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II



CLOCKWORK PLANET

From the bestselling author of *NO GAME, NO LIFE*



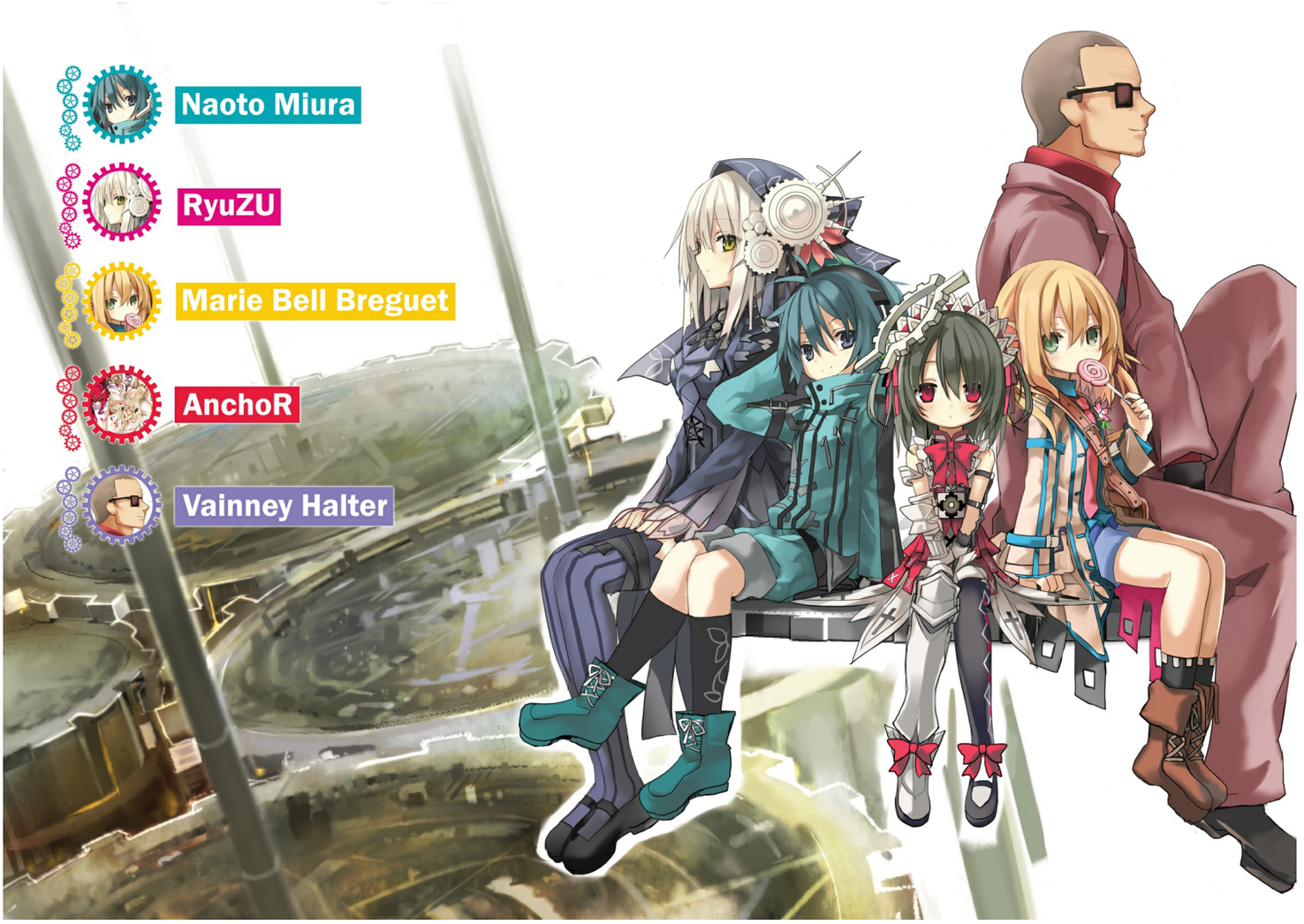
CLOCKWORK PLANET II

Yuu Kamiya & Tsubaki Himana

Illustration: **Sino**


"Ooh?! A swimsuit that suits you, you ask? —Gah, how difficult!"
Staring at the dressed-up mannequins behind the display window of a store next to the station, an idiot happily groaned.
"This one... Wait, actually—Somehow the swimsuit pales in comparison to the fine specimen it's intended to dress up! Shouldn't it be the other way around?! Am I supposed to pity it?!"
"It appears that such is the case, Master—In the first place, swimsuits are designed with consideration for those with disappointing figures so as to supplement those disappointing figures of theirs. When it comes to someone shaped as perfectly as myself, it is all the more difficult to find something worthy of adorning this body."


“——‘Mute Scream’——”
“——‘Bloody Murder’——”
Immediately after, the two legendary automata clashed.
RyuZU pinched up the hem of her skirt and curtsied, while AnchoR simply dropped down onto all fours upon the ground. Like a wedding vow and a cry of despair respectively, they spoke the most heretical, blasphemous words in this world:


Naoto Miura
RyuZU
Marie Bell Breguet
AnchoR
Vainney Halter

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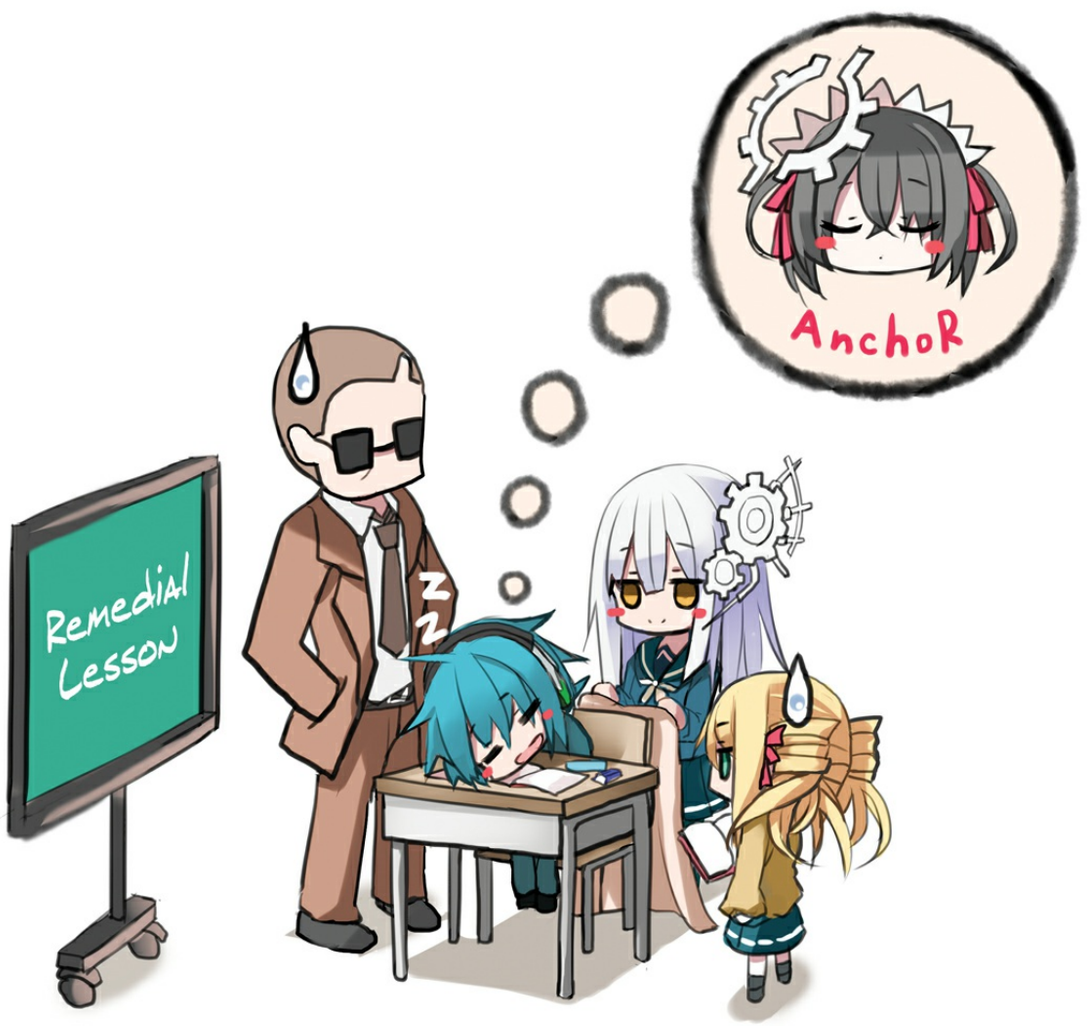
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There is nothing eternal in this universe.

This is a truth. It is a great, fundamental principle that will never change.

I'm not really talking about something abstract here, "If there's a beginning then there'll be an end."

Calling this simple fact a truth might be a bit over-the-top actually.

Just like how we're born meaninglessly and die worthlessly.

This universe too will fleetingly burn out someday.

While expanding at a speed faster than light, it'll consume an unfathomably enormous amount of energy to reach an ending referred to as the heat death of the universe. Contrary to what one might expect from the name, it's said that all of the greatly expanded universe will eventually approach absolute zero in temperature.

It's inevitable that we'll meet our demise someday. Whether it be Man or the universe, all changing things meet the same end. This is one of the fundamental roots of thermodynamics. It needs no proof, as it is a completely self-evident relationship of cause and effect.

—However, can't one think of it this way?

If it's true that nothing could possibly be eternal, then even that truth, itself, couldn't possibly last forever.

Most likely, that's what "he" thought.

Followed by:

"If that's the case, we only need to restore it."

—The world allows contradictions. All phenomena that seem subjectively inconsistent are nothing more than the result of two contradicting truths. The discipline we know as science is a scripture that continually updates its text by constantly adopting the newest conjectures—it's nothing but another form of religion. The real problem is on a whole other level: Our universe, itself, is actually completely illogical. At the very least, "he" thought the universe was incomplete, the study of physics flawed, which... *If that's the case, what harm*

could there be in me tampering with this absurdly enormous base mechanism and turning it into a completely different moving part?

For example, just by doing that, wouldn't this universe continue to uneventfully turn on a set of physical laws completely different from the current ones, like how non-Euclidean geometry was established without any contradictions?

There were many who mused of such things throughout history. Yet, unbelievably, what brought those musings into reality was just a single person who was stupidly talented.

His name was "Y."

The Earth had reached the end of its lifespan and was about to succumb to heat death. He was the aberrant genius who had recreated the planet with only gears on a world stage. The ultimate clocksmith who had created this Clockwork Planet. With a joke of a theory he had accomplished a feat so prodigious that nothing before or after could match its greatness. It was a legend that couldn't even become a myth, it was simply too unrealistic. However, reality wouldn't let one deny it. The Earth, which had died, was still being kept alive by gears even now: Click, clack, click, clack—like turning the hand of a clock. A thousand years after...

Prologue -- *:* -- Sweeper

(...This cigarette tastes terrible.)

Squinting his mechanical eyes, he shriveled his lips. Even in the dark, the unlit room appeared as bright as day to him thanks to the light-catching function of his artificial eye. Gazing at the flame of his cigarette, which was particularly brilliant, he quietly exhaled the smoke.

He was a man in the prime of life. Possibly thirty—at least, that's how old his cyborg body looked. It was a power-type body that had a thick skeletal frame jam-packed with muscle gears over which he was wearing a black rubber suit made of synthetic resins. His name was Vermouth. It wasn't his real name—just a code name. He was a covert operative who belonged to a certain corporation. A man who had screwed up in his youth and lost both his human body and his upright way of life.

"..."

He exhaled a breath mingled with purple smoke. If Vermouth were to abide by the tenets of being a spy, he wouldn't be smoking cigarettes during an operation. Not only does a cigarette's flame stand out in the dark, it leaves behind a scent too. As for any health concerns, in Vermouth's case, there wouldn't be an issue.

Ignoring the risks, Vermouth puffed away because that was his jinx. He had silently lit his cigarette, inhaled its smoke deeply, and savored its release. He then ascertained the taste of his cigarette with a body that was crammed full of gears. Vermouth divined his fortune by its flavor. *It tasted terrible.*

"...Amaretto. I don't remember waiting here until morning being our job." Where his eyes which could pierce the darkness fell, there was a silhouette crouching by a steel door.

"Could you not rush things so much, Vermouth-**senpai**?" Amaretto's voice was sarcastic. He was a slender young man who was also wearing a black

rubber suit. Because of it, the only part of him that was revealed by a nearby light gear's white glow was his face. Without turning around, he talked as he continued working with countless tools in his hands. "It takes time to make this frigid padlock moan. Premature ejaculators aren't sexy, you know."

"This cigarette tastes terrible, Amaretto." Snorting, Vermouth shook his large body. "When my cigarette tastes bad, more often than not, our feet have already caught fire. If we don't hurry and finish this, we'll end up with muzzles shoved up our asses."

"...I just don't get it, Vermouth-senpai, what meaning is there in a full-body cyborg like you to smoking cigarettes? It's not like you can taste the things, am I wrong?"

"Are you an idiot, or am I the idiot for leaving my back to an idiot like you? Cigarettes aren't savored by the tongue, they're something you experience with a man's spirit. That guy's a virgin geezer who sold his soul to the gods; he's not a ma—"

—Immediately after, Vermouth, who had abruptly shut up midsentence, drew his gun from his waist faster than the blink of an eye. There was no way one could tell that he had just been bantering from his stone-cold face. His gaze was sharp as he pointed his gun precisely at the ceiling. In that instant, Amaretto placed his back against the wall and drew his gun as well. Amaretto hadn't sensed anything, however. Vermouth, **his senior**, had done so, and that was enough of a reason for him to do the same.

There was no room for doubt. The two of them stared vigilantly through the darkness as they readied themselves for a battle that could break out at any moment. And then— *Snap*. A sound came from a duct near the corner of the ceiling. No sooner had the mesh lid of the duct come off when a woman poked her face out. She was a female cyborg with short, silver hair wearing a black rubber suit, the same as them.

Vermouth let out a sigh as he lowered his gun. Amaretto grabbed hold of the steel door's padlock and resumed working. By now, the woman had descended onto the floor with movements as slippery as squeezing out fresh cream from a piping bag.

“How was it, Strega?”

“Ain’t good. As expected, the space ’yond this door is isolat’d.” While brushing off dust from her rubber suit, the woman, Strega, answered. “Its walls’re on the level of a nuclear bunker. Even the sonar device couldn’t produce a’proper image of the interior. I tried gettin’ in through the ducts, but even its ventilation system’s separate from the rest of the building. Forget a mouse, evena’ fly wouldn’t be able to get inside.”

“Hmm,” Vermouth nodded.

Strega continued, “They must’ve somethin’ they really want to keep hidden here. This security ain’t somethin’ made on a whim for show. Very least, I can’t see it bein’ just a regular factory. —Well, that’s why we’re here right?”

“Another fishy job huh, god damn it... no wonder my cigarette tastes like shit.”

Their mission was to investigate a certain ammunitions factory. Factories of unknown affiliation with a dummy corporation aren’t rare. When considering the Five Great Corporations’s holdings, these factories are a dime a dozen. However, a factory that easily consumed the power and resources of an entire city was a different matter. Under whose orders was it built? What was being made there? For what purpose? They had to confirm what was inside by any means necessary.

This job wasn’t only for the sake of the interests of their corporate employers. It was necessary for maintaining a robust emergency management and security protocol in line with their everyday duties. Using camouflaged short-distance resonance gears, the three of them conversed through encrypted transmission signals.

“On the surface, it’s a major factory that the military had disposed of through sale... yet when we actually came here, it turned out to be guarded by a PMC with a security system on the level of a central reserve bank. We haven’t been able to grasp even a bit of its background, even after infiltrating this deep. I get that it’s something big, but you’ve gotta be kidding me.” Sending that message, Vermouth lit his second cigarette.

“...Only ones who could’ve made a facility like this are the Five Great

Corporations and the military."

"Yeah, given that it can't be our family considering they're the ones who sent us here."

"The one I'm seein' the most likely to do somethin' like this is the Vacherons, but..." Strega muttered suspiciously.

"Do they really have that kind of time right now? They've just taken a blow from the Breguet princess and are bleeding out their asses, you know?" Amaretto replied.

"Its'a true then? That crazy rumor that the Breguet princess is actually 'live and been the one exposin' the dirty secrets of the Vacherons, the military, and Meister Guild to the public?"

"If nothing else, she's undoubtedly officially dead on record." Shrugging, Vermouth continued, "They even held a company funeral you know. I was there too, having casually slipped in. It was a touching ceremony with eulogies that got tears out of the president and the first daughter. They couldn't possibly say, 'We made a mistake,' at this point."

"G'ess that means that they can't complain if someone up'n kills her a 'second' time, then. She's ain't long for this world."

"That's not necessarily true," Amaretto butted in, "There's no evidence that Marie Bell Breguet was involved in that terrorist information leak. Well, that's obvious, since she was already 'dead' by then."

"How's that related to anythin'?" Strega said, pouting, "Yer makin' no sense. Circumstantial evidence's plenty for those in our line of business."

"Of course, she's guilty. The problem doesn't lie there. That she managed to do all that without leaving behind any evidence—that's what's important."

"...Whaddya mean?"

"She pulled off that stunt as a ghost. That by itself suggests that it's highly likely that she's still deeply connected to and receiving support from her home—the Breguet Corporation." Vermouth kindly elaborated for Strega, "If you kill her, that would automatically make you an enemy of the Breguets. Even if they

can’t protest publicly—no, in fact, that just makes things all the more dangerous.”

“Made an enemy? Aren’t they the ones askin’ for a fight?”

“That’s not necessarily true. The incident at Kyoto may have been instigated by the Vacherons and the military—but the remaining three corporations, in essence, endorsed them with their silence. As we were unable to stop them, we’re just as guilty.”

“Ya sayin’ that that was all within the realm of retribution? Ev’n if that’s the case, didn’t they go too far?”

“It’s true that such a thing was unprecedented. Because of it, many of the bigwigs involved were forced to step down, yes... but at the same time, that means that the classified information that was revealed was only worth that much.”

“Only that much ya say...?” Strega widened her eyes.

Amaretto explained, “The truly classified information that would destroy those organizations by their roots was not revealed. If it were, society would topple over. What was exposed were only ‘open secrets,’ so to speak.”

“...Isn’t that all they knew?”

“Could be true,” Vermouth said as he exhaled, “But it could be false too. What if they **purposefully ended the information leak where they did**—in other words, what if that was nothing but a warning?”

Amaretto nodded with a bitter smile, “I wouldn’t want to provoke a princess who raises that kind of hell just from having her butt felt up a little.”

Strega cast a cold gaze onto Amaretto. “It’da be good for the world if ya were stabbed just once.”

“Enough chatter, open it up already.”

“Yes, yes—it’s open now. Thank you for your patience,” Amaretto replied with his natural voice.

Kachong. A heavy sound rang out as the steel door slowly slid open.

“Alright, wake Sambuca up. We’re breaking in.”

After Vermouth wound the spring of the support-type automaton sleeping in the corner of the room to start him up, they advanced into the depths beyond the thick door.

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And then, they saw something they shouldn’t have.

“—You can’t be serious,” Vermouth gasped with a dry voice, “Wh... What is this? Are they insane...?” Vermouth shook his head, the information his eyes were feeding him was simply too unbelievable. In conclusion, the gigantic vault that they had gone through the trouble to open was empty. The manufacturing area was a large empty space.

Had it already fulfilled its purpose? Countless tools and equipment, including gigantic cranes and ladders that must have been used to make something, looked lonely having been abandoned in what seemed like a hurry. They snuck past that emptied manufacturing area to where, deep in the back, there was what appeared to be a research office lined with bundles of documents and computers. In other words, the information that had been left behind. Reading only a small portion of it was enough to make them shiver.

Amaretto spoke, being the first one to regain his composure, “...If all of this is true, the sacrifices won’t end with just one or two cities.” In the worst case, this Clockwork Planet itself could be— “In any case, let’s make some copies and get out of here, Vermouth-senpai. We can study the information all we want after. What’s more important right now is to bring this information back without a hiccup. Otherwise...” ——It may have simply been that by witnessing such dangerous information Amaretto was able to promptly assess that this case was beyond them, but— Just as Vermouth and Strega, who had come to their senses upon those words, were about to take pictures of the documents, the three cyborgs felt something.

“———?!” It was an illusion of a sensation that shouldn’t have been possible to experience with their bodies that were covered in artificial skin. There was no other way to describe it—**they felt goosebumps.** In another word, terror froze the bodies of the three veteran spies. They felt a presence. Outside the

room, in the thick darkness, “something” was definitely there. It was small, so small, and yet—**it had the scent of extraordinary violence.** Without uttering a word, the three of them immediately scattered. They looked like they were on the run from something from how desperate they were to hide themselves in the shadows of the room. Without even having agreed on it beforehand, they all drew their Coil Spears instead of their guns.

Coil Spear—a bayonet that is able to vibrate at ultrahigh frequencies. Able to change into a pistol, a shotgun, or a grenade launcher with just a swing of the arm, Coil Spears are the best weapon a single person can carry in terms of both adaptability and firepower. If one mastered its use, a person would be able to fight against both human soldiers and automata. For the three of them who were combat cyborgs, it was an armament—a multifaceted weapons system—that would allow them to challenge just about any enemy, even if that enemy was a heavily-armored automaton. However, being the product of cutting-edge clockwork technology, it couldn’t be manufactured by any entity other than the Five Great Corporations. As such, there was a risk that their affiliations could be readily exposed due to the differences in company technology.

For those whose most important job was to remain undercover, simply having to use it meant that they had failed their mission. Even so, they had decided to use their Coil Spears without a moment’s hesitation. There was only one exceptional case in the mission regulations they operated under that would authorize a Coil Spear’s use. When returning alive without its usage had become hopeless, and furthermore, when there was a significant reason to prioritize survival over death. Being pros, the three of them determined that this situation fit the bill.

No, that’s just an excuse. Vermouth laughed wryly in his mind as he acknowledged his own shaking hands. The fact is, whoever was outside the room, had made them, three combat cyborgs, draw their most powerful weapon—from fear. Vermouth analyzed the situation with his artificial body’s light and sound focusing functions.

...This room is cramped. We’re in a room that lies deep in the facility. There’s only one exit. The owner of the presence is standing still outside the door. She’s —alone. If we throw Sambuca at the enemy to buy time, it should be possible to

forcefully break through even in a worst case scenario.

The support-type automaton that accompanied them, Sambuca. At first glance, it looked like an ultralight-armored automaton. The parts it was using—to conceal its affiliation—were civilian goods they had procured from the local area. Notwithstanding, having been modded by the three of them who were Geselles, its performance capabilities were powerful enough to fight against even a military automaton. In his head, Vermouth went through the escape plan that they had put together for this kind of situation before they had stepped into the room. With no need for words nor transmissions, the three exchanged glances and nodded.

Rattle. The door made a small sound as it was opened. Vermouth stuck his head out from the shadows to visually confirm the enemy and execute the plan ——however... upon seeing the enemy, his thoughts froze for a moment. The owner of the presence they had sensed standing in front of the opened door. The one who had pierced their hearts with unspeakable terror was—

...A, child—!? It was an automaton. One with the form of a young girl whose coquettish body was just like that of a prized doll. Her dainty arms and legs were covered with an ominous looking gigantic chain of plates that gave the impression of both armor and, strangely enough, restraints. Her hair that fell all the way down to her feet was as deep a red as blood, and an ominous mask covered her young, innocent face. Through her mask—their gazes met. Vermouth felt it. His intuition screamed at him to discard the plan and eliminate the enemy in front of him immediately.

“—Sambuca! Execute Code D3! Stop that thing!!”

Code D3—restrain the current target even if it means self-destruction. To that order, Sambuca rushed forward without a sound. He was a support automaton that ran on silent mechanisms—originally, he hadn’t been designed for direct combat. However, if he grappled the target, he could at least keep her from moving momentarily. Just a second would be enough. If Sambuca could restrain the enemy’s movement, then the other three could turn them both into swiss cheese with the focus fire from their Coil Spears. —However.



The automaton with the form of a little girl. Her cube made up of black solid gears—twisted.

Like a towel being wrung, the cube rippled as it transformed into two cones with a brief sonorous charging sound. That moment, faster than their cyborg sensors could detect that brief hum, Sambuca's body that had been grappling the masked automaton girl—**vanished along with a part of the floor.** "—Hah?" One of them let out a dumbfounded voice. The masked girl silently glanced at the faces of the remaining three. Seeing her nonchalant, inorganically cold gaze, Vermouth understood.

—*We can't win.* With a shiver, he acknowledged that fact. "—Tch. Break the walls!" He shouted fiercely to the other two without turning around. If there was an enemy that couldn't be broken through blocking the one and only entrance, then there was no choice but to increase the number of exits.

"I'll hold'er back! Gimme cover!" Strega booted up her double-speed gear. Emerging from the shadows, she kicked off against the wall and then the ceiling in a flash as she wielded her Coil Spear as a blade. The blade vibrating at ultra-high frequencies was sharp enough to easily cut through standard building materials. If she diced the ceiling, the rubble that would fall could easily be used as cover. Furthermore, they might be able to escape through the opening. In any case, she could buy them time.

Vermouth, who instantly recognized Strega's intention, pointed his Coil Spear at the automaton girl and prepared to shoot. The shells he chose were armor-piercing, high-carbon steel grenades. With these, he should be able to provide a barrage of cover fire while Amaretto blasted one of the side walls with hi-power explosives. —If a hole opened up, they should be able to escape from there as well. That would have been the plan, if, upon loading the shell into his Coil Spear, Amaretto's entire upper body hadn't been vaporized without leaving behind a single strand of dust.

"—!?"

"Yer kiddin' me..."

The floating cube made of black gears that followed the girl twisted into cones and began to hum once more. This time, it was Strega who exploded into

scrap iron mid-air alongside a thunderous roar.

—What the hell is going on—!? Vermouth's reason screamed. Both Amaretto and Strega were cyborgs with bodies that were armed with the latest technologies without question. So much so, that just like the use of their Coil Spears, dying and leaving behind their bodies was itself a forbidden action. But, that was no cause for concern—both of Vermouth's allies had been **annihilated** without a trace. Even if the enemy was a heavily-armored automaton, she shouldn't have been able to render them so overwhelmingly helpless. However, no matter his protests, the reality of Vermouth's situation wouldn't change. And, ironically enough, the presence of this unbelievable monster would explain everything.

The concealed nature of this facility and the gravity of the information they had just witnessed. The security of the premise left to a measly PMC that was **all too weak.** And then, out of nowhere, this demon...

There was no longer any room for doubt. What was this place? The answer was simple—it was Hell.

There's no doubt...! The silent operation that rendered their detection capabilities useless. The overwhelming firepower that dominated them to the point of absurdity. The automaton with the form of a young girl that shouldn't have existed, the enemy that stood before his eyes... this god of death was——
"Tch! You must be one of the InitialY Series...!!"

The enemy didn't respond. Without even taking a stance, the girl focused her mineral gaze onto Vermouth.

—I'm gonna die. Trusting his screaming instincts, Vermouth immediately hit the ground. Above his head, an unknown blast eroded everything in its way as it shot right over him. His left arm, failing to get out of the way in time, was taken by this unperceivable attack. He ignored the screaming signals that reported the damage to his brain.

After adjusting his posture to compensate for the missing weight of his left arm, Vermouth kicked off the floor. He swung his Coil Spear, and the loaded grenades were changed to something else. He fired. An anchor shot out and pierced into the wall, and for an instant, there was a roar of gears turning at

high speed. A cloud of dust emerged from the portion of the wall that crumbled from the ultra-high frequency vibrations. Vermouth barely managed to leap into the opening before the second attack from the girl vaporized the space where he had just been.

●

—Think.

Vermouth continued to flee while just barely evading the brunt of the incoming attacks from the god of death that was in pursuit. Every time a blast came, he would try to react as he lost yet another piece of his body. That Vermouth had been able to survive up to this point was thanks to his intuition. He had discarded the information his sensory devices fed him and ignored all tactical theory. If his instinct told him to dodge, he would dodge; if it told him to run, he would run. He had managed to somehow preserve his life for a little over five minutes by doing so. One could call it a miracle. However, that too was about to end.

The room that Vermouth had just dived into was a dead-end with nowhere to hide. Moreover, everything below his right knee had been vaporized by a blast he couldn't fully escape when he had thrown himself into the room. Vermouth's honed instinct was useless if he couldn't run. He had lost his Coil Spear too. The only equipment he had left was a hand grenade that wouldn't even scratch his enemy with a direct hit.

Contrary to his body that seemed hot enough to catch fire, his reason was thoroughly cold and clear. He silently concluded, that given that things had reached this point, his death was inevitable. To begin with, this life of his had already gone awry ever since he screwed up twenty years ago. Today just so happened to be the day he screwed up again, nothing more. An idiot who should have died twenty years ago would finally kick the bucket. That was all. It was nothing worth fussing over. The problem was...

"Obediently handing my life over to the reaper like this... no matter how I think about it, it grates on my nerves—damn it!" Footsteps sounded. Mixed among the damage reports flooding his brain was the sound of his death slowly approaching. It announced the god of death who had destroyed his two

colleagues like they were nothing.

"—Haaaah." Fetching a cigarette with his hand that was missing fingers, Vermouth gently lit it—such was his job. Neither Amaretto nor Strega were really his friends. In the first place, he didn't even know their real names. What colors they liked, what kind of music they listened to, their family, friends, and lovers, if any—he knew none of it. He had never asked about their past and frankly, he didn't care. After all, even without asking, he was sure that they were scum just like him. Vermouth had no reason, whether it be out of duty or friendship, to mourn their deaths.

—However, what **they** are trying to do... now that he knew, Vermouth felt a long forgotten zeal. It wasn't due to a sense of justice. It wasn't that he was moved by a cheap sense of humanism, nor was it that he was attempting to accomplish his job out of a spy's respect for his profession. It was due to a simple and pure, primitive emotion that came from his gut—

"...Kicking the bucket without being able to even deal one blow to that damn monster..."

"—Really pisses me off..."

That emotion, was the petty pride of the man known as Vermouth.

"Think...!" Vermouth groaned as he exhaled harshly spewing out smoke.

There was no meaning in facing off against that monster. He had neither the skill nor the power to do so. The most he could possibly do to give that monster a hard time would be to get the information he had in his hands outside by any means necessary. So, the problem was—how?

He didn't hope to return alive, nor did he care about the exposure of his background. Compared to the weight of this information, such things were as important as paper scraps. Before all else. At any cost. He had to tell someone about what had happened here. That was enough for him. "That's right. I won't hope for anything else, so...!"

Think. How can I contact the outside world from here?

This manufacturing area is completely isolated from the outside world. We couldn't even find a single communications room even though we made a sweep

through this entire area. There's no way to contact someone outside through a communication line. If there was a way to contact someone, it would have to be by sending a simple message somewhere with the primitive telegraph device that my body is equipped with. But what point would there be in doing something like that? What kind of crackpot would kindly pick out some sort of meaning from a such random message?

".....Pft, bwahahahaha!" Vermouth burst out laughing at his own idea.

—Someone like that does exist.

There was just one person he knew that would care about such a meaningless message, someone whose actions no one else could predict. The smartest, biggest fool, on the planet. Vermouth stifled his laughter and tuned the frequency of his telegraph device. As for where he addressed his message—"The only ones who could do something about this insane plot are those equally crazy guys." If it's her. If it's that princess who dealt a mighty blow to the evil in this world, then maybe...! The footsteps stopped. Inevitability was standing right before his eyes. However, Vermouth's heart was strangely peaceful.

There's no problem. I've done what I could. I can leave the rest to those who come after.

With this, our deaths won't be in...

"—Hmph." He became aware of a certain thought that had arisen in the back of his mind unnoticed. It was something that Vermouth hadn't yearned for or felt in a very long time. That the efforts of someone like him—**would be rewarded.** It was an innocent desire that he had left behind him somewhere, in a time that he could no longer remember...

"What a mess I am..." Scoffing at his surprising naivety in his final hour, Vermouth cracked a bitter smile. He puffed on the cigarette in his mouth.

I've borne the ill will of many people up till now, but I've never thought anything of it. I've always thought that that's just the way things are, and that's why the world's shit. But, I think I get it now. In this world, there are truly, truly evil scum that can't be forgiven even if they pay with their lives.

He didn't come to this conclusion from some sort of fastidious reasoning, nor

did he arrive at a juvenile sense of justice. It was something simpler, a hot emotion that boiled up from the bottom of his gut. He just didn't like this. It pissed him off down to his very core. So, if there was a way to hinder this monster, even just a little...

...What kind of idiot wouldn't take revenge? If, in return for our lives, we can expose this nauseating scheme, then I say we blow every last bit of it to hell—!

As Vermouth breathed in the ample smoke, for a moment, he mistakenly thought he could taste it, but that shouldn't have been possible.

"...Ahh," Vermouth sneered. "How delicious... Hahah... watch and see what happens, you bastards."

Before he could exhale the smoke, Vermouth's body was annihilated along with the space it had once occupied.

●

...I'm getting sleepy. The girl thought while her mind was covered in a dense fog. She could faintly tell that she was in a dreamlike state. She knew that she was forgetting something important, but she couldn't gather her thoughts. Her footing felt soft and somehow unstable, her eyelids were beginning to droop...

"Hmm... A short-wave transmission sent by a telegraph, huh."

She could hear the voices of human men, though she couldn't tell who they were. Beyond the fog of her mind were voices that she felt like she had heard somewhere before, but she was unsure...

"I can't imagine anything important was sent with something like this, but... I can't help wondering which organization these rats belonged to."

"She erased them, after all. I don't think there's any hope in identifying their bodies."

"Being unable to hold back is her flaw... but well, the deftness of their infiltration coupled with the professionalism they showed in paying for this information with their lives, those are sort of like dog tags in and of themselves."

"The Audemars? Or the Breguets? ...In any case, they're directly affiliated

with one of the two, surely."

"Is the transmission that was sent traceable?"

"I'm already on it. Though, I can't imagine that they would lead us to their employer..."

...How boring. Quickly losing interest in the men's conversation, the girl became dejected. She hated complicated discussions. She didn't like coldhearted schemes or scary stories either.*—Crushing, breaking, smashing, jumbling, and cleaning up?—* The girl couldn't understand the fun in such things at all. *Could it be,* she thought. *That these people are huge dummies? Even though there are any number of fun things to do, they're always talking about the same boring, meaningless trifles.—Singing, dancing, playing, laughing, and cleaning up—* Why didn't they do those things instead? The girl couldn't understand it one bit. No matter who or what time of day—doing fun things should be permissible.

"AnchoR." The man called her by name. Upon the girl—AnchoR—raising her gaze, the man smiled, "You did well. That was a magnificent victory. You must have worked hard."

...Victory? AnchoR tilted her head. In her mind, at least. In reality, she simply continued looking up at the man's face without batting a single eyelash. *As I thought, this person really is just a dummy, isn't he? Calling mere clean-up a victory—is that why he's boring? —Or is he like this—**because**—he's boring?*

"We'll take care of the rest. You can return to base first and receive maintenance."

AnchoR nodded silently while being unable to come up with the answers to the two questions whirling inside her head. *I suppose it doesn't matter...*

The Fourth of the InitialY Series—AnchoR, "the One Who Destroys." As she turned to make her exit, the eternal, indestructible, and strongest automaton's consciousness sank into a daze once more.

Chapter One *14 : 30* Goober

Life is something worthless, however, it isn't meaningless.

I'm sure there are objections to this statement and even rebuttals—but regardless, this is a truth that no one, not even God, can deny. After all, even if one's worth is something acknowledged by others, the meaning of one's life is something determined by the self. That's why everyone lives out their lives trying to find their own meaning in having been born. We all try to do so, more or less, in our own way. Because I'm sure that everyone knows that *that* is where true happiness lies. Even if one is poor, or orphaned, or homeless, or one's looks or brains left more to be desired... finding meaning in having been born, acknowledging it, and living life for the sake of that answer is surely the greatest happiness one can achieve in the world. Naoto Miura was certain of that, because he had found that meaning for himself.

As such... "I'm sure you understand what one should do when he has discovered his calling," Naoto Miura said as he made a fist and dug his two feet firmly into the ground. In spite of his scrawny body, Naoto's chest was puffed up with determination. That's right, Naoto knew the meaning behind his birth. What he was willing to die for. He already possessed a destiny worth betting his life on at this critical juncture in his youth.

"If you're human... no, if you're a man!" Naoto's gray eyes lit up feverishly—"If a man hears that there's a super cute automaton girl somewhere, then whether she's at the North Pole or Mar de Ajó, no, even if she's on the other side of the universe! To dash to her at full speed would be his manly duty—no! It would be his fate!" He shouted as he thrust his fist upwards. As if overpowered by Naoto's energy, the man closing in on his golden years standing before Naoto nodded slightly.

"...And so?"

"Right! As such, I'm announcing that I'll be absent from school for a wee bit due to personal circumstances compelling me to charge towards Tokyo." Just

like that, Naoto Miura presented his leave of absence form with a face full of smiles.

In response, his homeroom teacher beamed. “Ah, I know what you are, Mr. Naoto Miura.” The old teacher thrust a different sheet of paper in front of Naoto’s eyes. It was a white sheet of scrap paper with a “0” written in red ink, Naoto’s answer sheet. “You’re an idiot aren’t you?” Seeing Naoto’s smile freeze, the homeroom teacher continued cheerfully. “Just shut up and take your supplementary lessons. If you fail again on the follow-up test then forget a leave of absence, I’ll make you fill out a withdrawal form, and while I’m at it, I’ll introduce you to a good brain surgeon too. Got it?”

And so Naoto Miura’s grand destiny, and the profound resolve to fulfill his life’s purpose, were both crushed mercilessly without any further room for discussion.

Naoto had no other choice.

There was an anomaly in Tokyo.

It’d been confirmed that RyuZU’s little sister—another InitialY Series—was there as well. Naoto had immediately resolved himself to depart for Tokyo upon learning of that information, but—while being gazed at with glistening eyes by the girl who was his everything...

“Master Naoto, if you manage to fall to an even lower social rung, even if nothing about you has actually changed, you will at long last be branded as less than an amoeba by society. As my master, I would greatly appreciate it if you could do your best to avoid becoming so pitiful that I would no longer be able to look you in the eyes.”

—The girl’s smile that let Naoto know that she harbored not even a bit of malice.

—Her heartbeat that let Naoto know that she was simply worried for him.

It really was intended to be a well-intentioned lecture, only any hint of the girl’s kindness had been pruned by her active abusive verbal filter.

Seeing the automaton worry lovingly for him—Naoto simply had no choice to begin with— “And thus, the history of human warfare ended a thousand years

ago.” The bland voice of the history teacher was the only thing ringing in the nearly empty classroom.

“The Earth had been mechanized with an exceedingly advanced technology and humanity was not foolish enough to engage in warfare while atop what was essentially as delicate an instrument as a finely tuned clock. So, eventually an international treaty limiting the military force of all nations to only the amount necessary for the defense of its municipal grids was signed. Furthermore, the public use of older technology, which stands out among the things that threaten the survival of humanity today—in particular, the kind known as electromagnetic technology—was nearly entirely ban—”

The teacher continued the lecture by simply reading aloud the contents of the textbook and jotting down some key points on the blackboard every now and then. While propping up his chin with one hand and looking bored, Naoto asked the silver-haired girl sitting next to him, “Hey, RyuZU. What’s ‘electromagnetic technology’?”

“Long ago, humanity in its greatness tried to understand the unknown with their childish brains. Electromagnetic technology is the remnants of that effort.” The girl who was asked—RyuZU—answered Naoto, deepening her bewitching smile. Her voice, high and clear like that of a music box, rang clearly inside the classroom.

“There is likely nothing wrong in calling it a futile pile of labor that even monkeys would sneer at. In the modern day, such things are just worthless antiques of little significance. Considering the capacity of Master Naoto’s brain, learning about electromagnetic technology would simply squander the little resources in memory that you have left.”

“Ah— In other words, it wouldn’t be a problem in the slightest if I didn’t know about it?”

“It’s nothing that an elite like you would need to be expressly informed about on a day off, Master.” RyuZU answered with a blooming smile that would put even a flower to shame. Her eyes, however, were filled with malice—it was as if they were a pair of knives at the ready to murder some hated enemy.

Prickled by RyuZU’s sharp gaze, the teacher continued in a trembling voice,

“T, This is mandatory knowledge that is taught in elementary school you know! B, Because electromagnetic force causes gears to become misaligned—excluding the ‘planet governor,’ the magnetic field deployed from the North and South Poles to protect the Earth from solar radiation—its use and research has been completely banned.”

“Did you hear that, Master? The teacher has just courteously informed us that in the end, all he knows how to do is regurgitate what he has memorized from the textbook.”

The teacher trembled with a start at RyuZU’s immediate snarky response. Naoto tilted his head looking perplexed. “Why do you say that?”

“If both the use and research on electromagnetism were banned, then there is no way that he actually learned about it. In the first place, everything he has said for some time now has been, word for word, the text in the textbook. Are modern lectures just a public recital? I must say, if that is the case, then lectures are nothing but a waste of time. It would be more efficient to read the textbook by oneself at home.”

“Well... yeah, but if it weren’t for lectures, I wouldn’t learn anything. I never study on my own,” Naoto muttered as he sighed.

However, RyuZU deliberately folded her arms. “To begin with, just who was it that committed this act of utmost insolence by summoning *my* Master Naoto to school on the weekend? Would it be that venerable pig over there fat and ready for the slaughter? This swine who has only been equipped with a textbook recital function?”

The teacher’s face stiffened intensely from RyuZU’s sharp tongue. Naoto covered for the teacher while letting out a bitter sigh, “...You’ve got it wrong, RyuZU. It’s my fault for being so on the verge of failing this class that I have to take remedial lessons.”

“I see.” RyuZU made a big, theatrical nod—it was in such a humanesque way that, for a moment, even Naoto forgot that she was an automaton. RyuZU continued with an unchanging smile, “In that case, who could be the person who judged that my Master Naoto would fail? Where is the self-alleged all-knowing and almighty person who is in reality at the apex of incompetence?

Surely it is not that person over there whose regrettable head has been left wanting in terms of both brain and hair?”

Seeing the teacher tremble all over with a sidelong glance, Naoto shook his head, “...No, RyuZU, the reason he said I would fail the class is because I failed the final exam.”

“I see. In that case, which monkey was it that came up with the blasphemous test questions that made *my* Master Naoto fail? Could it be that baboon at the podium who is trembling for some strange reason? The one who is so apparently adequate down there that he exchanged *pleasantries* with his neighbor’s wife last night?”

“W—W-W-Why do you know that?!—Er, no, wait! That’s not what I meant!” the teacher, who had clearly become flustered, shouted with tears in his eyes, “I’m simply trying to fulfill my duties as a teacher! It’s not like I have it any better; I’m working on a weekend just for Naoto you know! Can’t you have some consideration for this futile endeavor that I’m obligated to attempt as well, RyuZU?”

However, RyuZU continued smiling despite the teacher’s pained appeal. “Yes. Receiving a lecture from a flea is surely a waste of time, so I have been politely *requesting* with the utmost discretion and sincerity that you let Master Naoto go home accordingly, but... it appears that you will not understand unless I speak in a flea’s language.”

—Indeed, in the first place, there was no way that RyuZU would accept these remedial lessons that were set up on the assumption that Naoto would likely have to repeat a year. Thus—already on the second day after the lessons started, she showered the teacher with abuse that endlessly chipped away at his ego.

RyuZU was completely unaware of her words herself; what she spoke was simply the result of her properly functioning abusive verbal filter. As such, she wasn’t trying to be rude. In her mind, she really was making a polite and courteous request with full sincerity. However, there was no way that anyone aside from Naoto, who could hear her operational sounds, could understand that.

Thanks to the artistic vituperation that RyuZU had mercilessly spewed out throughout the remedial lessons, the spirit of the teacher who had endured it until now was about to collapse. *I've done my best up to now, so it's fine if I just end it all here, right*— Just as the teacher's heart and knees finally began to fold...

ding dong dang dong...

The school bell rang.

"I, I've had enough—enough I tell you! Mr. Naoto Miura! Tomorrow's Sunday so the next remedial lesson will be on Monday. From Monday onwards the teacher will be that of a different subject, so show up with that in mind! Principaaaaaaaaaal! I'll haaaaaaaaaave you know that I'm going to apply for overtime pay and mental therapy for work-related injuries!!!"

Seeing the teacher run out of the classroom shouting, Naoto looked up at the ceiling—meanwhile, RyuZU, unaware of her own wicked tongue, simply tilted her head looking puzzled.

"Has he finally become aware of his own imbecility and resolved himself to visit a hospital for treatment? Though his intellect is less than that of a flea, if he learns some modesty now after having become aware of that fact, I feel I can respect him for his self-reflection."

"...Right, what should I say. Make sure to apologize to him so that his anger at being unduly abused isn't directed at me, alright?" Naoto held his head in his hands as he left the school with RyuZU.

I guess I should come up with some countermeasures before the new victim shows up on Monday...

●

Marie Bell Breguet had no experience of going to school.

—Well, to say that would be a little misleading. After all, she had graduated valedictorian from several prestigious universities overseas. Even so, if we're talking about how things felt to Marie, who was attending Tadasunomori High School in Kyoto—this was her first day of school.

As the daughter of the president of the Breguet Corporation, one of the Five Great Corporations that rule the world economy, Marie had been given the supreme educational environment fitting for her enormous potential. A wealth of talented tutors. An abundance of funds. The very best equipment. For a person like Marie, what reason could she have for going to school?

Even the greatest educational institution in the world couldn't hope to match the Breguet family's educational environment. As such, the reason that Marie entered college was neither to study nor to do research. It wasn't even to expand her social network, something that being the daughter of a respected family demanded. It was for proof.

—Something that would make the talent and capability of the young girl called Marie Bell Breguet obvious at a glance.

Everything had been for that cause. As such, from Marie's perspective, she couldn't say that she had ever gone to school. She had simply spent a bit of time taking the necessary exams to acquire a few certifications. That was all it had been.

Her mentality hadn't been much different from that of a job-hunting graduate filling in the qualifications section on an application.

On the other hand, here, at Tadasunomori High School, how the educational environment could compare goes without saying—the level of the teachers and the students were child's play compared to their counterparts at the universities that Marie had graduated from.

There was absolutely nothing that Marie had to learn from here after all her experiences working on the front lines as a Meister, not even as an independent study of society—

—However, in spite of that considerable gap, there was something that Marie had just borne witness to for the first time. That something was— "I see now that a failing mark is a real thing..." Marie muttered earnestly with a maccha dumpling in her mouth.

Halter looked down at the girl who had abruptly said such a thing with an indescribable gaze.

She had brilliant golden hair and pale, ethereal skin. She was as beautiful as a porcelain doll, but a powerful will resided in the dazzling emerald pupils showing from her eyes that squinted in annoyed disbelief. She was wearing a standard middy uniform with an orange parka... Despite that, the girl exuded an air of such class—and ardor—that her outfit did nothing to mask her regal aura.

Halter asked in a suspicious tone, “...Just for the record, you really didn’t know?”

“I knew of the phrase, but I thought it was more of a theoretical kind of thing. I didn’t think that it actually applied in practice.”

“Well, given that there’re tests and those tests are graded, there’ll be some students that fail too.”

“That’s what’s so confusing.”

“Hmm?” Halter tilted his head, to which Marie asked to make sure, “They’re taking lessons at school right? The contents of which show up on the exams right? Final exams are basically a means of checking whether the students understood the lessons or not, right?”

“Well, yeah.” Halter nodded, wondering why Marie was asking such obvious questions.

To that, Marie’s face turned into one that expressed just how utterly baffled she was, “Then—how can they fail?”

“Well...”

“I mean, that would mean that even though they took the lessons they still couldn’t answer questions about the content, you know? Doesn’t that contradict itself?! —How truly profound. What kind of phenomenon is it, really...”

“Princess... you’ve just made every student in the world your enemy.” Halter sighed as his shoulders drooped. When the man with a practically bear-sized body changed his posture, the bench draped in red cloth that he was sitting on creaked.

They were sitting next to each other at a tea house in a tourist area in Kyoto

Grid, Japan. The shop was located in the midst of a bamboo thicket, and the building itself was made of wood. There were even red paper umbrellas to provide shade for its outdoor seats—in other words, it was a total tourist trap.

In that regard, the teahouse was certainly successful. Sightseers seemed to enjoy its style, as the other foreign clientele around Marie and Halter would attest.

Kyoto Grid was a leading tourist city even for Japan. A thousand years ago—when the Earth had been reconstructed using gears—nearly all of the cultural heritage sites of the world had been preserved as much as possible in their former state. Among them, Kyoto was known for having preserved a particularly large number of sites.

Biting into her second dumpling skewer, Marie tilted her head. “I could understand a little if things they didn’t know appeared on the exams, but for stuff that they learned in the lecture? .....Why can’t they answer that? I don’t understand.”

“I don’t understand you either, princess.” Halter sighed deeply. As an average person who had experienced setbacks as much as anyone else in his life, he found the bluntly naive questions of this girl genius objectionable.

After paying the tab, the two of them left the teahouse behind them to take a walk in the bamboo thicket.

Packed earth filled the gaps in the white stone paving of the promenade they were on.

The sunlight was gentle thanks to the shade of the bamboo leaves making the air nice and cool.

When the wind rustled the leaves, an earthy scent would tickle one’s nose.

This scenery wasn’t man-made; it was real, authentic, nature.

This super-ultra-finely tuned Clockwork Planet. Because its mechanisms were simply too complex, maintenance of this hollow planet remained exceedingly difficult even now, a thousand years later. Maintaining natural greenery above the gears of this planet—just how much money and technology did the sight before them require?

“...Really, the Japanese get hung up on the strangest things. Was it really necessary to be *this* thorough?” Marie inadvertently spilled out in admiration.

Completely reproducing the scenery of a thousand years ago—one could feel the dedication, even unrelenting obsession, of the artisans in the path of the bamboo thicket.

“Well yeah, Kyoto isn’t one of the world’s leading sightseeing cities for nothing. It’s precisely because of that consideration. For the last thousand years—a few thousand years if you include the period before the planet died—they’ve preserved ‘this’ amidst countless climate changes and calamities. Of course the tourists are impressed.”

“Well, true, I would like to express my heartfelt respect for that great effort, but—” Marie smiled bitterly as she continued, “When I think of the government that readily tried to purge it, I’m forced to wonder if they have any regard for the will of the people at all.”

“Humans all have some things that they won’t yield, princess. For the artisans, thoroughly preserving nature is an obsession that they won’t let up on.” Halter smiled bitterly as he fiddled with a fallen leaf in one hand, and his expression seemed to harbor some hidden meaning.

At the end of the ancient promenade were the precincts of a large temple. It was Kyoto’s five-storied pagoda—one of its most famous tourist destinations.

“...Humph, should I say something like this was expected? I can see why *he* would recommend this.” Marie smiled bitterly while holding up the hand-drawn sightseeing map that was unfolded in her hands.

In the corner of that large scrap of paper were the words “Naoto Miura” signed in awful handwriting. When Marie had pressed Naoto asking what she and Halter should do for the duration of his remedial lessons, Naoto had retorted, “If you’re so bored, go sightseeing like a normal exchange student why don’t you?!” This hand-drawn map was what he had thrust at her.

The twelve tourist spots listed on it were all ones that Kyoto was famous for. —However, their outward appearances were just facades. Inside, they were all clock towers. Though they were called “clock towers,” they weren’t the kind of buildings that notified the public of the time. Rather, these twelve towers

assisted Kyoto's core tower in maintaining the city's environment.

This five-storied pagoda was one of them as well. A wooden pagoda with a height of twenty meters. As it was a facility that was deeply involved in the city's functioning, its location was top-secret information held by the military. Naoto only knew about it himself because of his superior hearing. As such, it maintained an outward appearance of a temple building befitting of a tourist attraction even though its interior had been secretly replaced with clockwork.

Marie probably wouldn't have realized it if Naoto hadn't told her.

She made her way to an inconspicuous spot near the tower, then fetched a small device from her shoulder bag while gazing at the clock tower in its flawless disguise. It was a measurement device used by clocksmiths. A vibrational frequency measurement device—a tool used to examine gear-based mechanisms in detail without taking them apart.

Marie activated the device causing it to make sounds like those of a typewriter as it displayed a number. She had remained expressionless as she studied the readings, but eventually clicked her tongue. "I suppose it's too hard to tell with a mere toy like this, after all."

"You're calling equipment that you pilfered from Meister Guild a toy..."

"I know that it's cutting-edge equipment that hasn't made it to market yet. However, no matter how much it bills itself as a convenient, portable device, what good is that portability if this is its degree of accuracy when I'm already this close to the tower? It's useless."

—Three weeks ago, Marie had become involved in the attempted purge of Kyoto, and had successfully stopped it.

It had been a major, unprecedented incident in which the government, military, and Meister Guild had conspired together to destroy a city and sacrifice its twenty million residents as collateral. In order to prevent such a catastrophic tragedy, she and Naoto had worked together to temporarily seize control of all the gears that made up this city of Kyoto.

Marie had come to this clock tower in order to investigate the aftereffects of the climate interference that they had carried out at that time—as well as the

many other irregular phenomena that they had caused, beginning with their forced manipulation of gravity. However, now that Marie had lost her status as a Meister and was just a regular civilian, it goes without saying that she didn't have the authority to enter the core tower or the clock towers, both of which were under the military's jurisdiction.

Because of that, she had no other choice but to examine the status of the mechanisms using a portable measurement device from outside the clock towers, only... "—There's no helping it huh." Marie said with a dangerous expression on her face.

To which Halter sharply reminded her without a moment's delay, "If you're thinking of illegally trespassing on a whim, then spare me, princess. You're just an ordinary person right now."

Marie pouted at those words. "I know that. Do you think I'd go and cause trouble over each and every little thing?"

—*You better believe I do,* Halter thought, as someone who knew the girl's "criminal record." However, he chose not to say this to Marie.

Marie, who had no way of knowing Halter's inner thoughts, continued, "What I was thinking of was using **that iii~~~diot**," Marie growled. She had emphasized the word "idiot" with a peculiar intonation. Then, as if struck by a sudden inspiration, she took a deep breath, crossed her arms, and closed her eyes.

"..."

Marie tried straining her ears.

—Just like how, Naoto Miura, the dunce about to become a repeat student who was in the middle of remedial lessons at this very moment, had done in demonstrating his superpower.

It was a miracle she had witnessed in the midst of that nauseating conspiracy. At that time, at that place, he—Naoto Miura—had been able to observe the operation of ten quadrillion gears. One could make the mistake of labeling his talent as irregular hearing and call it a day. However, what Naoto possessed was much more than a special talent... Marie understood that instinctively.

No matter how much one pushed the advanced measurement devices of

today, they still wouldn't reach anywhere near Naoto's level of capability. Not even close. Even with Marie straining her ears and focusing her attention like so, she couldn't even manage a poor imitation of his ability. The most she could hear was the sound of the wind, the chirping of the birds, the chatter of the tourists, and a dull vibration coming from underground—that was it.

—In the first place, it goes without saying that sound is a vibrational wave. Furthermore, it also stands to reason that if two waves collide with one another, their shapes will change. It should be common sense that one wouldn't be able to recognize the original shapes of two colliding waves, to say nothing of when the number of these waves are unfathomable.

Several hundred million, several trillion, several ten quadrillion—he had "understood" the sounds of an epic, immeasurable number of gears. Given that —**just what had he heard?**

However, at this moment, the miraculous talent that no one could replicate was stranded elsewhere.

And for the ridiculous reason of failing a high school test, no less.

"...Ahh, god! For an imbecile who can't even digest basic high school education to possess such an absurd power, just what is this bullshit! Am I being made a fool of?!" Marie shouted as she violently turned the measurement device off and thrust it back inside her bag.

"He'd be less loveable if he were a flawless superman though. Well, not that it makes his character make any more sense." Halter paused briefly before grumbling, "But given that his talent itself goes beyond all reason, what's the big deal if his grades are terrible?"

"For god's sake... If things had gone as planned, we'd be in Tokyo by now!"

"Personally, I'd like to have us stay under the radar for the time being... It's only been three weeks since the attempted purge, we can't say that things have completely cooled down yet, you know?" Halter said with a sigh.

The great tumult that Marie had caused by anonymously exposing a great deal of top-secret information wasn't something that would fizzle out within a month or two. Though society was calming down on the surface, the

incriminating revelations weren't so frivolous that people would simply forget about them.

Marie pouted. "...Humph. More importantly, what about Tokyo. Has there been contact since then?" In the first place, the reason Marie was so irritated was because despite receiving important information about an anomaly in Tokyo, she couldn't leave because she was stuck waiting on Naoto's *stupid* remedial lessons.

Halter replied, "'Thankfully,' no. For starters, though you've been calling it an anomaly—in short, an InitialY Series automaton was sighted and incidentally, the military is also behaving somewhat suspiciously. Those are the only things that have happened, right? How about calming down a little, princess."

"That InitialY Series automaton—was her name AnchoR? Just the confirmation that she's there is reason enough. You should know as well, having seen RyuZU in action, no?"

"...Yeah I guess." Halter ran a hand over the stubble of his buzzed head and lightly shrugged. The miracle that they had witnessed three weeks ago... Actually, Naoto's superpower wasn't the only thing that was absurd.

—The Initial Y Series.

The automata that the designer of this Clockwork Planet, "Y," had left behind. RyuZU, the First of the InitialY Series, was yet another absurdity that smashed Marie's common sense into pieces.

One of RyuZU's abilities, Mute Scream, allowed her to move within a world frozen in imaginary time and annihilate an entire battalion of military automata in an instant. Her capabilities were, to say the least, alarming. Despite that, according to the automaton herself, she was the weakest among her sisters.

Just the fact that one of the other InitialY Series was in someone else's hands was already dangerous in and of itself. However, it was also true that rushing off to Tokyo when there hadn't been any follow up information wouldn't accomplish anything.

"Going to school in Japan is a rare opportunity for you. How about relaxing and enjoying the life of a commoner?"

“The last two weeks have been more than enough for something like that.” Marie pouted, while sporting a stern expression. “The exchange student Maribel Halter is just a cover. It’s a façade for the girl who’s secretly active as a terrorist that saves the world, understand? —‘Big brother dearest.’”

Marie sardonically addressed the soldier standing next to her so as to nail in her point. Being siblings was the provisional character setting that Marie—who had faked her own death—had set as cover for the two of them in order to attend high school together, but...

“Even now, I find that setting... unbearable.” Halter grimaced, looking annoyed as he shuddered.

Seeing him so uncomfortable, Marie surfaced a sadistic smile. “Oh, would ‘big bro’ have been better? Or perhaps something like ‘elder brother’?”

“Stop it, princess, I’m begging you. I’m going to puke.”

“My, my what a thing to say to such a cute girl! Are you *that* unhappy with being siblings? In that case...—” Marie brought her lips to Halter’s ear. “—Should I call you **‘daddy’**?”

“＿＿＿”

The moment Halter heard the word “daddy,” he recoiled so hard that he nearly fell backwards. “Dual role of bodyguard and secretary,” Marie muttered. “Well, I’ll let you off the hook for now. Staying here any longer would just be a waste of time. Let’s head back home for now.”

“—Ahh, I guess you were beyond the life of a commoner the moment that you could call a suite of a high-class hotel ‘home,’ especially after so casually booking it,” Halter groaned as he stood up.

Marie knitted her eyebrows. “What choice did I have? Having a workspace and equipment is vital for a clocksmith. We wouldn’t have been able to find a private place with enough space to cram the necessary equipment with such an excellent level of security in such a short amount of ti—”

“—Hold up, princess.”

Suddenly, Halter gestured for Marie, who had been rattling on and on, to stop

with the palm of his hand.

“—? What?” Marie asked quizzically.

Halter furrowed his eyebrows as he stroked his chin, “.....Ah—princess, I’ve just received a transmission that’s a bit unusual.”

“Is it a follow-up report regarding what’s going on in Tokyo?”

“No, I’d told them to send information on that to our suite’s access terminal. Ah— ...Gee, I wonder if it’s really okay to relay this to you.”

Seeing Halter looking conflicted only made Marie more curious. “...? It’s fine, so just tell me already, what does it say?”

Hearing those words, Halter seemed to have resigned himself as he sighed, “Well... I’ll obey your order, princess, but... make sure to keep firmly in mind that these aren’t my words.”



After emphasizing that point to Marie, Halter cleared his throat. He then slowly opened his mouth and— Read aloud what he had just received.

●

—At that same time,

"...gh?" Naoto, who was in a manga café, looked up. To his side—RyuZU was nestled right up against him in the couple's seat. She had the textbook open and was grumbling with half-closed eyes.

"—Master Naoto. If my private lessons are boring you to such an extent, could you kindly just say so?"

"Eh?! Ah, no, I'm not—"

RyuZU's voice was as beautiful as always, a composed calm full of elegance. However, Naoto could hear a minute change in her inflection. Her voice, ever so slightly higher than usual, had creaked faintly as it lightly twinged—in other words, she felt hurt. Realizing that, Naoto, as flustered as could be, shook his head in a hurry.

Seeing his reaction, RyuZU pressed him in a dispassionate voice, "...In that case, please provide me with a reasonable explanation as to why you were paying more attention to the stains on the ceiling than me. Given how great a man Master Naoto is, I am sure that there must be an equally great reason for his distraction—have you succeeded in some great feat on the level of corresponding with aliens?"

—A peerless beauty who was currently jealous of ceiling stains. RyuZU's voice resounded throughout the manga café despite its quiet tone due to its beautiful glass bell-like nature. As it did, it triggered many clicking tongues whose chorus struck Naoto's sensitive ears from every direction.

The regular patrons would even spit out under their breaths, "Those damn lovebirds again? God..." —Indeed, at this point, the couple's seat was their designated place at the manga café. This was Naoto and RyuZU's "home" right now. They were manga café refugees, so to speak, but it wasn't like they were starving.

With the money that RyuZU had made from her “investments,” they could have bought a new house—even an entire mansion if they had so desired—and still have money left over to play. However, simply accepting such an enormous gift was too much for Naoto’s meek heart. More than anything—

“Or... Was it a lie when you said that you preferred this place because we can more readily snuggle here...?”

—*Thump.* The sound of people punching the walls of their booths in unison. Naoto didn’t need his superhuman hearing to understand what their neighbors were getting at with their banging: *Just blow up and die.*

While finding the atmosphere of general unrest unbearable, Naoto looked at RyuZU’s face. At a glance, her face looked the same as usual, dignified and as beautiful as a flower. She had bewitching, pure silver hair, pale skin, ripe, peachy lips, and rosy cheeks. Her golden eyes sparkled like a crown. Her beauty was otherworldly—she was a living jewel.

—However, her beautiful countenance was wavering ever so slightly in insecurity. Naoto, desperate to change the topic one way or another, deliberately took up RyuZU’s sarcasm. “Ah, ahaha, er, so, umm, do aliens really exist?”

“...I apologize, I tried using a sarcastic turn of phrase that you weren’t used to. Let me rephrase. I am asking if Master Naoto’s great brain that is simply too outstanding for a human has finally awoken and transcended not only human limits, but also worldly sense. Have you somehow reached a place beyond even my level of understanding, Master?”



Seeing RyuZU scrutinize him even more coldly, Naoto shook his head desperately. “No, that’s not it! It’s because I heard a sound that made me think, ‘If aliens really existed, their voices would probably sound like this.’”

“...Master Naoto, even if there is no room for doubt that you are the most outstanding human being on this planet right now, beginning to hear sounds that don’t exist would typically be considered—”

Beep. “I’m coming in!!” *Ba——-m.*

Suddenly, the door of the manga café was violently kicked open, cutting RyuZU off.

The fury who had done so stormed her way closer and closer to them, while bowling over countless things along the way and screeching all the while, “Naoto Miura! Naoto Miura who’s a pervert in many different ways! Answer me this instant!!”

Hearing her voice, Naoto stood up from the couple’s seat in a hurry. Seeing the girl in the narrow aisle between the booths, he shouted, “Naoto Miura, at your service! Hey Frenchie, you do realize that ‘I’m coming in’ is a phrase used to be polite and not a declaration of war, right?!”

However, Marie paid those words of his no mind. Glaring at Naoto, who had stuck his head out, she leapt at him. “There you are, pervert! Now’s the time to put your ultra-pervertedness to super perverted use! Come now, show me this second you pervert!!”

“Wai, sto, I can’t bre—?!”

Marie reached past the partition separating the booths and pulled Naoto up by his collar.

“Uh, umm, Miss? Please be quiet inside the sto— No, nothing, never mind, please enjoy yourself.” A brave employee had boldly tried to warn Marie, but ran away like a startled hare upon being instantly pierced by her glare.

RyuZU stood straight up. Looking down at Marie with a menacing look that signaled that she could explode at any time, RyuZU began sharply, “Oh, Mistress Marie. They say to keep your eyes peeled if you have not seen a boy

for a while as boys can mature into men in just three days, but I see that you are just as childish and energetic as ever... How very disappointing."

"Wow! First of all, I'm not a boy, and second, sorry for being energetic!"

"I mean, given your mental age—and your figure for that matter—I had expressly determined that a boy's idiom would serve just as well."

"Today's the day I'll take you apart!"

RyuZU met Marie's threatening glare with her own. "—If Mistress Marie simply refuses to free Master Naoto from the grip of those naughty hands, then I will have to free those naughty hands from *you*, yes? Who will really be the one to be taken apart, I wonder—"

RyuZU's skirt fluttered menacingly—

"Cool it you brats!" Halter brought his fist down on the top of Marie's head.

"~~~~~~gh!" It must have hurt a great deal. Though Halter had held back, his fist was nonetheless made of metal. Marie silently crouched down while holding her head. Nursing her wounds, she glared at the large man behind her with tears in the corners of her eyes.

"You—"

"Got something to say?"

"...gh, Why did you only hit meee..."

"Setting aside the punishment for that rampage of yours, princess, even if it's clear that RyuZU overreacted, it isn't physically possible for me to discipline her. Let's not forget that even if I did somehow manage to lay a hand on her, I'd die." Halter asserted flatly before turning towards RyuZU, "I apologize for our shrewish princess causing a scene, and also—thank you for not getting physical with her."

With that, Halter sincerely lowered his head, causing RyuZU to sigh mildly with a smile, "...I never cease to be amazed by you, Mr. Junkbot. Though I very much loathe to admit this, it appears that excluding Master Naoto, you are, by process of elimination, the smartest person around."

"That's an honor. So Naoto, are you alright?"

“Ah— ...I guess? Well, if anything, I’d like a reasonable explanation for why I was suddenly given a shakedown, but...”

“Well, that’s understandable... Anyways, there’s something we’d like to ask you to do knowing full well that it may be an unreasonable request... Well, princess? You’ve calmed down by now, right?”

Urged on by Halter, Marie slowly stood up. It seemed like her head still hurt, as she was still a bit teary-eyed. While rubbing her head, she asked, “...We’d like you to trace a transmission to its source.”

As far as Naoto knew, all transmissions were either sent through a wired connection made of a chain of sound-conducting gears or by the way of a wireless connection made of gears that can communicate across long distances via resonance. Put plainly, the underlying principle behind both methods is ultimately no different from a tin can telephone.

As such, if one reeled in the string connecting the cans, one should be able to find the party at the other end.

So why were they asking him?—

“You see, the transmission didn’t go through any relays—to tell you the truth, it was a short-wave transmission sent using electromagnetic waves.”

Naoto squinted his eyes at Halter’s smooth answer.

“...It just so happens that I just learned that that’s illegal in my remedial lessons, yes?”

“Now now, sweating the small stuff will make you lose your hair, you know?” Halter laughed, slapping his receding hairline for emphasis.

Looking at him with eyes filled with compassion, RyuZU whispered discreetly to Naoto, “Master Naoto, they say that experience speaks volumes. He must have lived his life worrying about small things often. The state of his head makes his claim profoundly persuasive, no? I believe we should pay close attention to what he has to say right now.”

Halter nodded, then made slight movements with his lips.

(“—Protecting the law won’t be worth anything if we’re defeated because of

it.”)

Ordinary people would have had no chance at hearing his sarcastic voice just now; however, Naoto heard it clearly.

“There are ‘certain jobs’ out there that don’t play by the rules. It doesn’t matter how dirty it is, or how illegal, if there’s a chance that the enemy will use it, you have to be able to deal with it somehow. Even things that don’t seem particularly useful like radio communication can count in a pinch. In any case, like I said, don’t sweat the small stuff.”

...So he says, but...

Being an ordinary person with zero affinity for the rough-and-tumble, Naoto stiffened his face. “...No way, even if you say that, I don’t want to be arrested at such a young a—”

“By the way, you do know that it’s unquestionably illegal for you to own RyuZU, right? Her specs far exceed anything permitted for a civilian-use automaton by miles.”

“Law shmaw! Now, why don’tcha tell me what it is you had to say, Mr. Halter!” In a record reversal, Naoto exchanged a firm handshake with Halter.

—That’s right, RyuZU said so as well didn’t she? That crime becomes crime only upon coming to light.

“Well then,” Marie interjected. “I’ll cut to the chase—Naoto, didn’t you hear a strange sound?”

“Sound? If we’re talking about your angry voice, then I heard that nonstop, but?”

“That’s not it! ...Rather than a sound, it’s more along the lines of a considerably high frequency wave. If we were to call it a sound regardless, then it would probably be an abnormally shrill sound, but...”

“Abnormally shrill, you say...” Naoto furrowed his eyebrows as he crossed his arms, thinking hard.

Halter muttered with a sigh, “I do think this is a bit too unreasonable to ask even of you, but...”

Upon which, RyuZU nodded, seeming to have thought of something, “—I see, so that was the source of Master Naoto’s ‘ceiling aliens.’”

“T, That was an ‘electromagnetic wave’? No wonder I thought it was a sound that I hadn’t heard much before.”

“—Hah?” Halter widened his eyes at Naoto’s unassuming answer. “...Come on Naoto, I know your ears are good but you’ve gotta be kidding me.”

The short-wave transmission that Halter had received was an electromagnetic wave with a frequency of thirty megahertz. Catching a wave whose frequency is fifteen hundred times higher than the upper auditory limit of humans with just his ears and through 100% soundproof headphones at that—?

—Just what does this guy “hear”? A chill inadvertently ran down Halter’s spine. However, next to him, Marie nodded, her face not even showing the least bit of surprise.

“—What are you so surprised about? Compared to distinguishing the sounds of all the gears of this city’s core tower, this isn’t much is it? —More importantly, Naoto.” Leaving Halter behind, Marie continued, “Can you tell roughly where that sound came from?”

“Umm, straight above... no, about eighty-eight degrees. From this direction I think? —Hey, wait, what are you doing!”

Without waiting for Naoto’s reply, Marie forced herself onto Naoto’s lap and snatched the pencil and notebook that had been lying on the nearby table. Retracting her legs, Marie curled up into a ball and began to write something at an astonishing speed.

“...Excuse me, Mistress Marie. Just whose permission did you receive to climb onto my Master Naoto’s—”

“Ah, RyuZU, your expression right now is amazing!! If you’d like to sit on my lap, I’d be happy to oblige at any t—”

“Shut it you lovebirds!” Marie yelled sharply before assuming the tone of a lecturer—

“What was used was a short-wave transmission. Short waves are what the

Planet Governors at the North and South Pole deflect by deploying a magnetic field to protect the planet from solar radiation. If we know the direction and angle it came from, we can use trigonometry to pinpoint the source of the transmission. If the electromagnetic wave came from almost straight above, then the source has to be close—if we further calculate how far the gears moved from the elapsed time, then...”

It seemed like Marie had already figured out the answer, as she vigorously circled the coordinates that she had computed. “The location is—Mie. It’s a neighboring city. From the relative coordinates, it’s in the industrial zone... We’re going there right this instant.”

“Uh, look here...” Naoto scratched his head. *I don’t get it.*

He was still completely clueless as to why this blond-haired walking landmine was so angry. Naoto turned his gaze toward the angry girl on his lap and with his head tilted asked, “In the end, what did that transmission say?”

Upon those words, Marie froze with a start.

“Y, You see, that’s... Hyah? Ow?!”

The instant that Marie had begun to mumble, RyuZU deployed her scythe from under her skirt. She had deftly hooked Marie’s collar with the blade and tossed her out of the couple’s seat.

“—Now then.” RyuZU surfaced a smile so gentle that it looked fit for a saint. “Just what kind of emergency transmission would warrant this continuous violence against Master Naoto? You surely have an **appropriate answer** for this, yes?” In the midst of her flowery smile, only her gaze affirmed the chilling malice behind her words.

“Ah... well, how should I put this...” After taking a quick glance at Marie, who kept silent, Halter reluctantly opened his mouth. Clearing his throat, he began—

“‘—Hey, harlot.’”

Marie froze with a start. She began to tremble all over again. Catching that with a sidelong glance, Halter sighed as he continued with as bland and emotionless of a voice as possible,

“‘I see that you’ve been getting awfully cocky for the ghost of a bratty girl. What’s wrong, is your pussy feeling lonely without the attention?’”

“＿＿＿”

Silence.

Marie had made tight fists with both her hands. She smashed those two trembling fists onto the floor. Taking his eyes off her, Halter continued reading out the last paragraph,

“‘No need to worry, there’re a bunch of small guys with surprisingly big cocks here waiting impatiently that can give you the bang you’re lusting for. Shake your cute little ass and beg for it and they just might do you the favor, bitch.’”

(—So yeah, that was the message that we received.)

“...That was sent to Marie?”

“No? Short wave transmissions aren’t precise enough for that. It was sent to this whole region, I just happened to pick it up.”

Well, in that case. Naoto tilted his head, pointing at Marie, who was trembling on the ground. “In that case, why is Marie blowing her top off as if the message had been directed at her?”

“Master Naoto... thick-headedness is the prerogative of a main character, but asking such a thing is simply too cruel. People become angry when they face the truth. It has been like this since time immemorial. Mistress Marie, if your hole is feeling lonely, there are shops that carry tools for that kind of thing nearby.”

“That’s absolutely not it!” Marie shouted as she sprung up, her face completely flushed red. “Ghost. Of. A. Bratty. Girl! Here! This is clearly referring to me, isn’t it!?”

“Rather, why do you know about those stores, RyuZU?”

“That, of course, would be because your sexual fetishes have distorted so much that they’re no longer recognizable, Master Naoto. Satisfying her master’s lust falls under the duties of a follower as well. Thus, in order to promptly meet your expectations whenever such a request might be made, I had—”

“Listen to me!” Marie angrily shouted. She then held her head as if exhausted,

“Ahh, I’ve had enough, talking to you guys makes me nauseous...! At any rate, you guys are coming with us right now.”

“...Eh, to buy toys?”

“I’m really gonna kill you, ya know!? We’re going to tie up the idiot who sent this message and mount him on the wall! What else could it be? Or do you want me to try a dry run on you first!?”

“Please spare me from such advanced sexual play...” Naoto groaned with his eyes half-closed.

Next to him, RyuZU nodded. “Apart from that, I am also unable to understand the meaning in our going together. While I could not be more opposed to them, Master Naoto does have remedial lessons, not to mention my personal lessons that I’m giving him so that he can break out of his current situation of being looked down upon by the imbeciles of society as well, so—please, you are welcome to go by yourself.” Her words were curt.

Halter interjected in a calm voice, “...Say, Naoto. Tomorrow’s Sunday. You shouldn’t have remedial lessons, right?”

“Hm? Well, yeah, but...”

“If the coordinates that this princess gave us are on the mark, it’s somewhere in the industrial zone. If my memory serves, there’s a seaside resort there.”

Twitch.

Seaside resort—those two words made Naoto freeze.

Curling his lips from seeing Naoto’s reaction, Halter continued his barefaced act in monotone, “Oh my, I had forgotten, it’s February right now, the absolute perfect season for fun at the beach. It’s truly the best season for appreciating swimsuits—”

“Ah, excuse me, we’ll be checking out. Please ring me up!”

Even Halter turned around in shock at the fact that Naoto’s voice came from behind him—more precisely, from the front desk.

“Well, it’s fine if we return by Monday, right? Alright, let’s go everyone! Don’t drag your feet, time won’t wait for stragglers y’know!”

“As expected of Master Naoto. Could you not somehow use that energy of yours that you currently only exhibit when you are filled with a twisted, vulgar lust for a clockwork doll on other things? Perhaps, if I said that I would fulfill any one request of yours if you were to receive perfect scores on the makeup exams—”

“Alllright! Leave it to me! I’ll memorize the entire textbook in one day when I come back!”

Naoto and RyuZU rushed out of the manga café while making a commotion. Watching them from behind, Marie spit out a sigh.

“...You’re good at dealing with those two aren’t you.”

“When you seek cooperation from others, show the other party what they have to gain. It’s the basics of negotiation you know, princess,” Halter said as he ran his hand over his smooth head. “Well, let’s get going as well, princess. We’re gonna be left behind at this rate,” Halter urged Marie on. However, he suddenly felt a strangely discomforting sensation.

Will things really turn out as expected? Was that message really just a mere provocation...?

Chapter Two *18 : 10* Searcher

...I'm getting sleepy.

The girl thought, her mind covered in a dense fog.

She just couldn't seem to grasp where she was or what she was doing. She had been like this for so long, she could hardly remember when it began. Recently, however, her driftings had been especially troublesome.

Like a harsh winter landscape, where anything and everything was frozen, her heart sank into numbness.

Playing cards, solving puzzles, drawing—none of them seemed as interesting as they did before. There weren't even any cards, puzzles, or crayons here to begin with. And of course, simply *cleaning things up* wasn't interesting at all...

...Ahh, the girl thought.

I see, that's why I'm dozing off.

There wasn't anything she had to do, nor did she know what it is that she wanted to do. As such, there was nothing left for her but to sleep and dream.

—I want to go back.

The faint thought suddenly popped into her head. Recalling her memories lifted the fog of her mind just a little. A room filled with toys, gently warmed by the sun.

Word puzzles and code puzzles.

A clockwork bear.

A collapsible chess set.

A curiously distorted mirror.

A hand organ that sounded towards the player instead of outwards.

A spring-wound bat that flew in the sky.

If she could leave those toys scattered around here as she slept on top of that luxurious sofa, she would surely be scolded by her big sister, but nonetheless, it would feel very good.

...But, she thought, as the fog's tide came upon her once more, *Just where was that nostalgic house located again...?*

●

The sun was about to set.

Above the ocean in the distance, the sky was beginning to turn scarlet, dying the planet made of steel in a red hue.

—The Clockwork Planet.

On this planet in which everything had been reconstructed with gears, the cities people lived in were built atop enormous cogwheels that ranged from several kilometers to up to several dozens of kilometers in diameter. Gears of neighboring cities meshed with each other, turning slowly as they circulated the enormous energy generated by the Equatorial Spring to every nook and corner of the planet.

One of those mechanisms, which numbered several million gears in total, was Kyoto Grid. At this very moment, Kyoto Grid was about to mesh with the gear of a neighboring city—Mie Grid.

On one tooth of that absurdly enormous gear were countless holes; each hole was about ten meters in diameter. The holes, lined up next to each other in an orderly manner, looked like a beehive.

On the other enormous gear moving to mesh with this one were, unsurprisingly, similar-looking holes.

The enormous municipal gears slowly meshed with each other, their gaps lining up against each other to a tee. —That instant, a deafening roar rang out from both teeth. Screeching, thunderous sounds as if several thousand cannons were firing overlapped with one another. The roar was so loud that it sounded like the gears would break.

Though this continued for a short while, the sounds eventually subsided when

the two perforated teeth detached from one another as their gears continued turning.

—It was the sound of transfers happening on the cylindrical railway, a means of transportation that connected cities together.

At the connecting station where the municipal gears meshed, massive cylinders holding passengers and cargo were simultaneously shot out and exchanged between the two cities in large numbers. After, the cylinders gathered at the terminal before being sorted and transferred to the various means of each grid's municipal transportation.

Though there were things like clockwork trains and buses and self-driving taxis within the city, because every city was constantly rotating, there was no road that connected any two cities together. Because of that, this kind of special means of transportation was necessary, but—

"...Hey Naoto, what's with you? You look like you're about to die." Marie had just gotten off the passenger cylinder and stood at the platform. Seeing Naoto walking like a zombie, she had addressed him in annoyed disbelief.

"Shut up... Rather, how are you guys all fine? ...It feels like my brain is still shaking." Naoto looked to be suffering as he pressed down on his headphones and let out a pained groan.

The passenger's cylindrical railway was piled with many layers of sound insulating material, more than enough for the ears of any ordinary traveler. For Naoto, whose headphones also had a one hundred percent noise-cancelling function, the roar of transferring had still taken its toll.

"...Well, being a normal person, I guess I have no idea what a pervert who can pick out electromagnetic waves heard just now. Those ears of yours must make everyday life a challenge."

While looking after the staggering Naoto, RyuZU opened her mouth to speak in his stead. Though she maintained her characteristic elegance, an undercurrent of hostility could be heard in her voice. "What a truly barbaric method of travel. It may be fine to transport base lifeforms and cargo like this, but to force Master Naoto through such torment without even preparing a first-class seat—could it be that you do not even know of the word

‘accommodation’?”

“Like there would be a special seat made for such a singular super-ultra-pervert,” Marie muttered coldly.

Halter followed apologetically, “Sorry about this, we didn’t think it’d be this bad for Naoto. We sort of thought it’d be overkill to use air travel just to travel to a neighboring city.

While muttering curses, Naoto shook his head unsteadily, “...Ah— No, it’s not your fault, the shock just now made me remember. I rode this thing once when I was a kid, and the noise crippled me that time too. Guess it was so traumatic that I erased it from memory... damn it.”

“Dang. Sorry about this, I’ll arrange for us to travel by air for the return trip.” The four of them walked, RyuZU supporting Naoto, whose steps were unsteady, with her hands.

As the cylindrical railway was a transportation system that instantaneously moved a great number of things and people several times throughout the day, the terminal was jam packed with people. The four of them wove their way through the crowd, climbing up the stairs to ground level and exiting through the ticket gate.

They were already in Mie Grid at this point.

From the entrance of the above-ground connecting station were the cornerstones of urban transport, a circular shuttle, and a pool of unmanned taxis lined up and waiting for customers.

To get out of the way of human traffic, the four moved to a corner of the entrance where there was a rest area. Settling in, Marie locked her hands together and placed her chin on top of her hands, “Anyhow—let’s not forget that there’s a masochistic punk who’s been patiently waiting for me to slap him in this city. Kuhuhu~”

Looking askance at Marie laughing menacingly, Halter said, “Ah— Princess, I think this goes without saying, but we still only know the general location that the message came from right now, you know? It’s not like we’ve successfully pinpointed the specific location of the sender.”

Marie smiled, brimming with confidence. “Are you making light of me, Halter? Since then, I’ve already narrowed the sender’s location down to an area with a radius of five hundred meters by making various approximations from the weather data and rotational speed of the municipal gear at the conjectured time of transmission. I couldn’t narrow it down further than this since the original data had some areas of uncertainty, but if we just match it to the local information now, the rest should work out one way or another. Pleasure time is just a step away, fufufu...”

Seeing Marie’s evil countenance across from him Naoto muttered in annoyed disbelief, “...Just how serious is this girl gonna get cuz of a mere prank message.”

“To be unable to dismiss disparaging and slanderous remarks as the delusions of a fool shows not just a simple lack of composure—but of self-confidence.” RyuZU maintained a smile on her face as she fired off those cold words; however, Marie only sneered.

Closing her eyes sardonically and, keeping her hands joined, she raised and shook just one index finger, “Tsk tsk tsk. It appears that you’re misunderstanding, RyuZU. I’m used to hearing mere words of envy, jealousy, and abuse from the masses.”

“...In that case, why are you so pissed?” Naoto asked with a squint as he straightened his posture. He seemed to be feeling a bit better now.

“Pissed? Me? Hahah, aren’t you a joker... Angering me would be an astounding feat, you know? Yep, no kidding. I’m not pissed; no siree, not at all.” Marie stared at Naoto with glazed eyes as she curled her lips, “‘If a lady is slighted, she shall snap at each and every insult with a smile and slap the offender silly after chasing him down to the ends of the Earth.’ I’m simply honoring the words of my elder sister.”

Naoto sighed, looking incredulous. “...Wow, I hope I never meet your sister my whole life.” It was a sincere wish from the bottom of his heart.

●

—Mie Grid.

Though it was next to the city where Naoto was born and raised, this was his first time actually visiting it. To begin with, traveling to a different city isn't easy in and of itself. As such, many people never leave their native city their entire lives...

But leaving that aside—Naoto thought as he made his first impression of Mie Grid: "...It's hot... Why is it so hot?"

The sun had already begun to set. It would be night anytime now. Despite that, the heat and humidity were so high that even standing in the shade was still enough to make one sweat.

"It's because the neighboring Shiga Grid was purged in the past, isn't it?" Answering briefly, Marie walked out. She was heading towards the end of the terminal where one could board the clockwork trains that revolved around the city—the ring-line.

Following behind her, Naoto asked, "Could it be that it was also a conspiracy like the recent incident at Kyoto...?"

"......Just what are you learning at school? I can see why you failed your tests." Marie shook her head before continuing,

"Dropping a city into the earth... it's true that doing so will inflict fatal damage to the planet in the long run. Even so, if cities with irreparable malfunctions were left alone, the entire planet would be affected. Choosing to sacrifice the afflicted city to contain the damage before that happens—that's what a purge is.

"It's normally something that's done only after going through the formal procedures, which include many thorough calculations and discussions. Generous aid is appropriated for the people who are displaced as well—" After rattling off this far in one breath, Marie seemed to have become unable to bear the heat as she fanned herself with her right hand. "...It really is hot isn't it. For the air to be shimmering after the sun has set..."

"Well, even so, it's better than Siberia," Halter said with a cool-looking face. It seemed like, as a cyborg, he was perfectly fine.

To those words, RyuZU tilted her head slightly, "Now—as far as I remember,

Siberia should be a frozen tundra, no?”

“During the time you’ve been sleeping—on the eighth of June forty-two years ago—Neryungri Grid was purged,” Marie answered concisely.

Halter continued, elaborating for Naoto and RyuZU from behind them, “The grid to the south of Siberia had malfunctioned, you see. As it was a grid that had been largely uninhabited to begin with, it took an especially long time to organize and conduct the purge. As such, nearly all of that region had become a scorching desert. The tundra had melted and Lake Baikal flooded, submerging its surroundings... The effects even reached Northeast Asia.

“—Well, nowadays the area’s a greatly prosperous resort spot. Humanity’s indomitable spirit never ceases to amaze me,” Halter laughed cynically.

While wiping away the sweat on her forehead, Marie picked up the rest. “It’s the perfect example of what happens when a malfunctioning city is left alone and unpurged for too long. So, there are times when a purge is unavoidable. Only as a last resort, of course, but...”

Even so—Marie thought.

The most frightening aspect of the Clockwork Planet—the absurd object that “Y” had molded into being—was precisely this.

In the first place—machines that can properly function with missing parts don’t exist. And when it comes to precise clockwork, losing even just a single gear, cylinder, screw, spring, or wire is enough to cause everything to collapse—even the smallest part is critical to the entirety of the mechanism.

However, this planet smashes such common sense.

Almost as if a purge had been taken into account from the very beginning, even if an entire municipal gear was missing, the other cities would adapt and make up for its absence like a living organism.

The astounding synergistic behavior of the gears was nothing if not complicated and full of mysteries. There have even been cases where a single purge affects a city far off in the distance, four thousand kilometers away.

As such, beyond obviously requiring the permission of the local government,

purges also require approval from an international agency and the grid's neighboring countries as well. This is because a purge is a literal last resort that could cause harm to the entire world.

"Of course—" Marie clenched her fists. "Preventing things from coming to that is what we clocksmiths are here for— Wait, what?" Letting out a confused voice, Marie tilted her head. Before she knew it, Naoto and RyuZU were gone. All she saw upon turning around was Halter scratching his head looking bored.

Marie furrowed her eyebrows, "...What happened to those two?"

"Ah— How should I say this..." Marie followed where Halter was pointing to with her eyes.

There—

"Ooh?! A swimsuit that suits you, you ask? —Gah, how difficult!" Staring at the dressed-up mannequins behind the display window of a store next to the station, an idiot happily groaned. "This one... Wait, actually— Somehow the swimsuit pales in comparison to the fine specimen it's intended to dress up! Shouldn't it be the other way around?! Am I supposed to pity it?!"

"It appears that such is the case, Master. —In the first place, swimsuits are designed with consideration for those with disappointing figures so as to supplement those disappointing figures of theirs. When it comes to someone shaped as perfectly as myself, it is all the more difficult to find something worthy of adorning this body."

"I couldn't agree more! In that case, should we go to a dedicated automaton clothing store after all? No wait! The swimsuit for someone on RyuZU's level has to be custom-made, right—?!"

"Do you think we have the time for that you idiot," Marie said, her chilling voice below freezing, as she grabbed Naoto's collar and pulled him away from the window. "Tomorrow's Sunday. You can play all you want with your automaton whether at the beach or the mountains **after** you help me finish my business here, so let's get going already."

"AHHhh... RyuZU! I'll think about it while we're on the move so take their pamphlet if nothing else!"

“Certainly, Master Naoto.”

●

With the pleasant sound of steel clacking against steel, the train of the ring-line ran on the outskirts of the city that had sunk into the darkness of night. Peeking out through a window in the front car, Naoto muttered, “In any case, what a dreary-looking city...”

The closed-loop train that ran on meshing gears. Its absolute speed was a mere eighty kilometers an hour. However, because it was going in the opposite direction of the rotation of the city, its relative speed reached a hundred forty kilometers an hour.

The scenery passing by outside the window consisted of buildings that had their gears exposed, more buildings, and yet more buildings. At most, a small park would pop up once in a while, but the gray landscape buried in the light of light gears continued on and on.

“Well yeah, you can’t compare this city to Kyoto,” Marie replied indifferently. “Kyoto is a tourist city that possesses a large amount of cultural heritage from ancient times. Meanwhile, Mie is fundamentally an industrial city. This is as good as the scenery gets.”

Naoto looked at Marie, blinking a couple times. “Hey Marie, doesn’t it seem weird that you know more about Japan than me who’s Japanese?”

“Have you forgotten that I’m an ex-Meister? Something like world geography is basic education. Rather, what’s shocking is that you don’t know anything about a city that neighbors your own. You should really get on that...” Marie said in disbelief as she re-crossed her legs. While glancing past the window through the corner of her eye, she muttered, “This country supposedly had a little more nature in the past. A country that had four seasons even.”

“Four seasons?”

“Spring, summer, fall, winter—in the past, summers used to be hot and snow fell during winter in this country,” Halter answered.

Naoto tilted his head, a blank look on his face. It was the first time he had heard of such a thing. “What? Are you talking about how things were a

thousand years ago?”

“—No, Master Naoto. The vestiges of the four seasons were still there, even right before I fell asleep a little more than two hundred years ago. The Clockwork Planet had had its climate settings adjusted so as to fully replicate the original Earth, but... things appear to have completely changed,” RyuZU answered. Curiously, there was none of the usual sarcasm in her words. Though she was looking through the train window, rather than the passing scenery, it felt like she was looking at something that wasn’t there.

“...Yeah. Various things are going to reach their limits any day now,” Marie nodded, closing her eyes melancholically.

Silence fell.

Naoto didn’t know what Marie’s words were implying; however, he wasn’t sure if he wanted to ask and find out either, so he just silently looked down at the swimsuit pamphlet in his hands.

—Some twenty or thirty minutes of being swayed by the train later, they arrived on the opposite side of the city’s core tower.

Getting off at their destination, the only things that could be seen above their heads were starlight, moonlight, and the silhouette of the Equatorial Spring cutting across the night sky.

“.....” Naoto looked up at the sky in silence.

Next to him, Marie revealed a malicious smile. “Now then—in terms of coordinates, my punching bag should be somewhere around here, but...”

“Princess, you’ve gradually escalated from slapping to punching, you know?” Halter retorted in disbelief, but Marie ignored him.

“Alright Mr. Walking Measurement Device, I’m going to calculate the sender’s precise location so help me with— Huh?”

Naoto ignored both of them.

He had already begun walking towards the platform’s exit while silently continuing to stare at the empty sky. As for RyuZU, she was following behind him silently as well.

“H, Hey Naoto, don’t just go off by yourself! I can’t calculate where the dummy I’m going to use for crash simulations is without you!”

“I see that the punishment you intend to inflict on the guy has finally exceeded that which you can do with your bare hands...”

Having been left behind, Marie and Halter chased after the two of them in a hurry.

Passing through the station’s ticket gate, what appeared before them was the sprawling business district that was located in front of the industrial park. Though Naoto had exited before Marie and Halter, he simply stood there, unmoving, as he stared off into space.

Marie called out from behind him, “Hey Naoto, what’s the big idea?”

“Quiet.”

“Now you look here—” Receiving Naoto’s brusque reply, Marie had opened her mouth reflexively, but—

“Mistress Marie, could I ask that you be quiet for a while?” RyuZU requested as she stood off to the Naoto’s side, keeping a respectful distance between him and herself.

Marie answered her with a slight nod.

She cast her gaze back onto Naoto, but Naoto simply continued staring off into space with his back towards her as if lost in a daze.

Marie had seen him like this before.

It had been during his miraculous performance that had revealed the precise number of the gears in Kyoto’s core tower, which were so numerous that one might as well consider them infinite. Those ashen eyes that were staring intensely into space were seeing something that Marie couldn’t.

—He’s straining his ears.

Marie didn’t know the reason why.

From the beginning, Marie couldn’t comprehend the world that Naoto perceived. However, if Naoto was intentionally straining his ears, there had to

be something.

...A cold sweat slowly dampened her forehead. Perhaps because this area was a shopping district, the noise coming from the gears, which had been boisterous on the journey here, was mild. The streets themselves were nice and tidy and had the smell of hot, moist air. That was all that Marie could perceive, but—

Naoto, who could surely hear more, finally opened his mouth after some time. “—I can’t hear anything.”

“Y, You punk, what were you acting all serious for—” Marie almost fell over from the epic let-down. However, Naoto’s eyes remained trained on the industrial zone that could just barely be seen at the end of the shopping district.

Halter spoke up suddenly, “—Say, what time is it right now?”

“Eh?” Marie uttered.

Everyone’s eyes focused onto Halter.

“The time, I’m asking for the time. I believe it should be about seven right now, but...”

“It is 18:58:23 right now according to Western Japan Standard Time—I see, this is strange,” RyuZU answered.

“What do you mean—” Marie started to say before shutting up mid-speech as she realized something. Marie took a look around the area in a fluster, but before she could voice what she had just come to understand herself, Halter said it:

“—Isn’t it too quiet?”

It was seven o’clock—at the entrance to the station. The sun had completely set and light from the light gears was illuminating their surroundings.

There was no wind blowing through this broad avenue. The damp, stagnant air felt heavy; the only thing brushing against their skin as they stood stock still was the hot air that was still simmering up from the surface of the road from the residual heat of day.

Despite the sweltering heat, Marie shivered.

There were no crowds of people crossing the street both ways nor any life in any of the open stores.

Though all of the lined-up stores looked a little old on the outside, their exterior designs were nonetheless chic. Despite them all having their shutters raised, there were no customers to be seen.

At the intersection of the main streets was what appeared to be a police box, but even that was unoccupied.

A deserted shopping district—why hadn't I realized the contradiction?

Now that I've noticed, this place couldn't be stranger.

It was almost as if—

"It's a ghost town..." Marie whispered, dumbfounded. Unnerved, she let out a quiet groan.

●

In Mie Grid's heavy industrial zone, there was an elevated platform where one could see the entire area in one view. It was an observation deck set up in the middle of a promenade on top of a small hill. The sun had set. Four silhouettes stood atop the broad, deserted platform.

Naoto, who was one of those four, bent over the railing as he narrowed his eyes and concentrated. What extended below his eyes was the night's view of factories illuminated by countless light gears. A forest made of steel intertwined in such a complicated way that it vaguely reminded one of an artificial organ. While in a sense, it could be described as eerie, its majestic appearance filled with pulsing energy was beautiful enough to make one sigh in wonder.

...However,

"As expected, nothing," Naoto said quietly assured, "I can't hear anything. The clock tower here is **stopped**—actually, it's completely empty.

The air sank under a heavy silence.

"...Do you understand what you're saying?" Marie choked. The words had caught in her throat before she was able to get them out. Her voice was dry and quivering.

The clock tower was stopped.

It might be simple to put to words, but the situation it described was beyond abnormal.

We aren't talking about a simple degradation in the function of one clock tower and the others making up for it here. If the core tower was the brain of a city, then the clock towers were none other than its internal organs. Together, they formed the lifeline of the city. Every one of them was irreplaceable. For example, if someone is missing any organs, his body won't be able to function properly.

As an ex-Meister who had been involved in a great number of municipal repairs, Marie could clearly imagine how grave the situation was. However, as Naoto turned to face her, Marie saw that Naoto's face was filled with an even greater terror; it had turned ghastly pale as if all the blood had been pulled from it.

"I'm telling you, this isn't on the level of a mere abnormality—this city," He paused for a breath, "is already dead. It's been dead for a long time." Sweat dripped down from Naoto's cheeks drop-by-drop. This wasn't due to the humid heat. The trembling of his hands and feet had nothing to do with his will either.

While everyone else became speechless, only RyuZU narrowed her keen eyes, "I see—so that is the reason this city has no wind." Her mutter made Marie and Halter widen their eyes.

—Indeed, there was no wind blowing.

Over there, beyond the industrial area in front of them—should be the ocean. As such, right now, there should at the very least be a breeze. Despite that, not even a wisp of the ocean was blowing past this elevated platform.

"...Looks like this ain't peanuts," Halter spilled out, groaning. Feeling an unsettling sensation creep up his spine, he sighed. The out-of-place feeling that he had felt when they had first set off was now becoming an ugly reality.

Halter glanced at Marie who was still standing next to him, speechless. "Princess. About that transmission you received, wouldn't it be a good idea to investigate it once more?"

“Eh?”

“I hadn’t planned on saying anything if it would help you kill time, but when things start to smell this fishy, it becomes a different matter.”

“...What do you mean?”

Halter nodded. Placing his hand to his forehead, he sighed, “First... as the premise, a short-wave transmission isn’t something that can be sent to a wide area.”

“I know that much. In other words, the sender knew where—” She stopped. Seeing the realization spread throughout Marie’s face, Halter nodded lightly. She recalled the provocative message. The prank message had been deliberately sent using fossilized technology in this day and age. However, if she considered things calmly, there were several points that made no sense in this interpretation.

Marie sighed before licking her lips. “If that transmission had really been addressed to my location, then there are—conditions—for someone to be capable of sending it.”

“Right. The first is obviously that he would have had to know that the princess was still alive and in Kyoto. And second...”

“That someone would also have to know that there was someone with the capabilities to receive that message—in other words, Halter—by my side.” Marie nodded as she took over for Halter.

Hearing their exchange, Naoto spoke up, seeming to have remembered something. “Ah, I see. You said earlier that those who work ‘certain jobs’ still use wireless transmission even now, right old man?”

“It’s not really like it’s standard equipment, but yeah.” Halter nodded with a wry smile. “It isn’t really an uncommon function for cyborgs who dedicate themselves to special—illegal—activities. I have it as well. Any cyborg who’s a covert operative or part of an infiltration unit somewhere probably has it.”

Moreover, Halter thought, *someone with access to such an artificial body would easily be able to get a hold of information on us.*

—Marie Bell Breguet had died, and the terrorist behind the information leak remained unknown. However, this was nothing more than P.R.

For a respectable intelligence agency—for example, the intelligence department of one of the Five Great Corporations—Marie and Halter's current whereabouts and identities were the same as open secrets.

"Of course, the possibility that it really is a prank isn't zero. The sender might have sent it in every direction over the course of many transmissions. Or, the intended addressee might not have been Marie to begin with. Be that as it may, given what the situation is here, let's forget about that for now and reassess things from the premise."

Marie nodded. "So basically, the question is—why did the sender choose to use an electromagnetic wave to send his message, right?" she pondered.

Let's erase the assumption that Halter had merely received the transmission by chance from the premise for now.

In the first place, unauthorized use of electromagnetic waves is a felony.

The risk was too high for a simple prank message that, for all he knew, might not even be received.

Crossing her arms, Marie pinched her small chin.

In that case, the first possibility that comes to mind is—"...A trap?"

"If that's the case, then it's awfully sloppy." Halter immediately rejected that interpretation, glancing at Naoto. "Which is precisely why I had determined that it being a prank was more likely. After all, even if we took the bait, it would have been impossible to trace the transmission back to its source if it weren't for Naoto."

"...I see, so from the culprit's perspective, we would have lacked the information necessary for him to successfully lure me out."

"Well, before that, there's also the fact that you're the only one who would work yourself up over a message like this, princ— Excuse my impertinence, let's continue," Halter had muttered quietly, but held his tongue upon noticing Marie's prickly gaze.

“In that case... perhaps it’s a warning. Or maybe—”

“Are you thinking it might be a tip-off? Even if that’s the case, it isn’t a good enough reason for him to have deliberately used a short-wave transmission.” Halter shrugged his shoulders. No matter what kind of message it was, it would only have meaning if it reached the intended reader. Even if it was a tip-off, there would still be no reason to deliberately take on unnecessary risk by using an electromagnetic wave.

“In that case,” Marie raised her head up, “what about the possibility that him using an electromagnetic wave was, itself, some kind of message?”

“Wouldn’t that be too roundabout? Why not just write things out clearly? Or, if he wanted to hide the message, he could just encrypt it into code.”

“Then... maybe he had no choice?”

“In just what kind of situation would you find yourself in these days where you can use electromagnetic transmissions but not gear transmissions...” Halter groaned as he sighed.

Upon which, Naoto, who had been silent up to now, suddenly raised his hand. Surfacing a smile, he said in one breath, “I see—all the riddles have been solved!”

“.....”

Upon his words, Marie and Halter looked at Naoto with suspicious gazes. Seeing their gazes, Naoto turned serious, muttering, “What’s with the cold reaction...”

“Well, I mean, you know...” Troubled as to what to say, Halter turned his eyes away from Naoto.

Marie sighed. “Say what you’re thinking just in case, I guess. We’ll listen.” She urged him to continue with a voice that sounded like she didn’t have even a shred of faith in him.

Naoto nodded before declaring, full of confidence, “In other words—all this means that there might be an InitialY Series automaton here right?!”

“.....” Marie closed her eyes and thought about what Naoto had said. After

thoroughly mulling his words,

“—So, Naoto...”

“Yeah?” Naoto replied, proudly puffing up his chest.

Marie smiled gently at him as if she were looking at a kindergartener, “Your conclusion doesn’t follow what we were just saying in the slightest. I’ve thought that your head was funny since the first time we met, but have the screws of your brain finally popped off for good? Don’t worry, I’m sure you’ll become better if you take your medicine... Probably, just a little.”

“No, listen to me, seriously. Doesn’t it make sense if you think about things normally?” Naoto grumbled with his eyes half-closed.

Marie sighed, “How? I have no idea why you brought that name up—”

“—I see, so that was the scenario,” RyuZU suddenly interjected. “The goal of the sender was to extract information for his employer, but he was in a situation where he couldn’t do so. As far as a possible reason for such a situation to have occurred is concerned—I see, that is a possibility.”

Marie furrowed her eyebrows suspiciously. *What is this automaton even saying? Naoto spewing nonsense out of left field is nothing new, but at the very least, RyuZU should have a proper head on her shoulders, putting aside her abusive verbal filter and her absurd functionality, in any case...*

Halter said what Marie was thinking. “...Hey RyuZU, maybe I’m stupid, but I don’t get what you’re saying at all...”

“Yes, that is certainly the case. There is no need to be depressed about it, however. The very fact that you are aware of your own stupidity shows that you are at least superior to the typical flea in some respects, Mr. Junkbot,” RyuZU asserted without even cracking a smile. She then narrowed her eyes. “It seems likely to me that this sender encountered my younger sister.”

“—Huh?”

Everyone’s gaze was focused onto RyuZU.

“You were just saying so yourselves, were you not? That electromagnetic transmission is not an uncommon function among cyborgs who pursue illegal

activities. And that the sender deliberately used short-wave transmission out of necessity. If we accept those assumptions, we can infer that he was not in a normal situation—in other words, that he was in the middle of a mission.”

RyuZU continued to weave her words together dispassionately.

“Most likely, the sender had acquired some sort of classified information, but had become unable to escape due to some unforeseen circumstance. As a last resort, he sent an encrypted message to Mistress Marie. Does that not sound possible? Lastly, that would mean that something that could force him into such a predicament must have been present.”

“Ohh, as expected of RyuZU! Right right, that’s what I wanted to say!” Naoto nodded merrily.

However, Halter stroked his chin, looking unconvinced. “In other words... you’re saying that that ‘something’ is an InitialY Series automaton?”

“My, do you have an objection of some sort?”

“I’ve got nothing but objections. There are a myriad of situations that could arise during a mission that would make escape impossible. —In the first place, what reason would a covert operative have to do something as random as sending information to our princess in the middle of an operation. The sender isn’t someone affiliated with the Breguets, you know? I’m willing to bet on that.”

“I do not know that much, nor do I think it is a particularly important detail.”

“But isn’t that the biggest mystery...?” Halter groaned.

However, Marie nodded next to him. “But it’s true that, if the sender were a covert operative in the middle of an operation—under that assumption, there would be an adequate explanation as to why he used short-wave transmission instead of a more standard transmission by resonant gears.”

“Oy, princess.”

“Their reasoning might have skipped a few steps, but it does check out. If we also leave the question of why he had addressed the message to me aside for now, the only question that would remain is—what is the true intent behind

that message?”

That message, the transmission that was the reason for Marie coming here in the first place. That was—

—Hey, harlot.

I see that you’ve been getting awfully cocky for the ghost of a bratty girl. What’s wrong, is your pussy feeling lonely without the attention?

No need to worry, there’re a bunch of small guys with surprisingly big cocks here waiting impatiently that can give you the bang you’re lusting for.

Shake your cute little ass and beg for it and they just might do you the favor, bitch.—

RyuZU stated the message smoothly, as if playing back Halter’s recorded voice.

The vein beside Marie’s temple swelled conspicuously as she menacingly laughed, “—Even if there really is beneficial information encrypted in this, I’m still going to hang this guy, after all.”

RyuZU continued with a serious face, “However, Master Naoto, with all due respect: Is there really a secret message in this? Though he may have poor character, are his eyes not truly keen? No matter how I think about it, it seems to me that this letter contains nothing but truth.”

“Do you want to be smashed into pieces?! I’m a virgin!”

“...wow—”

“guh...”

It had been an outdoor proclamation of virginity in a very loud voice. Marie turned her face away, flushing bright red from anger and shame. Her tightly clenched fist was trembling. Placing his hands on her shoulders to hold her back if necessary, Halter advanced the conversation. “...Well, let’s assume that deduction is correct and try thinking about things from there. First, that section —what was it, ‘small guys with big cocks waiting to bang you’? It’s clearly a strange section.”

Crossing his arms, Naoto opened his mouth, “If you think about it normally—

well, it's gotta be that. Small guys with big... dicks."

"It can also mean 'rooster' or 'stopcock,' but yeah." Halter smiled wryly before continuing, "Apart from that, it can also mean 'nonsense' or 'weather vane'—it can also be used to mean a 'whim' as a secondary meaning based on those two primary definitions. Additionally, though I don't really want to think about it, when I was in the army..." Halter broke off there.

Marie looked like she was still agitated from before. She urged him on while glaring upward at him obliquely, **"What?"**

"...It was used to refer to firing hammers."

"＿＿＿"

Silence fell.

Marie narrowed her eyes, looked downwards, and placed her right hand onto her chest. "...In other words, a gun that's small but has gigantic firepower?"

"Yeah. But let me just say that you won't find many guns that use firing hammers these d—"

"I know. 'Cocking'—an antique gun, right? A small but high caliber, antique firearm. Armament..." While muttering as if singing a rhyme, Marie suddenly turned her gaze towards RyuZU who was standing right next to her.

"...? Yes?" RyuZU tilted her head.

Without answering her, Marie licked her lips.

—The First of the InitialY Series.

An antique automaton that could destroy modern arms with extraordinary ease. *...Don't tell me, that what this secret message really means is*— "A small body with a big cock... A small but powerful weapon...?"

The instant RyuZU heard Marie's mutter, she surfaced a sweet smile onto her face. She then pinched up the sides of her skirt—sinister sounds of gears rang out from the hem. "Mistress Marie, to claim that I am equipped with a male reproductive organ—I am deeply sorry for not having noticed how tired you were of life. I shall humbly grant you your wish at once."

What flew out along with those words was a black scythe that could easily cut through even a heavily-armored automaton. Marie raised both hands, shrieking, “Wait, sto—?! T-T, THAT’S NOT IT!!!”

Don’t tell me... she thought as she turned her gaze towards Naoto. What lay on the boy’s face was—a somewhat blank expression, but if one were to look at it from another angle, one could interpret his expression as nonchalant, even arrogant. *Had this guy ended up with the same conjecture as me purely on instinct?*

Marie squinted her eyes in suspicion. *There are holes to this. I can think of any number of objections, and the logic behind it is definitely a little loose. Even so, I can’t deny that it’s possible. It’s just that it’s both incredibly absurd and highly unlikely.*

That meant that the possibility of it being the case was not zero. And more than anything else, his odd, even unnatural, thinking that led him to reach this conclusion in an instant—Marie had seen something similar to it before.

Her older sister—but also a few of the Meisters that she had once worked with—were this type. People who judged things from their intuition. Those who, rather than arriving at the answer through a process of logical deduction and verification, found the right answer with one big leap. People who possessed extraordinary judgment...

Their assertions always came more or less out of nowhere. Even so, if one inspected one of their conjectures closely, one would find that it would be nearly fully correct. If Naoto Miura, someone who possessed a sense that was in the realm of the supernatural was that type of person, wouldn’t his intuition be extremely close to the truth?

Marie groaned internally. She then opened her mouth, admitting, “—Though it’s absurd, there really may be an InitialY Series here.”

“Oy princess, are you serious?” Halter spoke up.

Returning his exasperated gaze with her own, Marie held up her hands. “It’s not like I know where all the InitialY Series automata are. I just can’t deny the possibility of one of them being here.”

“I mean, it’s not like this has to be referring to an InitialY Series. I think there are many other possible interpretations... Don’t you think you’re assuming a bit too much?”

“I’m well aware of that. I’m simply saying that I can’t completely deny the possibility. In practice—” Marie said, turning her gaze towards the city below her. According to Naoto, the city had already died. It was a paper mache city, one that had already had its gears pulled out. “...We have no choice but to infiltrate those factories and check, if we’re really going to know for sure.”

“Oohh! In other words, we’re going to search for an InitialY Series! Marie, I’ll be participating in the sandbag punching as well, got it? Encountering RyuZU’s cute little sister before me, how envioutrageous! We’re going, RyuZU!” Naoto’s inner fire was blazing, his desire at full throttle.

Seeing him like that, Marie swayed her shoulders. “You never break from character do you...”

Standing next to her, Halter lowered his head slightly to say, “...I can’t recommend taking action while we’re uncertain of the information.”

Marie nodded at Halter’s respectful warning; however, she then shook her head. “...Whatever the case may be, it doesn’t change the fact that someone in a position to know about our situation sent us a transmission that normally would have been untraceable from this abnormal place.”

“Yes, that’s true, but...”

“It might not be an InitialY Series. But the chance that the message was intended as a trap or warning is low. As such, that message might really have been an offering of information from someone at his wit’s end.”

“...You’re surprisingly cool and collected, aren’t you princess?”

Marie nimbly lifted just one eyebrow. “Don’t tell me that you thought that a provocation like that could actually piss me off.”

“I did, actually. Was I wrong?”

“Do you even need to ask? —Of course, I *am* going to kill whoever sent the message, but...”

Halter rolled his eyes.

Seeing that, Marie snorted, turning her chin away, “It’s not like I’m acting on emotion. We’re talking about your experience and my finesse alongside Naoto’s senses and RyuZU’s combat potential. With this lineup, infiltrating an industrial facility should be a piece of cake, no? We can just promptly turn back if nothing turns up after we gently probe around.”

“...Hmm.” Halter nodded, crossing his arms and stroking his chin. It was as Marie had said. It wasn’t like she was talking about trying to infiltrate a military base. If they put the abilities of everyone who was present here to use, infiltrating a common factory should be easy.

If they acquired more information, they would be able to plan out their next move, and even if their hypothesis ended up being wrong, they wouldn’t lose anything. *However,* Halter thought, *while I can’t refute this—I can’t consent to it either.*

It wasn’t because their conjecture was preposterous. That wasn’t the problem. Regardless of what he thought himself, if Marie was convinced that there was a possibility that it was true, then he was certain that her line of reasoning was the correct one.

Even so, though he couldn’t express the reason for his reluctance in words, the back of his neck felt intolerably tingly.

—I have a bad feeling about this.

This wasn’t the intuition that Naoto had displayed, nor the analytical logic that Marie had used. If he had put it into words, it was the sum of his life experience.

As someone who had run through a field showered with bullets—an otherwise normal person who marched through scenes of carnage where life meant nothing and lived to tell the tale—he possessed a vague sixth sense for danger that belonged only to cowards. Just as easily, however, could one dismiss it as simple paranoia.

In truth, Marie’s assessment of their capabilities wasn’t incorrect. Marie was a genius-level ex-Meister. In addition to her being well-versed in martial arts, if

she used her Coil Spear, it goes without saying that she'd be able to deal with a typical combat automaton without a problem.

Halter himself was a full-body cyborg whose configuration made good use of the Breguet Corporation's cutting-edge technology. Most problems could easily be solved by the two of them alone—

On top of that, they had Naoto's detection that saw through even "Goliath," the state-of-the-art stealth weapon of the Vacherons.

And finally, they had RyuZU—Placed against the overwhelming power characteristic of an InitialY Series automaton, any weapon would surely be powerless.

As Marie had said, there wasn't a single problem anywhere. ...However, no matter how many times he confirmed that for himself, Halter's unease just wouldn't dissipate.

●

The place was a giant factory right around the center of the heavy industrial zone on the outskirts of the city. Though nearly everything inside this industrial district had come to a halt; it was the one factory that was still operating, albeit just barely. As for what kind of factory it was, not even Marie could tell from just its exterior. Having identified its location thanks to Naoto's hearing, the four of them observed the factory from a distance atop a steel pylon.

Security guards wearing military uniforms were constantly patrolling the factory's perimeters. Marie was peeking at them from their vantage point while lying prone. "I guess I shouldn't be surprised to see some human personnel here, even if the rest of the city is deserted."

"Well, all things considered, they can't just leave the security completely to automata," Halter replied as he turned around to see Naoto facing the ground with his eyes closed. He wasn't wearing his trademark headphones right now. With his superpowered hearing that allowed him to converse with others through 100% noise-cancelling headphones———Naoto was mapping out the facility below them.

Naoto spoke without opening his eyes, "...It's definitely a big facility. It looks

normal on the outside, but the walls are pretty dang thick, the workspace area's abundant too. The factory's also connected to various other places from underground. Its lowest floor is unnaturally spacious and... Huh? There's 'something' down there, but it's inoperational."

Marie turned towards Naoto, furrowing her brows. "What do you mean 'something.'"

"Well, it's not operating so I can't tell... but it's seriously huge whatever it is. This—building?—is practically the size of an entire neighborhood."

"...I see, sounds suspicious. So, can you find a path for us to enter through?"

"Well, I can tell you where the structure is and the positions of the surveillance devices and security guards."

"That's plenty, please do." While nodding lightly, Marie unfolded a blank map in her mind. Doing so, she filled out that blank map and identified an infiltration route based on Naoto's report. After acquiring the necessary information, Marie slowly stood up. Halter, who was standing next to her, picked her small body up with just one arm. Marie didn't mind; her eyes remained focused on the clockboard of the watch she wore on her wrist. —She took a breath...

"Now."

He jumped. The direct distance from their position to the rooftop of the target factory was about a hundred meters. Halter covered that distance in a single leap. A small thud rang out as Halter landed on the concrete rooftop. A moment after, RyuZU soundlessly caught up to them with Naoto in her arms.

Inside of the factory made with reinforced concrete the passageways were broad so as to allow for the easy moving of equipment. Light gears installed at regular distances from each other brightly illuminated the entire network of passageways.

A young man in a white lab coat who appeared to be a researcher was walking alongside a small, four-legged automaton through one of the passageways. The man, who had been looking down at the bundle of papers in his hands as he walked, suddenly stopped. Matching him, the automaton by his feet also stopped. He turned around. There was nothing there.

The man tilted his head, then sighed. *It felt like someone was watching me, but it was just my imagination, huh.* Smiling bitterly, he faced forward again, before hearing the word— “Bonsoir,” in fluent French. Surprised, the man swung himself around to see a beautiful blond-haired girl smiling at him.

The man opened his eyes wide, unable to say anything in response. The defense automaton next to him that had been built to deal with any situation, however, revealed a gun from inside itself and announced a warning in a robotic voice, “In.tru.ders. de.tect.ted.” Immediately after, the man fainted after being struck at the nape of his neck from behind. Simultaneously, the automaton by his feet was torn into scrap iron pieces.

“Bonne nuit,” Marie whispered, seeing the man and the robot sprawled out on the floor.

Seeing the young man he had knocked out before him, Halter stroked his head, “—Oy, isn’t this too easy?”

It’d already been ten minutes since they had infiltrated the factory—though one could also say that it’d *only* been ten minutes—in any case, the four of them had easily made their way to the elevator that led to the deepest parts of the facility. It’s not that the security up to this point had been lax. Quite the opposite, it had been much too tight for an ordinary factory. Despite that, Marie shrugged her shoulders at Halter with a face that said “obviously.”

“Why are you surprised? Naoto not only pinpointed the positions of the guards and the surveillance devices, but even informed us of the building’s floorplan. There might as well be no security at all.” Marie continued speaking over her shoulder. “...Those ears of yours really are convenient aren’t they. I think you’d be dissected for research if the world found out about your ability.”

Actually, I wouldn’t mind doing so myself. Marie glanced at Naoto, who was straddling RyuZU’s back, but he didn’t reply. It was RyuZU who had torn the security automaton to pieces. Because Naoto was the only one whose physical ability was below average among them, they had decided to have RyuZU carry him so he could focus purely on his hearing without them having to worry about him becoming tired or out of position, but...

“.....”

At the moment, he was ogling something right next to him just below RyuZU's shoulders. Considering how outstretched his neck was, it was obvious what he was focusing on. Marie addressed him with a smile that took all her effort. "Mis.ter. Na~oto—?"

"—Huh? Ah, no, I wasn't thinking about it. I wasn't wondering at all whether RyuZU would let me touch her boobs, you know, seriously, I mean it!" Naoto spun off an obvious lie.

RyuZU replied with a composed face, "—If Master Naoto wishes to eliminate his carnal passions which resemble those of a beast, then by all means, grope them to your heart's content. I have no objection to it."

"Eh, really?! But if you say it like that, my desire weakens somehow. Ahh, my boyish heart feels so conflicted—"

"No one cares, so could you two put that off for later?" Marie muttered, throwing them a freezing stare with her eyes half-closed in disgust. She pointed at the double door at the end of the passageway. There was a panel of buttons on the wall next to the doors which were firmly shut. This was a high-security elevator that couldn't be used unless one entered the correct password.

"Well?"

"—Its structure is the same as the one that was on the previous floor. If you unfasten the thirty-sixth hook from the right of the fourth inner layer, it'll open."

"Got it," Marie replied briefly before flashing her hands about. Immediately after, the panel next to the doors was removed in an instant and screws began to float in the air as if there were no gravity.

On the inside of the wall was a multi-layered clockwork padlock. Normally, this kind of lock would take even an experienced clocksmith several hours of cautious work to unlock. However, Marie stuck her hands in indifferently. At the same time, the thirty-sixth hook from the right of the fourth inner layer—a part the size of one's pinky nail—was unfastened with surgical precision before the panel was closed as if nothing had happened. With the whooshing sound of her hands, the door was opened like a magic trick. It had only taken an instant.

“Alright, let’s go. It’s under where we’re standing, right?”

“Yeah.” Naoto nodded without hesitation.

Confirming that, Marie boarded the elevator exultantly. Observing everything from the rear, Halter, the last one to board the elevator, inadvertently sighed.

—The detection device that could expose the facility’s security more perfectly than any sonar no matter how advanced, Naoto.

—The clocksmith who disarmed the security at a godly speed based on that information, Marie.

—The force that destroyed even heavily-armored automata without allowing even a single counterattack, RyuZU.

With this group as one’s opponent, any level of security and vigilance would be completely meaningless. Even if this was the headquarters of one of the Five Great Corporations, they could probably infiltrate it easily.

No security system could last longer than ten seconds with Naoto and Marie as its opponents. As for physical barriers without a disabling password, they were sundered in less than a second by RyuZU’s scythe. The latest traps and surveillance devices were meaningless as well. They were immediately detected, dismantled, and destroyed. As for the patrolling guards, researchers, and automata, they were either slipped by or incapacitated.

Even though they were infiltrating a facility with such a tight web of security, these three were behaving like they were on an educational field trip.

...If this isn’t cheating, then what is?

If I had seen this back when I was in the army, I’m sure I would have retired immediately.

...However, it still won’t go away.

If anything, the prickly unease that coiled around his neck was tightening ever more. Inside the elevator that was descending deep underground to the lowest floor of the facility, Marie studied Halter’s expression. “What’s wrong, Halter? Your face looks gloomy.”

“...It’s nothing.” Halter shook his head, yet his eyebrows furrowed.

The infiltration is going well, true. Actually, it's going so well that I'm taken aback even... Yet, what is this mysterious sensation—no, I should stop pretending. Halter let out a deep sigh quietly. *The truth is, I know what this is. I've felt this sensation before. This is—that's right...*

The deja vu of the thoroughly equipped unit that he had been inside advancing forward, everyone's minds complacent from seeing the enemy's weak resistance. *—This is exactly the kind of time when something unexpected happens. For example, yes... it was just like this when, before we knew it, we had plunged into the enemy's kill zone.* Halter had a feeling that a terrible situation like that was waiting for them—correction, he had the **conviction**.

"Ah, wait... I hear something," Naoto began suddenly, cupping his ears with his hands.

"What do you mean by something?" Marie asked.

"The sounds are difficult to discern, they're pretty soft, but... the aggregate sounds of the missing parts? —No, there are way more sounds than that."

"From where?"

"Roughly—around 74,850 meters below maybe."

"Around seventy-five kilometers underground...? That's impossible," Marie immediately rejected.

Naoto pouted, "Why?"

"Because there's nothing down there. That's below even the base of the core tower. When the Clockwork Planet was created, this planet's crust and mantle were used to make the enormous municipal gears, you know?

"As such, this planet is hollow. If there was something down there, it would be the cooled core of the planet at best—" Marie paused, seeming to have suddenly realized something, before muttering, "If that's the case, I can only think that there's a floor that was added on after the Clockwork Planet had already been created."

After about an hour and a half, the elevator arrived at the lowest part of the facility. The four of them exiting the opening double doors saw a plate on the

wall right next to the elevator that read, “The 25th Floor.” As far as Marie knew, this was the deepest floor in Mie Grid.

Beginning right outside the elevator, this floor was a spacious atrium. By the ceilings and walls were exposed gears operating systematically. The area was as bright as noon thanks to the radiance of the light gears embedded in the walls. Naoto slowly shuffled his feet, walking towards the center of the area. There, he turned around and kicked the floor lightly.

“It’s under here. As expected, there’s a hollow space... and ‘something’ underneath.”

Marie silently looked down at the floor where Naoto was standing. There was a metal panel affixed to the ground. Below that should be a protective layer then the outer shell of the building. Any floor beyond these layers would be a very deep underground level—in other words, it would be a floor that should be below the municipal gear.

Naoto was saying that there’s something there.

“...To confirm, you’re certain that there’s one more floor below this one, right?”

“Yeah, there’s no doubt about it. I don’t know where the entrance is though.” Naoto nodded.

Nodding back, Marie squinted. “That floor is probably connected to the core tower. Where we are is simply the base of the city and nothing more, so there wouldn’t be an entrance to a floor below the city around here to begin with.”

“Then, what are we gonna do?”

“Let’s rip the floor here to shreds then descend,” Marie said nonchalantly. “If it’s just this much, even my Coil Spear should be enough to dig out a hole. Stand back.”

“No, wait, the depth of the floor below is... -327.3 meters, you know?”

“...Just how big is it, jeez. I assume that RyuZU can carry you down, but... it’d be too much for Halter’s legs, no matter how strong they are. Let’s use an anchor wire.”

“...Roger.” Answering briefly, Halter narrowed his eyes. His expression was stiff as he continued to stay on guard. “Stay focused, princess. I’ve been smelling danger for some time now.”

“I know. This isn’t normal no matter how you look at it.” Marie nodded, then flashed her Coil Spear.

They dove into the hole she had created. It was a free fall of over three hundred meters—despite that, RyuZU elegantly adjusted her stance in midair while carrying Naoto and landed silently as if it was nothing. A few seconds after, Halter landed with Marie in his arms, having rappelled by wire. Jumping out of Halter’s arms, Marie blinked again and again.

“...It’s so dark.”

It was pitch black without a single light. Forget the face of Halter who was standing next to her, she couldn’t even make out her own arms and legs. Looking up at the ceiling from where they came, there was a large, glowing hole that looked like a full moon in the midst of this all this darkness.

Naoto began, seeming timid, “—Hey, Marie, this is...”

“Wait a second. I’m not a pervert like you who can tell everything through just sound, ya know. Let me put up some light first, alright?” Having whispered that, Marie transformed her Coil Spear with a swing of her hand. Pointing the muzzle up high, she fired a flare. In an instant, the vast space became buried in light as bright as noon by means of the device’s violently turning flash gears.

At that moment, something emerged from the darkness.

“—What kind of a joke is this,” Halter groaned, seeing the sight before him. *Why can’t my bad premonitions ever end up being wrong?*

“...What, is this...” Marie widened her eyes, flabbergasted.

Halter clicked his tongue, “It’s obvious isn’t it.”

He took a deep breath.

“—It’s something nefarious that’s going to be used for another fucked up scheme. Sons of bitches!” Halter glared at it through his heavily shaded glasses.

—What was there was mountains of steel.

That was the only way to describe it.

It was enormous, simply too enormous, way too enormous no matter how one looked at it. Anyone who saw it would only be able to comprehend it as such. Try as one might, it simply wasn't possible to capture the entirety of its form in one's field of vision.

As Marie took it in, somehow keeping a perspective in mind despite its massiveness—she thought that it looked like a spider.

A terrifyingly enormous, multi-legged—automaton, probably.

This thing moving was so implausible that it would be insane to believe it ever could; however, as far as the ex-Meister Marie could tell, at the very least, its exterior structure was made to do so. Even so—its mammoth size exceeded the realm of sanity by miles.

Even just the joints of its folded legs were each the size of a skyscraper. Those legs were covered entirely in black plating that looked like the scales of a fish and were equipped with an absurd number of cannons sticking out through countless gunports.

As for the trunk of its body, its size was as big as a full-sized aircraft carrier. Like its legs, the exterior was also clad with countless protruding cannons that covered every inch of it like the fur of a hedgehog.

Marie didn't need to rely on Naoto's hearing to tell. There was no room for doubt that this was—a preposterous weapon.

She opened her mouth, squeezing out, "—Halter, you know the Military Force Limitations Agreement that was established by the International Grid Management Organization? ...I wonder if you remember what its first article says?"

"'All research, manufacture, and possession of weapons of mass destruction that could inflict fatal damage to the municipal gears—and consequently, the planet's mechanisms, therein threatening humanity's habitat—are permanently banned,' right?"

"...So, why am I seeing this joke of a thing that looks like a superdreadnought WMD in front of me? There wasn't something in my coffee, was there? Is this

just my imagination?" Marie lied to herself. Her voice was dry and cracking.

"Yeah, unless it's paper mache, you're probably right on the money," Halter replied, his voice shaky.

As the two of them stood frozen, Naoto threw something at the gigantic weapon. Something the size of his palm, maybe an iron scrap, spun in the air before hitting the plating of the weapon. *Clonk.* The sound resounded in the air. After the small echoes had completely faded away, Naoto said, "...Miss Marie, Mr. Halter, I probably don't need to tell you this considering you two are professionals, but can I say it anyway?"

"...What?"

"We're in a staggeringly dangerous situation right now, you know?"

"Yup, we know," Marie replied. While gazing at the ceiling in a daze, she continued, "Now then, Mr. Naoto. Could we hear your expert opinion on the situation? As a someone with your ability—what kind of danger are we in?"

"...First, I can assure you that this was where the missing parts of the hollow clock tower went."

Upon those words, Marie swallowed her breath. *—So the parts of an entire clock tower were diverted to make a weapon, huh.*

"I see... so this is the city's 'cause of death.'"

"I thought the Japanese's fondness for giant robots was in reference to a thousand years ago..." Halter groaned as he stroked his bald head.

However, Naoto shook his head and went on, "But, even that's not enough. I can't clearly tell because this thing isn't in operation, but—at the very least, it's using six times the number of parts needed to make up the missing sounds."

Marie raised a hand above her eyes, still remaining silent. Narrowing her eyes and shading them from the flare's light, she glared at the all too gigantic weapon, trying to gauge its depth.

"Naoto, I can't get an overview of this thing, it's just too big. Can you tell how big it is?"

"Look here, do you think I'm a sensor or someth—?

“Just answer me!”

“It’s not in operation so I can’t tell exactly, but judging from the respective sounds I hear from the gear closest to us and the one furthest away, I would estimate its height to be about 320 meters and its depth to be 932 meters... Damn! Adding to that, it seems like it’s fully ready to start up at any time!! ———Shit!” Naoto panicked, pointing diagonally to his left. “There are forty-two sets of human footsteps, and eighteen sets of unnaturally heavy footsteps filled with killing intent coming right at us us!!”

—*Found us out, huh?* Marie ground her teeth. *But it doesn’t matter, whatever this weapon may be, we can’t just leave it as is.*

“RyuZU.”

“You are acting unduly familiar toward me, but yes, what is it?”

“—Can you destroy this thing’s exterior with your scythe?”

RyuZU silently tilted her head as she pointed her eyes towards the gigantic weapon’s plating. With a flutter of her skirt, a scythe extended forward at a speed that couldn’t be visually recognized.

—As a sharp, clear sound rang out, sparks flew.

“?!” RyuZU’s eyes widened in surprise at the rare occasion.

Scrutinizing her black scythe and the construct’s plating that had received just a mere scratch, she compared them with each other before curling her lips. “...This is most surprising. It appears that even with humanity’s mosquito-sized brains, something meaningful can unexpectedly be accomplished if one trains their minds toward the singular purpose of making something ‘very hard’ and nothing else—this is a new discovery.”

Marie asked with a suspicious squint, “—So can you destroy it or not?”

“Mistress Marie, to think that your intellect was so deplorable that you would have to ask whether a kitchen knife can cut through tungsten alloy—”

“Start with a yes or no!!” Marie cut RyuZU off as she began to scramble. “Hurry up and snatch something, documents, schematics, anything that’s proof of its existence! We’re getting out of here!”

“Wai, wha, are we just going to leave this thing as is?!” Naoto yelled out from behind her.

Marie shouted back without turning around, “What do you expect me to do against something that that piece of junk made with futuristic technology can barely even scratch?!”

“But isn’t this thing absurdly dangerous?!”

“I’m a clocksmith, not a mercenary!”

This isn’t a joke, you know? Marie thought. *...That’s right, this absolutely isn’t a joke. How? Just who exactly is supposed to be able to deal with a monster like this?*

In modern municipal warfare, the strongest deployable weapons are, undoubtedly, heavily-armored automata. When considering the main model in current use, that it would be unable to match the offensive capabilities of the behemoth shouldn’t come as a surprise. The construct’s unmatched defensive capabilities were what was truly alarming.

For starters, the fact that RyuZU’s scythe could easily cut through the armor of heavily-armored automata was already absurd, but...

You’re telling me that a swing of her scythe did absolutely nothing to this monster?

In other words, by process of elimination, there are no existing weapons of modern warfare that can do anything to it either.

—Well, even if this conclusion is a bit hasty, at the very least, weapons made for intracity warfare have no chance of damaging that plating.

However, weapons that were made for extracity warfare—conceived for wars conducted on uninhabited domains—were a different story. The weapons at the upper limit of permissible military force established by the International Grid Management Organization—for example, resonant cannons or heavy artillery that fired ultra-high frequency shells might be able to destroy it. Or, if one of the limited massive projectile weapons were used, it would surely be possible to destroy any type of plating.

However—the problem was this thing's size.

If the large-scale weapons of extracity warfare were used to destroy something as enormous as this— "If it comes to that, there's no way the city would escape unscathed... Tch!" Marie spat out as she clenched her fists tightly. *However, in the first place, what was this thing made for?*

It was a weapon. As such, it was surely to be used for some military goal. However, weapons could have different "personalities" but be otherwise the same. Weapons were tools that cost a tremendous amount of money and labor, so they were generally made with a concrete concept in mind. For example, to invade others, to defend the homeland, or to deter enemies by simply existing, and so on.

...I feel like this gigantic weapon doesn't fit any of those categories...

If an automaton of that size really started up, it's clear what would happen as a result. Whether it be to invade or defend, if something like that moved around, the city would be battered to pieces. Even as a deterrent, its size was much too unnecessarily large. Feeling as if she had been plunged into total darkness, Marie groaned. *Disregarding the weapon's intended use—*

If that thing moves, the city will be destroyed.

It's possible to destroy it before that happens.

However, if we do that, the city will be destroyed along with it just the same.

—In that case, that means that that's just the kind of weapon it is.

"Tch... What a joke..."*A weapon made to destroy cities? No, this is none other than a weapon made to destroy the world.*

Just who was the idiot that made such a thing, and for what purpose? ...We need to gather information to figure that out as well.

The identity of the enemy and their goal, the weapon's structure, its weak points, and its capabilities in detail—There was a mountain of things that Marie needed to investigate. *I have to find the blueprint documents and communication records someh—*

"Hm...?"

“—Stop, princess,” Halter said with a sharp, still voice.

Only the two of them had noticed *her* presence.

●

The one standing there was a little girl.

It took a second before Marie managed to respond, “—A child?”

No. She’s an automaton.

A little doll girl smaller and daintier than even Marie, who was petite herself. She was wearing a formal dress dyed red and white and her arms and legs were encased in silver armor. A pendant in the shape of a cube dangled by her chest and a ring made of two half-gears rested above her head like the halo of an angel.

The girl’s face was the avatar of innocence and purity; however, it was covered by a black, uncouth mask.

—That black mask was singularly ominous somehow.

Sweat traced Marie’s forehead as she felt a chill in her spine. Halter quietly stepped out in front of her and held up his fists, at the ready to protect her. Out of context, it might have looked like a bizarre spectacle. A large, cyborg man was on the highest possible alert, and had taken a measured fighting stance against a little automaton girl.

However, Marie didn’t find Halter’s reaction strange or unnatural at all. After all, Marie herself—facing the automaton in front of her who looked like nothing but an adorable child—was so scared that she hadn’t been able to breathe since she first saw her.

RyuZU stepped forward in front of both of them with a smile on her face, “My —you are AnchoR after all. It has been a while, has it not?”

“Huh...? This girl is AnchoR-chan?” Naoto asked with widened eyes as he tilted his head. “Based on what Marie said, isn’t AnchoR-chan supposed to be in Tokyo?”

“I interpreted what she said that way as well. However, in the end, it seems like it was a mistake to have swallowed information from someone like Mistress

Marie at face value. ...In any case, what is with that mask, AnchoR? I must say, it is a bit much for good taste."

Without showing any reaction, the girl simply looked through her mask at RyuZU with a mineral gaze.

Naoto tilted his head suspiciously. *...This is her?*

The Fourth of the InitialY Series—AnchoR, "the One Who Destroys."

Considering that it was none other than RyuZU saying so, there should be no doubt that this girl was indeed AnchoR. By no means would RyuZU ever mistakenly take some other automaton to be one of her sisters.

Even so, Naoto thought. *—Something is off.*

The girl before his eyes was standing silently still. Her operational sounds were practically nonexistent; they were so quiet that even Naoto, whose ears weren't covered by his headphones, couldn't be certain that she was operating.

—There was no friction, no inconsistency, no redundancy in her mechanisms. Nothing was grating and nothing was bending. Like water trickling down, they were running in absolute harmony with her form.

Naoto had never heard such a quiet operational sound before. Considering that fact, there was no room for doubt that this girl was an automaton made with aberrant, transcendent technology.

Still, Naoto thought.*—Something's definitely off.*

He took a step back. Clenching his jaw, he glared at the girl in front of him. There was no doubt. He was sure of it. The girl before his eyes was quiet. Too quiet. Her mask was distorting her beautifully serene operating sound, ruining it.

It was like an elegant violin solo played all on a single string—something delightful forcefully twisted and distorted into a vehement, violent scream. Such a ferocious, aberrant noise enveloped the girl.

RyuZU called out her name again. "AnchoR?"

"Enemy threat level, Category Two—requesting a boost from the Power Reservoir... Approved."

The girl suddenly opened her mouth. What came out of her mouth wasn't a reply, but something much more dangerous and dreadful.

"—Initiating shift to the Third Balance Wheel of Differences."

The girl's figure transformed.

Her hair grew longer and her limbs bigger; the red of her clothes turned scarlet, and the white turned black. The ring of half-gears above her head split into two, each standing upright on one side of her head, and the cube by her chest transformed into a solid gear.

The figure of the girl who was as pure as an angel transformed into the figure of a girl who was as tainted as a demon.

"Chrono Hook—initiating output of imaginary power by means of the Perpetual Gear. Materializing."

Naoto began to hear grating noises in the aberrant sound coming from the girl as it warped greatly.

—It sounded just like a cry of anguish as the girl uttered words of imminent doom, "——'Bloody Murder'——"

The next instant.

""—Get out of the way!"" Halter and Naoto yelled out at the same time, Halter from his premonition and Naoto from his instinct.

Without questioning what Naoto's words meant, RyuZU automatically obeyed his order. She picked Naoto up and leapt backwards faster than the blink of an eye.

The girl, AnchoR, raised her hands, upon which the shape of the solid gear floating above her head changed. Immediately after,

—The air exploded.

Whatever it was, it was so overwhelming that it could only be described as such. Things that shouldn't be breakable broke and things that shouldn't be tearable tore. The noise pierced Naoto's eardrums.

Then, Naoto saw it. The spot where he and RyuZU had been standing until

just a moment ago had been annihilated. The floor, made of a complex alloy which most things wouldn't even be able to scratch, had disappeared without a trace.

"—Wha"

No way. Marie was left speechless.

Meanwhile, seeing the floor sunken into the shape of a crater, RyuZU narrowed her topaz eyes as a dark cloud came over them.

"AnchoR?" RyuZU called out her name once again. However, the tone and gaze with which she did so were no longer like how she would address someone close to her.

"——I shall give you just one chance. Explain yourself wisely. Based on your intentions behind bearing your fangs against Master Naoto, even if you are my cute little sister—"

At that point, RyuZU's emotions froze. All signs of RyuZU's human warmth receded as she became a machine who only cared about fulfilling its purpose. She threatened AnchoR in a flat, frigid voice,

"—I'll shatter you—thoroughly—beyond repair."

RyuZU's eyes turned red. That was the sign that she was initiating the native functionality that belonged only to her. However, Naoto yelled out to stop her, "Wait a second, RyuZU! That girl—she isn't functioning!"

RyuZU replied without diverting her gaze, "Even though we were just attacked?"

"That's not it; even though she's operating she isn't functioning! She's broken —no, that's not exactly it either. In any case, she isn't in a normal state!"

—He could hear it even now. The sound of gears twisting, bending, grating. Naoto knew what kind of sound this was—it was the "cry" of gears that were trying desperately to defy an overwhelming power. *It's almost as if...* Naoto turned his eyes towards AnchoR.

"—gh" His eyes met with hers through her mask.

It's not my imagination, Naoto thought. He felt it. He was sure now. This is

what the eyes behind the mask were unmistakably saying:

—*No, I don't want this!*—While despairing over being unable to convey that to anyone, while lamenting over being unable to be heard by anyone, she yelled hoarsely over and over again with her inner voice. —Big sister, please, destroy me—



“Damn it.” Naoto ground his teeth while clenching his fists. *Don’t say something so sad.*

“—Just asking to be sure. Miss, can you win against that thing?” Halter whispered. Even as he asked, his gaze didn’t leave the girl in front of him for a single moment, he fully understood that every little move of hers could lead directly to their deaths.

RyuZU replied without turning around, “...Under ‘Mute Scream’—I would say that my chances are around twenty percent.”

Silence fell upon her answer. RyuZU—the one who had single-handedly destroyed an entire battalion of cutting-edge heavily-armored automata in an instant by manipulating imaginary time—was implicitly asserting that she had almost no chance to win. The other three’s faces paled upon swallowing that fact.

Each of them recalled what RyuZU had once said:

—The Fourth of the InitialY Series... AnchoR, “the One Who Destroys.” She was the one who boasted the strongest combat ability of all automata.

Notwithstanding, RyuZU took a step forward, declaring, “There is no problem. In the worst case, I can at least hold her back long enough for Master Naoto to esc—”

“Rejected! Halter, turn right!” Naoto yelled, cutting RyuZU off.

At the same time, the cube floating above AnchoR’s head twisted once again. Responding to Naoto’s words, Halter at the ready immediately shifted into double gear and picked Marie up before jumping to the right. In an instant, the space where Halter had been standing was hollowed out.

The cube twisted further.

“RyuZU, behind you! Halter, it’s from the left!!”

While evading the silent, invisible attacks assaulting them by relying on Naoto’s instructions, Halter groaned internally. *He’s reading her attacks—? Just what can he possibly hear that would let him do that?!* He couldn’t comprehend it. However, that was their only lifeline right now. He had to entrust his life to

something he couldn't understand—Halter tasted something bitter in his mouth. The thought of that was unbearably frightening to him.

After several rounds of attacks, it appeared that AnchoR had judged this method to be fruitless. Changing strategy, the cube rotated at a fierce speed before stopping. At that moment—seeing an enormous sword appear in AnchoR's hands, Marie cried, "You've gotta be kidding me! She's capable of spatial manipulation—?!"

The all too enormous sword was terribly mismatched against her small body. It hadn't been stored through compression with clockwork technology. It had materialized from nothingness into AnchoR's hands. It was a super technology that couldn't be mimicked with current clockwork science.

—This is AnchoR's native ability? Marie's eyes opened wide. The frozen gears in her head began to turn again, accelerating.

—RyuZU can't use Mute Scream. There's no way this opponent would let RyuZU activate it. No, even if she managed to activate it somehow and defeat AnchoR, her spring would become fully unwound in doing so. It would be game over at that point.

Even Marie could now hear the enemies that Naoto had detected earlier approaching. Forty-two soldiers and eighteen military automata. If they engaged in direct combat while RyuZU was asleep, there would be no way for them to win no matter how they struggled. *Then—in that case, what do we do?!*

"RyuZU! Halter! Target the floor!" Naoto yelled.

Upon which Marie yelled, "Halter! Throw me up!"

With the enormous sword from the void in her hands—in an instant, AnchoR closed in on RyuZU at the speed of an artillery shell while spinning like a top. RyuZU evaded her attack by a paper-thin margin. At the same time, her black scythe ripped the floor below her.

Meanwhile, Marie, who had been catapulted into the air by Halter, whipped her Coil Spear around once—and shot out a high-explosive shell. Without missing its mark, the shell scored a direct hit on AnchoR just after she had

swung down her sword. A thunder-roar rang out as flames burst forth.

—Despite this, Marie thought, *AnchoR is uninjured. I'm sure of it.* She hadn't counted on the shot to injure AnchoR in the first place. Buried in flames and smoke, AnchoR couldn't be seen. At the same time, AnchoR couldn't see them either.

Halter charged, going on the offensive. From his ankles to his knees, thighs, waist, torso, shoulders, and arms—Halter shifted his entire body into double gear in unison and instantly accelerated. He threw out his fist with the utmost output a cyborg was capable of, a punch that exceeded the speed of sound—however,

Slap. A sound that was all too light rang out as AnchoR caught his fist with one hand.

Halter groaned, his lips stiffening, "...Oy oy, what kind of shock absorption mechanism are you equipped with, friend? You're gonna hurt my feelings." He let out a smile as he opened up his fist and cast the gunpowder in his hands towards AnchoR's feet.

His target was not AnchoR—but the floor itself.

It exploded.

First RyuZU's scythe, then Marie's explosive shell, and finally his directional detonation with the help of a metal jet. Even the complex alloy floor with a thickness of more than twenty meters was unable to withstand these successive attacks. As a giant crack ran through the ground, AnchoR lost her footing.

Broken metal pieces fell into the abyss from the jagged, newly-formed hole—Marie clenched the grip of her Coil Spear tightly as she watched to make sure that AnchoR really was gone. Dangling down from the anchor wire she had shot into the ceiling, she asked implicitly with her eyes, *This is what you meant, right Naoto—?!*

This was a "dock" that had been created as an add-on below even the city's lowest floor. In that case, beyond this was the hollow interior of the planet. A vacuum beyond which only the thoroughly cooled core of the Earth awaited.

RyuZU was more than capable of escaping with Naoto, and Halter could escape the explosion by firing his own anchor wire as well.

Only AnchoR would fall into the abyss along with the collapsed floor!

—However, as the floor collapsed, AnchoR became visible again. She adjusted her posture. Halter immediately reeled in his wire and transported himself to where Marie was. As he did so, AnchoR chased him with her gaze. Once again, the cube rotated, and the gigantic sword in AnchoR's hands disappeared. Replacing it was a warped pillar whose tip was twisted into the shape of three drills.

The drills began rotating fiercely—hearing their sound, Naoto gasped, "Holy crap—this sounds super bad." *I've never heard this sound before, but I do remember reading about something that operates with three drills like this. If I remember correctly, the textbook said that*—Naoto turned his face upward and yelled, "Marie! What's the phenomenon that occurs when three linked drills turn in resonance with each other?!"

Marie swallowed her breath upon Naoto's words, "—Is this a resonance cannon?! At that size?! Don't mess with me!" Marie gasped.

Normally, it would be a massive, destructive weapon that might be installed onto a heavily-plated helicopter or perhaps a destroyer. Both its firepower and the energy it required limited how compact it could be—there was no such thing as a portable version of it.

In the first place, a resonance cannon had enough firepower to cause a building to collapse with one shot. At the moment, the barrel of such a weapon was currently pointed towards Halter and Marie.

There was no time to evade it.

Should AnchoR pull the trigger, the two of them would evaporate without leaving a trace. Feeling the premonition of inescapable death, a chill ran through her stomach.

—I've gotta, I've gotta come up with something... Her mind was spinning without direction. She couldn't collect her thoughts. She couldn't come up with an answer. Her genius faltered. With the end before her eyes, she became

aware of her own helplessness.

I won't make it. There isn't enough time. Yeah, but, can this at least buy enough time for RyuZU and Naoto to escape...? Marie considered their chances in the corner of her mind when...

"—RyuZU! Stop that thinggggGGG!!" Naoto yelled.

""—Wha?!"" Marie and Halter doubted what they had just heard. However, RyuZU had faithfully dispatched her black scythe upon Naoto's words.

The scythe pierced through the barrel of the cannon that AnchoR held in her hands. Immediately after, a screech rang out as the barrel burst in an explosion. The scythe was caught up in the explosion and blown to pieces as well. During that time, Halter succeeded in covering Marie inside his embrace.

Discarding the broken cannon, AnchoR turned her gaze towards RyuZU and Naoto. Once again, the cube twisted. However, before it could finish its twists, RyuZU turned around in midair and dispatched her remaining scythe. Striking AnchoR from her blind spot, RyuZU swiped powerfully at AnchoR's feet—making AnchoR lose her footing.

However, RyuZU lost her balance in midair as she did so. "Naoto?! RyuZU?!" Marie yelled through all the debris. RyuZU tried to adjust her posture while carrying Naoto—however, with her bearings still a mess and debris continuing to fly in her face, AnchoR drew out a new cannon from the void and pointed its muzzle towards RyuZU and Naoto——— And fired.

...Watch out! Marie was about to verbalize her warning, but before she could, Naoto yelled, "RyuZU—fall faster!"

Responding to those words, RyuZU gave up on trying to find her balance in midair. She swung her scythe against the debris floating above them. Their fall accelerated because of the principle of equal and opposite reactions. Thanks to that, though AnchoR's shot grazed them, they were able to avoid a fatal hit.

However, unable to fully withstand the impact, RyuZU ended up in a tailspin and was falling down among the debris. What lay beyond was—

"Halter! The anchor wire!"

“It’s no good, princess, it won’t reach them!”

RyuZU fell into the abyss with Naoto in her arms. Marie and Halter quickly lost sight of them as the falling debris covered them up.

What lay beyond—was the core of the planet from which one could not return once one had fallen. At this point, even RyuZU was helpless. Even if she was a legendary automaton who could manipulate imaginary time, a force which remained beyond the grasp of modern technology a thousand years later—she didn’t have the ability to fly.

Narrowly managing to grasp onto the edge of the hole, AnchoR hung on, staying where she was. Her eyes were pointed downwards. She was watching RyuZU and Naoto fall into the abyss. Her face, concealed by her mask, betrayed no sign of emotion. However, the cube twisting above her head... swayed ever so slightly as it rotated.

Chapter Three *23 : 20* Avenger

—Naoto fell.

Before Marie could swallow that fact, Halter turned the gears of his artificial body to full throttle and carried his mistress away from the vicinity of the hole. As the distance between her and the abyss grew at a vehement pace, Marie yelled, “Wait! Stop Halter!”

Halter didn’t wait.

He didn’t stop.

A cutting-edge cyborg operating at full throttle—even as she struggled to breathe from the violent speed at which she was being carried, Marie swung both her hands, bashing Halter’s back. “Turn back, you idiot! We have to save those two, or else...!!”

“It’s useless,” Halter replied with a stony dispassion causing Marie to become speechless. “They fell into the great abyss, you know that. It might be one thing if it was just me or that Miss, but that isn’t an environment a human with flesh and blood can survive. You understand, don’t you?”

—Of course I know that!

Falling into the great abyss was the equivalent of falling into outer space. It was a hollow void down there. As the mantle of the Earth had been fully mined out, it had become a vacuum containing only the Earth’s cooled core. Naturally —it wasn’t an environment that humans could survive in.

However, “Are you telling me to abandon them?!” Marie yelled, clenching her fists. “I was the one who got that guy—Naoto—involved; I was the one who brought him along, you know?!”

“I’m saying that it’s futile, princess.” In contrast to Marie’s voice, Halter’s was absolutely calm and cold. He asserted decisively in a dry voice, “Naoto Miura is dead.”

“———”

“There’s no way he’s alive after falling into the great abyss. Are you going to commit suicide to confirm it? What point would there be in doing that?”

“——ugh!” Marie ground her teeth. Her passions were raging. Her fists clenched. She was assaulted by the impulse to smash something into pieces while feeling that her gut was being wrenched at the same time. “Ah—Ahh...” The corners of her eyes were heating up.

How great would it be if I could just scream and bawl my eyes out.

...But that isn’t acceptable. I can’t do that.

She had brought Naoto along, she had gotten him involved. Marie couldn’t do something as shameless as pity herself over the consequences of her actions. That wouldn’t be allowed. Marie Bell Breguet didn’t have the right to do that.

This was something she should have been prepared to face the moment she took a boy who never had any training to such a dangerous place just because he had a somewhat unique talent. As such, this was nothing but the obvious conclusion to things, an end that would have come someday, sooner or later.

“Still...!”

Even so, it should have come *someday*. For it to happen now, so suddenly—

“———”

Halter adjusted his hold of the convulsively sobbing girl before jumping. He jumped with so much force that the floor beneath him cracked as he rose twenty to thirty meters above the ground. As he reached the height of his jump, he kicked off against a pillar and jumped again just before he would begin to fall. By repeatedly springing off of pillars in a triangle, he dashed up through the empty space.

In the midst of that, “——Look at that. Lucky us.” Finding a small tunnel in the walls, Halter clung onto that stroke of luck. While taking care not to let Marie bump into anything, he slipped into the opening. Halter advanced through the passage while ducking his head. Upon reaching the end, he kicked open the shutter blocking the exit carelessly and stuck his head out. There, he found a

large shaft that extended vertically.

Its diameter was around thirty meters. It wasn't clear how far it went downwards or upwards, but along its walls was a spiral staircase. At that point, Halter stopped and lowered Marie onto the ground.

They couldn't use the path they had entered from. Their infiltration had already been discovered. A tight security web should already have been set throughout the facility. Even so, they couldn't just stay here dilly-dallying either. Even at this very moment, their pursuers should be on their way.

Without RyuZU, combat wasn't feasible, not to mention, if they were to be assaulted by AnchoR they wouldn't even have the means to resist.

"...Have you calmed down yet, princess?" Halter asked.

Marie was sitting silently on the spiral staircase, unmoving.

"...You can understand the situation we're in without me having to tell you, right? With those two gone, our current combat strength is nothing like it was before. We're in a real pickle."

"..." Marie didn't answer him.

Sighing, Halter continued, "Even if we were to bet on a slim ray of hope and try to fight back somehow, if we stop here, even that'll be impossible. First and foremost, we have to escape to the surface somehow."

"..."

"I've memorized the full layout of the factory that Naoto revealed for us, but we can't go back the way we entered. So, we have no choice but to look for other exits, right? As such, from here on out, we have to slip past the enemy's security web without cheating. Sounds fun doesn't it, oy!"

"....."

"Should I be frank with you?" Halter rubbed his smooth, bald head as he narrowed his eyes sharply, "We have to evade the military's security without prior information now. If we're not careful, we'll be assaulted by heavily armored M.A.'s and the InitialY Series. —It makes things harder for me if you keep playing at being dead weight, you know."

“—Don’t, make light of me!” Marie raised her face and glared at Halter. Her eyes had become wet and swollen, but Halter didn’t mention that. Marie raised her shoulders a great deal as she took in a deep breath, then lowered them as she breathed out.

“...This is probably where they transported the parts.” While looking at the altimeter wound around her wrist, Marie continued, “Considering that they managed to create such a thing in secret, they couldn’t have been bringing the parts in through the warehouse entrance on the surface. They likely made the parts in the factory on the surface then transported them underground for assembly on that hidden floor.”

“...In that case, does that mean that this shaft is connected to some of the factories on the surface?”

“No, it’d simply be too inefficient to bring in parts all the way from the surface to the ghost floor every time they needed something. There should be a storage place for the parts midway somewhere... which should be connected to multiple factories.”

“Hmm... We might be able to escape somehow if that’s the case,” Halter said as he looked up through the shaft and stroked his chin. “It’d probably take the ones pursuing us around... an hour to give up, upon which it’d take them another hour to contact their allies above and suspend the lifts and elevators. If we quickly climb up this shaft and slip into that storage place before then... well, we should be able to escape one way or another.”

...The problem is, Halter thought as he looked at the girl sitting by his feet, *Marie’s stamina.*

This shaft is more than seventy kilometers tall even by the most modest estimate. They would have to dash their way up that height in about two hours. It wouldn’t be impossible for Halter’s cyborg body, but it was questionable whether Marie’s physique would be able to handle such a grueling climb. Though she had more stamina than typical girls her age due to her training—she was still only human.

However, “Don’t mind me,” Marie said as she returned Halter’s gaze.

Halter asked doubtingly, “Can you handle it?”

“Are you saying that there’s another way? If I can’t make it then just leave me behind.”

“I very well can’t do that, now can I?” Daunted by Marie’s self-abandonment, Halter furrowed his brows.

Marie stood up slowly. Halter could see that her arms and legs were trembling slightly. It wasn’t from fatigue, it was psychological—she had taken a blow to her psyche. Naoto Miura’s death had crushed Marie Bell Breguet’s heart violently.

...I guess it’s to be expected. Halter sighed internally, masking his thoughts from his face and voice. Even an idealist, girl genius whose assertiveness bordered on arrogance—was ultimately, still, just a girl.

This girl wasn’t perfect enough to be able to immediately swallow the death of someone close to her. However—the current situation wouldn’t forgive such weakness. Halter said sternly, “Listen up, Marie. Get this through your head.”

“...”

“We don’t have time to rest. I’m going to dash up as fast as I can starting now, so cling onto me expecting to die if you stop. If you really can’t bear it any further, no matter what, then say so. Otherwise, keep your mouth closed.”

Marie gulped for a moment before nodding silently.

“Good,” Halter nodded back. “—Well then, let’s go.”

●

“——ah” Marie fell from Halter’s back onto the floor of the staircase. She couldn’t move a single finger anymore— Correction, they were moving, but the twitching of her arms and legs had nothing to do with her will. Her muscles had completely stiffened like **a dead body**.

In an hour, fifty-eight minutes, and thirty-four seconds, Halter scaled the roughly seventy-two kilometers high shaft. Marie had clung on the whole time as Halter ran up the spiral staircase in a leaping dash. Facing the instant acceleration and deceleration made possible by his extraordinary cyborg functionality as he ran, Marie narrowly managed to endure a level of G-force

that would knock an average person unconscious.

However, she was at her limits.

...I can't stand. Marie groveled on the floor, gasping violently. Her lungs squeaked, her heart was crying as if it would sunder at any moment. Her entire body was drenched in nasty sweat, and tears welled in her eyes from the racking pain. Her vision was flickering as she felt herself gag. Her bones were aching dully as if they had been broken—but...

So what—

"ah...gh, ha—"

So what if that's the case?

Halter crouched down next to Marie and whispered stoically, "Are you unable to stand, princess?"

—*Who do you think you're saying that to, bastard.* Marie tried to curse, but failed. Only a moan of a stomped on frog came out. From her vision, blurry from the tears, she saw Halter's cool face. A human versus a full-body cyborg. Comparing the two would be unreasonable, but even so, Marie couldn't help but be angry. *How is he completely fine when I'm in such a sorry state from just clinging on.*

However, thanks to that, her willpower had returned. She flexed her trembling hands, folding her fingers inward one by one starting with her pinky, in order to make a fist. Still on the ground, she punched the floor and pushing up against it, flipped her body over. She then pulled her knees in under herself and lifted her waist up. She breathed deeply and clenched her jaw.

—*I can still move.* She was still alive, unlike that boy...

"Don't push yourself," Halter said as he picked her up, causing Marie to choke. Her face flushed from the anger and humiliation of being treated like a young child. She wanted to complain, but she kept her mouth shut. It was true that she was in no shape to walk right now even if she could stand.

"Let's get away from here for the time being. Continue being luggage for a bit longer."

Nodding lightly in return, Marie closed her eyes. She thought about what they should do from now on. In other words, she reflected on what had happened up to now.

——Naoto Miura died. She bit her lip. She didn't have intuition as good as his, she could only assemble the pieces of information she had in a way that made sense.

Just what was that massive weapon that we saw on the bottommost floor? It definitely wasn't something made with noble intentions. Even if one ignores the fact that it violates the treaty, what legitimate use could there be for it? How could that monster possibly be used effectively? It's something that can only be used to ruin and destroy, nothing else. As far as a group that would need such a thing... terrorists?

——I got him involved.

Her heart jarred. *As if something so silly could be true. There was no way some terrorist organization could pull off making something on this scale using a hidden floor of the city in secret. There was no way they would have enough funds or materials or manpower. In the first place, who could be so incompetent that he doesn't realize that all this is happening right under his nose?*

——Incompetent? Like I'm one to talk...

Her eyes were hot. *The enemy is the military—or perhaps someone who is capable of controlling the military. Furthermore, the enemy is also someone who recycled an entire clock tower into that monster. If that's the case, then not just the military, but even Mie's parliament is surely a fellow conspirator.*

——This information is something you were only able to obtain thanks to the boy who died because of you.

Her head hurt. *And one more thing. Why was AnchoR here? Though RyuZU ridiculed the trustworthiness of my sources, that report should have been accurate. So, AnchoR, who had first been taken to Tokyo was then moved to Mie? If that's the case, why Mie? She had originally been something that Kyoto's military possessed, so wouldn't it make more sense for her to have returned to Kyoto? This strangeness has to be related to that massive weapon somehow. Is this detail the key to this entire mystery?*

——At this point, no matter what I do, I can't bring him back.

Unable to endure any longer, Marie tumbled down from Halter's arms. Groveling on the floor, she assumed a fetal position. Unable to suppress the bile that had gradually risen in her throat, she threw up.

"Ugh, gu, gueeeEEeeeeeeeeEE...gh!"

She vomited onto the floor of the staircase over and over again. Despite the intensity, there was no blood mixed in.—*Ahh, my internal organs aren't injured,* Marie thought. She despised herself from the bottom of her heart for noticing such a menial detail.

"...I must look pretty pathetic."

"Yeah, you look quite awful," Halter frankly agreed.

"...I failed. They beat us to a pulp."

"Yeah. We screwed up big time. It's a crushing defeat," Halter affirmed quietly.

Right now, Marie was thankful for his bluntness. She was glad that he didn't offer her cheap consolation. She asked to confirm it for herself, "—Naoto is really dead, isn't he?"

"Yeah. There's no way he'd survive down there," Halter nodded coldly.

——Everything is your fault.

"—I'm sure you're right!!" Leaving herself to vengeful passion, Marie punched the floor with both hands. The pain that reached the core of her bones stung her sharply, but she didn't care. Compared to this discomfort that felt like her organs had been entirely flipped inside out, it was nothing. Sharpening her gaze, her emerald eyes filled with a dark flame— "I'm going to make the payback extravagant."

"Of course. You're going to pull out all their hair including their ass hair right?"

Nodding to Halter's words, Marie stood up. There was something she had to do immediately, even a second sooner if possible.

Ahh, that's right. She had gotten him involved. When she had poked the bushes just to kill time, a tiger had appeared. He had lost his life because of that, so she had to take responsibility for his death. She didn't have the time to bask in regret or be crushed by guilt.—*I can enjoy that luxury after everything's been dealt with.*

Wiping her soiled lips on the sleeve of her coat, Marie spoke. "...The fact that AnchoR, who was transported to Tokyo, is here, in Mie, has something to do with that massive weapon."

"Yeah, it would be natural to think that."

"In that case, that would mean that Mie and Tokyo are connected. At the very least, it would mean that someone in a position capable of dispatching the InitialY Series that was in Tokyo is backing Mie."

"One more thing, don't overlook the fact that that person also has the technological prowess to manipulate that AnchoR or whatever."

Marie nodded. When AnchoR had assaulted them, RyuZU was extremely shocked. In other words, to RyuZU, AnchoR's actions were something that she never would have thought possible. At the very least, she should have been certain of that. To begin with, AnchoR should have simply been sleeping under Kyoto until now.

"...Someone either internally modified her or hijacked her will through an external device."

"At the very least, that mask is suspicious. Well, in any case, if the one responsible has the technology to accomplish something like that, then one of the Five Great Corporations has to be involved." Halter stroked his chin, continuing, "The Vacherons, the Pateks... you can't discount the Langes either. Though I hear the Audemars keep their hands relatively clean, I can't say for sure that they're innocent either.

"...Whoever it may be, that's a question to answer *after* we return to the surface." Marie sighed. "We'll have to ask our people in Tokyo first."

●

By the time they returned to the surface, it was near daybreak. The place that

had turned out to be their exit was an abandoned factory in otherwise good condition. After leaving its property and walking for a short while, they immediately arrived at the station for the ring line.

After having boarded and been on the train for a bit, the streets of Ise came into view. It was a district with a cylindrical train station like the one that the four of them had gotten off at last night. However, they couldn't return to Kyoto just yet.

Marie and Halter patted off the dirt on their clothes as they exited Ise station and walked onto a nearby side street by the shopping district. It was dawn so the shutters of the stores along the road were lowered, but there were people traveling to and fro. Unlike the shopping district right in front of the industrial complex, it appeared that the streets here were alive.

After turning several corners, the two of them ran into an old derelict hotel. It was the kind of establishment that someone who had had too much to drink might rent to pass the night. It had an exterior that made one question whether it was really operating or not, but upon entering, its interior was surprisingly in order.

After booking a room and entering it, Marie headed straight for the communications device installed in the room. Picking up the receiver, she dialed the number for the Breguets' encrypted line. Shortly after, she heard the robotic voice of the operator and declared her authentication code as well as the number she wished to reach. Using the line, she'd be able to contact her people in Tokyo.

After a few seconds of ringing, she heard a voice from the other end. "—Hey, Dr. Marie. It's been a while, hasn't it." The other party said intimately.

Marie replied in a curt, tense voice, "It's been a while."

"...Did something happen?"

"Something, huh... indeed. A whole lot has happened—truly." Muttering as if to spit the words out, Marie cast her eyes downward. If she faced the events of the last twenty-four hours head-on, she might truly break down.

While stifling her emotions, she continued in as even a voice as possible

through the receiver, “I apologize. I don’t have time for pleasantries today so... cutting to the chase, do you know where the InitialY Series that I had you investigate the other day is right now?”

“No, what’s this about?”

“Several hours ago—I encountered it here.”

“What did you say?!” The other party raised his voice, sounding shocked, “By here, do you mean Kyoto?!”

“No, I’m currently in Mie Grid.”

“Mie?”

“I was infiltrating the bottom floors of the city due to a certain... anonymous report I had received when I discovered something dreadful.”

After that, Marie explained the massive weapon she had seen on the floor that shouldn’t exist. She did her best to cover its appearance and functionalities based on what she could tell with her eyes.

She also mentioned AnchoR, who had appeared to guard it, and her insane combat strength.

Furthermore, there was also the fact that the culprit was likely Mie’s city council and the military, and by conjecture, that behind them was one of the Five Great Corporations—

When Marie had finished explaining everything, the other party groaned, “...To think that there’s a conspiracy that can exist on that level.”

“As such, I want to confirm: Are you certain that the InitialY Series was transported to Tokyo?”

“...The military had sent it to Tokyo at least temporarily. We have both the records of the transfer and eyewitness accounts. We had confirmed it ourselves, so we’re certain.”

“In that case, that would mean that it was then sent to Mie from Tokyo.”

“As you say... I can’t imagine that it doesn’t have anything to do with that weapon you mentioned.”

“I think so too. Mie and Tokyo are connected by this incident somehow. As such, could I have you investigate who the current handler of the InitialY Series in question is?”

“I see. So you suspect that the one managing the InitialY Series is cooperating with the brass of Mie.”

“Yes.”

“If you could give me a little time, I should be able to discover something.”

“Thanks. I’m counting on you.”

Marie was about to hang up when the other party stopped her, “On a separate note—or probably not—there’s been something strange going on in Tokyo as well.”

“.....”

“Tokyo’s military is rallying all of its forces in one place. Considering that Tokyo is a federation made up of multiple grids, and almost all of its military force has been stationed in one area, right now the respective core tower and the clock towers of many other grids have been left defenseless.”

That’s— Marie groaned. The suspicious actions of the military—the core tower and clock towers that were currently defenseless. She couldn’t help but be reminded of the incident that had just recently taken place in Kyoto. The incident where Kyoto’s military had tried to purge the city along with its twenty million residents...

The other party proceeded cautiously, to try to assure Marie. “Leaving history aside, in the end, Kyoto is nothing but a regional tourist city. On the other hand, if the entire domain of Tokyo were to fall, it would surely affect all of Asia.”

“Are you suggesting that there’s no way the military would purge Tokyo? However, that’s...” For a moment, she lost hope. Marie tightened her grip on the receiver, lowering her voice. “But by that logic, Kyoto wouldn’t have been purged either.”

Ultimately, it was a question of one’s moral bindings—

How could one assert that the people, organizations, and school of thought

that had determined that it was “right” to slaughter twenty million people would even care to consider the effects that their actions would bring to all of Asia? Even if there was a drawback for themselves as well, it still wouldn’t be out of the question—it would just mean that they would need **more of a reason to do it.**

The other party replied in a cheerless voice, “...It’s as you say. Indeed, you’re right.”

“At any rate, please look into the matter we discussed earlier. I’m going to stay here a little longer and continue my investigation on my own. There are many places that seem like they would yield clues if I just dig a little.”

“Understood,” the other party affirmed before warning, “Please be careful, Dr. Marie. The enemy is a fearful one.”

“...I will. Thank you.” Replying briefly, Marie hung up for real this time. She let out a bitter sigh. Unable to contain her irritation, Marie kicked the bed by her side with all her might, yelling, “Really! Every last one of them!”

“You sure are throwing quite a fit, princess,” Halter teased her from behind.

Marie looked back over her shoulder, glaring at the face of the large man leaning against a chair. “Yes, that’s right, I’m throwing a fit! What, are you volunteering to be my punching bag?”

“If that would satisfy you, then sure, punch me.” Halter curled his lips provokingly.

That moment, Marie knit quite the knot with her eyebrows—before flipping her hair like a dog shaking water off. “How stupid,” she spat out. “Forget it. Let’s get going since we’ve already decided on the next step.”

“...Oy oy, we just barely managed to escape intact, you know? Can’t say I’m feeling eager,” Halter chided.

To which Marie snorted in displeasure, “Very well then. I’m going, even if I have to do it alone.”

“That’s exactly what I’m talking about, princess. Try to calm down a bit—actually, I guess you’re calm, but your methods are needlessly reckless.”

“—So what? What’s the problem?” Marie continued, her face not showing any emotion, “I’m only alive because Naoto died, you know? Considering RyuZU’s functionality, she just might be able to return from that great abyss. If that happens—she’ll probably kill me.” Marie hugged her own shoulders, shivering. “If my time is limited anyway, then I might as well use it effectively. I want to fulfill my duties before I’m killed by RyuZU.”

Halter listened to her words with a puckery face. He was frowning as if he looked like he wanted to say something, but ended up not saying it. He sighed once instead, nodding. “I get it, princess. Do as you wish. But let me warn you sincerely as a pro: Rest right now. If you want to fully dedicate yourself to this cause, then you should be in your best condition for the greatest possible result, right?”

“.....”

“Take a shower and drink some sweet cocoa or something. Then get some ample sleep. First, recover your stamina and clear your head. You can flatten anyone you don’t like afterwards to your heart’s content.”

“.....”

“That would be more rational, right?”

“...Yeah. It’s just as you say.” Perhaps she liked the ring of the word “rational,” because Marie nodded obediently. Halter confirmed that she had entered the shower before exiting the room.

Buying a sandwich and hot cocoa from a small nearby shop, he quickly returned to their room. When Halter returned, he could still hear the sound of running water coming from the bathroom. He sat down on a chair. While waiting for Marie to come out, Halter suddenly wondered, *There’s no way she’d go and slit her wrist in the shower, right?* But he immediately laughed it off. *Nah. Impossible. I know Marie. She would never do that, no matter what.*

Shortly after, Marie stepped into the room while blow drying her hair. Halter’s conviction was correct. She was only wearing a bath robe as she walked on the floor with her wet feet. Seeing Marie’s dejected look, Halter silently handed her the cocoa and the sandwich. “Thanks,” she muttered weakly before stuffing the sandwich into her mouth. She finished her cocoa silently, then crawled into bed

sluggishly.

Halter moved his chair next to the room's door and settled there. Seeing the girl with her back to him in a fetal position, he had a sudden thought. He opened his mouth hesitantly. "Say, Marie. I think that as an adult, I'm obligated to say this just in case."

"...What?"

"You're just a kid. A brat. You said that yourself before, right?"

"...Yes, and?"

"No one's going to complain if a brat cries."

Marie didn't answer him. She kept silent for a long time, but just when Halter figured that she had fallen asleep, she finally gave him a grave answer. "—Someone will complain. Even if no one else does, I will. I absolutely wouldn't be able to forgive myself. If I break down and cry here, I'd—**I'd be ruined.**"

Marie didn't stir at all. She didn't tremble either. Her voice was flat and calm, not wavering in the slightest. Halter decided to leave it at that.

And then—he silently thought, *Marie Bell Breguet's talent—is not an omnipotent one. I know that.*

A girl genius who became a Meister at the youngest age ever in history. If one hears that, one would be sure to have a certain kind of image of her... that she's smart and can do anything... but that's definitely not the case.

The real reason she's a "genius" is this: Marie Breguet's overwhelmingly strict level of self-discipline is simply baffling. That's exactly why the details behind her supreme talent of hard work have been simplified to the single word "genius."

She tries her best to be wise.

She tries her best to be strong.

She tries her best to be virtuous.

In other words, she strives to manifest her ideals with her entire being. In Halter's eyes, the strength of her faith was equivalent to madness at this point. The goal line where a normal human would have had his heart crushed and

given up was the fervent starting point for this girl. She had this destructive will to endlessly improve herself even when her internal engine was already being scorched. She was strict to others and even stricter to herself due to her indomitable self-restraint.

—That is the core of Marie Bell Breguet.

That's why this girl wouldn't break. She knew that if she broke down just once, she would decline into being just another ordinary person. She was afraid of that more than anything else. She wouldn't pamper herself. She had stipulated to herself that she would live this way. She understood that that was what made her Marie Bell Breguet.

To compromise—would mean death.

"Alright— So, where should we raid when you wake up? I think I know what you're thinking, but I can't say I recommend it."

"......Then you should also know that I have no intention to back down whatsoever."

"I figured as much," Halter nodded.

Marie continued in a soft, yet menacing voice, "You know what they say, 'if you want to take down the enemy general—begin by ripping off his head.'"

●

"—Damn it!" Morikatsu Muroi agitatedly turned the communication device's dial. He was the governor of Mie Grid. After finishing his work for the night and eating dinner with his family in a hurry, he had holed himself up in his study. He would usually enjoy drinking with his remarkably fat wife after dinner, but tonight, he didn't have the time.

Ever since he had assumed the office of the governor, every day had felt tepid —his work consisted of simply performing set routines. It was plain, boring, and meaningless.

However, he had been satisfied with that. There was a time when he had been burning with the ideals of his youth, but upon reaching middle age, and now nearing his golden years, he could only laugh bitterly at how naive he used

to be.

After all, in the end he was nothing but a replaceable cogwheel in society, but that was just how he liked it. He wanted to live out his days simply working his job and receiving his pay, buying his daughter's contempt with his fault-finding and being scolded by his wife.

—*It's fine like that,* he thought. He didn't need change. No one wanted such a thing in the end. Which was all the more reason why the incident today was unacceptable. It appeared that there had been infiltrators on the bottommost floor of the city. Together, they had somehow breached an exceedingly classified area, and what's more, the guards had failed to capture the perpetrators.

When he had received that report in the morning, he laid bare his anger, something he rarely ever did. He remained in a bad mood through dinner and offended his wife and daughter with his conduct.

...I have to apologize to them later. While troubling himself over how best to please his wife and daughter in the corner of his mind, he turned the dial. Shortly after, the line was connected.

"—It's me."

"＿＿＿"

"...Yes, about the incident this morning. Just what is the situation now? I do believe that you assured me that preservation of secrecy is guaranteed."

"＿＿＿"

"That was the deal, you know, if we close our eyes and shut our mouths then you won't threaten our everyday life either. Are you breaching our agreement at the eleventh hour?"

"＿＿＿"

"Threatening you? Please don't jest. I'm making a request of you: If nothing else, just don't betray me when the chips are down. Yes— Yes, I believe I understand your situation as well. However, hate and ideals alone won't put food on the table."

“＿＿＿”

“That’s fine. Well then, please hurry and put up some results. It’s been thirty years since then. It can’t be helped that it’s a bit looser now than before, but this isn’t something that we can let end like this—for both you and me.”

With those last words, the line was cut. Muroi sighed deeply as he returned the receiver to its holder. Just now noticing the sweat on his forehead, he dabbed it with his handkerchief as he sat down in his chair.

...Thirty years. Thinking back on the lengthy years that had flown by in no time, Muroi spit out a bitter sigh.

Up to now, his job had been to keep Mie turning without a hitch. Sure, there had been trouble along the way, some bigger than others, but even so, he had been able to fulfill his job. His job wasn’t really anything worthy of boasting about. It was simply to feign ignorance of the bomb that could explode at any time and take all of Mie with it.

However, to have this arrangement spoiled at this late hour was unbearable. Whether it be the infiltrators who expressly came to prod his sore spot or “they” who had easily let that happen, he couldn’t contain his enmity towards either of them.

Why is it that every last one of them can’t keep their mouth shut?

“...Damn it,” Muroi cursed bitterly.

He felt thirsty for some strong liquor. *That’s it for tonight, let’s go to bed after a shot of whiskey. I can apologize to the wife tomorrow.* While massaging his temples, he stood up.

It was then that he was suddenly pulled back into his chair with a forceful jerk of his collar. His heart jumped.

A soft piece of cloth was stuffed into his mouth just as he was about to scream. Something was wound around his wriggling body—it was duct tape. The perpetrators finished binding Muori to his chair with the adhesive in no time. For the moment, the one who had bound him to the chair had remained silent, but their intention was clear.

—Be quiet,

—Or else.

Sensing the threat which he had no chance of opposing, a great amount of cold sweat perspired onto his face all at once. This wasn't someone's prank. Someone with malicious intent had snuck into his study. He couldn't immediately believe that fact. This was the official residence of the governor.

Though the security may not be on the level of the top-secret facility in town, there were guards who were permanently stationed here. Muromi had remained completely unaware that there had been someone hiding in the room from the time he entered the room to the end of his call.

As a result, he had just been bound to his chair by someone. With his body wrapped from his feet to his shoulders, the one who had been pinning him down came right before him. He was a tall, broad man wearing a black rubber suit. He was exuding an intimidating air that spoke volumes of his experience in this kind of dirty work. That man whispered in a low voice, "I'm going to remove your gag now. If you want to keep all of your limbs, then don't say anything unnecessary."

Muroi nodded, his shoulders shaking. The man removed the cloth from his mouth, upon which Muroi exhaled roughly. Just as he thought that the interrogation would begin, the man reached out his hand and grabbed onto the back of the chair, turning it around off-handedly.

"—!" Muroi widened his eyes from astonishment.

What had been behind Morikatsu Muroi was a young girl. She was wearing a black rubber suit too. Muroi could distinctly make out her slender body line, but by no means did she give off the impression that she was some frail girl. Her brilliant blond hair as well as her emerald eyes that shined like a cat's in the darkness made sure of that. She was just like boiling magma. That was the atmosphere she gave off.

Morikatsu Muroi recognized the face of that girl. "Ma, Marie Bell Breguet... You're alive?!" The younger daughter of Breguet should have died three weeks ago—yet, here was a girl with the exact same face as her. The girl pulled out a baton, and swung it casually.

Swoosh, it connected with a crack.

Muroi's right temple ached from what he imagined was his fractured skull. He groaned, because he couldn't scream. For the first time in his life, Muroi discovered that screaming actually requires a certain sense of composure.

The girl ground the tip of her baton lightly against his throat as he desperately gasped for air. "—Who said you could speak?" the girl said in a light, indifferent voice.

Hearing the bored ring to her voice, Muroi flared up, "Y, You bastards, d, don't think that you'll get away scot-free with something like t—"

The reply he received was another blow from the baton. It was a merciless strike. His vision flickered. As Muroi was writhing in agony unable to even let out a cry, the girl asked in chilling stone-cold voice, "I'll say it in a way that even that feeble mind of yours can understand. I'm not making a request. I'm giving you an order. You and I aren't equals."

"gh...D, Don't mess with me!" Muroi's face turned grotesque with rage. "I, I'm the governor of Mie you know! You won't be let off the hook pulling a stunt like this!"

"That so," the girl said with a mocking nod, then shifted her gaze to the large man. "Go downstairs and bring his wife up here. It seems like it'd be a good idea to show him just how serious I am. His daughter would be fine too."

"Stop, please!" Muroi cried out, "I beg you! Don't hurt my family! I'll answer your questions."

"I was hoping for that attitude from the beginning."

Muroi was terrified by her dry tone. Unreadable emerald eyes were staring at him, *just like that of a praying mantis,* he thought. Though her sharp eyes seemed almost inhuman, they harbored a fierce will that he couldn't comprehend.

"Always begin by saying, 'Yes.' Answer what you are asked frankly. Do not continue to trouble my hand with the chore of beating a worthless creature like yourself."

Muroi nodded while trembling. The girl didn't think anything of him. He was made to realize that if he hesitated even a little—she would do just as she had threatened.

"In that case, let's begin with an easy question, shall we?" The girl sat onto his desk and crossed her legs at ease. "Now then, it sounds like you didn't know that I'm alive from your words just now?"

"...R, Right, I thought you had died."

"Halter, hang him up."

Being suddenly lifted up by his collar from behind with staggering force, Muroi couldn't breathe. Suspended in midair and strangled with the weight of his body stressing his neck, he squirmed. The girl announced coldly, "Your speech is lacking due respect. —Also, begin your answers with 'Yes.'"

The man let go of his collar. Muroi dropped back down on his chair and began to cough violently. While his shoulders trembled in fear, he uttered an apology in tears, "Y, Y...Yes, I, I'm terribly sorry..."

"This is why I hate training ignorant dogs. It's such a hassle." Curling her lips, the girl asked, "Next question. You know of the massive weapon that was constructed in secret on the bottommost floor of the city, yes?"

"Y—Yes. I do."

"And also the fact that it's a weapon of mass destruction that violates the international treaty on military force."

"Yes... I, I don't know the details myself, but I hear that that is the case."

"My-my, how convenient," the girl scoffed, raising an eyebrow. "You say that you don't know the details and yet you've allowed for such a dangerous thing to be built underneath your own city? Just how incompetent are you? Do you think that anyone would be stupid enough to believe that?"

"I, I'm telling the truth! It was decided that we would leave such things to them."

"It was decided? The one with the greatest authority in Mie Grid is you, isn't it? It follows naturally then that the ringleader of any conspiracy taking place

here has to be you.”

“I, I am but a mere representative...! All of Mie’s current council is like this. We merely perform routine work on the city’s mechanisms. We had come to an agreement with them not to interfere with each other.”

“What kind of gibberish are you spouting? Are you suggesting that the military created that weapon by themselves and you simply turned a blind eye to it?”

“...Y, Yes, that is correct.”

“What reason is there for me believe you?”

“T, That’s... You see, we councilmembers were threatened by the military...”

“Don’t,” the girl said, looking down on Muroi with a gaze that was below freezing. “There’s no way that the military would be able to take over an entire city just by threatening military force. Mie—at the very least, Mie’s city council, including you—must have proactively assisted the military.”

“T, That’s...”

“What I don’t understand is the reason for it. At first, I thought it would be something like financial gain through bribery, but there wasn’t anything that suggested that in the city council’s financial account. Just the opposite, you were the ones *sending* the money. I couldn’t piece together what you might have received in return in the slightest. —What a truly unnatural relationship, right?”

“.....”

“Explain yourself.”

Muroi stayed silent, not answering.

The girl sighed and signaled Halter with a jerk of her chin. “It’s penalty time. Go kill one of them.”

“Don’t, stop!!” Muroi yelled in a fluster.

The man slowly pulled out a knife from his waistband and turned towards the girl. “Which one should we kill?”

“Good question...?” The girl tilted her head slightly in a cute manner, then smiled at Muroi. “I’ll let you choose. —Your wife or your daughter, which would you prefer?”

“Please. Stop, I’m begging you...!” Muroi yelled in agony, his face a mess from the dripping tears and snot.

The girl looked down on him coldly. “Shouldn’t you be saying something else? You’re gravely mistaken if you think that I’m going to continue disciplining you gently forever.”

“We share the same lot with them...!” Losing his will, he hung his head as he squeezed out, “Not because there’s a massive weapon! If it came to light that they are in Mie, we would be in danger as well. That’s the reason we cover and aid them...”

“...I can’t follow what you’re saying.” The girl furrowed her brows, irritated. “Do you intend to explain clearly? Yes or No?”

“T, They... are not Mie’s military...”

“...What’d you just say?” The girl frowned.

With his breathing in disarray from fear and shock, Muroi spat out, “They’re the military of Shiga Grid, the city that was purged thirty years ago...!”

●

It was something that had happened before Marie was born.

In response to a sudden and large-scale fatal malfunction in the city mechanisms, the federal government had speedily approved a disaster management measure. They followed through with the compulsory purge without waiting for Meister Guild to even arrive.

Of course, this led to quite a ruckus and the cabinet had been pressured to resign. However, when a later investigation established that if they had delayed their decision, the effects of the malfunction would have reached all the grids in western Japan, public opinion changed.

As such, it was now seen as an unavoidable, albeit difficult decision. In fact, there were even those who praised the federal government for having taken

decisive measures and accepted the necessary sacrifices.

However, “...That’s nothing but a lie,” Morikatsu Muroi denied that piece of history, his voice trembling. “At the time, research on electromagnetic technology was being conducted in Shiga Grid. It was a grand-scale national project... For that reason, close to ten thousand Technical Force officers were gathered there.

“Electromagnetic technology...!” Marie muttered with grim eyes. It was something that had been used ubiquitously in ancient times, but in the modern world where everything operated on gears—

“That’s right... It was a violation of the international treaty. A large electromagnetic field had leaked out from the research facility in the middle of an experiment, causing the city mechanisms to malfunction. ‘Dispose of everything and cover it up before Meister Guild arrives and realizes the truth’—that is the true reason for Shiga Grid’s purge.”

Marie’s face became expressionless. Only her emerald eyes were blazing as she stared at the governor’s face.

“—The Paperwork necessary for purging the city had been prepared beforehand for such a contingency. It had been ready to be enforced at any time with simply the signature of the Chief Cabinet Secretary. According to the records, the vast majority of Shiga’s residents were able to successfully escape to the prearranged city of refuge. That city—is Mie.”

“.....”

“However, they... the clocksmiths who had been discarded by the federal government survived. They decided to permanently settle in Mie, taking advantage of their refugee status as a camouflage to hide from the government authorities. Everything happened behind the scenes quietly, and rapidly.”

Pausing, he raised his head. Sweat had oozed onto his old, wrinkly forehead. “...Twelve years. That was how long it took for them to gain control of Mie.”

“Why would that be necessary?” Marie asked in a low voice. “They had been engaged in illegal research on the nation’s orders. The project had been about to become exposed so they had been silenced. I get it up to that point. But if

that's the case, then why didn't they simply expose the truth?"

"...Then what? Have Mie, their only refuge, be the next city to sink into the earth?" Letting out a deep sigh, Muroi shook his head. "Shiga was sunk for the sole purpose of a coverup. How can you say that the federal government wouldn't sink Mie if they realized that Shiga's clocksmiths were still alive—wiping the slate clean?"

"That's... There's no way they could have purged another city so hastily, the loss of Shiga alone must have been painful."

Cities were national territory. So long as modern technology wasn't capable of reconstructing cities, to purge a city mean to lose territory.

That Shiga had been sunk for the sake of concealing the illegal research there should have already been a measure that had been decided narrowly.

In the first place, if Japan continued to purge its cities one after another, the questioning from foreign countries would naturally become severe.

However, Muroi curled his lips upon her words. "That's some sound reasoning. However, if I may—quit joking. We saw the feds sink Shiga firsthand. Shiga's Technical Force was actually left to die, themselves.

Don't tell me you're seriously saying that we should believe in the rationality of the insane bunch working at the top of what we call our federal government. Are you really asking us to bet the lives of ourselves and our families on that?"

"....."

Marie couldn't answer him.

A stiff, agitated smile appeared on Muroi's face. "At the time, I was merely an aid to a councilmember. Upon coming in contact with 'their' leader by chance, I understood the situation immediately. If 'their' existence was discovered one day, Mie would be sunk. Before that happened, I needed something I could use to negotiate with the federal government at any cost."

"...Are you saying that something is the enormous underground weapon?"

Muroi nodded. "I haven't been told any of the specifics, but I know that Shiga's Technical Force is pursuing tangible power. A deterrent so strong that

even if the federal government were to dispatch the national army to purge Mie, it could repel them."

Marie scowled at Muroi, her expression still grim. "Is that end worth cannibalizing even your own clock tower?"

"There weren't enough raw materials from just Shiga's ruins... or so I'm told. We determined that it was unavoidable ourselves, as well," Muroi said flatly, his face turning pale.

Marie narrowed her eyes. "For the sake of a deterrent?"

"That's right," Muroi squeezed the words out, practically gasping. "It's as effective as we anticipated. The existence of Shiga's Technical Force was discovered by the federal government a few years back; however, them being in de facto control of Mie while also possessing a powerful military deterrent allowed them to somehow negotiate a pact of confidentiality with the government.

"Its monstrous power is one obvious factor, yes, but the very existence of that enormous weapon being none other than the proof of the illegal purge that they had forced upon Shiga is also important. As such, we have never had to use it, even though we've had it all this time."

Muroi had made a feverish appeal of his circumstances; however, Marie looked down on him silently. She understood what he was saying. Even if they should have known that Mie couldn't have been purged so easily, they couldn't believe in that logic. Driven by their fear, they had sought a more definite power.

However, that's— "You're lying."

"It's the truth!" Muroi yelled, his expression desperate.

Marie peered at his face, then asked, fully articulating each syllable, "If that's the case, why has that weapon been left on standby?"

"...What did you say?" Muroi widened his eyes, dumbfounded.

Surprised by his reaction, Marie continued, "We've actually been underground and seen that weapon. It's been set for deployment at any time. If

you don’t actually plan to use it, there shouldn’t be a need for that.”

“.....”

Muroi sank into silence. His silence wasn’t that of someone keeping his lips sealed nor that of a liar who just had his lie exposed. His eyes simply widened in shock as his broad shoulders trembled dramatically.

“—I see, so that’s how it is!” Suddenly, he dropped his shoulders. While Marie and Halter sent him quizzical gazes, he took a long breath and shook his head lifelessly. “It’s over. It’s all over...”

“...I’d appreciate it if you don’t just decide things all by yourself, you know. Do you have no intention to explain?” Marie inquired.

Muroi laughed scoffingly. The governor of Mie raised his head and stared right into Marie’s eyes. Though the rest of his face was pale and trembling in fear, his mouth was distorted into a sneer. “Haah... It appears that you really don’t understand anything. Even though you made such a clamor of lecturing me, in the end you’re nothing but a naive little princess, huh.”

“—!” Marie knit her brows at his reckless remark.

Halter, who was standing behind Muroi, pulled him up by his collar over his shoulder behind and whispered, “Oy, don’t get cocky. Watch your words.”

“Shut your mouth!!” Muroi shouted. His expression was so threatening that Halter inadvertently let go of him. He glared at Marie and Halter alternatingly. “You still don’t get it?! That weapon was originally supposed to be a deterrent that wouldn’t ever be used. It was insurance to avoid being purged at most! Yet, it’s ready to boot now? Even an idiot would know what happened!”

He paused for a breath.

“—The deal is off! The feds plan to dispose of us. And they, Shiga’s military, surely plan to resist. This is all your fault, Marie Bell Breguet!”

Marie furrowed her brows. She couldn’t understand his rationale in suddenly denunciating her; however, Halter appeared to have gotten it as he gulped slightly.

“Hah! It looks like the big thug gets it now. Can you even imagine how many

losses the feds and the national army suffered, how much trust they lost from the international community?!”

“———”

“It’s become necessary for them to find an enemy that they can use to justify their existence!!”

“—!” In an instant, everything connected in Marie’s head.

Tokyo was rallying its military while Mie’s military—or rather, the former military of Shiga—was readying the enormous weapon for battle. The federal government had been turning a blind eye to their existence but were now trying to crush them. Why?

The only incident that could have led to this—was Kyoto’s attempted, premeditated purge.

It had been the design to sink Kyoto along with all of its twenty million residents into the earth. After the plan had been thwarted, the full story had been brought to light by an anonymous whistleblower.

Damage had been done to the dignity of the nation. The citizens had lost trust in both their government and the corporations—in such a situation, what should the government do to quickly and easily recover from these injuries?

The answer was simple—they simply needed to accomplish a feat that everyone would recognize as meritorious. For example, the annihilation of a rebel army that had secretly constructed a weapon that violates the international treaty. That would be very convenient indeed—

“Get it now? It’s all your fault!” Muroi cried out, shaking so violently that the chair he was bound to shook along with him. “The whistleblowing was your doing too, right? What a shocker! Do you fancy yourself some hero of justice? It’s time to grow up, little girl! What you did only unnecessarily stirred the world into mayhem, nothing else!”

“———”

“Thanks to your meddling, the feds were driven to the wall! That’s why they plan to paint us as the villain and play the hero! You were the one who forced

them to write this scenario!!”

“.....”

Marie didn’t reply. Her face, which was fair to begin with, became even whiter, like paper, as it paled further. Her lips were tied together stiffly.

Seeing her like that, the governor snorted as he sneered. “However, it appears that the feds don’t get it either. How Shiga’s military... no, how *we’ve* felt living like this for the last thirty years.”

He curled his lips as he continued, “...This whole time, for the last thirty years... We’ve been afraid: When will the feds sniff out ‘their’ existence and decide to purge us? We were tormented by despair; our fear became an obsession— What if the trump card we created out of desperation turned out to be just an empty threat...?”

Marie understood what he meant.

—The enormous weapon I saw on Mie’s deepest underground floor.

Just how much damage would be done if such a thing were to be unleashed? Even if Tokyo’s military rallied together and got serious, there was no way they would be able to annihilate Mie one-sidedly.

“...”

Marie grunted, stifling her breath by biting her lips. She had started wheezing at some point. The man in front of her probably didn’t know the details of the weapon. However, he did know something else very well; He was absolutely certain that the weapon, the culmination of the fear and obsession of Shiga’s clocksmiths—could not be something half-baked.

Muroi smiled. “I imagine you understand what choice we must make to survive by now, Miss Self-Proclaimed Genius. History is written by the victor. Shiga’s military will mercilessly pulverize our enemies in the name of ‘justice.’”

“Though,” he paused, adding with a dry voice, “who knows how much damage will be done in the process. It could be that a grid or two somewhere might fall—now then, once more, who’s responsible for this again?”

Marie didn’t reply. She couldn’t reply. Her eyes were stretched wide open

from the intense mental shock, her limbs were trembling. An audible gulp sounded from her throat as she swallowed the saliva that had been accumulating in her mouth.

"—It's you!!" Muroi yelled, his voice seeping with unending hatred. His face was distorted from spite, as he glared at Marie, seething. "If you would have just shut your mouth and died quietly—it wouldn't have come to this, you stupid brat!!"

●

—Since when?

When Marie came to her senses, she was walking through an unknown street at night.

It was a street that she had no recollection of, a narrow path formed by the gap between tall buildings. There was no sign of others—a dark path without its own source of lighting, an alleyway that the dim lights from the surrounding streets didn't reach. The hustle and bustle of the city sounded distant.

What am I doing here...?

Halter was following behind her, matching her pace.

Her shoulders felt cumbersome as her gait dragged. Turning around, saying something, it felt like too much trouble. She spat out a long sigh.

My memory ends in the middle of the interrogation. I have no idea how we dealt with the governor or cleaned up the scene whatsoever, but, seeing as Halter isn't saying anything, he must have taken care of it.

"....."

Their stratagem was a success.

—Wringing information out of Mie's governor. That goal had been thoroughly accomplished. What was going on in this city, how things would proceed... She had more or less learned everything that she had wanted to know.

However, she couldn't feel happy about it at all. Her mood right now, was, frankly—that of someone who had suffered defeat.

“———”

Marie stopped.

When one tries to do something, one’s efforts could end up having the opposite effect.

Like if one tried to turn a clock hand to synchronize the time and ended up breaking the clock entirely instead.

Marie wasn’t naive enough to think that striving for justice alone was enough to keep the world turning. Even so, she had tried her best to live a life that she could puff up her chest and be proud of.

—And this is the result, huh.

She had gotten full of herself after saving Kyoto and exposed the misdeeds of society’s VIPs. Because of that, she had suffered a crushing defeat and lost Naoto in the midst of it. And now, because of her, Tokyo and Mie were about to enter into war.

—I can’t leave things like this.

Marie reached what was, to her, a very natural conclusion. However, a problematic question then arose in her mind.

—But what should I do?

Everything that happened was a result of acting upon her sense of justice. She couldn’t make any excuses, everything was her fault. As such, she had to take responsibility. But how? What would enable her to take on this burden? Just what could she do to overturn the current situation?—

“What exactly am I supposed to do about all of this...” she muttered in a moment of weakness.

—Rain began to fall.

Just as Marie thought that it was a tepid drizzle, it immediately turned into a violent downpour. Marie didn’t seek shelter from it, she simply stayed right where she was standing.

“—You don’t need to do anything.”

Halter had stopped behind her.

“This situation isn’t something that should weigh on your conscience to begin with. The governor’s words were just sophistry. ‘The one responsible?’ Who else could it be but the feds who sank Shiga in the first place?”

“Yeah... I know that much.”

The ones who started it all by promoting illegal research in Shiga were the feds. The ones who purged Shiga to conceal that truth, were also the feds.

On the other hand, choosing not to deal with that through the proper method of indictment is the fault of the refugees from Shiga; it doesn’t justify Mie creating a weapon that ignores the international treaty.

There’s no way that saving Kyoto was the wrong thing to do, and the whistleblowing afterwards was just karma for those responsible, no?

As such, Marie Bell Breguet bears no responsibility whatsoever for this situation—?

—There’s no way that’s true.

“But, I can’t leave it be.” Even if the actions that Marie took in the process had harbored no ill intent, her actions were still a factor in bringing about the present result. *How can you pretend that you don’t see that, Halter?*

“That’s not the problem,” Halter rejected in a cold voice. “The situation is far too gargantuan. It’s long past the domain of things that you could do something about as a clocksmith.”

“That’s not...!”

“Then what are you going to do? Leak this information? I’d be willing to bet that that wouldn’t accomplish anything but expedite the feds’ plans.

“In the first place, it’s just idle gossip without proper evidence. They could lie their way through with any number of excuses. While we’re at it, they could also just say something like this, you know? Some BS like: ‘We had attempted to purge Kyoto for the same reason as Shiga’s case.’

“You know that bunch, they wouldn’t have any qualms lying through their teeth. The attempted purge of Kyoto was a bitter pill they had to swallow for

that reason.”

“In that case...!” Marie turned around and glared at Halter.

Halter withstood her glare without even a tiny flinch. “In that case, what? Are you going to put a stop to things behind the scenes? How? You’d be up against the governments of both sides, their armies, and one of the Five Great Corporations. What are you suggesting that you could do as you are now?”

His tone was calm, even gentle. “Did you forget that you’re supposed to be dead? In the first place, you’re in a situation where normally you should be quietly living the life of a student in Kyoto until things settle down. That holds true even now.”

“Then what are you saying I should do!!” Marie yelled indignantly. “Are you telling me to quietly watch what’s about to happen from the sidelines?!”

“That’s an option, yes.” Halter nodded, letting out a light sigh. “The feds are probably going to use Tokyo’s army to crush that massive weapon. If they could do that, they would probably recover a minimum level of trust with the public.

“A good-for-nothing bunch and an incorrigible bunch are going to try to destroy each other of their own accord. There wouldn’t really be anything wrong with just observing.”

“...Are you being serious?”

Halter shrugged. “I’m not much of a joker, unfortunately.”

Marie scoffed, “You saw it too, didn’t you? That underground weapon... Having seen it, do you seriously think that the might of Tokyo’s army could restrain that thing? Remember that Mie has AnchoR as well. If that weapon and an InitialY Series assault Tokyo together, do you still think the feds can win?”

“It might be too much for them, yeah.” Halter nodded readily. “So, is there a problem? Is it important whether the feds win or lose? As the governor said, the feds’ script might be turned against them—but so what? It’s not like that really troubles us in any way, no?”

“Lots of people will die!”

“Yeah, true.”

“There’s no way that things will end without consequence if a weapon like that goes on a rampage. Regardless of who wins, some city somewhere is going to suffer fatal damage!”

“Yeah, probably.”

“If that happens—if that happens, the death toll would easily exceed the twenty million lives that were almost lost in Kyoto, you know?!”

“You’re not wrong princess, however, if I may repeat myself, that would be the result of idiots doing stupid things. It’s not something that a little brat needs to feel responsible for and fret over.”

Flabbergasted, Marie stepped back. She couldn’t understand what Halter was saying—no, she could understand, at the very least, she recognized that his logic was sound. Whatever happens from now, even if she can’t do anything about it, it wouldn’t really be her responsibility—that was what he was saying.

“Quit joking!!” Marie shouted angrily, clenching her teeth. Her pride had been wounded. *Are you seriously going to strip me of accountability when things have already come to this?*

Halter took a breath, loosening his expression as he shook his head. “I’m not really joking. I’m simply stating the truth, princess. If you’re saying that you don’t like that, then... very well. I’ll abide by your decision.”

“So,” Halter asked, “what are you going to do?”

Marie couldn’t answer him. There was nothing she could do. She knew that best herself. She understood both her abilities and her limits. She had come this far by making the impossible possible by pushing her abilities beyond those limits. It had become her way of life, but... at present, she had no cards she could play.

“＿＿＿”

Her knees buckled.

As she dropped down on the spot, she felt her underwear soak up the dirty rain water that had pooled on the ground. It felt disgusting, but she didn’t care.

She had become unable to stand as her mind filled with the feeling that

something precious inside her heart could snap at any moment.

She pursed her lips tightly. Marie was fully aware of her powerlessness. She understood that there were things that she couldn't accomplish just by conducting herself in a way she could be proud of.

Even so—she felt like if Naoto was with her, she could overcome it somehow. Now that she had gotten him killed, there was nothing left that her paltry self could do.

"...No." *That line of thought was just an excuse.* She smashed both her fists on the ground. Water and mud splattered as numbing pain shot through her arms.

—Don't get the wrong idea.

What could be done, even if he was here? Just how convenient of a gimmick do you think he is?

Thinking of his talent as some kind of magic or miracle because she couldn't understand it was exactly what had led to this situation. She couldn't give up. She couldn't do that even if it meant she would die. However, there was nothing she could do. She couldn't change anything.

—She was spinning her wheels.

The downpour became stronger still.

Being pounded by the incessant rain, Marie felt like her body was getting heavier and heavier. She couldn't see anything in front of her on this unlit path.

The only thing she could make out was herself, who had become unable to advance in any direction.

"...Why—"

—did things turn out this way? If I had quietly died like the governor said, would things really have turned out better? The lives of twenty million people had almost been thrown away just to save face. After I had managed to save them through furious effort, now even more people than that are about to be killed because of it?

"What's up with this..."

Marie couldn't understand it.

—There was always someone pulling her down. It had been like this her whole life.

Even if one were right, from the other perspective, one would be wrong as well. Justice didn't exist anywhere. Fidelity and passion could both be easily corrupted by even the tiniest bit of malice. Only what is convenient is true, everything else is just a lie.

—She had troubled herself over that fact. She had understood the way the world worked and resolved herself accordingly. Lamenting it wouldn't change anything. She had accepted that it was the world she lived in every time reality strived to remind her of it.

Even so, the truth was, that always, ever since she was a kid, she had been irritated by this disgusting world.

Marie wheezed slightly as she looked up at the sky. The sky that could be seen from between the tall buildings was narrow and dark. The relentless rain continued to hit her face, tracing a line from the outer corners of her eyes and down her cheeks before falling.

Words that shouldn't be said, that she had always kept inside her heart, spilled out—

"...What value does a world like this have?"

She was aware that such a thought was the height of insolence. A single person questioning the value of the world was simply laughable. The world was what countless people continually made better by solving problems little by little while crying and laughing along the way—she understood that that was the answer to her question.

—Fuck that.

I'm sick of it. I'm tired of pretty ideals.

The Clockwork Planet is littered with patches here and there that extend its lifespan—but isn't it already too late? Haven't the people living on it long since set in motion their own undoing?

So—even if this crappy world is overhauled, so what?

It's been roughly a thousand years since we humans miraculously managed to force this dead planet to continue to function. The end result of all that is the situation we have now. To just what extent has the nature of man improved in that time, if at all—?



Marie lost her strength. Her fists which had been tightly clenched unraveled.

—It was then.

Clank!

In conjunction with a rather light sound, a nearby manhole was popped open. The narrow hole was just large enough for a human to barely pass through.

After that, a boy with a rather dull face poked his head out. “Wow, what the hell, it’s raining! Seriously?! Right after we escape the water below it comes falling down from above! Damn it!”

“If you consider that the filth will be washed away, it should quell your anger to some degree, master. Then again, if this rain is the result of poor maintenance then I would very much like the supervisor of the weather system to take responsibility and allow me to bury him in the earth for sullying my clothes.”

“.....”

This isn’t real, Marie concluded arbitrarily.

It appears that my reason has blown so far off course that I’m even seeing hallucinations now. Even the great Marie Bell Breguet has finally hit rock bottom, huh.

From the corner of her eye, she could see a boy and a girl whom she knew all too well ploddingly crawling out of the nearby manhole, but it was nothing but a mirage. A nonexistent delusion. It could be the rain’s fault.

...I mean, after all, this definitely can’t be real.

“—Christ, it’s freakin’ steaming! If you’re going to have it rain at least lower the damn temperature! God, what’s up with this city?!”

“Master Naoto, is it really so upsetting that you will be unable to see me in my swimsuit, even though it is finally Sunday, due to this rain?”

“Ah——! There’s that too! Gah, dammit! Talk about kicking a man while he’s down! Ahh, but that person just now... Hm? Ah, it’s Marie. Crap, let’s avoid her.”

“Master Naoto?! Could it be that you have finally acquired the high-level skill of ‘learning’?!”

.....No, as real as they seem, it’s a hallucination. This is too much, even for a breakdown, Marie. Immersing yourself in a convenient delusion like this and ending up as an invalid would be disgraceful beyond belief. Even if you discarded your name, you mustn’t discard your pride. Even if life is sad and painful, keep facing forward. Be gracious even in defeat— Wait.

She stopped her breath.

Placing her hands on the ground, Marie pushed all of her strength down into her legs. As she relaxed her joints, she felt all the muscles in her body coil into a spring.

Pouncing, Marie bounced up in spite of her wet clothes weighing down on her and, like an acrobat, flew spinning through the air—

And drove a flying roundhouse kick with all her might right into the phantom who couldn’t possibly exist—!!

“—Gehwaha?!”

“Master Naoto—?! Such inhumane violence! I see that you care little for the value of your life, Mistress Marie. Very well, if you wish to be turned into mincemeat so badly then I shall oblige y—”

“Wait, wait! Both of you calm down, especially you, princess, come to your senses already!”

“GwaHHhhhhhhhhhhhhh!!” Naoto cried out in agony. Notwithstanding, Marie grabbed him with her hands, upon which she let out a gasp in shock.

Choking, Marie surrendered herself to the torrent of emotion that overcame her. She felt like all her mental anguish over his death had been for nothing. Still, the physical sensation of restraining the idiot that she felt from her hands was definitely real, so with great pains, she forced herself to accept the situation.

“—If you were alive then why didn’t you say so?!”

“Gu, gueh... A, are you freaking kidding me!? We just got back to the surface

moments a—”

“Shut up! Don’t talk back to me!”

“Master Naoto, please wait a moment. I will immediately tear this mad dog to shreds.”

“I’m telling you two to calm the hell down already!”

—Somehow, it appears that this isn’t a convenient delusion, Marie thought.

●

Turning the clock back twenty hours...

Upon waking, Naoto wondered where he was.

It’s a dimly lit and pretty spacious area. The distance to the ceiling is more than several hundred meters. It’s almost like I’m outside... Wait, outside? He suddenly remembered. *We were fighting AnchoR when we fell, me in RyuZU’s arms.*

As Naoto recalled the chain of events up to that point, a voice came from above his head. “Have you awoken, Master Naoto?” Glancing up slightly, he saw RyuZU’s face. She was looking down at him. He finally understood the situation.

RyuZU is providing me with a lap pillow. Once he understood that, he felt like getting up now would not only be troublesome but wasteful, so he simply nodded slightly and closed his eyes again. Underneath his head—was the softness of RyuZU’s thighs. He focused all the nerves in his brain on that sensation.

“You appear to be tired, Master, so please listen as you continue to rest. We are currently beneath Mie, stuck deep in an underground floor. Normally, Master Naoto would have died within about ten seconds in a place like this, which should be equivalent to outer space—”

“GahhhhhhhHHHHHHHH?!”

Naoto leapt up in a fluster. As precious as RyuZU’s lap pillow was, what she had just said was too important to ignore.

“C, Crap, if we don’t get back soon I’ll die— Wait, h, huh...? We’ve already been here for way longer than ten seconds though, haven’t we?” Naoto asked as he used his hands to feel himself over.

RyuZU nodded, answering, “—Yes. That should have been the case, but strangely enough, it appears that an environment suitable for human life is being maintained in this area. ...Actually, hm? Was it not because you had sensed this that you gave me such an order, Master Naoto?”

“Eh? No, I just said that because it seemed like there was footing for you further below. I sort of thought that if there’s another floor below, then falling wouldn’t really be a big deal...” *That was all.* Naoto was about to say that, but then he suddenly shut up.

RyuZU was staring at him, any expression gone from her face. With a look as dreary as a Noh mask, she began, “Master Naoto.”

“...Yes.”

“As you stand above all other humans, you are, relatively speaking, quite sapient; however, I have determined that, from an absolute point of view, you are hopelessly foolish.”

“Uh, umm...”

“Allow me to explain concisely. These are the remains of the scaffolding that were made for a mining project more than a thousand years ago.”

“Scaffolding...?” Naoto repeated in a daze as he surveyed his surroundings. Straining his eyes, he observed the dark space around him and saw countless intersecting aisles in the shape of a web. They looked old but sturdy. One could see that they were being maintained. For some reason—it reminded Naoto of a construction site. That, or a stupidly gigantic, complex jungle gym.

Seeing Naoto catch on, RyuZU continued, “This Clockwork Planet was made by using the Earth’s mantle as its material. As an obvious consequence, scaffolding was necessary to extract the mantle. After the mining was finished, it was then put to another use, serving as the foundational framework of the Clockwork Planet itself—as such, similar frameworks exist underground throughout the entire planet.”

“Uhh, that’s...”

“In the present day, where the planet’s construction is already complete and every city is operating normally, these floors are not being maintained by the Clockwork Planet’s environmental management system.”

“Which means...”

That while there was scaffolding and as such, footing, everywhere in the deepest underground floors, it was just Naoto’s mistaken assumption that it would be a place that humans could survive in—

“Yes.” RyuZU nodded, correctly guessing Naoto’s thoughts. “To put it bluntly, you should have died. Thank goodness we had been lucky. It must be a reward for the good deeds I do day in and day out that put even an angel to shame.”

“Gyahhhhhhhhhhhhh?!” Understanding now what a dangerous gamble his actions had been, Naoto let out a cry. Despite it being in the past, he suddenly broke out in a cold sweat as his heart furiously pounded.

RyuZU coldly stared at Naoto who was so flustered he was practically foaming at the mouth, saying, “Master Naoto, once we return home I will be strictly lecturing you on matters outside of your school subjects as well, so prepare yourself. You have a rare and exceptional talent, yes, but even so, continuing to live your life without the bare minimum level of common sense would be extremely dangerous. This is what I have determined.”

“Yes... I am terribly sorry for my actions.” Naoto prostrated himself before RyuZU. *Still*— Naoto thought as he tilted his head. Another question popped up in his mind in place of the old one. *Why is this place an exception?*

He asked RyuZU this. “There is only one possible answer for that, Master. Someone has been maintaining this place.”

“Who do you mean by someone?”

“I do not know. However, I suspect that it has something to do with that unsightly enormous weapon.”

“Hmm.” Naoto nodded.

It’s true that an irregularity right under that ridiculous thing is probably not a

coincidence. Above all—this place is new no matter how you look at it.

It's worn down, yes, but not as much as something from a thousand years ago should be. On top of that, it's dim here—in other words, there is some kind of light source when there should be absolute darkness.

The light is unreliably faint, but nonetheless, there are light gears installed here.

"In other words," Naoto muttered, "someone is taking care of this place, right? As a transport route for that enormous weapon, or... well, I'm not sure, but in any case," Naoto strained his ears, "we have to get back to the surface."

If maintenance was being done on this area, then naturally there should be an entrance and an elevator somewhere as well. And so, Naoto discerned where they should head from his hearing. Turning around, he said, "Over there. Though it feels pretty far from here, there's a bunch of sounds of mechanical operation... not to mention people as well, it seems."

RyuZU nodded. "In that case, let us proceed. Please hold onto my hand, Master Naoto."

The two of them held hands as they began to cautiously test the worn-down aisles. With Naoto's super-hearing and RyuZU's high tech sensors, they wouldn't be inconvenienced much, even if this place was pitch black, but... even so, if they were to miss their footing, then they really would fall into the abyss this time.

They hurried on gingerly. The paths intersected each other complexly. They were also irregular—after a downward slope steep enough to slide down, there would be a gentle ascending slope and so on.

Despite what a labyrinth the place was, Naoto's ears unfailingly guided them in the right direction. After continuing like this for a little under an hour, the path became wider, as if they had been walking on the branches and had now reached the trunk of a very large tree. In accordance, the aisles became sturdier as well, the maintenance here seeming to be more thorough.

Let's take a short break. Just as Naoto was about to say that aloud, light entered into his field of sight. It came from a slightly different direction than

where they were heading. Lots of light was being scattered from the ceiling all the way down to the bottom of this abyss.

"...What's going on here?" Naoto tilted his head. Somehow or another, he felt like it was a gigantic building, and one that hadn't been built that way originally, at that. It felt almost as if it were a building that had collapsed and gotten caught in a spider web of scaffolding, somehow.

Though puzzled at the surreal sight, he quickly found the answer upon straining his ears. It was— "The city... No, the core tower?"

If one were to be even more precise, it was the ruins of the core tower. Unsurprisingly, it wasn't operating. Its interior had been considerably gouged out as well. Naoto could sense just how hollow the structure was with his ears.

Next to him, RyuZU tilted her head slightly. "Considering the direction the light is coming from, the tower likely belonged to the purged Shiga Grid. To think that it stopped at this depth, it must have been awfully light... Well, it was a city with holes everywhere to begin with, I suppose."

"Holes?"

"In ancient times, it was the region that held Japan's largest lake. Indeed, a sixth of its surface domain was occupied by the lake, and the majority remainder, the boondocks. It was said to have been a plain, gawky provincial city."

Naoto stared at RyuZU with a sidelong gaze. "...Hey, do you have a grudge against Shiga or something?"

"No? Not at all. It is simply described as such in my records," RyuZU denied with a composed face before continuing, "When Shiga was mechanized, it was made into the water source for the entire region of western Japan. Mie's climate being so sultry most likely comes from Shiga being purged."

"Ah— Now that you mention it, I think Marie said something like that before." Naoto nodded as he gazed at RyuZU, who had finished giving her smooth explanation. "Even so, aren't you oddly well-informed about it, RyuZU?"

"If you have forgotten, then allow me to regretfully introduce myself again for the umpteenth time—the one who created me is the person who designed this

planet.”

“Ah, I see. That’s why you’re so knowledgeable about this, makes sense.” Naoto nodded.

“＿＿＿”

“...Hm? Is something the matter, RyuZU?” Naoto asked. He had noticed that she had sunk into silence and was fixing her eyes on him intently.

“Yes... It is about AnchoR,” RyuZU said. Fully facing Naoto, she lowered herself, feet touching, in a deeply proper bow. “I know this is late, but I deeply apologize for what I did.”

“Eh...? Wait, RyuZU, what’s this about all of a sudden?”

“Due to my negligence, I ended up exposing Master Naoto to grave danger. The disrespect towards you from my failure of a little sister could never be atoned for in any way, but... please forgive her. I beg you.”

Naoto was dumbfounded, his mouth agape. He couldn’t see RyuZU’s face because she was still bowing, but seeing the way she was wringing her skirt—her quivering shoulders, Naoto said in a hurry, “Please stop. Lift your head up, RyuZU.”

“.....”

“You know, I’m not mad about that at all. I’m not even annoyed by it.”

“.....But.”

“—Isn’t calling AnchoR a failure of a little sister going too far? I feel bad for her. Though she tried to kill us, she did say that she wanted us to stop her after all,” Naoto said in a bright, nonchalant voice.

Upon those words, RyuZU raised her head, her beautiful golden eyes were opened wide, “—You heard AnchoR’s voice?”

“Hm? Ahh, well, probably? If I wasn’t mistaken.” Naoto nodded.

RyuZU relaxed her expression ever so slightly. “To be frank, I am surprised. That girl was the one who was the worst at expressing her emotions among us sisters, but...”

“Hmmm? It didn’t seem that way to me though...”

“No, what surprises me is that someone like Master Naoto, a social reject whose communication skills are exceedingly questionable, was capable of apprehending what AnchoR was feeling. It is a miraculous feat, to say the least. I do not think anyone can dispute this.”

“Please stop, I’ll cry.” *I’m sorry for being a loner*, Naoto thought as he trembled.

Paying him no mind, RyuZU knit her brows and continued, “Still, if it wasn’t AnchoR’s will to attack us, then, as expected, it has to be...?”

“Ah... Yeah. That suspicious mask is probably the culprit. Like, it was the only thing that was making an awful sound too. The mask seemed like it was suppressing AnchoR-chan’s sound.”

RyuZU cast her eyes downward. She made a fist with one hand and covered it with the other as if enduring to hold herself back. She spat out just two words, “—How unforgivable.”

“Yeah. AnchoR-chan isn’t at fault at all. When we find the ones responsible, we’ll demand reparations for it until they cry.”

“Of course,” RyuZU said with a sweet smile like that of a saint. “I’ll slice them, bit by bit, starting with their toenails. I’ll drill the revelation of their mistaken birth into their very *bones*. And when they at last beg for death, I shall offer them a cruel public execution on such a level of despairing agony that it will leave a mark in history— a warning for anyone who ever dares to try such a thing again.”

“...Try your best to restrain yourself from painting a grotesque scene, okay?” Naoto added fearfully, to which RyuZU smiled and nodded. It was an equivocal smile that could mean either yes or no.

“...Well, whatever. Let’s keep going, shall we?”

After they had continued walking for some time, with several breaks in between, they finally arrived at their destination. At first glance, it appeared to be the ruins of a town. Above the scaffolding were heaps of scrap material taking the form of crude but satisfactory dwellings. The tower in the center

somehow soared far above all the way to the ceiling—it appeared to be connected to the base of the city of Mie.

—However, there were no signs of people anywhere. There were traces of the fact that several thousand people had once lived here, but every decaying house around was now filled with dust.

After taking a look at several of the houses, RyuZU said, “If we consider things logically, this is probably where the survivors from Shiga Grid used to live.”

“Surviving a purge... Uh, is that possible?”

“They must have been very fortunate. Or perhaps one could say that they were very unfortunate, but...” RyuZU paused, breathing out in admiration of the sight before her. “...Still, to think that they would build a town in a place like this to survive. I see that humans are much more tenacious than I thought.”

“Well, they say that home is where the heart is, but I wouldn’t want to live here if I had a choice...” While agreeing with RyuZU’s sentiment, Naoto pricked up his ears.

This town was a deserted ruin that had been abandoned by its inhabitants—however, Naoto could definitely hear the sound of just one person living here somewhere. After sounding out the rough location, Naoto asked, “What should we do, RyuZU?”

“How about we ask him what he knows? He’s living in a place like this alone. That fact alone makes him reek terribly of a loser who’s leading a worthless life, but we might be able to acquire some clues on the insolent bunch who manipulated AnchoR—in any case, I could deal with a single human in **any number of ways,** so...”

Naoto felt a chill run down his spine. “...Well, let’s keep it friendly for now, okay?”

They walked through the town ruins towards the central tower. Doing so, they stumbled upon a small cabin before long. It was a barracks made of scrap material just like the other dwellings, but there was no dust around its entrance. A dull operating sound of a small power tool could be heard from the rear of the cabin—someone was here.

Naoto knocked on the door casually two, three times before calling out loudly, “Umm~, excu~se me! We’d like to ask you about a few things if possible~”

A voice answered him from beyond the door. “...Who are you. What did you come here for.” It was the raspy voice of an old man.

“We’re lost and just happened to be passing by. We’d like to know how to return to the surface if possible.”

“.....”

After a considerably long silence, the old man said, “...The door’s not locked. Come in if you’d like.”

Naoto exchanged glances with RyuZU, then resolved himself and slowly opened the door.

The room they had entered was as suffocating as it looked. The ceiling was low and the lighting dim. There was a bookcase along the wall of one side. Old books and bundles of papers had been stuffed into it messily. If one shifted one’s gaze to the side a little, one could see a simple kitchen and a small bed as well. The cabin had everything necessary for a single human to live.

Illuminated by a light gear lamp in the center of the room was an old, large man sitting in a rocker. He was stout and broad-shouldered. Tempered muscles covered his entire body beneath his aged skin. While both his crumpled hair and the beard that laced his chin were gray like ash, they more exuded the gravity of a lifetime’s experience over the feebleness of old age.

The old man propped his head up with one hand, resting his elbow against the arm of the rocker. He was watching his two guests with his radiant, moss-green eyes. “...Who are you guys? Where did you come from?”

“Ah— Well, you see, we had accidentally, that is...” Naoto stumbled verbally, his words vague.

Next to him, RyuZU explained, “We fell down 34,258 meters from the base of the city.”

“Right right. Umm... Well, something like that I guess? So, how can we return?

Dammit. All this is that damn Marie's fault. That walking landmine is a damn goddess of pestilence, I tell you."

The old man gazed at the two of them suspiciously, but eventually, he shook his head slowly. He sighed gloomily, "...You can't return to the surface."

"Ah— Could you please do something about that? You see, I have a duty to hurry and return to the surface so I can rescue a girl called AnchoR-chan."

"This is a town where everything has already been thrown out and abandoned. The only things that remain are myself and a modest manufacturing plant. The elevator to the surface has long been out of order."

"In that case, why don't you just start it up again— Hey, would you get a move on grandpa! AnchoR-chan is suffering even as we sp—?!" Suddenly, Naoto felt suffocated. His vision dimmed and his balance became unsteady. He was about to fall over when RyuZU supported him with her hands.

"Master Naoto, while it is true that there is air here, its oxygen content is extremely low. Even if you are close to the level of a being that has ascended from humanity into godhood, at present, you are still human and have not yet actually become a higher dimensional lifeform capable of surviving without oxygen. As such, I would suggest that you calm down so as not to die."

"What, I'm going to die?!" Shocked, Naoto widened his eyes.

As she patted the forehead of his pale face, RyuZU continued, "...First your remedial lessons, then being dragged all the way here to Mie on Mistress Marie's exceedingly selfish whim, followed by infiltrating a military facility, suddenly entering into battle with AnchoR, falling down a distance of more than thirty thousand meters, and finally a long and continuing march in thin air..."

"—I am already plenty impressed with the level of proactiveness you have shown when it comes to pursuing your perverted desire for automata, so please, rest for a little while, Master."

"...If you want to let him have some rest, have him sleep on my bed over there," the old man said.

RyuZU turned her gaze towards the bed silently, then nodded. Naoto had lost his strength. She picked him up and carried him over to the bed by the corner of

the room. After she confirmed that Naoto had fallen asleep, she turned to face the old man.

“Now then, I will be asking the questions in Master Naoto’s place.”

“...”

“I have absolutely no interest in who you are, where you are from, or what you are doing here. However, Master Naoto has something he must do, and I have a duty to assist my master in realizing his wishes with all the abilities I have at my disposal. Not to mention, this place is not good for his health—”

RyuZU said dispassionately as a black scythe popped out from underneath her skirt. Like a snake targeting its prey, she lifted the pointy end of the blade up.

“I request that you give me, as quickly as possible, information on how to return to the surface from here. Be aware that I am prepared to utilize the full measure of my knowledge and abilities to inflict all sorts of agony upon your person should you refuse.”

“I see now, you’re an InitialY Series huh.”

—The scythe flew forth. It was caressing the old man’s neck as he continued to prop up his head up with one hand.

“You sure are devoted to your master.” The old man smiled bitterly, sighing. There was no sign of fear in his eyes despite the danger of being decapitated at any moment.

RyuZU inquired, “What do you know?”

“It isn’t really strange for me to deduce that you’re an InitialY. You survived a bout with ‘that’ and fell all the way down to this floor, right? Yet, you’re unscathed—the only automata who would be capable of such a feat are you sisters.”

“...”

“I heard that just the other day, Breguet’s daughter was caught up in a large scuffle to save Kyoto from being purged. My guess is that you are the First of the InitialY Series, the one that she owned, am I right?”

RyuZU didn’t answer him, her eyes narrowing sharply. “To know of such a

recent event, it appears that you are not a shut-in who, after losing in life, began fancying himself a hermit after all."

"You're not really wrong. It's true. I am someone who was defeated." The old man continued, "I wasn't lying when I said that the elevator to the surface is out of order. It'll move if you power it though."

"Then do so," RyuZU ordered.

To which the old man replied, a gentle smile still on his face, "Sure, if you would be so kind as to humor a story an old man has to share first."

●

"—And so, that's how we got back to the surface," Naoto said, tying things up. The four of them had been exchanging information with each other after returning to the hotel room that Marie and Halter had rented out.

Marie was in a daze from Naoto's story, "So, you didn't expect to die from pulling a stunt like that...?"

"Hah? Me? Die? Why?"

"Uh, well, I thought that you had sacrificed yourself to protect me and Halter..."

"The heck are you saying?" Naoto shot her down immediately and continued, "I just wanted to stop AnchoR-chan. In the first place, who would die to save a walking landmine like you? It would make RyuZU sad if I died. Plus, I wouldn't be able to help AnchoR-chan either. Marie, could it be that... you're actually an idiot? How would me dying help anyone? Use some common sense."

"＿＿＿"

Receiving Naoto's pitying gaze, Marie trembled all over.

"...Well, figures, I guess," Halter muttered quietly.

Not letting Halter's verbal shrug slip by, Marie turned around and asked with a growl that sounded like it rang from the bottom of hell, "Halter—*surely*, you're not going to tell me that you knew, right...?"

"I mean, I wasn't sure, you know?" While being glared at by Marie, Halter

shook his head, adding, “After all, we were mistaken in thinking that he would die from falling into the deepest underground layers. Though, it is true that I couldn’t quite buy into the narrative that this boy had risked his life to save you, princess.”

“If that’s the case, then why—!”

“If I had said something like that back then, would you have believed me? If you couldn’t actually confirm that Naoto was alive, my words wouldn’t have comforted you in the slightest, right? I kept quiet on the matter thinking that I shouldn’t add oil to the fire, but...”

“＿＿＿”

Marie fell into silence. *There were some details that didn’t seem to fit, that much is true. For instance, Halter was unusually composed about Naoto and RyuZU’s fall, but I thought that that was just his soldier’s spirit—the grit forged through years of training and actual combat experience...*

But it all makes sense now.

In other words, I’ve simply been dancing around like a clown by myself, huh? The despair and the anguish, the tears and the vomit, my determination nonetheless to face what had happened head-on and figure out how best to atone despite my heart feeling like it was being grinded down were all—all just my misunderstanding, a comical one-man show.

—Great, I’m gonna kill him, Marie quietly determined. *If I don’t sink everyone involved with this to the bottom of the earth and purge all proof that this ever happened, I’ll never be able to regain my thoroughly smashed dignity...!*

“You three...” With a large sway, Marie stood up.

Yet, despite that, Naoto was laying out a map on the ground, completely ignoring her. “Well, leaving that aside, shall we head to Tokyo?”

“—Huh?” Marie stopped moving at Naoto’s words. She hadn’t told him about the information they had gathered on their end yet. Neither the truth behind why Shiga Grid was purged nor that things were heading closer and closer toward a headlong clash between Mie and Tokyo by the hour. *And yet, how do you know?*

Receiving her baffled gaze, Naoto answered, “Hm? Did I say something strange? AnchoR-chan is here protecting that enormous weapon, but she was originally in Tokyo, right? In that case, that weapon should be heading towards Tokyo now that it’s begun moving—or so I thought, am I wrong?”

“You’re not... wrong, but...” Half giving up her case, Marie sighed. *I’ve slowly gotten more and more used to it, but his thought patterns completely ignore the need for proof and the circumstances behind a situation. Such things are trivial to him.*

“...So, what do you want to accomplish by going to Tokyo?”

“Huh? I’m going to save AnchoR-chan, duh. How could anyone say no to a plea for help from such an adorable automaton? Unthinkable. He’d have to be a real brute.”

...This guy’s an idiot after all, isn’t he. Marie massaged her temples, warding off a vengeful headache. “...You probably don’t know this considering you just got to the surface, but FYI, that weapon intends to attack Tokyo.”

“Well, yeah, I mean, it’s a weapon. That’s what they do, what’s your point?”

“‘What’s my point’? —Now, look here, you...”

But Naoto cut her off. “I’ve been trying to tell you that AnchoR-chan asked me to help her, you know? Rescue AnchoR-chan and wreck that enormous weapon. Wouldn’t that clean everything up nicely? Incidentally, the mastermind behind this or the last boss—whatever you want to call him, he’s gotta be in Tokyo too, no? Why not just round them all up at once and resolve this incident?”

“.....” Marie sighed deeply as she grimaced.

Next to her, Halter interjected, “...See, the thing is, Naoto: It’s easy to say that, but the question is what to actually do about it. Are the four of us enough to stop that weapon now that it’s started up?”

“Isn’t that exactly what we’re going to work on starting now?” Naoto snorted.

Halter stroked his chin, continuing dispassionately, “Tokyo has rallied its army and Mie has booted its enormous weapon. From my assessment, Mie should be the one with the initiative. So it wouldn’t be a bad idea to go to Tokyo and lie in

wait, but if they start fighting in Tokyo, Tokyo itself won't get away scot-free, you know?"

Naoto answered without a shred of hesitation, "In that case, let's think of a method that would keep Tokyo safe."

"To do that would mean to not only make an enemy of that enormous weapon, but also Tokyo's army."

"They weren't our allies in the first place. It'll be fine. We can just manipulate them for our purposes with some clever trick."

"Well then, that would mean that—"

"Arrrggh, you're soooooo annoying! It'll be fine if we just cross that bridge when we come to it, you idiots!!" Naoto shouted, exasperated.

He faced Halter and Marie then continued to slam them. "No matter how many 'buts' you come up with, what we have to do doesn't change in the end! At the very least, I don't have even the slightest intention of giving up on AnchoR-chan. I don't care who prattles at me or how sound their argument is. If they're gonna get in my way, I'll cut them to pieces, whoever they are, even if they're the president!"

"———"

Marie found herself unable to respond. Seeing that, Naoto went even further, "So? When all's said and done, what is it that you two want to do! If it's just escaping responsibility by making excuses for why we can't do anything, even an idiot could do that! **Huh?!**"

Marie's seethed from his provocative tone. Before she realized it, she was shouting back angrily—

"Don't look down on me!!"

Her emerald eyes were blazing as she shot those words off on impulse. Naoto and Marie faced each other down, foreheads nearly touching, their eyes glaring.

"Who do you think you're talking down to? Just who do you think I am?!"

"I don't care, stupid! With all those complaints stuck in your throat, you're nothing but a landmine crybaby!"

Neither of them would back down even one step. Sparks were flying between the pairs of ashen and emerald eyes.

“It’s not like you actually even have a concrete plan, so quit drooling in your selfish delusions, idiot!”

“If your idea of a concrete plan is to just give up cuz it’s too much trouble, then who needs such a thing!”

“Haah?! Who said we can’t do anything?! Don’t just shove words into my mouth!”

“Huh, really?! Cuz it looks to me like you guys have been making excuses one after the other for a while now!”

Marie reached her hands out and grabbed Naoto by the collar in a fit of rage.

“＿＿＿”

She was about to shout some curses, but seeing Naoto’s expression, she swallowed her words instead. Marie regarded the ashen eyes right in front of her while sensing the clear disappointment in his unwavering gaze. She felt her body flaring up. The humiliation made her shoulders tremble. Fury was roasting her heart.

She was fine with him thinking that she’s cheeky. Arguing with someone was a fresh experience too. She didn’t need him to pay respect to her. As far as spewing vitriol goes, they were both at fault. However, even so, there was one thing that she absolutely could not stand.

Being pitied by this guy is the one thing I won’t stand for—!!

That moment. Like a flash of lightning suddenly cutting through a dark night, she remembered something.

“I’m—!!”

Something just like this had happened before, with her and Naoto glaring at each other. At that time, she had said something—words that she had believed in unwaveringly, which she had somehow, to her shame, forgotten somewhere along the way until just now. They were a few words of pride that defined who Marie Bell Breguet was.

Marie yelled, her emerald eyes shining vigorously,

“I’m a woman who’ll never believe that something’s impossible!!”

“Yeah.” Naoto nodded as he relaxed his expression. “—That’s right. If you weren’t that, you’d ‘just be’ a walking landmine, right?”

Marie began laughing aloud, finding something amusing in his words. “Fufu... Haha, ahahahahahah!” Naoto, Halter, and RyuZU merely watched her, taken aback, but that didn’t bother her much either.

Good lord.

To think that I had forgotten such an obvious thing until just now.

Marie sighed, “Let’s confirm something. —You’re an outrageous idiot.”

“Oy.”

“—And at the same time, an idiot who’s a much better person than me,” Marie promptly added before shaking her head.

RyuZU addressed Marie from the side, her voice betraying a sense of astonishment. “It certainly is unusual for you to say something that I can wholeheartedly agree with—did you hit your head or something, Mistress Marie?”

“Yeah, I feel like my head’s been smashed in with a hammer. Being an idiot feels good, doesn’t it?” She looked happy and carefree as her tension crumbled, her posture loose, she simply shrugged her shoulders.

—It’s true, she thought. *The whole of humanity might just be nothing but a big group of idiots, just like RyuZU said.*

Like the words I uttered in my moment of weakness, there might not be any value in this world.

But, even if that’s the case, so what?

“In short, there’s nothing but idiots in this world. Every last one of us is an irrational, obstinate, and selfish creature—and yet we all still expect to be loved. There might not be any value in this tattered world, but there is meaning in it: After all, even if one’s worth is something acknowledged by others, the

meaning of one’s life is something determined by the self.”

That’s why everyone lives out their lives trying to find their own meaning in having been born.



—At the very least, Naoto Miura understands that, unlike me.

Marie declared, “Okay, as you said, going to Tokyo isn’t a bad idea. Very well. Let’s pick a fight with both Mie and Tokyo and flip the world upside down, shall we?”

“I’m not really sure what you’re saying, but I won’t budge on the matter of saving AnchoR-chan, got that?”

“I know that. Our goals haven’t changed. You save AnchoR and I’ll save the world. We’ll do it because we want to—we’ll do whatever it takes to fulfill our duties.”

Halter interjected, “Oy oy, princess, I’m glad that your spirits are back, but what are you planning on doing?”

“Isn’t it obvious? **Whatever it takes.**”

—That’s right. I have no obligation to uphold in choosing an honorable method. Whether there is leeway to do so doesn’t change that fact.

“My goodness, what a terrible misunderstanding I had. Hey, we’re not allies of justice—we’re terrorists, right?” The cogs in Marie’s brain began to turn at a speed that was something fierce. As she plotted, an unrestful aura began to emanate from the petite young girl.

“I regret how I’ve been acting—I understand that I’ve lacked resolve up to now.” Marie squeezed her fists tight.

Seeing her like that, Naoto was awfully taken aback, muttering, “Uh... could it be that I just unknowingly spurred on a monster?”

“Rest assured, Naoto. Thanks to you spurring me on, you’ll be able acquire AnchoR, I promise.”

“Then I’ll spur you on as much as you’d like! I’ll push you forward with a truck, if that’s what it takes, leave it to me.” Naoto changed his attitude at the speed of light.

Seeing them like that, Halter pursed his lips, grumbling, “I don’t know what you plan to do... but seeing how you’re behaving, it can’t be something good.”

Marie nodded, “Isn’t that obvious? We’re going to do bad things.” She grinned sweetly at Halter before turning to Naoto. “Now then, Naoto, I’ll have you answer two questions for me.”

“Right... I have a rea—lly bad feeling about this, but what is it?”

Marie stuck up her index finger. “First, going by the way you’ve been talking, it seems that you think that you can restrain AnchoR, but can you really?”

“We can,” he answered immediately.

However, RyuZU objected, “...With due respect, Master Naoto, no automaton can win against that girl in com—”

“That’s not true. If it’s you, RyuZU, it’s possible. I don’t think I even have to mention this, but I won’t let either you or AnchoR-chan be destroyed. Just as she begged of us, we’re going to save her. That’s absolute.”

“That so. Then, I’ll leave the details of her case to you. I won’t ask for the basis for your confidence, but in exchange.” Marie prefaced her second question with another finger before asking, “How far would you be willing to go to see both of them safe and sound?”

“That’s obvious. I’d do anything.”

Marie curled her lips into a smirk, “—Halter, you heard him. Did you get that on tape?”

“Yeah, I guess...”

“You said you’d do anything, right? Yep, you did, you said it. As such, I won’t let you run away making excuses, got it?” Marie pressed him menacingly.

Naoto began to feel a bit of doubt, he was getting cold feet. “Uh, Umm... If RyuZU and AnchoR will both be safe at the end of it all, yeah, I’ll do anything, but... I’ll pass on dying, as RyuZU probably wouldn’t accept that.”

RyuZU stepped forward, her eyes grim, to stick up for Naoto. “—Though this is obvious, if you are hoping for a situation that would conclude with Master Naoto dying, or being on the verge of death, then prepare yourself accordingly. As it is, I already have something to say to you concerning how carelessly you have gotten Master Naoto involved with this incident to the point of nearly

getting him kill—”

“Rest assured. I won’t let him die. Not him, not anyone.” Marie smiled bitterly as she relaxed her shoulders. “I’d just like to have him... Hmm, right. Naoto, what subject was your next remedial lesson again?”

“Huh? It’s modern history, why...?”

“That so? Perfect. That textbook will have been rewritten by the time we get back, so you won’t need it anymore.”

“...Hm?”

“We’re going to have them record us in that textbook. As the vilest terrorists in history, probably ♪.”

“Say,” Halter interjected, “you’re putting on quite the airs, but in the end, what are you planning to stir up, princess?”

Being asked that, Marie answered with a smile, “It’s simple.”

She paused for a breath.

“We’re going to attack Tokyo before Mie’s enormous weapon can get there.”

Marie waited for the three of them to take in what she had just said before continuing, “Adding the information we acquired on our end to the things you just told us about in your report, I now have a pretty good idea of how that weapon operates. I was unsure of how they were going to send such an enormous weapon to Tokyo, but now—”

Never mind how tough the plating of the grids are, if a gargantuan body like that walked on the ground, it would destroy everything in its path on its way from Mie to Tokyo.

If that happened, forget just Tokyo, the military of every grid in its path would intercept it, and if they struggled to deal with it, the armies of other countries would probably set out to control the situation.

To begin with, no matter powerful of a weapon it is, there’s no way it could move very quickly with a body like that. If a city was to be purged while it was traveling through the city, it would be helplessly brought down along with the

grid.

“In other words,” Marie began, “That thing’s a weapon that moves underground. The reason it was made underground isn’t just to conceal it. That hangar itself also serves as the docking area that connects directly to the deepest underground layers.”

And, that should also be the greatest factor in Mie’s prospects of winning. There’s no way an army could be deployed against them in the deepest underground layers in the first place. That was because no one would take a weapon that moves underground into consideration to begin with.

No matter how big of an army they amass on the surface, if they were ambushed from underground, it would be absolutely over. From there, the enormous weapon could just destroy all of Tokyo, or perhaps even take all of its core towers as hostages instead.

“That’s why we’re going to terrorize them instead, before that weapon gets there.”

“Terrorize you say, but what are you thinking of specifically? Are we gonna blow up the National Diet Building?” Naoto asked with a puckery face.

Marie gazed at him as if fed up with his stupidity. “What would that accomplish, even if we succeeded, dummy? What I’m thinking of is much more impressive—we’re going to take over one of the grids of Tokyo at the perfect moment.”

“So... umm, just like what we did in Kyoto?”

Last month, Naoto and Marie had usurped control of all of Kyoto’s core tower in order to save the city.

“You want to do that again?” Naoto asked.

Marie nodded. “That’s right. If we pull that off, not only could we evacuate the residents first, but also bait Tokyo’s army to the city’s underground actuator as well. If we do that, their Technical Force would surely notice the enormous weapon advancing underground. If we leave the rest to both sides... Now *that* would be a real duel between men of honor, right?”

“I’d like to nitpick you on the details, but... well, I get what you want to do,” Halter interjected. “But, princess, we’re a bit short on the necessary manpower to execute that plan. We don’t have the time to thoroughly prepare for it either. Even if we brute force our way through, no faction would be able to willingly ignore us. In the worst-case scenario, we might even be assaulted by AnchoR.”

“That’s exactly what I’m hoping for though—well, it’s not a problem in any case.” Smiling sweetly, Marie shrugged her shoulders. “You might already know this, but I have lots of friends that I can count on too, you know?”

“—Is crushing the heart of an outcast fun for you?” Naoto muttered in response, his warped personality on full display.

Chapter Four *00 : 00* Returner

10:34 AM on the sixth day of February of the 1016th year of the Wheel.

About seventy-five kilometers below the surface of Mie Grid lay the base of the city's mechanisms. Something that would never be seen by the people who lived on the surface slowly began to move.

It was an enormous steel spider.

All in all, it was 320 meters tall and 932 meters in length. The fact that such a thing was moving at all was ridiculous. Nonetheless, it walked forward with an incredibly loud noise.

It slid under the bottom of the city into its deepest underground layers, where free from the gravitational restraints of the facility's hangar area, it headed straight eastward. What lay in its projected path was the capital area of Japan—the Tokyo Grids. Its walking pace was slow. It would most likely take about a day and a half for it to reach its destination.

However, in spite of the noise and its lumbering pace, what was crawling through the hollow space of the Clockwork Planet was something that could definitely sneak up on and deal a lethal blow to its prey—it was a weapon that could destroy the very planet itself. There was no doubt that it was an extremely dangerous existence.

A malevolent spider that should have been crawling forward unbeknownst to all; and yet, there was someone secretly observing it from the shadows...

"It's finally begun moving, huh..." the shadow muttered, her silver hair swaying. "It's an unbearably ugly, unsightly thing, but... it certainly is menacing." After spewing out those venomous words, the shadow—RyuZU—narrowed her eyes.

Confirming the monster's departure, its path, and its speed, she quietly left the scene without being discovered by anyone.

●

6:27 PM on the sixth day of February of the 1016th year of the Wheel.

There was a building referred to as the fourth clock tower that could be found on Yasukuni Street in Akihabara Grid, Tokyo, Japan.

As a rule of thumb, clock towers were under military management, but here, for the purposes of technological research, the tower was among a handful of exceptions whose maintenance was annexed to a university.

There were multiple silhouettes walking through the campus of that university, The Akihabara Institute of Technology. They were wearing matching blue work clothes and pushing a cart with a large package, brazenly traversing the campus illuminated by the crimson light of the setting sun. There were still many students and faculty members out and about, but no one paid any mind to the workers making their way across the campus.

As a result, without being questioned by anyone, they arrived at the entrance to the clock tower's warehouse. There, the group encountered an iron gate and a small accompanying stall which housed a security guard. The security guard, who looked to be in his late sixties, watched the crew moving the large package, perplexed.

The man in front, who was large and bear-like, called out with a smile, "Hi there! Thanks for your hard work as always."

"Y, yeah, you too... Umm, what business do you have here today?" the security guard asked.

The large man surfaced a refreshing grin as he took out a single sheet of paper from his satchel stuffed full of various documents. "We're from Seiko's shipping department, we came here to deliver the new measurement devices."

"Eh, I haven't heard of such a purchase though...?"

"Oh man. Another one, huh." The large man scowled exaggeratedly, then grumbled in a small voice, "This is already the third time this year. It seems that university researchers are rather irresponsible when it comes to detailed paperwork... Ah, no, sorry, that was rude of me."

"No no, I know what you mean." The security guard smiled bitterly. "Let me guess, it's for Professor Kizaki isn't it? The seminar students often complain

about how strict he is despite being pretty sloppy himself."

"Well, I guess technically you could say that it's nothing new at this point, but..." The large man huddled his shoulders together as if feeling obliged and pointed at a line on the document that he was handing over to the guard. "It seems like Dr. Kizaki went off on a sudden business trip today so he can't be reached at the moment. He told us to install the devices while he's out because he wanted to get to work immediately once he's back, but... maybe that would violate protocol?"

"Hmm... Well, you see, normally you would need a written form from the professor, but..." Nodding, the security guard muttered, seeming sympathetic, "Well, your document looks official so I guess it's fine. When the professor comes back I'll give him a warning for next time."

"Thank you very much! Really, you saved us a lot of trouble."

"Not at all, thanks for your hard work. I'll open the gate now." With a smile, the kind security guard flipped a switch on his desk. As the gate opened, the large man was handed back his stamped document from the guard. He bowed as he said his thanks.

The group in blue work clothes pushed the cart into the warehouse. Once the security stall was completely out of sight, the large man—Halter—burst out laughing, "—Well, that's university security for you, Dr. Hannes."

"My goodness. I can't believe you, Mr. Halter." The one who responded was the man pushing the cart right behind Halter. He had chiseled features and a long, rectangular face. He was the very picture of a straight-laced middle-aged man. "Is it really normal to let people whose identities you aren't sure of into a clock tower with a single document, just like that?"

"Normal people judge others by their clothes and their attitude. If you wear the uniform of a delivery man and throw a joke in somewhere, you really won't seem suspicious."

The other man—Hannes—didn't look like he was convinced. "Still, it was a stroke of luck that the professor was conveniently away on a business trip, wasn't it?"

“Oh, that? No, we had the Breguets handle that for us.”

“...What did you say?”

“Given that we’re dealing with a university, we can’t be too violent with our methods, you see. That’s why we made up some business for the professor that would get him out of the way. Thanks to that, we’re the only ones in this clock tower right now.”

Hearing those words, Hannes sighed deeply and repeated, “...My goodness, I can’t believe you.”

“It seems you’re a rather straight-laced person despite having worked with that tomboy,” Halter teased, grinning.

However, Hannes immediately returned with a blank face, “Tomboy? But she’s the most serious, sincere, and outstanding woman I know.”

“...Well, words are an imperfect vehicle of expression, I suppose.” Though Halter couldn’t dismiss Hannes’s description of Marie as completely wrong, it didn’t seem exactly right to him either, somehow.

Taking a breath, Halter shook his head and changed the subject. “Well, in any case, if any problems arise I’ll take care of it, so please take care of the work, professors. Taking the installation of the devices into consideration, I’m estimating that the job should take about four hours. Is that enough time?”

“Of course. We’re still Meisters, you know. Have a little faith, won’t you.” Hannes—the man who once served as an observation chief of Meister Guild—replied, puffing up his chest.

To those words, Halter smiled bitterly and lowered his head, “—My, you’ll have to pardon me for asking.”

●

0:00 AM on the eighth day of February of the 1016th year of the Wheel.

A little before the present, on this day that will be deeply carved in history, Marie Bell Breguet was in Akihabara Grid, Tokyo, Japan—inside its first clock tower.

In a mechanical room filled with gears just like the inside of a core tower—

several scores of technicians were working relentlessly in order to execute Marie's plan. Their first step was to synchronize the core and its supporting clock towers. They were working without rest to accomplish that.

Of course, they weren't the Technical Force who normally serviced this place. Their racial backgrounds, genders, and ages were all over the place. Their clothes and equipment weren't uniform in any way either—actually, there was just one thing they shared to mark them: A chrono compass on the wrist.

The proof of being a Meister.

A super finely detailed timepiece with nine clockfaces large and small. The medal that represented being at the peak of all two hundred million clocksmiths in the world.

Even hundreds of ordinary clocksmiths couldn't rival a single Meister. Meisters were extraordinary clocksmiths who possessed both talent and the history of results to back it up. Among the gathering of Meisters, one of them was yelling out, "Dr. Marie!"

Marie lifted her head up from her work desk. She had been focused on her calculations, a string of equations showing on the piece of scrap paper on her desk. "Yes, go ahead. What is it?"

"We've confirmed the synchronization of the 3,340th to the 7,990th, as well as the linkage of all the floors."

"—Understood. Thank you for your hard work," Marie nodded.

Only a moment later, a different clocksmith who had been standing guard over the communications device yelled out, "Reporting! A transmission from the fourth clock tower says that the functions of all floors over there have been released. The administrative privilege over the atmospheric temperature system is being transferred to us."

"—Understood, please send them this message in response: 'It's almost time for the operation, so once you finish the final confirmation please escape immediately.' Also, please forward the administrative privilege to the rest of the clock towers once we receive it."

After sorting through some more reports, confirmations, and requests for

instruction one after the other, Marie let out a large sigh. She stretched her back as far as she could in her chair before releasing the tension in her muscles.

A man in his late fifties came up behind her. “It looks like we made it somehow, eh?” He laid the steaming cup in his hand onto the table with an elegant motion and continued, “It’s black tea. One with plenty of milk and honey—you liked your tea sweet, right?”

Marie relaxed her expression and took the cup in one hand. “Thank you, Service Chief Konrad.”

“I’m not the service chief anymore you know, Dr. Marie,”

“...That’s true isn’t it.” Putting her lips against the rim of the piping-hot cup, Marie cast her eyes downward.

Konrad had once been her advisor, serving as her service chief when she had been in Meister Guild. He was an old and experienced technician who had lent his hand to her during the incident in Kyoto, even staying in the core tower to the very end despite the danger.

After the incident, he had retired from Meister Guild and was now working as a freelance clocksmith. He was also the one who had investigated the suspicious movements of Tokyo’s military for her.

“I’m glad that the work was safely finished... I asked too much of everyone.”

“Not at all. Everyone enjoys working with you. Plus, the work was easier than expected as most of the clock towers turned out to be empty.”

“...Yeah, it’s like a parade of felonies.”

She took a breath as she tasted the sweet, hot black tea. She thought about the clocksmiths working here and at the other clock towers. Nearly all of them were like Konrad, Meisters who had once been her subordinates. They had left Meister Guild after Kyoto’s incident and become regular civilians.

—Hijack the city mechanisms and sortie against the approaching raid by the enormous weapon.

Anyone else who heard of such a plan would surely call it absurd, but they had readily gotten on board with it. People who possessed a priceless level of

technical skill that would allow them to work wherever they pleased were helping her with a job that would not only not pay much, but was illegal.

Because Marie Bell Breguet had asked them to—for just that reason.

Marie blushed as she was filled anew with a deep gratitude she could never fully express. “Really—I’m so thankful for you all.”

Just then, the correspondence device that had been left on the table started ringing. Marie flipped the switch to receive the call, upon which a voice immediately asked, “—Marie, are the preparations done?” It was Naoto’s voice. Perhaps he was slightly nervous, because his voice was higher than usual.

Marie curled her lips at the receiver. “—Of course. Who do you think I am?”

“I’m counting on you, Meister.”

“That’s obvious as well. Just make sure you take care of things on your end.”

“Roger,” Naoto answered briefly, upon which the transmission ended.

Konrad asked, “Was that ‘him’ just now?”

“Yeah, it was Naoto Miura.” Marie nodded.

Konrad muttered with a sigh, “Though I had just witnessed it again myself the other day, it’s still hard to believe no matter how many times I see it. To be able to fully grasp the makeup of a core and twelve clock towers with just his bare ears and that level of equipment to aid him...”

“But, it’s real.”

Naoto had grasped Akihabara Grid’s structure with his ears, and Marie had drawn up its blueprint based on his description.

The plan was to analyze which functions were shared between the core tower and each of its supporting clock towers. From there, reverse-engineer a way to hijack the core tower from four of its clock towers and seize control of the atmospheric temperature system along with the communications network. Then, construct their own system that they could freely manipulate through the network.

Normally, it would take several hundred years just to be able to get the

overall picture of the tower network, but Naoto and Marie had managed to finish that absurd task in just three days.

“If the core tower is the brain of the city, then the clock towers are its internal organs. If I were to make an analogy, what we’re doing is something like interfering with the brain by stimulating the organs, well... It’s true that the core tower and the clock towers are connected so it isn’t impossible in theory, but... my word...”

Of course, it was something that was only made possible thanks to the cooperation of as much as several dozen clocksmiths.

Konrad whispered in a low voice, “As a clocksmith myself, I find it somewhat terrifying.”

Konrad was himself a Meister, someone who stood at the pinnacle of all clocksmiths. He could safely say that he had mastered, even perfected the latest clockwork technologies that humanity possessed. It wouldn’t be self-conceit if he did; he had the resume to back it up. Yet, there was a talent that truly existed that even he couldn’t understand at all.

“I wonder if he... or rather such an ability is really human.”

“He’s definitely human, Dr. Konrad,” Marie replied immediately, casting her eyes downward. “He isn’t a handy god nor a convenient magician. He’s simply another idiot you could find anywhere, no different in any way from us.”

“.....”

“He’s an idiot, but—at the very least, he’s a much better person compared to the ones responsible for Kyoto or our current situation. However abnormal an ability he may possess—at least he feels human.”

He wasn’t some absolute good or the incarnation of justice by any means. He wasn’t truly omnipotent either. If trying to find meaning in one’s life while stumbling along the way was how humans, who were all born without inherent value, should live—then Naoto Miura was the most human person of anyone that Marie Bell Breguet knew.

Konrad stared at Marie for a while, but in the end, he quietly nodded. “—Indeed, it’s as you say.” Then, as if it had just incidentally come to mind, he

ventured, “By the way, I’ve actually thought this for a while now, but...”

“Huh?” Marie tilted her head. Seeing that, Konrad whispered teasingly, “You’re simply terrible at pretending to be a goody two shoes.”

“Eh...?” Marie let out a baffled voice.

Konrad grinned. “However, know that I think the real you is much more charming, Dr. Marie.”

“—P, Please don’t tease me!”

Konrad enjoyed the sulky look on the girl who was like a granddaughter to him before turning around. Before Marie had realized it, the clocksmiths had stopped moving their hands to watch her exchange with Konrad.

Konrad looked among the faces one by one before clapping his hands twice. He then vigorously declared with his smooth bass voice, “—Now then, everyone, it’s finally time. What do you say we enjoy the moment that history changes course together?”

●

On the moment that the day turned from the seventh of February to the eighth, what would come to be called The Akihabara Terrorist Incident that led to the Uprising of 2/8 opened its curtains.

—At the command given by a certain boy, a severe earthquake with a radius of thirty kilometers centered in Akihabara Grid shook Tokyo. All communication mechanisms ceased functioning as the city’s internal resonance gears began to operate outside of regulation.

The group of gears in the core tower that tuned the city functions displayed unprecedented behavior.



It wasn't a malfunction, nor was it degradation in function due to age. The system was operating normally; it was simply that the administrator, a young girl, had networked them to a new system that she had built herself.

And, five minutes after the start of the affair, the hijacked communication mechanisms began to operate once more. The helpless people who were forced to watch the situation unfold ended up receiving a rather enthusiastic claim of responsibility:

"Ladieees aaannnd gentlemen!! Along with the foolish and banal ordinary citizens who are neither gentlemanly nor ladylike, good evening! Pardon me for disturbing you while you're enjoying your weekend night!"

The processed voice which sounded like a drunken master of ceremonies resounded at a high volume throughout the city from countless televisions and stereos.

Hearing those words, Konrad furrowed his brows, feeling conflicted. "Good heavens, it appears that I simply can't keep up with the sensibilities of you youngsters these days."

Beside him, Marie was similarly clutching her head as she groaned, "No... could you please not treat that idiot as the representative of us young people."

Marie and Konrad had devoted all their time to building their own system, so they had left it to Naoto to make an adequate claim of criminal responsibility. This was what they ended up with.

For an unprecedented, unparalleled historical event like this—the claim is simply too crass, Marie regretted the outcome, but it was already too late. "Arghh god, I need to have a word with him after this— How's the transmission of the disinformation going?!"

The clocksmith standing watch over the control panel answered, "As planned! All 168 communication circuits are still under our control. There's no sign that they've noticed!"

"—Understood; observation squad, what's the current location of the enormous weapon?!"

“It’s currently proceeding through the base of Shibuya Grid! Factoring in the projected movement of Tokyo’s military, I estimate that the two sides will clash in about five or six minutes!”

“—Understood, so it’s going well for now. In that case, please prepare to boot up the atmospheric temperature system!”

After Marie had finished tossing out the latest instructions in rapid succession, Konrad interjected, “Dr. Marie, we’ll be fine by ourselves from here.”

“...Thanks. In that case, I’ll meet up with them as planned and move on to the next stage. Everyone, please escape immediately after the operation ends.”

“““Understood.”””

Hearing that chorus of voices behind her, Marie grabbed her coat and bag while dashing out of the room. As she ran her arms through the sleeves of her coat, she rushed up the emergency staircase to the rooftop of the clocktower and threw open the door.

Standing in the doorway, Marie felt the tepid air of the night brush past her cheeks. The light gears of the cityscape were running, converting gravity into a florescent shine. The stars, overshadowed by their radiance, couldn’t be seen. The only things on the horizon were the silver moon and the Equatorial Spring turning from its gravitational pull.

From a speaker somewhere, Marie could hear Naoto’s joke of a terrorist threat. She shouted, “RyuuuuuuZU!!”

“—You do not need to shout, you know. I have been here ready to pick you up for a while now, Mistress Marie,” a cool, refreshing voice called out from behind her.

Marie turned around to find an automaton whose silver hair was fluttering in the night’s wind before her.

“Rather, it is you, Mistress Marie, who is about two seconds behind the projected time. In a situation like this where even a slight delay could lead directly toward a crisis, your blunder is—”

“Then why don’t you hurry up and make up for it!” Marie shouted as she leapt at RyuZU.

RyuZU’s face wore a glorious frown as she begrudgingly took Marie into her arms before jumping off of the building. She was heading towards Naoto, who was currently delivering their claim of criminal responsibility from the rooftop of a building by the nearest train station. For the next stage of the operation, the three of them and Halter were to meet up there.

RyuZU raced through Akihabara, jumping from rooftop to rooftop with Marie in her arms. Perhaps, because of their broadcast, the cityscape that flowed by below was exuding an air of alert stillness.

“—It’s starting!” Marie muttered briefly, raising a finger. She was pointing towards a red tower in the night—Tokyo Tower. A relic of the ancient times, it was turning white as it froze over. “It’s nearly time for the final stage of the operation.”

Freezing Tokyo Tower then smashing it into pieces would serve as an easy to understand threat visible throughout Tokyo. It was a show of strength that served as definite proof that they had seized control of Akihabara Grid as they claimed. Once they were done here, they would promptly end Naoto’s broadcast and move on to the final stage.

RyuZU replied in a cold voice, “More importantly, something has been on my mind for a while now. It appears that the enemy’s movements are approximately two minutes and thirty-seven seconds faster than anticipated.” Turning her head slightly to the side, RyuZU cast her gaze upon something far in the distance.

Following RyuZU’s eyes with her own, Marie recognized three large shadows flying silently through the night sky. “Stealth helicopters...!”

They were military weapons carrying assault automata within them. All three of them were heading straight towards the same destination as RyuZU and Marie—namely, the rooftop where Naoto was waiting. Naoto’s location had been purposely leaked from the beginning, so it was only natural that they would know where he was—but their response really was quicker than anticipated.

Even now, the stealth helicopters, kings of the sky that they are, were pulling ahead of them in the race to Naoto before Marie's very eyes. *—At this rate, Naoto will be fired on before RyuZU arrives.*

"Furthermore, I can see security automata on the ground."

Lowering her gaze to confirm RyuZU's report, Marie found security automata rushing towards the building where Naoto was with flashing sirens. There were a little more than a dozen of them.

The security automata were several orders of magnitude less threatening than the stealth helicopters, but they still had to be dealt with. Though they looked awkward, like large steel cans with feet, even just one of them would still be enough to restrain an unarmed human.

—What should we do? Furrowing her brows, Marie was troubling herself over how best to deal with the situation when RyuZU whispered, "Mistress Marie, you are carrying a weapon, yes?"

"Huh? I'm carrying my Coil Spear, of course, but what about it...?" Seeing Marie nod, RyuZU announced dispassionately, "In that case, I shall leave the riffraff below to you as I am currently in a rush."

"Huh? —Kyaaaaaaaaaaah?!" Without time to even reply, Marie let out a scream as she was tossed in the air.

Seeing the sky and the ground in alternation as her body rotated in freefall, she hurriedly retrieved her anchor wire from her holster and fired it. As Marie adjusted her posture in midair, she killed most of her momentum by pulling on the wire, and in doing so, managed a rough landing with a roll.

Meanwhile, having discarded her excess "baggage," RyuZU accelerated away in a race against the helicopters.

"Ow ow ow ow... That shitty doll...!" Marie raised her head up cursing, before immediately swallowing her breath.

"Suspicious person detected—" Multiple voices of warning overlapped with each other. Marie had landed right in the middle of the security automata that had been rushing towards Naoto. And at the moment, they were surrounding a suspicious girl who had fallen from the sky while packing heat.

“Wha...!” Marie hurriedly drew her Coil Spear from its holster. At the same time, confirming an increase in their target’s threat level, riot guns protruded out of hatches on the automata’s torsos.

“Attempt to resist arrest confirmed—Commencing subjugation.”

“If you’re going to drop me, then drop me in a better spot, you piece of junk!!” Marie yelled out as she jumped back from where she was. It was an indiscernible cry of either anger or desperation.

Immediately after, gunshots rang out.

●

—After that, having made it through several close calls, Marie somehow managed to defeat all of the automata.

After confirming that she had brought down all of the security automata in question, she hurried towards the rooftop of the building where Naoto was.

As she entered the building and ran up the emergency staircase, she saw the minced wreckage of several helicopters crashing down in a blaze through the windows.

Making it to the top floor, what awaited Marie was a scene of ruined assault automata that had been demolished into scrap metal, Halter with his back to her, Naoto who was prostrate on the ground for some reason, and—

“__”

RyuZU with a composed look on her face.

The moment Marie found her, she fired her Coil Spear without a second thought. Her aim was accurate—however, RyuZU evaded it with just a single step backwards.

“...That’s dangerous, princess,” Halter uttered as he broke out in a cold sweat.

“Halter,” Marie called out as she swiftly made her way to him. In contrast to her inner heart which was at a rolling boil, the words she uttered were cold and businesslike. “Please restrain that piece of junk. Today’s the day I’ll dismantle her and fix that rotten personality for good.”

Halter shrugged his shoulders and sighed. “Don’t ask for the impossible, princess. Just what do you expect me to do?”

“When do you plan to capitalize on your career experience if not now? Please use the Marine Corps’, uhh, hand-to-hand combat techniques to seize that piece of junk. I don’t mind if you break her in the process, okay?”

“I was in the Army, not the Marine Corps. What’s this commotion all about?”

Without answering him, Marie swung the pistol-sized mechanical bayonet—Coil Spear—that she held in her right hand one time, causing it to transform into its blade mode.

“This shitty piece of junk deserted me and ran away by herself! Despite the fact that I was surrounded by security automata!” she yelled out gruffly right before she slashed at RyuZU.

The swing was sharp and carried the momentum of Marie’s upper body; however, RyuZU evaded it with just a light step.

“Oh my, your facade is peeling off, you know.”

“Shut it!”

“Mistress Marie, you are always calling yourself a multi-faceted prodigy, so there is no way you would have any difficulty with a small threat like ten or twenty generic security automata, right?”

“How could that possibly be true?! I thought I was going to die!”

“What—” RyuZU opened her eyes wide in astonishment. “...I apologize. I thought my opinion of you was already as low as could be, but to think that you are such a complete wimp... You have my sincerest apologies.”

“...I’m gonna destroy you! I’m definitely, seriously gonna destroy you...!”

“Be quiet—” Naoto muttered, cutting off Marie, who was trying to transform her Coil Spear even further to extend its blade. He was kneeling with his head against the concrete ground.

When he spoke, the three ended their farce abruptly and turned their eyes towards Naoto in silence.

He continued as he pressed one ear snugly against the ground. “As expected, they’re heading towards the ‘Actuator.’”

Naoto strained his ears with all he had. Far in the distance... underground footsteps sounded 5,387 meters away.

He heard all of them without missing a single one.

“There are 3,021 automata and 1,765 soldiers on foot.”

“...It should be safe to assume that that’s practically all of the garrisoned forces that could immediately be mobilized.”

While rubbing his head, Halter laughed as if to say, *What an opportunity.*

Marie retracted her Coil Spear. “They should know where we are, too.”

“There are seven sources of sound heading straight toward us—they’re not stealth helicopters this time. They aren’t loaded with automata, even. They’re authentic assault helicopters.”

“Out of the heavily armed helicopters that Japan owns, the ones that could be mobilized right now... they’re PTK-A74s,” Marie deduced.

To which RyuZU inquired, “How much of a threat are they?”

“They’re heavily armed, unpiloted, autonomous fighters. They’re equipped with two resonance cannons... Well, with seven of them, they can scorch this entire grid without needing to resupply.”

“Alright, let’s get the hell outta here. Hey Naoto, how much time do we have?” Halter asked. Naoto quickly got up.

“About 372 seconds until they arrive—it should be something like that.”

“Well then, let us withdraw before we come into contact with them. I shall carry the luggage.” RyuZU piled up the pieces of Naoto’s equipment and lifted them up easily.

Naoto unplugged the unneeded lines from his favorite pair of headphones, then put them back on his head. After that, he turned on the noise-canceling function.

...Ahh. He let out a large sigh. *...It’s finally quiet.*

Seeing Naoto like that, Marie asked quietly, “Hey Naoto, are you okay?”

“...Well, yeah, somehow.”

“That ability is a burden on your body after all, isn’t it...”

“Nah, that’s not it. I messed up... Sorry,” Naoto replied as he turned around and stuck his thumb up with a snap.

“You see, it seems there’s a sex parlor in that building over there.”

“.....Hah?”

“With the beds creaking and the people moaning constantly, they couldn’t be more of a clueless nuisance if they tri—”

Before Naoto could finish, Marie uppercut his chin, her face flushed.

Halter called out to Marie, who was stomping on the back of Naoto’s head in silent anger. “Oi, cut it out, princess. That brain shoulders the future of the world.”

“The world must have gone mad, then.”

“...Aren’t you being completely unreasonable...?” Naoto groaned underneath Marie’s feet.

Halter let out a sigh. “Hurry up, now. It isn’t the time to be doing a comedy skit.”

“...R-Rest assured, Halter—” Naoto uttered as he stood up while teeter-tottering. He adjusted his headphones, which had slipped off his ears, and brushed off the dust that had gotten stuck to his clothes. “If we’re all together, something as minor as a metropolis of forty million people is as good as putty in our palms.”

“...Hopefully, you’re right,” Halter grumbled while rubbing his head.

Afterwards, the four of them ran down the building’s emergency staircase and stepped outside. Passing the three helicopters that had crashed and were now in flames, they headed towards the roundabout in front of the station.

A giant display that hung on the outside of the station building was playing an emergency news broadcast, reporting in-depth on this unprecedented act of

terrorism.

Stopping in the midst of the chaos of a plaza packed full of evacuating people, Halter said, “Well then, as planned, the princess and I will wait for you guys in the workshop after we evacuate all of our clocksmiths, alright?”

“We’re leaving AnchoR to you. Don’t screw up and die, got it?”

“You don’t need to worry about that,” Naoto said as he returned a gentle smile.

However, RyuZU suddenly interjected, “No, I am terribly sorry for asking this, but could you come along with us as well, Mistress Marie?”

Marie turned around, her head tilted, “—You want me to come too?”

“RyuZU?” Naoto asked, perplexed.

Upon those words, RyuZU meekly admitted with downcast eyes, “It is impossible for me to win against AnchoR solely on my own. Master Naoto provided me with a suggestion that could make it possible, but—if anything were to happen to Master Naoto, I suspect that I would never be able to operate again.”

“...”

“As such, I would like to ask you to accompany us to guard against that disastrous, albeit unlikely, possibility just in case, Mistress Marie,” RyuZU said as she bowed deeply.

Marie widened her eyes in silence. *To think that RyuZU of all people would lower her head to me when, even taking into consideration her abusive verbal filter, she has unfailingly treated everyone aside from Naoto like an insect.*

Marie gulped, then slowly nodded. “—Very well. I don’t think I can do anything against AnchoR, but even so, I’ll accompany you guys if you would like me to. Win or lose, we’ll be together to the end.”

RyuZU raised her head with a composed look. “Your resolve is admirable, Mistress Marie.”

Marie turned around and looked up at the bear of a man that was Halter. “Halter, you’ll be fine by yourself, right?”

“Yeah. After all, Dr. Konrad will be with me as well. That grandpa is no amateur himself. Even if you’re not there, he’ll be able to handle leading the evacuation,” Halter said flippantly.

“...If you’re disrespectful towards Dr. Konrad, I’ll strangle you to death later, you know?” Marie glared at him menacingly.

Naoto cut in from the side, “Hey, Konrad is that old guy, right? Will he really be okay?”

“Yes, he should be fine. Though he may look feeble—” Marie shrugged, “he’s actually someone who can hold his own against a dozen lightly armored automata with just a screwdriver.”

“...What, really?” Naoto groaned, reluctant to believe it.

Halter backed up Marie’s claim, grumbling, “To be honest, I’m allergic to the guy. The way he asserted that he could easily pin me down by twisting my arms, just because he has full knowledge of the structure of my artificial body, is just...”

“...No no no, you two are just trying to trick me, right? You guys are at least exaggerating, right?”

“Nope. It’s the whole, unadulterated truth,” Marie asserted flatly.

Naoto looked ever so suspicious. “I doubt that this could be the case, but... does everyone from Meister Guild think that might is right like you?”

“Now *that’s* impossible. At its core, Meister Guild is a gathering of intellectuals, you know?”

“...Of course, I should have known better! Phew...”

But Marie continued, “It’s just that, since repairing clockwork is a test of stamina, everyone does some sort of basic body training. Incidentally, the one who taught me self-defense is Dr. Konrad, you know.”

“...You call those nasty techniques of yours self-defense? As Naoto recalled Marie’s footwork in taking down two soldiers in an instant, the muscles along his spine trembled. *—No matter how you look at it, that technique was designed to kill.*

“Well, you know,” Marie said as she curled her lips, “when trouble arises with the local military, we have to be able to crush them easi—at the very least defend ourselves.”

“You said crush just now didn’t you?!” Naoto cried out, but Marie only returned a sweet grin.

After parting with Halter, the three of them got moving. They were heading towards the underground parking lot of the train station. It was a location that fulfilled the requirements of a wide and deserted space that they would use to lie in wait for AnchoR. As they took a position where they could monitor the entrance, RyuZU muttered, “...Will she really come?”

“She’ll come.”

“She’ll come.”

Marie and Naoto both asserted the same conclusion, but for different reasons.

“Our actions should have caused them to deviate from their script. After all, there’s no way that they would have taken into account the possibility of terrorists hijacking the city mechanisms. Now that things have come to this, neither side of the incident can ignore us. And the only one who can stand up to you, RyuZU—is AnchoR.”

“...She’ll come to meet you. To be precise, she’s coming—to be destroyed by you, but...” Naoto narrowed his eyes as he gazed into RyuZU’s. “Like I’ll let it be that easy. I’ll definitely put an end to this with both of you unharmed. So, RyuZU—I’m counting on you. Please stop AnchoR-chan.”

“Yes. If you say so, Master Naoto. Besides—” RyuZU paused, placing a hand on her chest. “...Hurting my sister is, to put it mildly, something I would like to avoid as much as possible.” With her eyes cast downward, she voiced her true feelings.

—Immediately after, AnchoR showed herself at the entrance of the underground parking lot.

In the dimly lit parking lot, the air was still. The pandemonium outside seemed far away. Two InitialY Series were facing each other thirty meters apart.

It was an extremely close distance that could be covered in an instant by either one of them.

One of them was a young automaton child wearing a formal dress of red and white—AnchoR.

The other was a silver-haired automaton girl wearing a formal dress of black and white—RyuZU.

Behind them, Naoto and Marie gulped as they watched on, they didn't dare move. AnchoR paid them no mind, her eyes were focused solely on her elder sister.

RyuZU began with a gentle voice, "Can you hear me, AnchoR?"

There was no reply.

However, RyuZU paid it no mind and continued, "Your voice reached my master. I can understand your humiliation in having your will trampled upon by that odious apparatus on your face, but—" She paused, taking a breath. "Me destroying you is out of the question."

Narrowing her eyes, RyuZU scrutinized AnchoR, who was remaining silent. "As both your elder sister and a follower of my master, I shall save you. As such, you ought to fight for yourself as well, AnchoR. Listen only to yourself, break free of that fetter."

AnchoR didn't reply. The cube dangling by her chest came off its chain, quietly floating up in front of her chest.

RyuZU took a step forward to answer her challenge. "Subjugating." —Sounds escaped her lips. It wasn't her usual airy singsong voice. RyuZU was speaking—announcing—in a mechanical, businesslike tone. "Definition Proclamation—the First of the InitialY Series, RyuZU YourSlave."

Immediately after, AnchoR replied in kind, "Definition Proclamation—the Fourth of the InitialY Series, AnchoR, the One Who Destroys."

They both began to transform. While Naoto and Marie watched on, the two InitialY Series charged straight into a territory that the humans who lived inside this universe could never fathom.

“Inherent ability—‘Dual Time’ ...Initiating start sequence.”

“Inherent ability—‘Power Reserver’ ...Initiating transformational sequence.”

They had both declared their defiance of natural law. Together, they were saying none other than this: Right now, from this moment onward**—I shall break the laws of physics.**

Naoto struggled to breathe. The power hidden inside RyuZU, a function antithetical to the laws of this universe, manifested. At the same time, there was a resounding sound of gears meshing into place—

Like dominoes being toppled over, RyuZU’s black dress changed its color in a flurry. The naked, pale skin of her arms was laid bare as her face was adorned with a fluttering veil. A bride with her dainty torso wrapped tightly in a pearl-white wedding dress; her golden eyes flared into a brilliant, ruby-red.

“—Commencing shift from the first timepiece, ‘Real Time,’ to the second timepiece, ‘Imaginary Time.’”

“—Enemy threat level: Category Five—Initiating Shift to the Twelfth Balance Wheel of Differences.”

“No way,” Marie gasped. *—Did AnchoR say “the twelfth” just now?* Marie knew nothing about the inherent ability AnchoR possessed. She couldn’t grasp it with her intuition like Naoto; however she could at least make an educated guess.

When we first encountered her in Mie, she definitely said “the third” back then. I’m sure my memory is correct. If that term is something that refers to her output of energy, or a limiter of some kind, then the twelfth would be—

As Marie shuddered, AnchoR transformed. The cube floating by her chest twisted, and began to turn at the speed of light. Her glamorous black hair was stained blood-red while her pure white armor blackened and swelled from the crimson lines which snaked over her like a nervous system.

The angelic ring of two half-gears above her head split into the horns of a demon as a crackling sound came from the black mask that covered the girl’s face.

“Chrono Hook—Jumping from normal operation to imaginary operation.”

“Chrono Hook—Initiating output of imaginary power by means of the Perpetual Gear. Materializing.”

RyuZU and AnchoR simultaneously stepped forward. More than just a mere physical movement, their steps indicated that they had entered into states that should be absolutely impossible in this universe. As imaginary time spread, sealing the area, infinite heat welled, to the despair of the universe.

AnchoR announced dispassionately, “Executing orders... Declaring: I shall destroy the target ‘RyuZU’ before me.”

RyuZU smiled in response. “Come at me with all that you have, ‘AnchoR.’ I shall do you a kindness and corporally teach you to respect your older sister.”

The sisters called out each other’s names as they faced one other anew. Then — RyuZU pinched up the hem of her skirt and curtsied, while AnchoR simply dropped down onto all fours upon the ground. Like a wedding vow and a cry of despair respectively, they spoke the most heretical, blasphemous words in this world:

“——‘Mute Scream’——”

“——‘Bloody Murder’——”

Immediately after, the two legendary automata clashed. The phenomena that occurred after was beyond anything that could be grasped by Naoto and Marie.

●

RyuZU was dashing inside imaginary time. Time was frozen still in reality—the domain between zero and a second later belonged to her. It was a fictitious domain that shouldn’t exist in this universe. It was a contradictory gap formed by a breakdown in the laws of physics. As long as she was in this state, she was untouchable, her scythe was absolute...

—However, her little sister was also an irrational existence in mutiny against this universe.

AnchoR’s salient blood-red hair traced an arc through the air as she evaded RyuZU’s unobservable attack with a leap inside imaginary time. Simultaneously

with the shift, she stomped a nonexistent ground as she swung her right hand down. She had tried to tear both RyuZU and her imaginary time apart with her enlarged, enormous hand equipped with sinister claws.

"—" RyuZU's face showed no surprise. She evaded AnchoR's claws with a composed and elegant maneuver, putting some distance between herself and the girl. This much was within her expectations—she had already known beforehand that AnchoR was capable of this much for sure.

Even if RyuZU could move unfettered by the restraints of time itself, AnchoR could keep up with her through sheer force. Her infinite heat was distorting the universe, wrenching open small holes in spacetime.

RyuZU was gracefully dancing through the frozen world while AnchoR was violently burning through her imaginary time. The two automata were defying the natural flow of time through completely different methods.

RyuZU raised her arm.

—The first of the InitialY Series, RyuZU YourSlave. Envisioned as a servant, she had just the two scythes extending from under her skirt as her weapons. If compared to AnchoR, who was designed for battle with her innumerable number of armaments, one could even call RyuZU relatively weak. As such, RyuZU called herself the weakest of her own accord. In her own words, she's "the one least suited for combat among her sisters."

However, "That does not mean—that I will lose."

Obeying RyuZU's will, the black scythes cleaved at AnchoR from both left and right as she came charging towards RyuZU. Her swings were not only swift but skillful, the scythes were flashing through the air. She gracefully minced everything before her into fine pieces while neither breaking form nor revealing her pair of aberrantly powerful blades for more than an instant.

However, the sharp blades were blocked by something, a high-pitched *shing* rang out as they were repelled.

"...?!" RyuZU shifted her center of mass, and twirling to the side with a light step, dodged AnchoR's barreling charge. She noticed that there were ripples in the empty air where her scythes had been repelled... The cube floating above

AnchoR's head was changing its shape as it twisted— "So it was her spatial manipulation...!"

Spatial manipulation—the basic ability of the weapon called AnchoR. She had created small spatial distortions in the way of RyuZU's scythes to shield herself. It was impossible for RyuZU's scythes to break through that shield.

"...gh" RyuZU swung her scythes again. Expecting to be blocked this time, she prioritized speed over accuracy hoping that AnchoR wouldn't be able to react in time to the sudden overwhelming flurry of her attacks.

"—!!" However, they were all repelled. Ripples appeared as AnchoR grunted with a distorted voice, everywhere RyuZU swung, her attacks were neutralized without fail. RyuZU dashed away in retreat feeling uneasy; AnchoR chasing after.

Though they were nearly equal in speed—RyuZU was slightly faster. The field of imaginary time itself was giving RyuZU an advantage.

No matter how much AnchoR accelerated in pursuit, her spatial manipulation ability was being restrained by imaginary time. That she was only relying on spatial manipulation for defense without tapping into her armory of countless weapons was proof of that.

In other words—AnchoR had to take RyuZU down with just her bare hands.

"—gh!" AnchoR swung her claws. It was a close call, but RyuZU managed to evade it with a jump to the right. However, the instant those claws cut through the air, the spacetime they were in furiously jarred as it twisted. At the same time, the car behind RyuZU was annihilated. It had been blown into smithereens without leaving a trace.

The heat that AnchoR possessed, enough to wrench open gaps in time, was pouring generously into the claws of her right hand. If even a single one of her claws touched RyuZU, RyuZU's body would be helplessly disintegrated.

AnchoR defeating RyuZU with just her bare hands? It was a very real possibility for "the One Who Destroys." AnchoR having her armaments sealed didn't even serve as a handicap to her.

To begin with, RyuZU's attacks couldn't penetrate AnchoR's defense. Even if

RyuZU could use her advantage in speed to prolong the battle, eventually her spring would become unwound and she would shut down. That, or she would be caught and smashed into pieces before then.

That was the conclusion—the near future that would soon arrive, the end to this duel.

However— “Just as expected—or rather, **just as planned**,” RyuZU muttered quietly as she desperately evaded the claws that tore through the spacetime around her. There was no fear in her eyes. This was a scenario that she already knew would come to pass.

—Three days ago.

At the strategy meeting, Naoto and RyuZU had this exchange: “If I were to battle AnchoR head on, our chance of victory would be zero,” RyuZU asserted. To which Naoto replied with a troubled expression, “You don’t necessarily have to win, you know? If you could just destroy that mask—”

“It is the same thing, Master Naoto. There is a difference with regards to combat ability that is simply insurmountable.”

“...Even if you use your inherent ability?”

“Yes. Even if I were to access imaginary time, AnchoR would be able to follow me into it through sheer force. That child has an infinite reservoir of heat energy that makes it possible.”

Naoto nodded. “In that case, there’s only one answer.”

“What would that be?”

“It’s simple,” Naoto answered. “—Just make me into your shield.”

“That is out of the question,” RyuZU immediately cut down his proposal. She glared at him. “It is not even worth considering. Do you truly understand what you are suggesting?”

“There’s no other way is there?”

“There is. We can just avoid an engagement with her altogether,” RyuZU said, her cold gaze below freezing. “I shall be blunt. Compared to exposing Master Naoto to danger, AnchoR being enslaved is a trivial matter.

Even if Tokyo collapses and several hundred million members of the esteemed human race fall to the bottom of the planet because of it, I do not care—”

Indeed, this was the one line that RyuZU would absolutely not cross...

“—gh” RyuZU kicked off the ground, flying into the air. Hooking onto a pipe on the ceiling with her scythes, she used it as leverage to swing her body. With that maneuver, she narrowly escaped destruction from AnchoR’s claws yet again.

Glancing behind herself, RyuZU saw her little sister continuing to rush at her without a single moment’s pause. With all the heat she had stored up, AnchoR’s body was distorting the spacetime around it just by existing. An ominous shimmer was enveloping the child’s body as if she were on fire.

RyuZU twisted her body and kicked off against the ceiling. She launched herself, and using both her scythes and feet, remained elegantly airborne by vaulting continuously through the sealed space of her imaginary time.

She was trying to slip past AnchoR with a maneuver resembling the trajectory of a pinball, however, AnchoR didn’t move. The shape of her cube changed in non-Euclidean geometry.

“——?!” A large-scale spatial distortion unfolded, its boundaries assaulting RyuZU. One of her scythes was caught and crumpled like scrap paper, the force of which, caused RyuZU’s body to jolt off course as she lost her balance and was thrown by the shockwave.

Just before she hit the wall, RyuZU cut off her broken scythe with her remaining one. If it couldn’t fulfill its function anymore, it was nothing but a burden. Regaining her freedom of movement, RyuZU landed perpendicular against the wall—and immediately reversed her trajectory rebounding off of it with a leap.

That instant, the wall she had kicked off of disintegrated in a blast.

—She recalled.

“Even if I were to agree to such a ridiculous plan, pardon my bluntness Master Naoto, nothing would be resolved by someone as measly as you laying down

your life. A human body would not even serve as an anthill before AnchoR's power." RyuZU cast her eyes downward asking in a weak voice, "Master Naoto, do you think that it is fine for you to die?"

"Hm? Why do you say that?" Naoto replied, jauntily laughing. "You've got it all wrong, RyuZU. I'll risk my life, but I haven't even the slightest intention of dying. Nor do I have any intention of sacrificing you, and of course, I won't be giving up on AnchoR-chan either."

Casting her golden eyes downward, RyuZU sighed. She shook her head. "That is an impossible luxury. Frankly, it would be a mad endeavor."

"Well, that might be true. But for some reason, I don't get the feeling that we're going to fail at all." Winking one ashen eye, Naoto continued, "Yeah—I'm not gonna die and AnchoR-chan's not gonna kill me, either. I believe that you'll be able to pull it off for us, RyuZU. Besides—"

She had lost one of her weapons.

That meant that her options had become significantly more limited. The number of times she could attack in a set amount of time, her methods of evasion, and the maximum permissible damage she could bear—in other words, her very chances of survival had been reduced.

Even so. "There—is no problem." RyuZU turned her timepiece, her crimson eyes burning.

Quickly. Swiftly. Rapidly. —And more, deftly!

She would master herself. She would command time and space. She would continue to maintain the initiative and control the battlefield. RyuZU understood that she was capable of this, that she could win if she continued to see it through.

She had lost one of her weapons due to a large-scale spatial interference, but in exchange, she had gained some distance between herself and AnchoR. The distance she had gained was a paltry something that could be covered by AnchoR in less than a second, even in imaginary time, but—even so, it was an opportunity.

Keeping her eyes on AnchoR, RyuZU leapt over her causing AnchoR to turn

around and give chase in hot pursuit.

There was no point in considering their difference in abilities and strength. Her own master, Naoto, had said that she could do it. Naoto believed in her abilities, so RyuZU would believe in them too. And, more than anyone else, RyuZU herself—believed in her own little sister.

—Her master had said this: “After all**—AnchoR-chan can’t kill humans**, right?”

RyuZU didn’t refute those words. She simply asked, her expression unchanging, “...You do realize that that child is being controlled right now?”

“But she’s desperately resisting.” Naoto looked into RyuZU’s eyes as he asserted unwaveringly, “As proof of that, AnchoR-chan didn’t attack me or Marie in Mie. She only targeted you and old man Halter the whole time.”

“It could simply be that she had chosen her targets by their threat level.”

“That could be true,” Naoto readily admitted, but he immediately shook his head after. “But, I don’t think that’s the case. I’m sure of it. I’m okay with risking my life to save her and prove that I’m right.”

“Besides,” he continued, “that child asked her dear older sister to save her.”

“———”

“AnchoR-chan can’t kill humans. So, if you use me as a shield and create an opening that way, you’d be able to break her mask in that moment, right?”

So she was asked, but... RyuZU didn’t answer him. Thinking about things logically, she couldn’t accept Naoto’s plan. It was way, way too risky. However, she couldn’t bring herself to lie and say that it was impossible either, so she remained silent.

Naoto smiled gently as if he knew what she was thinking, “Yeah, in that case—this is an order, RyuZU. Save your little sister by making me your shield.”

—At this point, hesitating would be pointless.

She determined the proper timing by first eyeballing the distance between herself and the one in front of her, then the distance between herself and the one fiercely chasing after her from behind. AnchoR looked just like a small

meteor as she charged towards RyuZU while distorting the spacetime around her.

“AnchoR.”

RyuZU called out her little sister’s name.

“I believe in you.”

She couldn’t see her little sister’s face through the mask covering it, but just the same, AnchoR was closing in on RyuZU—her body having become an avatar of destruction.

RyuZU finished her calculations. She could picture the maneuver in her mind. She smiled gently and lowered her speed ever so slightly. Just by doing that, RyuZU entered AnchoR’s attack range. AnchoR raised her right hand along with its massive claws. A blow that would crush everything in its way came at RyuZU.

Immediately after—RyuZU jumped straight up. She wouldn’t be able to evade the attack like this. Having done so at this timing with only this amount of distance between them, AnchoR’s strike would smash her body into pieces while she was stuck in midair.

However—that was only *if* AnchoR accelerated.

The instant RyuZU had jumped and AnchoR saw what was before her, she flinched. AnchoR abruptly decelerated. Like the core of a nuclear reactor whose fire had been extinguished after running out of fuel, she lost the massive amount of heat she possessed that warped even spacetime.

In other words—she had entered into a completely frozen state inside imaginary time.

RyuZU lifted the ends of her lips bewitchingly. “—You did well.” She dispatched her scythe along with those words of praise. Its single black edge turned into countless flashes as it brushed past AnchoR’s mask again and again. She halted the turning of its gears, severed its wires, and thoroughly dismantled it down to its very last screw.

Finally, she brushed aside the massive claws that had been hovering over **the blonde girl’s head** while whispering, “Rest for a little while. Master Naoto will

get to repairing you right away.”

—RyuZU returned to normal time.

Immediately after, AnchoR’s body was blown back by the crushing force of the explosive energy.

●

Naoto and Marie were unable to tell what had happened in imaginary time.

As such, the only things they could perceive were a thunderous roar, a burst of wind, a shockwave, and some marks of the battle left behind here and there between the two InitialY sisters in the parking lot.

Additionally, it appeared that RyuZU was falling asleep and AnchoR had somehow become tattered from being blown away.

It had all happened instantly, all at once.

Seeing the body of the young automaton girl slam forcefully against the wall, Naoto cried out, “—?! AnchoR-chan!!” He rushed to her side in a hurry and held her up. She wasn’t moving at all.

AnchoR’s condition was, frankly, an awful sight to behold. She had returned to her original white appearance—an angel instead of a devil. However, it was clear even at a glance that her body had been immensely damaged. It looked like either a dump truck had hit her, or she had somehow found her way under a gigantic hammer.

In reality, the explosion had come from within herself due to the feedback of her abruptly halting her energy output. It was the same principle as forcefully stopping an engine that was accelerating limitlessly. With no means of release, the energy that was great enough to wrench open pockets of imaginary time bared its fangs against AnchoR herself.

“Ah... H-Her inner parts are still moving at least... Thank goodness,” Naoto sighed in relief. After sounding out AnchoR’s condition by straining his ears, he knew that her inner mechanisms were still functioning properly.

Marie nodded. “In that case, wind RyuZU’s spring for now. While you take care of that, I’ll see to AnchoR’s emergency repairs.”

“R, Right. I’m counting on you, Marie...!”

After that, Marie took on the task of repairing AnchoR until RyuZU rebooted. But even if the spirit was willing, there still wasn’t much she could do. Marie simply did a quick inspection of AnchoR’s whole body and disengaged any mechanisms that were continuing to burden her. Truly fixing her up would require the equipment of a workshop and Naoto’s ears.

After finishing AnchoR’s first-aid treatment, Marie let out a soft sigh, “...But really, to think that this plan would really succeed. To be honest, I couldn’t believe it when RyuZU agreed to using you as her shield, but...” *There’s no way that that RyuZU would approve of exposing Naoto danger,* Marie had thought, and indeed, that should have been the case.

While a normal automaton naturally wouldn’t be able to defy its master’s orders, that sort of common sense didn’t apply to RyuZU. If she deemed it necessary, she could ignore Naoto’s orders. Even so, this was reality.

“...That is because I believe in Master Naoto wholeheartedly,” a cool voice said from behind her. Marie turned around to see RyuZU started up, her spring rewound. “Master Naoto, a person who exceeds the standards of mankind in various ways—said that he believes in me. In that case, I have a duty to repay his faith. Similarly, if Master Naoto says that he believes in AnchoR, then I must believe in her as well.”

And, judging by the results, Naoto’s plan was a great success. AnchoR was in terrible condition, but she could be repaired. They had overcome a match that they absolutely shouldn’t have been able to win and accomplished their goal. It was more than enough of an achievement.

Naoto had believed in RyuZU and AnchoR, while RyuZU had believed in Naoto who believed in her. RyuZU and AnchoR had risked their lives to answer his faith. Marie genuinely thought that that fact was beautiful.

“...Yes, you two have a wonderful relationship, don’t you? Really, I see both of you in a whole new light now.”

“I suppose I am thankful to you for accompanying us, Mistress Marie. Indeed, while it goes without saying that I believe in Master Naoto, a pragmatic concern still daunted me, so it was necessary for me to procure some **insurance.**”

“...Hm? Aren’t you putting it rather strangely?” Clueless that she had been just a few centimeters away from death in imaginary time, Marie tilted her head slightly.

Just then, Naoto, who had taken off his headphones, let out a small voice, “Oh...?”

“What’s wrong? Did you hear something?”

“Well, I just heard a tremendous sound from below... It appears that the fight between Tokyo and Mie has concluded as well. The enormous weapon has stopped making any sounds.”

“Well, that’s good news. Looks like it was worth raising hell,” Marie said as she stood up. “Now then, how about a change in scenery? Let’s get AnchoR to a workshop quickly and fix her up.”

●

—I feel really sleepy...

The girl had been walking inside sweet, white fog. Or swimming, perhaps. She might have even been flying. Everything felt ambiguous, fluid, haphazard, vague —but even so, there was no mistaking the glittering light floating in front of her eyes, the warmth she felt inside her heart.

—I wonder what this feeling is.

I’ve felt something like this before, sometime, somewhere...

Thinking to herself, she quickly came up with the answer. It was simple...

—Ah, it was when I was born.

I felt like this when I was born in that very warm, pure white room that was full of wonders.

There were several people there, I remember that they would tell me very fun stories.

—But, it’s strange.

I can’t remember the details of our conversation at all...

The stories they told me, they should have been lots of fun, and yet, why can’t

I remember...?

The girl became immensely sad, even feeling like crying a little. Just then—She suddenly heard a voice that sounded nostalgic somehow.

“—I’m telling you, that’s just how it is.”

“Don’t mess with me!! First an imaginary mechanism and now a perpetual one?! How am I supposed to fix that—are they picking a fight with the universe?!”

“Ugh god, I’m saying that you don’t have to fix that! There’s a zero-friction escapement inside her, right? It’s fine if you only fix up the gears that are meshed against that!

“How can gears mesh against something with zero friction? Can you describe that in words that a human could understand?!”

—Their voices sounded nostalgic, yet they were foreign to her. Still, the girl became a little happy as her head began to feel warm. At the same time, she felt a dense lump of energy small enough to be scooped up by a spoon and eaten ooze out from the depths of her heart as something locked into place inside her.

“Argh! Fine, I’ll fix her then, so lend me your screwdrivers!”

“Hah?! W, What’s up with your hands? They’re totally shaking! The way you’re holding the screwdriver is crazy, hey, do you want to break her or something?!”

“It’s because you’re taking your sweet time that I’m doing this, you know?!”

“That’s not— Y, You... Fine! Then give me some proper instructions on what I should tamper with and how, since I’m going to be doing exactly as you say.”

“I’ve been telling you that there are three gears to the right of the 40,325,831th resonance-linked circuit haven’t I?!”

“Where are you counting from to get that kinda number?! If you don’t cut it out I’m really going to hang you!!”

—*Really, how nostalgic.* As the energy that seeped out of her heart diffused throughout her entire body, bit by bit, what had felt vague and murky began to

take form. The first thing she managed to recall was her own name, AnchoR. Indeed, she would recall this if nothing else. It was the name she had received while everyone was celebrating that she had been born.

It was a precious name—with the meaning of a precious vow.

“In the first place! What’s up with this cryptic incomprehensible unidentifiable mechanism?!”

“In that case, allow me to explain it in a way that Mistress Marie’s regrettable brain can understand.”

AnchoR batted her eyes. *I know this voice. There’s no mistaking it. It’s a familiar voice that I can clearly recall—the voice of someone I truly, truly love. It’s older sister’s voice.*

“AnchoR’s inherent ability is Perpetual Gear. In other words, she uses the energy from her self-winding spring as her driving force without expending any of it. All of that energy is converted into heat and stored inside this cube.

“So, her spatial manipulation and the storage as well as the summoning of her armaments are all just faculties of her ability to create and utilize infinite heat.

“The function of her main body is simply to ‘operate perpetually.’

“Do you understand now?”

“Like I can understand that! Would you be so kind as to explain the principle behind it?!”

“...Master Naoto, Mistress Marie’s feeblemindedness has exceeded my expectations. Please, if you could give it a try.”

“—So basically, such a gear exists.”

“Like I’d accept an explanation like that————————-!!”

—“Hehe,” AnchoR giggled. Like thick stage curtains being opened up to begin a play, the fog inside her mind cleared. She became aware that she was no longer in a dream.

—Still, I remember...! Even if it was a dream, my heart clearly remembers! It was also just like this when I was born...!

While thinking of such things, AnchoR opened her eyes. Three faces were there to greet her. One was a face AnchoR knew well. Someone who she remembered had always been smiling, but whose face was currently reflecting her concern—AnchoR's eldest sister, RyuZU.

And as for the other two...

"Good morning, AnchoR-chan. Do you feel alright?"

"—She should feel fine. Probably. Most likely."

"That's a rather timid remark for a self-proclaimed genius, don't you think? Well, the way you honestly admitted that AnchoR's mechanisms were too much for you to handle is commendable at least."

They were faces and voices she didn't recognize. Even so, for some reason, the impression they gave her was the same as a very important memory. AnchoR began to open her mouth, but hesitated a little.

She was a bit troubled as to how she should address them.

—*Ahh.* She immediately came up with the answer. She knew the two most perfect, wonderful words that would fit them to a tee.

"—Father, Mother, Older Sister—good morning."

...Why are they looking at me like that?

For some reason, the very moment she had uttered those words, the faces of the three who were peering at her stiffened.

●

The safehouse that Konrad and the other Meisters had prepared was at a location near Akihabara that boasted a comprehensive set of clocksmithing equipment. After bringing AnchoR there, it had taken about three hours for Naoto and Marie to repair her.

AnchoR had managed to successfully reboot; however, hearing the first words out of her mouth, Naoto, Marie, and RyuZU's faces all became stuck in a cringe.

"...Oh AnchoR... so the repairs failed after all. Ahh, that is why I warned you over and over that we mustn't let Mistress Marie touch her, Master Naoto! And

yet...” RyuZU exaggeratedly lamented.

Hearing her, Marie angrily shouted, “Hey you shut up over there!! Do you have any idea how I feel right now?! Of all the things, I was just implicitly called this pervert’s wife, you know?! I’ve never been so humiliated before in my life!”

Meanwhile, Naoto was crouched down so that his eyes were level with AnchoR’s. “AnchoR-chan, could I have a word~? Listen caaaaaarefully okay sweetie~? This Mister’s tastes aren’t thaaat bad. It’s already been settled that RyuZU is my wife. See, so my tastes are good, right?”

However, AnchoR simply tilted her head with a blank expression. “Can’t I call you Father...?”

Naoto grinned widely as he shook his head. “Listen well, AnchoR-chan. That’s fine. Completely fine. Yeah! To be honest, I got chills hearing you call me ‘Father’!”

“Wow,” Marie groaned in disgust, her face twisted as if looking at a louse she’d accidentally crushed under foot.

Naoto paid her no mind. “But putting that aside, see, the problem is, if you call that girl over there mother as well, it implies the unthinkable—that we’re married. My wife is RyuZU, not her. Living out my life together with that walking animal-protein landmine over there would be a nightmare. It hurts me a little that you would think that, AnchoR-chan. Do you understand how I feel~?”



“—Hey, the one it’d be a nightmare for is *me*. Even if I were to play around with some boy in the future, I do have standards, you know?”

“.....?” AnchoR tilted her head trying to find the error in what she had said. Shaking her head, she rushed over to Marie and hugged her tight.

Naoto cried out, “*Huh?!* That ain’t fair Marie! I’m so jealous, let me take your place this instant!”

“Shut up! Don’t come near me you pervert!” Marie cursed, knitting her brows.

Freed from her mask, AnchoR’s face was the very picture of an innocent little girl.

There’s no problem with her movements as far as I can tell at a glance. The reason her facial expressions seem limited and her diction seems lacking in comparison to her mental faculties is probably just a factor of the personality she was programmed with.

However, how emotionally attached she is to Naoto and me despite not having completed her Master Confirmation is strange. It would be odd enough for an automaton to have the concept of having parents much less for the imprinting process to cast her in the role of a child. What kind of a joke is this?

Marie asked RyuZU, “What’s the meaning of this? Does she have a circuit that recognizes the people who repaired her as her parents or something? It might be a different story for a cheap automaton, but for an InitialY Series to have such a crude Master Confirmation? Seriously?”

RyuZU frowned. “...No, this has nothing to do with her Master Confirmation. It appears that she is confusing her memories... Do you understand, AnchoR? Calling Master Naoto your father is enough. That thing over there is nothing but an extra.”

“Hey, watch it.”

Ignoring Marie’s protest, RyuZU emphasized, doing her best to make AnchoR understand, “She is one of the tools, so to speak, that Master Naoto used to repair you. You understand, right?”

—However, AnchoR tilted her head while continuing to cling to Marie, “.....Can’t I?”

“~~~~gh! You can! If you want to call her that, we don’t mind at all, AnchoR-chan! Yeah! Let’s bear with this much, alright? What do ya say, Mom!” Naoto said as he tried to bring AnchoR and Marie into a group hug.

“Gyahhhhhhhh?! Don’t spew out such nasty things you pervert!”

“Whahgeuh?!” Naoto hit the floor. Marie had brought her leg all the way back and punted him mercilessly.

As Naoto writhed on the floor, RyuZU addressed him, “Master Naoto, I advise that you do not spoil AnchoR too much. Be strict with her when appropriate, alright?”

“This is weird after all! Can’t she be fixed somehow?!” Marie cried out in exasperation. She was grabbing AnchoR’s shoulders as she tried to pry the girl off of her. AnchoR looked up at Marie’s face from below. “Mother...?”

“I’m telling you that I’m not your Mo...” Marie faltered.

“.....” She looked down at the innocent little girl gazing up at her. There wasn’t a clear expression on the girl’s face. There wasn’t, but...

“_”

...Ugh, she’s so cute.

“Wait, Marie, don’t let that distract you! Get it together.” She shook her head in a fluster, mentally refocusing. *I’d be the same as that pervert if I accept this. What right would I have to live then? I can’t let such a farce be exposed.*

Marie considered how she should respond before promptly saying, “In any case, let’s do her Master Confirmation first. It just might cure her of this bizarre imprinting.” *If the confirmation process overwrites her current ego, then great. Or, even if that doesn’t happen, we might be able to have her stop calling me mother anyway if Naoto orders it as her master.*

“.....I suppose. We cannot postpone it indefinitely after all.” RyuZU nodded to Marie’s proposal. She then turned to face the girl who was still clinging to Marie, calling her name kindly. “AnchoR.”

“...? What, Big Sister?”

“Allow me to confirm: No one is currently registered as your master, yes?”

“Yeah,” AnchoR nodded.

“Good girl. Well then, AnchoR, I have a proposal for you—”

RyuZU absentmindedly lifted Naoto up by his collar, strangling him. Paying no mind to his choking “gueh,” RyuZU thrust his face before AnchoR. “Allow me to introduce him. This is Master Naoto Miura. He is my current master. As of right now, do you have any interest in registering this person as your master?”

AnchoR cocked her head to the side, her expression blank. Peering into Naoto’s pained face, she asked, “—Does Father want to be my master?”

“Oh—? Ooh, yea yea! Yes yes, I super want to be your master!” Naoto affirmed as he raised both hands into the air in an excited appeal for his candidacy.

“—Okay, I understand,” AnchoR nodded, leaving Marie’s side.

Just then, all sense of will was thoroughly effaced from AnchoR’s eyes; though she was rather expressionless to begin with, the change was clearly palpable. Her red eyes had lost their radiance, becoming like dark glass beads. She looked at Naoto.

“...?!” Shocked, Naoto choked on air.

Without showing any reaction, AnchoR quietly opened her mouth. **“Verifying qualifications for the Master Confirmation—Question: Who am I?”** A completely bland, mechanical voice, like that of an automatic voice response system asked.

Naoto and Marie inadvertently looked towards RyuZU. Acknowledging their glances, RyuZU nodded. “This is AnchoR’s formal Master Confirmation process. If you can give the correct answer to this question, then you will be acknowledged as her formal master—though, no one has managed to do so up to now.”

“Could it be that you know the answer, RyuZU?” Marie asked.

“Yes, I do.” RyuZU nodded, her expression unchanging, “However, there

would be no meaning in it if Master Naoto receives the answer from me. To borrow your own word from earlier, her Master Confirmation is not so 'crude' as to permit cheating."

"....."

"Furthermore, though this should be obvious, there are no retries allowed. Everyone, regardless of who they are, only has the right to one try—if they answer incorrectly in their first attempt, then it would be useless even if they say the correct answer afterwards. The process cannot be initiated for them again."

"...I see." Marie nodded, "That's why they used that mask, eh."

She had wondered why they had used such a roundabout method of a device to fool AnchoR's Master Confirmation instead of just registering her, but now she knew.

"So they couldn't successfully complete her Master Confirmation. Well, seeing the precedent you set, RyuZU, it's questionable whether AnchoR would have obeyed their orders unconditionally, even if they were able to register as her master; the same holds true for Naoto, but..." *It's not like we can just leave her on her own.* Marie turned towards Naoto. "We can't afford to get this question wrong, Naoto. Let's think about this carefully before we—"

However, before Marie could warn him, Naoto answered promptly, looking straight into AnchoR's eyes, "—AnchoR-chan is a cute girl, right? That's just common sense."

"Would you listen to what I'm saying?!" Marie cried out in exasperation.

Naoto snorted, "What are you going on about? This isn't a trick question. AnchoR-chan is a pretty little loli-girl. What else is there to it? Ah, maybe the little sister vibe?"

...This guy's hopeless. If I don't do something about him soon... Marie looked up towards the ceiling. *The stakes couldn't be higher and the dumbass decides to think with his dick...* "...No, calm down, Marie. Only Naoto failed. I haven't answered yet, so there should still be a chance..." Marie mumbled to herself while holding her head in her hands.

It was around when Marie was agonizing over what she should do when...

“—Confirmed.”

With those dispassionate words, the light returned to AnchoR’s eyes.

“...Hah?” Marie’s eyes widened, her mouth agape.

“Hell yeah!” Naoto pumped his fist.

Next to him, RyuZU nodded contentedly. “I am relieved that you arrived at the right answer without issue. As expected of Master Naoto. So quickly too, well done.”

“Wait, what?! What do you mean that’s the right answer?!”

“What do I mean? It is just as you saw yourself. Master Naoto’s answer was precisely the programmed password for AnchoR’s Master Confirmation. That is all there is to it.”

...No no no. That’s impossible. Marie waved her hand dismissively while covering her forehead with the other. “Shouldn’t the answer to such a question normally be something like the concept behind her design or a message ‘Y’ left behind?!” *Is it really okay for the correct answer to a question that nobody could answer for countless years to be the filth that this pervert vomited out on an impulse...?*

However, RyuZU sneered at Marie’s words. “My, is that all a mediocre pseudointellectual like yourself can come up with? The truth tends to be simple. Occam’s razor—only the wise can understand that.”

“Even so, for the answer to be... ‘a girl’?”

“AnchoR is the only one among us who was clearly designed as a weapon. Infinite violence that operates perpetually—That is AnchoR’s concept, yes, but do you seriously think curs who give such an answer should become her master?”

“That’s...”

As Marie faltered, RyuZU continued with a smile, “If I may be so bold, in defining AnchoR as a girl, Master Naoto did in fact pick up on ‘Y’’s message. If one is to attain infinite force, one must not have the intention of exercising it.”

She paused for a breath.

“An anchor is something that holds warships at bay. If one can pick up on why ‘Y’ gave her this name, then the answer to the confirmation question is not so unreasonable, no?”

Marie was completely lost for words. Looking back towards Naoto, she asked somewhat suspiciously, “Did you give that answer after thinking so far ahead, Naoto?”

“Eh? No, not really?” Naoto answered blankly.

—I figured as much.

As Marie glared at him with half-closed eyes, Naoto held up his hands in surrender. “As you can see, AnchoR-chan is a frighteningly aesthetic, extremely sensual, agonizingly adorable automaton, right? So what if she has some rather showy armaments? She’s no different from RyuZU on that point, no?” Naoto babbled on, right in his element.

“—How fearless of you to cheat on me with my little sister, Master Naoto,” a cold voice from behind him called out.

“Huh— Ah, no, that’s not it?! Of course you’re my one and only wife, RyuZU, but! This and that aren’t related—right, I meant what I said as a father!”

The radiance disappeared from RyuZU’s eyes. “To lust after your own daughter... I see that you are in the terminal stage of your disease...”

“...Ah, is that jealousy I sense? Miss RyuZU is seriously cute—” RyuZU’s blow floored Naoto.

Just then, AnchoR, who had remained silent until now, spoke, “—Your orders, please.”

“.....?” Naoto got up abruptly, his face perplexed.

Receiving his gaze, AnchoR repeated, “—Your orders, please.”

“AnchoR-chan?”

“—Yes, I am the Fourth of the InitialY Series, AnchoR, the One Who Destroys. I recognize you as my master, Naoto Miura. Your orders, please.” Though not to

the point of sounding like an automated reply system, her voice still sounded cut and dry like a machine. Her expressionless face and voice hadn't changed from earlier, but she didn't feel at all like a little girl.

Naoto turned around in a fluster, "RyuZU! AnchoR-chan seems strange! Could she be bugging out?!"

"So that answer was wrong after all..." Marie muttered.

"Hahh, are you kidding me?! How else could that question be answered!"

"No—AnchoR is operating normally, Master Naoto,"

Naoto turned around, "—What's the matter with her then?"

"The answer is simple. AnchoR is denied free will once her Master Confirmation is complete."

"———"

Naoto's face lost its expression as he turned to face RyuZU. "What? Why..."

"I stated this earlier as well, but AnchoR was the only one of us designed as a weapon. If she had a will other than her master's, she could not be considered a weapon. As such, she is programmed to cease self-determination once she acquires a master."

"...Didn't you just say that the reasoning behind the answer to her confirmation question is that her master shouldn't be someone who intends to use her for violence? What's up with that then?!"

"AnchoR was designed to entrust all of that to her master," RyuZU replied dispassionately.

Marie cut in from the side, "Wait up. In that case, what status was AnchoR in when she hadn't gone through her Master Confirmation yet?

"When she is without a master, she possesses free will so as to be able to find herself a suitable master who could manage her overwhelming strength. Though, she has a significant restriction put in place during that time period."

"Which is?"

"She must not harm humans. That is all."

“...I see,” Marie nodded.

When AnchoR doesn’t have a master, her safety is her own free will. Once she finds a suitable master, she functions purely as a weapon.

That is how she was programmed.

“...Well, considering that common sense can’t be applied to an automaton with free will to begin with, I guess one could say that her system is well thought out...”

“—Well thought out? Are you freaking kidding me?! Just what part of such a system is well thought out!! I didn’t save AnchoR-chan because I wanted a weapon! RyuZU, why didn’t you tell me if you knew this would happen!”

“...Master Naoto,” RyuZU replied meekly, her eyes downcast. “I had expected that you would become angry. However, surely you have not forgotten, have you? AnchoR and I are automata.”

“.....”

“I understand that you treasure us, out of your own credences, but—we are not human. We possess inherent abilities in line with our design concepts and are charged with an eternal duty. Acquiring a master and putting our abilities to good use are how we derive meaning from having been born.”

“But, in that case, RyuZU...!”

“I was born as YourSlave. It is only natural that the way to use me would be different from AnchoR, who was born as the One Who Destroys.”

For a moment, Naoto nearly shouted something... but he changed his mind. He simply bit his lip as if enduring something and lowered his gaze, muttering, “Even so, how am I supposed to accept this?”

“I trust you **to treat AnchoR kindly,** Master Naoto.”

“.....” Naoto didn’t reply. He clenched his fists while looking downward.

Seeing how crestfallen he was, Marie called out timidly, “Naoto...?”

“——I don’t like this.”

“Huh?”

Naoto raised his head. Furrowing his brows, he glared at RyuZU, then Marie, then AnchoR in turn. “...I don’t like this one bit. This isn’t what I wanted. A girl happens to be an automaton so she doesn’t need her own will? That really pisses me off! In the first place, if I’m her master and my orders are absolute, then she should obey my orders god damn it!”

RyuZU replied promptly, “As she is right now, she will obey your will a hundred percent, Master Naoto.”

“That’s not what I mean! It is, but it isn’t! Argh, god! In any case, I won’t acknowledge being AnchoR-chan’s father like this.”

Marie spoke up, amazed at his behavior. “Calm down a little. You’re all over the place you know?”

“Shut it, stuuupid.” Naoto turned to face AnchoR again. Staring right into her red eyes, he called out her name, “AnchoR-chan.”

The weapon replied dispassionately, “Yes— Your orders, please.”

“What do you want to do?”

For a moment, the weapon froze, then answered, “—Error. The content of the order is unclear. Requesting further details.”

“Tell me what you yourself want to do, AnchoR-chan.”

“Yes—I would like to serve adequately as AnchoR, the One Who Destroys,” the weapon answered clearly.

From behind, RyuZU said gently, “Master Naoto, I know I am repeating myself, but AnchoR does not have her own will right now.”

“She does,” Naoto asserted curtly.

RyuZU asked softly, “What makes you think that?”

“If AnchoR-chan didn’t have her own will, she would have killed me. When that mask was manipulating her, she was constantly resisting it.”

The strange noise that he had heard from AnchoR the whole time when she was being controlled had not simply been her operating sound—

It was the proof that AnchoR had her own will.

Naoto remembered that voice, that cry of lament, well.

That was the grounds for his claim.

Staring straight at the girl in front of him, Naoto continued, “That was your ‘mission’ just now, right, AnchoR-chan?”

“Yes.”

“Aside from that, what are some things you like or want to do?”

“Yes— Confirming: Is that a request for a disclosure of information regarding AnchoR’s own will?”

“Right! What does AnchoR-chan wish for?”

“Yes— Answering: Currently, this automaton’s free will has been locked.”

“Okay, then let’s give you an order. Remove that lock, ‘kay?”

The weapon took a while to respond to his words, “...Yes— Confirming: Is that an order for me to act by my own will?”

“In other words, I’m entrusting you to your own will, AnchoR-chan.”

“Yes— Is that an order to remove all my limiters?”

“Well, I think so?”

“Should I understand you to mean that I am given permission to voice my own opinion by way of me disengaging my emotional suppression circuit and unlocking my routine sequence of self-determination?”

“Yeah yeah! That’s exactly right! I authorize all of that, all of it!!”

“——”

“Do you understand? You can do whatever you want. With your own will, AnchoR-chan!”

—Immediately after, Naoto’s ears heard the sound of countless gears within AnchoR rearranging themselves. That was the signal that the rules that had been imposed on her were changing. It was the sound of the fate that had originally been forced upon her being shattered. Before Naoto’s eyes, AnchoR was trembling. A voice escaped from her quivering lips. “...Anything I want?”

“Of course,” Naoto answered immediately.

“...Really?”

“Without a doubt,” Naoto asserted flatly.

Being told that, AnchoR’s eyes fluttered about. She appeared flustered and afraid, seemingly troubled over whether she should really voice her desire. Belying her face that was expressionless as a whole, only the wavering of her eyes and voice expressed her anxiety as she said, “...I want... permission...”

“Hm?”

“...I want... permission to cry.”

“That’s...” Marie doubted her ears. *Permission to cry—what’s going on here?*

However, Naoto answered her immediately with a nod. He gave her the permission while slowly stroking her head. “You can cry.”

AnchoR’s face crumpled right up. Large teardrops formed at the corners of her red eyes and immediately began to fall. “...I want... more permissions.”

“Yeah?”

“Can I touch you...?”

“Sure.” Naoto nodded, upon which AnchoR took a step closer to him and felt his chest gingerly.

She continued, “Can I apologize...?”

“You don’t have anything to apologize for, but if you want, yeah.”

Upon receiving permission, AnchoR immediately buried her face in Naoto’s chest as she sobbed. Sniffling, she repeated, “I’m sorry,” over and over again. Her voice was soft at first, but before long, it was a reverberant wail.

Seeing her, Marie whispered, “Hey RyuZU.”

“What is it, Mistress Marie?”

“I’m going to ask, just to be sure: Was this turn of events part of your calculations?” Marie was suspiciously peering into RyuZU’s eyes.



Though Marie's gaze was like that of an inquisitor, RyuZU smiled as gently as usual. "I said so just a little while back, did I not? That I trust that Master Naoto **will treat AnchoR kindly.**"

Marie sighed as she grandly dropped her shoulders. Crossing her arms, she stared at RyuZU incredulously. "RyuZU, you've got a nasty personality."

Unexpectedly, RyuZU didn't refute her statement.

"Yes, I imagine that it would naturally appear that way to someone with a regrettable brain like yourself, Mistress Marie, but," RyuZU continued with a sunny smile, "I am YourSlave. It would not be appropriate for me to say too much or take the lead. I simply *believed* that Master Naoto would arrive at the truth without the help of a mere servant like myself."

—That was the truth. Seeing Naoto meet her expectations—RyuZU smiled with pride.

Seemingly convinced, Marie sighed, "Could I ask one more question?"

"What is it?"

"I've always been wondering—on what grounds did you determine Naoto to be worthy of being your master?"

RyuZU raised her eyebrows, perplexed. "—Dear me, I thought I had already informed you plenty of times, but—no, excuse me. I do not mean that I expected anything from your memory, which is as deficient as your breasts, but..."

"＿＿＿"

While Marie silently fumed, RyuZU continued, "It is because Master Naoto is the most outstanding individual in the pathetic, even pitiful bunch known as humanity." She paused for a breath, then smiled. "—It is because he made me believe that where he is going is where I should follow."

AnchoR asked, her words broken apart by sobs, "...Is it okay—if I don't break anything anymore? Is it okay—if I don't kill anyone anymore?"

"Yeah. There's no need for any of that!" Tightly embracing the trembling girl, Naoto nodded firmly.

Just then, the cube dangling by AnchoR's chest twisted, letting out a groan. At the same time, a single giant ripple surfaced in the area. It was a hole that led to an "armory" that didn't exist anywhere in this universe. Like before when AnchoR had pulled out her armaments, something was slowly revealed, upon which it tumbled down onto the workshop floor.

Interlude *04 : 30* Outbreaker

“...A cyborg?” It took Marie a bit of time before she realized that she was looking at a human. It wasn’t really that his mechanical body had deceived her. It was simply that the object before her eyes hadn’t retained the shape of the human form.

He was missing parts all over the place. Limbs had been torn off and there was a large hole where his abdomen should be. By Marie’s estimate, nearly half of the man was completely gone. The only things that still retained their original shape were his head and torso, along with his right arm.

Naoto widened his eyes as his jaw dropped with AnchoR still in his arms. “What’s up with this old man who seems like he’s gonna die any second now. Actually, how is he even still alive?”

“Well, a sixth generation artificial body would probably be able to endure this much damage, but...”

Marie squatted down next to the cyborg man lying on the floor. She removed the parts that had been crushed and inspected the surviving mechanisms.

“Hmm... judging by the characteristic Royal Oak he has, I think his body was made by the Audemars, but... from what I can tell, it doesn’t seem like he’s a commercial model that would be sold on the market. His body was probably something that was made to order using trade secrets.”

“Ah~ like old man Halter?”

“I guess, yeah. Halter’s an eighth generation model of the Breguets though. Seeing just how tattered this guy is, I imagine that he probably fought with AnchoR while she was still wearing the mask...”

Marie cast a sidelong glance at the girl in a red and white dress who was clinging to Naoto. *It really doesn’t seem like she’s in a state where we can get information out of her right now. Still, judging from the circumstances,* “...He was probably disassembled through spatial manipulation and stored inside her

cube up to now.”

Marie began to offhandedly repair him through muscle memory as she gathered her thoughts. *Omit all extraneous functions and connect the surviving gears with a basic interface to his brain circuits which are asleep right now.*

While watching Marie’s hands flow like water, Naoto asked, “Can you really fix him? He’s pretty beat up.”

“Just from the neck and up. What I’m doing couldn’t even be called first aid. Well, he should be able to talk at least.” Marie turned up the rotational speed of the gear connected to the man’s brain circuits.

The man’s artificial body jumped up, spasming.

“—Gheeh—Kah.”

The man awakened, opening his eyes. His creaking voice wasn’t out of suffering but due to the damage to his artificial vocal cords. The spasms of his body quickly came to an end as the parts of him from his neck on up began to operate smoothly.

Marie waited for about ten seconds for the man to compose himself, then called out, “Hi, are you awake now?”

“gh, ah—What’s this about...” The cyborg man grimaced, seemingly nauseous.

Marie extended her hand and snapped her fingers twice before the man’s eyes. “Can you hear me? Who are you? Try stating your name and affiliation.”

“...” The man didn’t reply. Instead, he turned his neck slightly to see Marie’s face with his artificial eyes. Recognizing her, his eyes widened in slight surprise. “—Marie Bell Breguet?”

“You’re awake I see,” Marie nodded.

“Hah—so that means that this place is hell, right?”

“Nah, neither you nor I have died. This is reality.”

“So, like I said, hell.” The man surfaced a cynical smile. “I’m Vermouth. Nice to meet you, princess.”

Marie asked with a suspicious gaze, “Is that your real name? Or your code name?”

“My code name, of course. Forgive me, but after all, wouldn’t a real name be too luxurious for scum like me?”

“...So you’re a spy I see. Do you belong to the Audemars?”

“Good question, do I?” Vermouth played dumb, continuing, “Well, I’ve probably been fired for a while now, so there’s no point in hiding my affiliation. But hey, even scum have their pride, so I’ll beg your pardon.”

“...Fine, I suppose. It’s not a big deal anyway.”

“Can I ask a question as well? Where is this, what’s today’s date?”

“This is Akihabara Grid in Japan. It’s February eighth just before daybreak.”

Vermouth furrowed his brows, seemingly taken aback, “Hmm... February eighth, in Tokyo? I can’t figure out how I’m still alive for the life of me... but in the end, I guess everything worked out somehow.”

Marie tilted her head, “...? What do you mean?”

“You’re here because you received a transmission addressed to a ghost, no?”

In an instant, Marie’s face twisted into that of a raging horned demoness. “—Ahhhh, in other words, it was you, yeah? The audacious dummy who sent that shitty prank message to the great Marie Bell Breguet.”

“Precisely. To chase me all the way to hell from a provocation like that, as expected of the mad princess of the Breguets. You’re just as the rumors say. Man, I’m relieved to see that you did a better job than expected.”

“Ah ha ha— You’ve got guts. I assume that you’re prepared for what’s to follow?”

“Of course. But man, just how pent up are you—my age is catching up to me, you know? If you want me to give it to you then, for starters, try shaking your cute little ass and begging for it.”

“———” Marie sprang to her feet. With a pure and innocent, even angelic smile on her face, she raised one foot up—and stomped down forcefully. While

digging the heel of her shoe into Vermouth's face she said, "Oy, mongrel—talk down to me and I'll decapitate you and flush you down a toilet."

Seeing things unfold with cold eyes, Naoto opened his mouth. "Miss Marie, that old man is *hypothetically* on the verge of death, so don't go too far, alright? Also, this is bad for AnchoR's upbringing, so do it elsewhere would you?"

"With his artificial body, it's possible for him to survive with just his brain circuits. There's no problem at all. Also, what upbringing would an automaton that's been operating for a thousand years need at this point?"

Underneath Marie's foot, Vermouth flippantly laughed, "For starters, princess, isn't your underwear a bit too childish? Either wear some that're a little sexier or just don't wear any at all.

"I'll really beat you to death you know?!" Marie shouted as she stamped down on his head again and again.

The low, hoarse voice of a man sounded from outside the room, "Oy oy, princess? What the heck is going on? Why are you howling?" Halter opened the door to the room and stuck his head inside, peering in.

Seeing him, Vermouth exclaimed from beneath Marie's foot, "—You, aren't you Vainney Halter?"

"Huh...? Oy princess, who's this greenhorn that's about to croak?"

"How cold of you. I'm your humble fan. The Scarborough Fair Incident is still talked about among those in our line of work, even now, you know?"

"The Scarborough Fair Incident?" Naoto tilted his head, looking puzzled.

Halter waved one hand irritably. "You don't need to know about it. It's an old story from another time."

Vermouth thinly smirked. "I was half-disappointed, half-relieved when I heard that you took the job of babysitting the princess of the Breguets."

Halter asked, seeming perplexed, "Relieved?"

"Encountering a monster like you during a mission would surely end with me in pieces—that's what I had thought. To think of all ways that I could've ended up meeting you, for it to be like this though, guess you never know what's

gonna happen in life.”

“A greenhorn who can mouth off with just his neck I see. Nice guts. If you want my autograph then keep your mouth shut.”

“I won’t ask for your autograph, so could you maybe save me? I feel like this princess is gonna kill me.”

“That sounds good to me. Just die as you are under her foot, thanks,” Halter spewed out curtly, then turned towards Marie. “Really now, where did this youthful eyesore come from?”

“It seems that he was stored inside AnchoR’s cube through spatial manipulation. Apparently, he’s also the one who sent that shitty prank message. I’m in the middle of thanking him extensively for that right now.”

Bonk. Marie struck Vermouth’s head with her heel.

“Ahh,” Halter nodded. “AnchoR should have just killed him. Actually, why didn’t he die?”

“Oh—AnchoR-chan was restricted from killing humans, so I think that’s probably why,” Naoto interjected, still holding the sobbing AnchoR in his arms.

Vermouth’s eyes widened in fear. “Oy, don’t tell me that that girl’s the InitialY Series who crushed me?”

“She is. What about it? —I’m saying this now, I ain’t givin’ her to you.”

“I wouldn’t take her even if you asked me to, brat.” Vermouth looked completely baffled as he stared at Naoto who was asserting ownership over AnchoR while hugging her. Vermouth grimaced. “In the first place, I let you guys talk for a moment and you tell me that she can’t kill humans? My entire team was eradicated by her. So you’re saying she doesn’t consider us full-body cyborgs as human?”

“—Hmm? I’m curious about that as well.” Halter looked at AnchoR while scratching his chin, “When we first met, I was considered one of your targets, right? In addition, this annoying greenhorn’s comrades were done in, but here he is alive... Just what criteria are you going by for determining your targets?”

It would make sense for Vermouth to have died as well, as he didn’t have a

human body. However, in reality, AnchoR had stored Vermouth, a full-body cyborg, inside her cube, sparing him. *—In that case, what was the primary factor in AnchoR determining whether she was allowed to use lethal force?*

Upon Halter's question, Naoto looked up and let his gaze wander, "Probably —from how human they were acting, I guess."

"...Whah?" Halter stared at Naoto incredulously.

Naoto continued, "I mean, at the time, you were only thinking about letting Marie escape, right? Forsaking me and RyuZU was a given, and you didn't care whether you died yourself."

"....." Halter stayed silent. Without replying, he thought to himself, *That's true... At the time, I had abandoned my humanity upon encountering AnchoR. I had switched my ego from that of a human to that of a soldier who's ready to fight—to the machine that I am.*

Adjusting one's mindset, it was an exceedingly basic skill that Halter had learned to help him survive. Nothing was forbidden on the battlefield. All options were justifiable. One had to base their decisions upon rational criteria—emotion would only get in the way.

Halter's duty was to protect Marie Bell Breguet. If it was for the sake of bringing her back safely, he could easily decide to let Naoto and RyuZU die as decoys. It wouldn't even faze him to do so. Naturally, if it was for that sake—his own life meant nothing to him either.

—Because of that, AnchoR hadn't recognized Halter as human.

"———" Halter lowered his gaze to the floor where Vermouth was.

This guy—considering that he sent such a message to Marie, he must have turned back from a soldier into a human at the end. After all, I can't find any logic or rationality in that action. Why would a spy send a transmission to the Breguet princess who should be dead?

To do such an inexplicable thing—I see, so he must be human.

"Oh—old man, in case you misunderstood me, I'm not blaming you. I understand that that's your job. If anything, I'm impressed by how firm your

resolve is.”

“...Ahh, you’re embarrassing me. Geez,” Halter laughed bitterly. There was a mountain of things he wanted to say.

To begin with, does this mean that he read the kind of mental state I was in at the time? Even if he could hear the operating sound of my cyborg body, my brain itself is human...

—For goodness’ sake, just what does this little punk who plays the fool really hear with those ears?

Shrugging his shoulders, Halter let out a deep sigh, “...Was I deemed lacking in humanity by an automaton of all things? Oy, that hurts you know,” Halter grumbled to himself while stroking his bald head.

●

5:38 AM, around the daybreak of the eastern sky.

Marie turned her head as she surveyed the workshop. “Now then, with the relay broadcasting equipment taken care of, we’ve gotten rid of all the evidence as of now, right?”

Halter nodded. “Yeah, Dr. Konrad and the other Meisters have already left. We’re the only ones left.”

“Right, and as for the alibis of everyone who was involved in the incident this time—”

“I’ve taken care of that, of course—aside from Naoto’s.”

“Good good.” Marie nodded before turning around with a smile. “Your name will go down in history, Naoto. Isn’t that lovely?”

Wincing a bit as he saw that smile of hers, Naoto replied, “...Well, I guess anything’s fine since RyuZU and AnchoR-chan are safe. Though, all things considered, isn’t making me out to be the sole instigator of this large-scale terrorist act pushing it a little?”

Beside him, RyuZU said somewhat triumphantly, “Perhaps you should think about it this way instead, Master. You will finally shed your lowly reputation at that ridiculous microcosm of society called a school and obtain worldwide

recognition instead.”

“Yeah, but as the villain of the century—”

“What worth is there in the subjective morality of fleas? What is clear is that you are a phenomenal individual, Master Naoto.”

“Father, you’re amazing!” AnchoR hugged Naoto’s arm tightly with a carefree smile.

Naoto instantly broke into a grin. “Crap... I might achieve enlightenment from how happy I feel right now gehehehehe—”

“Stop fooling around. We’re getting out of here,” Marie chided coldly.

At that, Halter knocked the ball he was carrying under his armpit somewhat discontentedly. “Can’t we just throw this guy away, princess?”

“Oy oy, isn’t that a bit cold? Appearances aside, I’m a man with a strong sense of duty, you know? If you give me a new body, I’ll work hard to return the favor.” The ball—actually Vermouth who was just a head—laughed flippantly. Despite being reduced to a state that would make any child who saw him cry, his attitude was truly brazen.

Marie snorted, “Hmph. I’ll work you to the bone, alright? So prepare yourself.”

“Thank you for your benevolence, dear princess —Ahh, by the way, got a cig?” he asked wantingly.

Everyone ignored his frivolous request.

—Just then.

“Oy, wait a second,” Naoto, who had been grinning the whole time, suddenly said in a sharp voice.

Marie turned around looking perplexed, her eyebrows furrowed. “What, did you forget something?”

“That’s not it! ...Oy, seriously, what’s with this sound—it’s coming from underground?!” Naoto cried out.

Immediately after, a thunderous roar pierced through the floor as the

vibrations from an intense collision shook the city. The force was such that everything in their field of visual was jolting up and down.

Unable to remain standing, Marie fell on her butt. Naoto tumbled down as well while covering his ears and screaming; RyuZU and AnchoR rushed to his side.

“—What’s happening?!” Marie yelled.

No one answered her.

It wasn’t an earthquake. The vibrations and the deafening noise didn’t gradually die down; just the opposite, they became stronger and stronger. Even Marie, who didn’t have Naoto’s super hearing, could tell that something was crawling up from underground from the sensations assaulting her body.

“—This can’t be real!” Naoto yelled out, gasping. “That thing—that enormous weapon is rising to the surface while tearing through the earth!!”

“You’re kidding me!” Marie cried out.

Naoto screamed back, “Like I would say this as a joke idiot!!”

“The hell is Tokyo’s military doing?! Don’t tell me they were annihilated?! There’s no way!” Marie yelled as she ground her teeth.

—It’s true that the weapon was of the superdreadnought class. It was equipped with countless guns and armor that even RyuZU’s scythes couldn’t tear through.

However, it was nothing but a sitting duck due to its size. In a battle of attrition against overwhelming numbers, it stood no chance. If Tokyo’s army had clashed with the enormous weapon at the base of the city where they could fight without having to worry about collateral damage—at least, up to a certain extent—then maybe not without zero loss, but they should have been able to take it down.

That was how it was supposed to go according to the plan Marie had drawn up, but—

At that moment, Vermouth shouted warily, “Oy, don’t tell me you had Tokyo’s military clash with that weapon...?!”

“Shut up, there wasn’t any other way!” Marie retorted with a click of her tongue against his reproach.

However, Vermouth knit his brows as if he had a headache. “Give me a break, ghost princess. So you overlooked the most important part? You’ve gotta be kidding me.”

“—What are you talking about?!”

“Why do you think I went through the trouble of sending you a transmission through EM waves? The research conducted in Shiga that violated the international treaty and led to the purge of the city—was on electromagnetic technology. That monster is the culmination of that technology you know?!”

Electromagnetic technology.

Technology that had been used abundantly in ancient times but had since fallen out of favor. The reason it went out of fashion was because electromagnetic waves could derail the particle-sized gears that were used in nearly all precision instruments—

—*Wait.* Feeling a chill run down her spine, Marie gasped. The countless events that she had experienced in the past week flashed before her eyes. She could easily excuse herself by saying she had had far more pressing concerns on her mind back then, but—

Illegal research on electromagnetic technology had been conducted in Shiga Grid.

The city was purged because the truth had been at risk of being exposed.

Mie’s clocksmiths survived that unjust purge.

At the same time, Marie remembered those nauseating words that Mie’s governor had said: *—The federal government doesn’t realize that what Shiga’s Technical Force created was not just an empty threat.*

“Why...! Why didn’t I realize it!!”

The true ability—

Of that enormous weapon—

Is—

“That which governs an electromagnetic field—are you telling me that it’s an enormous electromagnet?!”

That moment, Naoto covered his ears and let out a stifled cry, “——ah?!” As if masking his scream—all of the city mechanisms along with—Halter, RyuZU, AnchoR, Vermouth... in other words, anything and everything that employed gear technology—

—Ceased functioning.



●

5:47 AM on the eighth of February in the 1016th year of The Wheel.

The ground began to rumble like an earthquake. Just as the phenomenon steadily increased in intensity, the giant crowd of people who had evacuated to Akihabara Grid witnessed something—a gigantic pillar of blue light pierced straight through the dawning sky as the day broke.

Immediately after, a profoundly deafening roar rang out, upon which all the mechanisms of Akihabara Grid began to screech. As ripples expanded outward from the pillar of light, everything made of clockwork in their path ceased functioning one after the other.

After only a few minutes which themselves felt like hours to the witnesses at ground zero—an enormous steel spider tore through the ground while making a sound like a howling animal.

●

Inside a dimly-lit narrow room was a monitor covering an entire wall. It was refreshing constantly with data on the external environment as well as the status of the unit itself.

“We’ve reached the surface of the city. No targets in sight. Continuing to search for enemies.”

“The main cannon’s battery is 14% cooled and 3% charged.”

“Recalculating the time until recharging is complete.”

Receiving the reports in rapid succession, he nodded with poise. His adjutant standing next to him asked to confirm, “If it is as Your Excellency says, then there should be two InitialY Series here, but...”

The person being asked—an old man of ashen white hair and beard answered with a tired voice, “...They may be ‘Y’’s legacy, but even they should be powerless in this stilled world.” The glittering, moss-green eyes of his wrinkled face were glaring sharply at the monitor before him.

His adjutant—a bespectacled young man—unconsciously straightened his posture. “Your Excellency, may I ask you something?”

“I don’t mind. Go on.”

“Right— Your Excellency retired from active duty three years ago and had since then secluded yourself underground, right?”

“Are you dissatisfied that an old hermit is butting in?”

“Absolutely not. It is my honor to serve under Your Excellency. This is merely the curiosity of a petty officer—I believe you had been leaning against carrying out this operation, so I’m wondering why you chose to return to active duty.”

“...Because I’ve discovered a question that I must ask.”

“Eh?”

Paying no mind to the adjutant’s confusion, the old man’s eyes darkened as they narrowed. He recalled the boy he had met underground that day.

—I have no proof. No, such a thing isn’t necessary to begin with. But I understood. When I saw that boy and his automaton that day I was convinced...

—That is “Y.”

A reincarnation? A successor? It doesn’t matter. Frankly, I don’t care to know.

However—that gaze of his that rejected everything in the world, that asserted the truth of his own subjective view without a trace of doubt, was precisely in the spirit of the culprit behind the creation of the present world.

That was awfully—yes, extremely distasteful.

I once had hope for the future, but I was disappointed by history and thrown into despair by the world. That’s why I thought that it would be fine if I lived out the rest of my life in resignation.

—However, indignation and enmity, the old man whispered in a low, hoarse voice, “Like I could let things end like this after seeing that. I’ll teach you what us run of the mill men can do if we put our mind to it—you wretched monster.”

(Joint) Afterword

—At a certain location on a certain day, Editor S said this to us with half-closed eyes: “...Now then, feel free to explain why it took so long for you two to finish volume two. I thought you two were playing catch, bouncing ideas off each other...”

“Hehehe... Since when did you get the false impression that we were playing catch—?”

“We weren’t playing catch; we were playing dodgeball. Dodgeball with an iron ball at that. Hehe.”

For some reason, Kamiya and Himana had answered while brazenly giggling.

“After all, now that Tsubaki is in Saitama as well, I can punch him anytime I want. Previously, the distance between us prevented me from doing so.”

“And when he does, how strange! For some reason, I find myself punching back! Long live the Code of Hammurabi!”

“...Can’t you two keep things a bit more civil.”

“With due respect, did you know that a certain peace-loving musician with round glasses got into a fight with another band member before leaving the band and causing their breakup? This is what happens when you get rid of national borders [read: division of labor]. Are you seeing this from heaven, round glasses?”

“In the end, everyone insists on having it their own way. In other words, to find a point of compromise, the only option is to speak with your fists. (In an assertive tone)”

“Indeed, peace is nothing but an illusion. Humans can only understand each other through fisticuff—”

“Well, it’s fine I guess. After all, the ones who would be caught in a financial pickle if the book never gets published are the two of you, not me.”

“‘“War doesn’t leave behind anything but debt, does it. (With solemn faces)”” At their editor’s words, the two whose faces were swollen (from punching each other) nodded.

“...I remembered something just now.”

—Sino, who had been watching from the sidelines until now, spoke up:

“Regarding a certain series of Mr. Kamiya’s that’s published by another publisher... Mr. S, you were the one who set up that project and also the one who made Mr. Kamiya adapt it into a manga together with his wife, right?

“...Wouldn’t it be the case then that you made Mr. Kamiya publish Clockwork Planet knowing full well that he would be crushed by the additional workload, Mr. S?”

—Sino had realized what must not be realized.

Indeed, as everyone fell silent, only Editor S said leisurely, “Now then, I have to get back to sending the manuscript to the printers. Please be quicker with the third volume, alright?”

Seeing him begin to make his exit while wearing a dark smile, Kamiya and Tsubaki both barked:

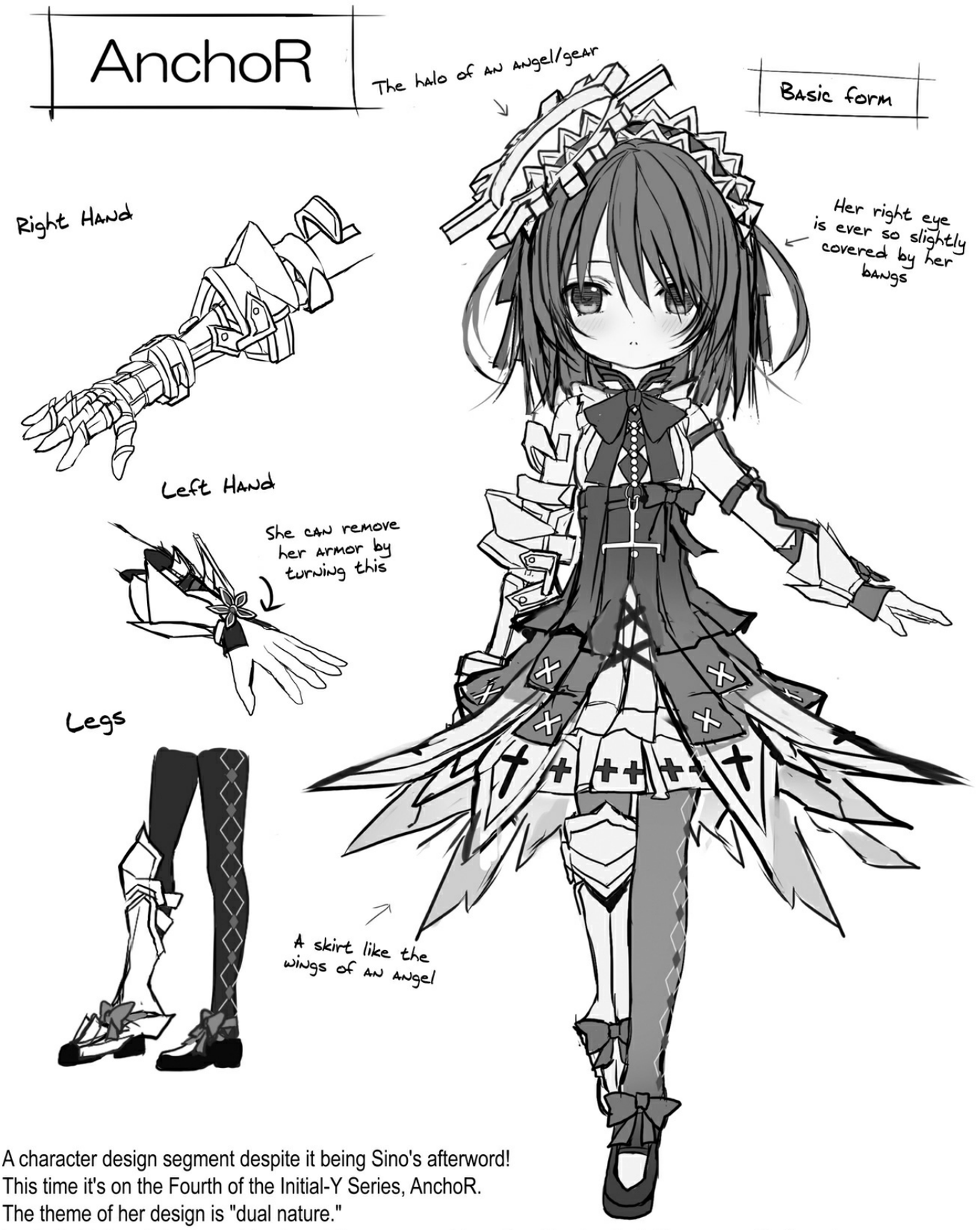
“Stop right there! If I wasn’t crushed to death with work for my other series we could have given you the manuscript for volume two a tad earlier you know?!”

“No wonder Kamiya kept saying ‘I’m busy,’ when I would ask him whether he had checked over the plot outline yet—so you were the culprit behind everything!”

The two of them then, like mirror images—shook hands with ferocious smiles. “The source of conflict ought to be sentenced to death 3.” With that show of unity, the two chased after their editor at full speed.

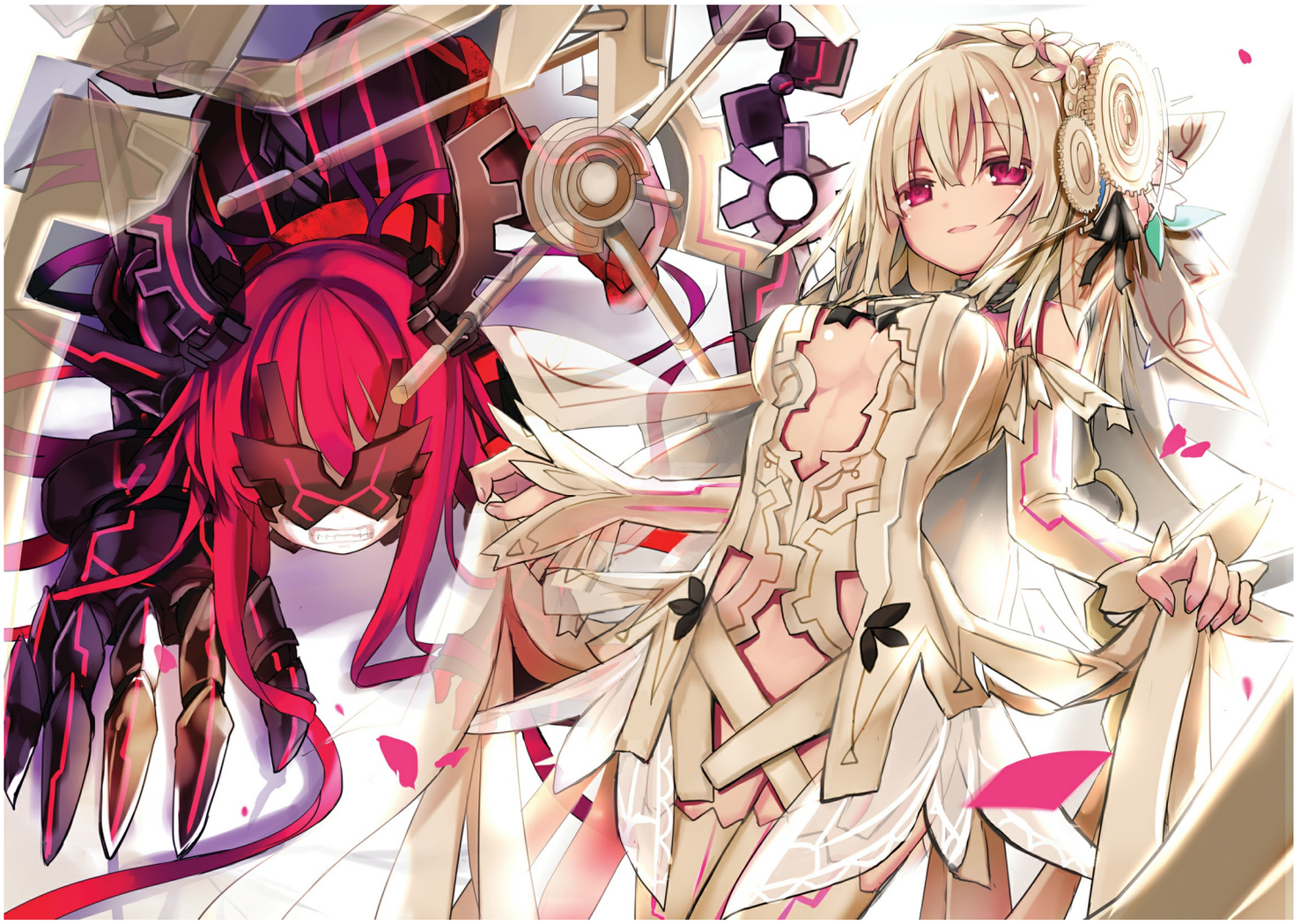
...Sino nodded deeply. “...Wowww, conspiracies really do exist in real life~”

—*Yep, it looks like we’re still far, far away from achieving world peace,* Sino muttered internally...



A character design segment despite it being Sino's afterword!
This time it's on the Fourth of the Initial-Y Series, AnchoR.
The theme of her design is "dual nature."
I put effort into points like making her clothes asymmetric and making her look like an angel before she transforms but like a demon afterwards. AnchoR herself *is* an angel so that aspect isn't at odds with her character (lol). She went on a rampage in imaginary time this volume, but that actually wasn't her true form. Her true form might be revealed sooner rather than later so please look forward to it until then!







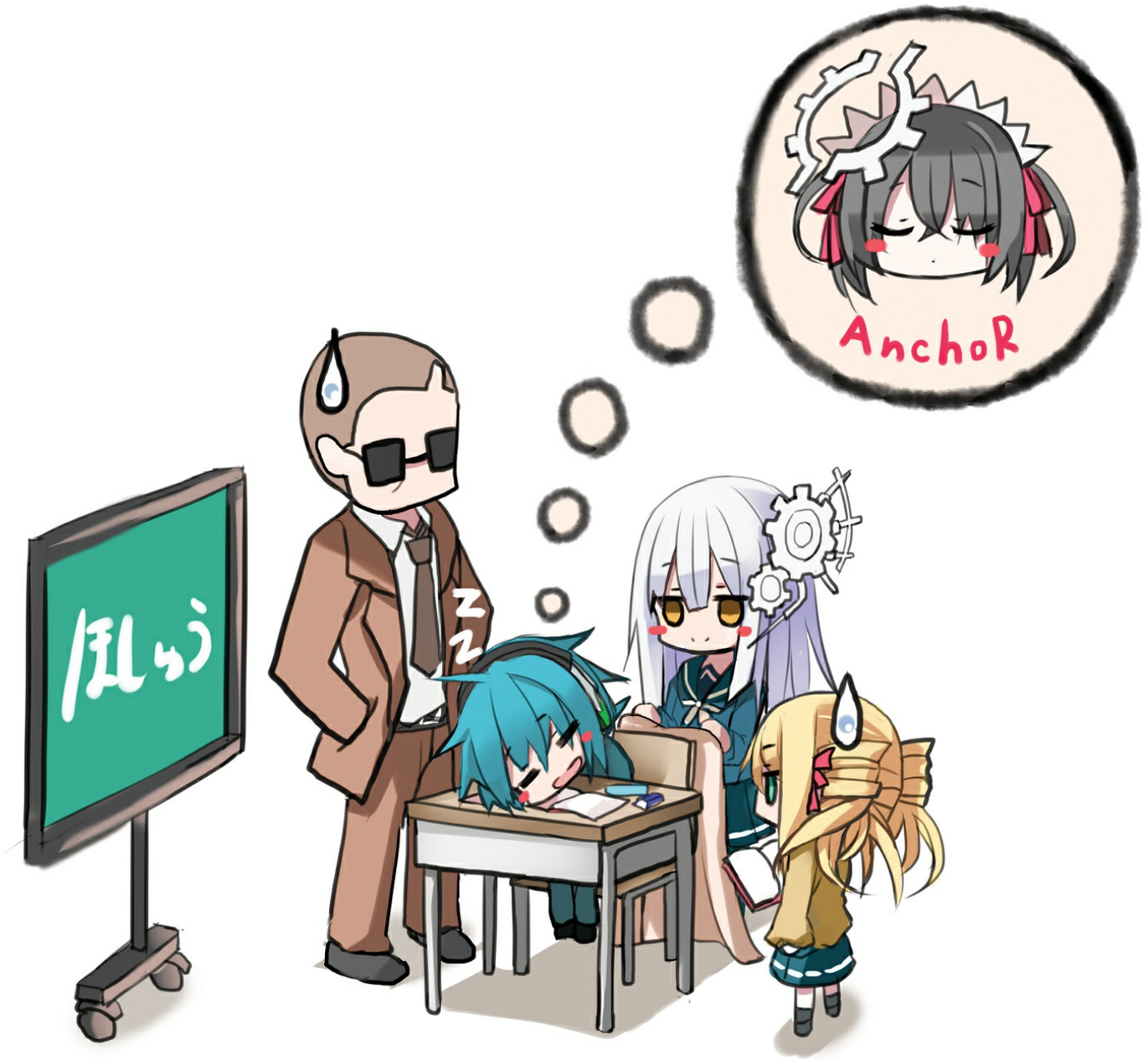

AnchoR
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