had to do. Rentaro looked quietly at the police officer near him. “Throw her out.”

Enju looked at him like he had betrayed her. “Rentaro? Rentaro? Rentaro…!”

Listening to her wails grow farther away as she was pinned down on both sides and dragged away, Rentaro’s fist shook and he gritted his teeth. Just as she was out of Rentaro’s field of vision, suddenly, the officers on either side of her were knocked down, and Enju rushed back toward him.

Her eyes were red. She had released her power.

“Hey, idiot. Stop—” Before he could finish his sentence, he was blown back by a strong force, and the next thing he knew, his hands were on the ground. Looking back reflexively, he realized that she had gone into the morgue behind him.

What had just—? The air trembled for a moment, but it could also have been Enju’s sob. But the next instant, a shriek echoed inside the police station. It was a scream the regular Enju would never have screamed that could crush the hearts of those who heard it.

Rentaro closed his eyes hard and held his ears as hard as he could. He wanted to avert his eyes for just an instant from the harsh reality of it all.

7

When he pushed the iron door open, a strong, slanted gust of wind greeted him. The clouds were moving surprisingly fast, just like they had been that morning.

Rentaro went to the fence and held it with his left hand, staring at the bleached Monolith in the distance. Civil officers couldn’t cry every time someone died. Hardening their hearts was something they all had to master

sooner or later.

Seeing that Enju had calmed down after crying herself to exhaustion, Rentaro went to the roof of the police station. Right before he left her, Enju was even able to muster the strength to smile at him to thank him for his consideration, but when Rentaro saw that, it made him feel the impending danger even more.

Rentaro pulled out the bundle of handouts from his bag with his right hand. They were the future dreams he had his students write for fun after the quiz. Idol singer, actress, pastry chef, nurse, wife. It brimmed with various hopes that would never come true.

Lynching and killing with bombs. What made the hearts of the citizens of Tokyo Area so devastated that they would do such things? In the past, Rentaro had been taught that humans possessed both high intelligence and virtue and were true social animals, that they were the beings closest to God. Then why did they kill each other like beasts? How could they destroy each other's hopes and dreams? Why in the world could they machinate such stupid things?

Damn it, he muttered in his heart. *What in the world was I looking at? The ones who really needed a helping hand were those girls.*

There was a gust of wind on the roof, and Rentaro's uniform fluttered. The papers in his hand were also blown up, making an arc in the sky, spinning and undulating as they danced in the air. Rentaro gripped the fence tightly with both hands, his body shaking. *Sorry, everyone. It was my fault. I'm truly sorry.*

Rentaro gritted his teeth and looked up at the sky. The Monolith in the distance seemed to be pressing near to his chest.

It was then that the cell phone in his breast pocket started to vibrate. Seeing the name on the screen, he hesitated for a moment but then finally pressed the button to pick up.

"*Can you talk now?*" said the voice on the other end.

Rentaro looked up at the Monolith and closed his eyes miserably. "I'm embarrassed to be part of the Stolen Generation. Even though they trample the Children and laugh, they still expect us to defeat Aldebaran… But we still have to do it… Damn it!"

“*You knew that when you first became a civil officer, didn’t you? You must carry it out, Satomi. That is what a civil officer does.*”

“But Kisara, don’t you always say to carry out justice? Tell me, where is the justice in this vat of filth that is Tokyo Area?”

“*That’s not it, Satomi. That’s why we have to fight. If we win and save Tokyo Area, then there may be a few more people who will abandon their swords of hate and change the way they think. Satomi, didn’t you say it in front of those girls, too? ‘Bear it. And don’t even think about getting even.’ Did you say that even though it wasn’t what you thought just because you wanted to look cool in front of those girls? That’s not it, right? Please, Satomi, let your mind be filled with righteous light. Don’t abandon your heart of justice.*”

Rentaro put his hand to his temple as he shook his head. “I don’t know what face to make as I fight beside Enju…”

“*I don’t know either. But you can’t run from her.*”

“…Being a civil officer is a terrible trade, isn’t it?”

“*But that’s why it’s worth doing.*”

Rentaro looked up at the sky and exhaled deeply.

“*Have you calmed down a little?*”

“Yeah, thanks, Kisara.”

Kisara teased, “*I’m actually a pretty devoted woman, you know.*”

“How’s Tina?”

“*She’s fine. She’s calmed down.*”

“Then, what about you…?”

“*I’m fine, too.*”

“I see…” If that’s what she said, then he was probably supposed to ignore the slight shaking in her nasally voice. Still, the anger that was budding inside him was like a banked fire, burning brightly at a high temperature. But right now, he would not think about the absurdity of it. He had to aim that spearhead at Aldebaran.

Rentaro felt optimistic as he looked out over the Outer Districts. “Then, I’ll go back soon to see how Enju’s doing.”

After Kisara gave herself some time to think, she was sure to say, “Got it.” But she stopped in the middle of those words, and the Kisara at the other end of the line shook violently, and he could hear her gasping breaths.

“Hey, Kisara—”

“*It’s begun, Satomi.*”

Rentaro frowned. But before he could say another word, the woman on the other end of the phone spoke again. “*Look at the Monolith.*”

Rentaro raised his gaze from the ground. A ripple of shock went from the top of his head to the tips of his toes.

First, a corner of the rectangle collapsed. But that immediately led to the next collapse. The large body of the cracked Monolith finally couldn’t stand up against the Varanium corrosion fluid and let out a scream, and then nothing could stop the chain reaction.

From where Rentaro was, he couldn’t hear the sound of the collapse, but that made the shriek of the Monolith even clearer. Abruptly, the whole bleached Monolith became fatally cracked, and the Monolith looked like it was shrugging its shoulders as it completely disintegrated. Chills shot down Rentaro’s spine.

The collapsing structure looked like time-lapse photography, falling from its base with fragments peeling off. It would crash to the ground in no time. There was a roar, and Rentaro was suddenly hit with a rumbling from the ground—a shock wave—making Rentaro raise his arms and grit his teeth. The intense vibration shook Rentaro from his feet to his guts, and the shock wave blew away the surrounding debris, rotting signs, and sheet metal.



When Rentaro looked up again, he saw the sky covered with a cloud of dust and fine particles. “No way…”

There was no way. There should have been one more day before the collapse. Wasn’t that what the precise calculations done by the Seitenshi’s office said?

Rentaro’s clothes flapped in a sudden gust of wind, and at the same he had a sudden realization: “The wind…”

Currently, in the year 2031, it was still hard to completely predict the weather, and they could not accurately predict the chaotic air currents. The people at the Japanese National Security Council had read the flow of wind wrong.

It was starting. The Third Kanto Battle was starting—and not when they were planning.

“*Satomi!*” Kisara yelled.

“I know!” Rentaro hung up and fixed his eyes on the Monolith once more, running toward the battlefield.

July 12, 2031 at 3:16 p.m. This moment in time was the start of what would be remembered in history as Tokyo Area’s worst war, the Third Kanto Battle.

AFTERWORD

When trying to accomplish something, I do not think it is futile to calculate how much effort it will take to arrive at the end. And most goals can be calculated with the equation: Talent × Environment × Effort. For example, if you assume that there is a value of a thousand required to reach the goal, then someone who has a ten in talent and environment, and a ten in effort, will be able to accomplish their goal (pass the bar exam, write a song using Vocaloid software, become an author, etc.) because 10 × 10 × 10 = 1,000. What I realized using this equation was you can't use inferior talent or environment as an excuse to abandon effort.

There are many people who brag about how they have no talent and then abandon effort, but I personally think that's not how it works. I think people who were not blessed in the areas of talent or environment need to put in a hundred times the effort of a genius or someone privileged. Even if the values of their talent and environment variables are only one, it is entirely possible to reach the goal with a thousand in effort. I often say that I'm a failure, but even so, I believe my strong desire to create the best is the only thing that determines the quality. I believed that, and I kept believing and believing until I was working so hard that I spit blood and continued to move forward and finally became an author, and I am somehow able to continue being an author.

When I met the author who wrote the cover review for this book, Reki Kawahara, and told him how excellent I thought his composition and writing, he shook his head furiously, denying it. It may sound presumptuous, but because I am also an author, no matter how humble the other person is, I can feel the mastery achieved after oozing blood by reading between the lines. I wanted to write about how happy I was that the review was written by someone who was a hard worker like me.

Everyone should also bless hard work. If you have a heart that earnestly believes and pushes forward, I'm sure your dreams will come true.

This time, too, I owe a lot to my managing editor, Mr. Kurosaki, the illustrator Saki Ukai who makes the main character look excessively cool, Reki Kawahara who wrote the review for the cover, and everyone else who was involved in the book, including everyone at the editorial department. Thank you all.

Finally, to my dear readers: In the next volume, we will start on the story of *that person* who was inserted occasionally in the subplot up until now. I hope you will look forward to the next volume as well. Thank you very much for buying this book. I pray that all of my readers will be blessed.

Shiden Kanzaki

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BLACK BULLET, Volume 3

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