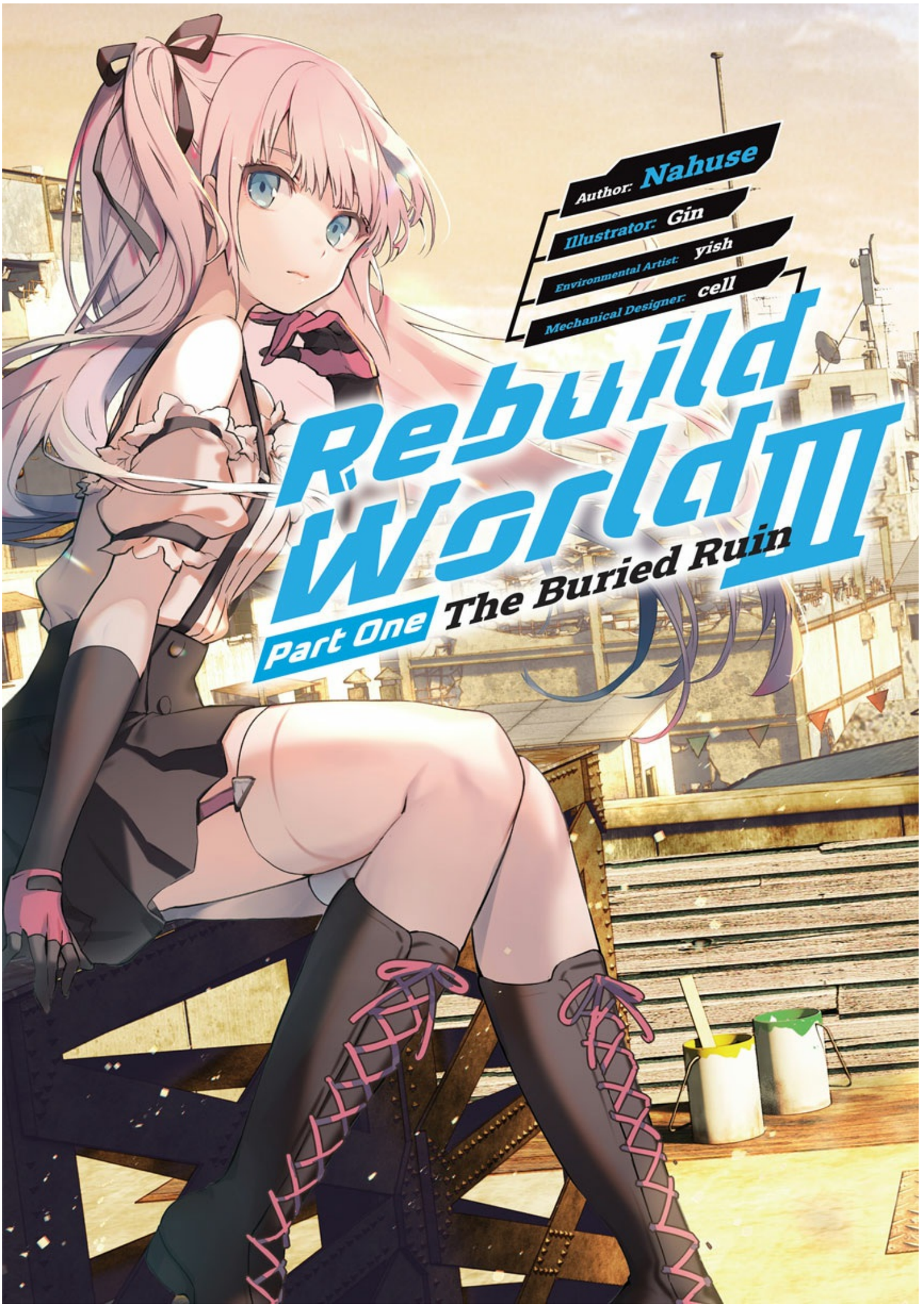

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Rebuild World III
Part One The Buried Ruin


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Rebuild World: Volume 3 Part One [Complete]

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Part One The Buried Ruin

Chapter 70: The Buried Ruin

Akira had become a relic hunter to escape his life in the slums. In the Kuzusuhara Ruins, he'd met Alpha and accepted a commission from her, making them partners from then on. The checkered career that followed had tempered him, enhancing his skills at an astonishing rate. Alpha's support—an advance payment on their contract—had given him a powerful advantage, swiftly transforming an ordinary slum kid into a hunter so accomplished that Kugamayama City had requested him by name for one of its projects.

As a result, Akira now had the life he'd dreamed of during his days in the back alleys, when he'd worn dirty clothes, eaten food so unsafe it was practically experimental, and never known whether he'd be killed in his sleep. He'd longed for decent clothes, a healthy diet, and a safe room to sleep in—humble wishes, but far beyond the reach of most slum dwellers.

And now he had them. His clothes were good, although they were combat gear. He'd eaten meals so delicious they blew him away. He'd rented a house larger than the average rookie hunter could afford. In short, he'd left the slums behind, and he was living his dream.

Even in his newfound affluence, however, Akira's mind had remained trapped in the back alleys, where scorn, distrust, and murder were the norm. Yet even that was now slowly changing in the course of his work. Seeing people unflinchingly risk their own lives for others had opened his eyes to a new side of humanity. And then there had been a few words, spoken by a girl called Yumina:

"The *thief* is to blame, obviously!"

Coming from anyone else, in any other circumstances, this statement wouldn't have left such a strong impression on him, would never have shocked him as it had. But as it was, the words loomed large in Akira's mind. The day he'd heard them, his spirit had taken its first small steps out of the back alleys where it had been loitering and into the outside world. More such steps would carry him forward, leading him further into his career and closer to

accomplishing the job he'd promised to perform for Alpha—and to achieving, one day, a wish he didn't even realize he had.

Akira and Alpha had a lot more hunting ahead of them, each in pursuit of their own desires.

◆

Akira had successfully fought off a gang of relic thieves in Kuzusuhara, and then sold the credit for his achievement to Kugamayama City for 160 million aurum. But he'd already spent 150 million of that: sixty million on hospital bills after the battle, eighty million to replace all the equipment he'd lost, and ten million on high-end medicine.

Years of harsh slum life, followed by a series of even more brutal battles, had left his body a wreck. Thanks to his costly hospital stay after his fight with the thieves, however, he was now as healthy as those who lived in luxurious safety within the city walls.

To reach new heights as a hunter, he needed powerful weapons and a good powered suit. But the best gear commanded steep prices. Effective medicine, too, was a product of advanced technology, and hence expensive. Yet Akira would be far less likely to survive combat with injuries slowing him down, so products that could cure wounds on the spot were worth the small fortune they'd cost him.

In short, Akira needed all his recent purchases. He hadn't wasted a single aurum. Nevertheless, the string of exorbitant payments had steadily chipped away at his financial sensibilities. No trace remained of the Akira who had once been ecstatic to make a mere two hundred grand.

He'd already ordered his full new kit from Shizuka. He'd been buying gear from her as long as he'd been a hunter, and he trusted her so completely that he hadn't hesitated to pay her the full eighty million aurum up front. And now the news had reached him that his long-awaited order had arrived, he was rushing off to her store.

I see someone's *in a good mood*, Alpha remarked, observing his excitement with a sardonic grin. *Are you really that eager for your new gear?*

’Course I am. I mean, did you see *the list on the quote? I can’t wait!* Akira replied matter-of-factly, taking more care than usual to stick to telepathy as he entered Cartridge Freak—he didn’t want to get carried away and let Shizuka see him talking to himself.

The shopkeeper was so beautiful that some hunters patronized her business purely to improve their chances with her, and she greeted Akira with a friendly smile on her lovely face. “It’s good to see you, Akira. Right this way.”

She stood up from behind the counter and beckoned to him. As Akira followed her into the back room, a sudden thought struck him, and he asked, “Shizuka, are you sure you can take time away from the front?”

“Don’t worry. I won’t get a line of waiting customers just because I left the counter for a bit. I only *wish* business was that good.”

“Y-Yeah?” Akira mumbled, looking torn. While he could tell Shizuka was joking (even with his paltry communication skills), he still didn’t think blithe agreement seemed the proper response. Yet he couldn’t think of a better one, so he returned to his original question. “No, I mean, what if someone steals a gun from a display or something?” From his perspective, this was an obvious concern. He was used to things being stolen the moment they left his sight.

Shizuka sensed where his question came from and inwardly deplored the life that must have given him such ideas. Yet she didn’t want to show him needless pity, so she kept smiling as if he’d said nothing unusual. “Oh, so *that’s* what you mean. Don’t worry about that either. All my display models are locked to their stands, and I’ve got security cameras watching the shop. I even have an insurance policy linked to a private security firm, so everything will be fine.”

Even if robbers *did* take this opportunity to burgle Cartridge Freak, Shizuka explained, her insurance would cover the damages and keep her store’s losses to a minimum. And to uphold its reputation, the private security firm under contract to her insurance company would capture the thieves—and then go about recouping its expenses. The robbers’ safety would ultimately depend on their ability to pay damage claims filed under a dizzying array of pretexts. If they lacked funds, their property, bodies, and futures would be converted into cash by any means necessary until they met with a fate that fit their crimes. Whether

they merely lost assets to confiscation, got conscripted into backbreaking labor, or ended up an unwilling test subject for new drugs and technologies depended entirely on how much they had cost the company and its clients.

Of course, once the firm mobilized, they usually didn't care if they took their target dead or alive. The company would rather kill a suspect than lose face by letting them escape. So the opportunity to pay damages and live on applied only to thieves who survived capture.

Even after hearing all that, Akira still seemed a little uneasy, so Shizuka decided to try a different tack. "Anyway, even if I do lose something because I stepped away from the counter, I'd still call it a smart business decision."

"You would?" Akira asked, incredulous and baffled to the extreme.

"Yes. You're a big spender and a regular customer in the making," Shizuka answered, not entirely seriously. "Showing you a little favoritism to keep you coming back will be better for my bottom line. So, step right this way, my good sir."

Akira realized she was trying to reassure him and decided to stop worrying. With an answering smile a little too broad to be natural, he said, "All right. Let's go."

A "regular customer in the making," huh? he reflected, struck by Shizuka's choice of words, as he followed her into the back room. *I've already spent a lot buying all my gear here, and I've made plenty of visits to stock up on ammo, but I guess that's still not enough to make me a regular in Shizuka's book.*

He found himself regretting that he hadn't yet made the cut, and he was just wondering how he could improve his standing with her when Shizuka said, "By the way, I always appreciate your business, but I'd like it even better if you bought more from my inventory. When it comes to something like a powered suit, I'm essentially just placing an order on your behalf. So to be honest, there isn't a lot of profit in it."

"Oh, er, I hope you don't mind waiting a little while for that," Akira said awkwardly, avoiding her gaze. She'd put him on the spot, and he didn't know how else to respond.

“I don’t. I have high hopes, but remember: don’t do anything reckless.” Shizuka spoke chidingly, as if to a child, although she never lost her concerned smile.

“I understand,” Akira replied earnestly. He had just been about to conclude that running a few risks might be worth earning himself more opportunities to visit Cartridge Freak—and more money to spend there—as a shortcut into Shizuka’s good books. But her casual admonition banished that idea before it was fully formed.

“Good.”

Shizuka’s storeroom doubled as a delivery entrance, and its shelves were packed with the heavy weaponry and ammunition she traded in. While Akira stared at the vast array of goods, she pointed to a shutter which led to her garage. “Now, that’s where you’ll find the new gear you ordered.”

Akira looked inside, shock and delight plain on his face. Although he’d known what to expect, he could still hardly believe his eyes. “Shizuka,” he asked hesitantly, “I read your sales quote, but are you *sure* I can have this as part of my new kit?”

Shizuka flashed him a proud grin. “Of course! I made sure to keep it in your budget.”

Before them sat a truck built for the wasteland. No compact car, confined to paved city streets, could match the intimidating presence of this five-meter-long machine. Akira had rented similar trucks in the past, and as off-road vehicles went, it was unremarkable. Nevertheless, the realization that this one was *his* left a deep impression on him. No hunter could roam the wastes without transportation, and here he had just gained a replacement for the motorcycle he’d lost in his battle with the relic thieves.



“All right, I’m going to check that your full order is here, and I’d like you to go over it with me.” Shizuka produced paper copies of her sales quote and handed

one to Akira. Then she began pointing out each item on the list, confirming that all were accounted for.

“One Tatsumori Heavy Industries Telos Type-97 desert utility vehicle. It’s a used truck, but it’s in perfect repair, and it has an onboard control system with a threat-detection module.”

Wasteland vehicles, as they were commonly known, were built to traverse rugged, rubble-strewn terrain. More than that, they were designed to address the unique challenge of wasteland travel—monster attacks. The Telos Type-97, for example, lacked a roof so that passengers could easily open fire from inside the vehicle. (Hunters in powered suits often carried weapons far more devastating than typical onboard systems.) Its high suspension and large, rugged tires allowed it to drive right over the minor obstacles that littered the wasteland.

The truck’s body was also covered in plates called “armor tiles,” which responded to impacts by engaging force-field armor. Some of these tiles were thick, heavy plates, while others were as thin and light as stickers. But large or small, almost all were designed to affix to a surface and to peel and crumble away after activating their protection. Onboard force-field generators did exist, but only in top-of-the-line wasteland vehicles geared toward the high-ranking hunters who could afford their prohibitive energy costs. At present, that feature was out of Akira’s price range.

“One CWH anti-materiel rifle and one DVTS minigun,” Shizuka continued, “both mounted on the truck so you can use them even without a powered suit.”

The rear of the truck was an open bed with two gun emplacements, each of which held one of the weapons. The mounts weren’t on the front of the vehicle because monster encounters in the wasteland more often involved fleeing a target than driving toward it.

“You can detach them to carry with you, of course. But be careful with the DVTS minigun—it really guzzles ammo. Just to be safe, I had custom parts installed to expand its capacity. It’s designed for use with compatible high-capacity magazines, but don’t worry, it can still take standard ones as well.”

The minigun rested on a sturdy emplacement and looked so imposing that

Akira had trouble believing a human could carry it. An ammunition belt stretched from the heart of its firing mechanism to a massive magazine stored behind the weapon. Although too large for portability, it could support rapid-fire from the truck without resorting to custom parts. If Akira ran into another pack of monsters, he could simply mow them down.

"The custom parts for your AAH and A2D assault rifles are in that box. They're compatible with either weapon, so you can mix and match them however you like later."

Akira had purchased both rifles at the same time he'd ordered new gear, and he'd left them unmodified so that he could fire them without a powered suit. Naturally, they wouldn't do much damage to Yarata scorpions and other hard-shelled beasts. He planned to keep one stock for emergencies and customize the other to fire overpressure ammo, among other upgrades that he could only take advantage of with his suit on.

"Two Tatsumori Ference data terminals for wasteland use. They're built tough and equipped with armor stickers. They're also both pre-synced with your Telos Type-97, so you can use them to control it remotely. When it comes to the features of wasteland gear, I'd say durability is king, wouldn't you?"

Two terminals lay on the truck's passenger seat. They shared a rugged design, although a less charitable observer might say that they'd sacrificed any sense of aesthetics in the name of durability. The covers that protected their screens when not in use looked almost as if someone had just slapped armor tiles over them. But their ability to survive trips through the wastes made them right up any hunter's alley.

"And last but not least, one ERPS powered suit with a fully integrated scanner suite. The manufacturer calls it Powered Silence. It comes with a full set of accessories in that storage case there. This includes a rifle sight it can sync with, so remember to install that later if you plan to use it."

The back of the truck held a large case that only barely fit on board. Akira currently needed a new suit more than any other piece of gear—he couldn't reap the full benefits of Alpha's support without one. It was so vital, in fact, that if forced to choose between the suit and all the rest of his new acquisitions, he

would take the suit in a heartbeat.

So, anxious to thoroughly inspect this all-important piece of equipment, he grabbed the case by its handle and tried to lift it out of the truck. But it was heavier than he'd expected and didn't budge. He tried gripping the handle firmly in both hands, to no avail. Refusing to give up, he braced one foot on the side of the truck and pulled with all his might. The case moved, but only barely.

Seeing that Akira was struggling, Shizuka walked up beside him, seized the handle in one hand, and gave it a tug. The case that had resisted all his efforts moved as easily as if it were made of styrofoam. Shocked, Akira hurriedly let go of the handle. Shizuka lifted the case out of the truck and set it down on the floor single-handedly.

"Whoa," Akira gasped admiringly.

Shizuka's friendly smile grew a bit colder as she asked, "You do realize my *suit* did all the work there, right?"

"Huh? Oh, right. I knew that," Akira hastily replied, reminded that she wore a thin suit of powered inner wear underneath her clothes. But why had she stressed the point? That question he couldn't answer.

Turning back to the matter at hand, he opened the case. Inside, he found a black powered suit, neatly folded, and a range of small electronic accessories. Before he could lift the suit out to take a better look, Shizuka beat him to the punch, unfolding it and holding it up for him to see.

The fabric that formed the suit's base layer was woven of synthetic fibers, and while it appeared rigid at first glance, it was flexible enough to fold into a compact bundle. In place of an exoskeleton, a material like long, thin sheets of stiff rubber formed a sort of harness on its surface. More of the same substance sheathed the backs of the hands and tops of the feet, which also featured what Akira supposed were ports for connecting some kind of electronic device.

Shizuka noticed him staring curiously at them and explained, "Those ports are for attaching the miniature sensors it comes with. I told you this suit has a fully integrated scanner, right? It was designed to give you both in one package."

Akira next unpacked the accessories. The miniature sensor terminals looked

like regular polyhedrons split in half, and each one housed cameras, microphones, motion and vibration sensors, and more. This caused each module by itself to suffer from low individual performance, but linking them together made up for that weakness.

"So this suit has a whole set of scanners built in?" Akira asked, staring curiously at these accessories his old suit had lacked. "I'm guessing it must have cost more than a normal one, then."

"Of course," Shizuka confirmed. "Higher specs and additional features always add to the price tag."

"That figures, especially since it has to include the cost of a scanner too. I can't believe my budget covered this *and* a truck." Akira's whole kit cost eighty million aurum—a large sum, yes, but he couldn't shake the feeling that he'd gotten more than his money's worth.

"The Powered Silence has a bit of a...history," Shizuka explained. "I found it for less than the list price."

"What kind of history?"

"Oh, don't worry. It's brand new, and its performance is a cut above any other suit in its price range. It's just that a little incident tanked its popularity. So, well, I got it on clearance."

Of course, there were incidents and *incidents*. So, hoping to dispel the decidedly uneasy look that had appeared on the face of such a big spender, Shizuka embarked on a more detailed explanation.

Neither superiority in raw specs nor cost-performance guaranteed that a product would sell—there were other key factors at play. Reviews didn't always match performance, while marketing and gossip often swayed perceptions—even when they had nothing to do with the product itself. This was as true in hunting as in any other field. And the Powered Silence had suffered for it.

Shortly after the suit had gone on sale, a hunter wearing one had failed spectacularly in a big job and then loudly panned the suit in an effort to shift the blame. To make matters worse, that hunter had had a decent reputation for competence prior to this, and had gone on to achieve great success in their next

job after switching to a different suit. Overnight, the Powered Silence had gained a disastrous reputation, and its sales figures had cratered. Whether there actually was a bug in the suit's control system—as the hunter had claimed—and whether it had really caused their failure was now a subject of endless—and pointless—debate. Even if the claim was false or the bug had since been patched, the suit's reputation would never recover from this fatal blow.

Usually, Shizuka would never recommend such a maligned piece of equipment—unless she could be certain its infamy was undeserved. In the Powered Silence's case, the success of a near-identical model under a different name had convinced industry professionals that there was at least nothing wrong with the suit's design and performance. By that point, however, it had become too outdated to return to major retailers' shelves. The ill-fated product—which did its job well, although its experimental nature had resulted in somewhat uneven specs—had never been able to escape its initial bout of negative press.

The story left Akira feeling a sense of kinship for the unfairly maligned suit. They were both victims of terrible luck. And Alpha read his feelings through their telepathic connection.

You've got nothing to worry about, she interjected. *Even if there* is *a bug in the system, it won't matter once I rewrite it all.*

Yeah? That's a relief, Akira replied.

I won't let you down. Alpha's smug grin dispelled the last of Akira's misgivings.

With her explanation out of the way, Shizuka helped him to don and boot up the Powered Silence. Its resilient synthetic fibers stretched and shrank, contouring themselves to his skin. He experienced no discomfort, and the few simple movements he tried felt perfectly natural.

The accessories in the suit's storage case included simple protectors—add-ons that provided surfaces to attach the thin defensive plates (also included), which would be difficult to stick directly on the flexible suit. Akira plugged in the miniature scanner terminals, then added the protectors and a goggles-like wearable display. He finished by strapping on his two assault rifles. To his slight embarrassment, Shizuka looked him up and down, then smiled and nodded, as

if to say that his new gear looked good on him.

“Well, now you’ve seen everything you ordered,” she announced. “Does it meet your expectations, sir?”

“Yes. I really can’t thank you enough.”

“Wonderful! Cartridge Freak looks forward to your continued patronage.” With that, Shizuka’s smile changed slightly, no longer quite the one she used with customers, and she tenderly embraced Akira. “I’m sure you’ll go right back to hunting, but try to be careful. You will, won’t you?”

“Yes.” Akira nodded happily.

Akira packed all his purchases back into the truck, then nodded to Shizuka from its driver seat and departed for home. She saw him off with a cheery little wave. But once he was out of sight, she sighed and murmured ruefully, “This isn’t healthy—I’ve gotten much too attached to him. Maybe I’m not as good at keeping my feelings out of my business as I always thought I was.”

Procuring Akira’s new equipment had been an eighty-million-aurum deal and a major boost to her sales figures. In terms of coming out ahead, however, it had been questionable at best. She wasn’t in the red, but her profit was nowhere near what she would have expected to earn on such a large contract—a mere pittance, even to a woman who took pride in not gouging her customers. Of course, she’d know this when she made the call to purchase his gear. She’d justified it to herself as an investment to secure repeat business from a major customer, but she had still cut her own percentage to the quick to furnish Akira with the best possible gear. The young hunter could be dense in some matters, but even he had realized something was off.

“Akira,” she said, chuckling to snap herself out of her reflections, “I got you the best your money could buy. Now I’m counting on you to keep shopping here for a long time. So you’d better come through, okay?”

Shizuka returned to her sales counter, wishing that she would see Akira return to her shop many times in the years to come—that the wasteland wouldn’t swallow him up.

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Three days later, after making all the necessary preparations to resume hunting, Akira drove his truck out into the wasteland. Alpha had taken over the computers in his suit, terminals, and truck. He had gotten the hang of his integrated scanner on a quick tour of the wasteland near the city limits. And he'd installed the custom parts in his A2D, swapped out its sight and those of his other weapons, and test fired all of them. He felt ready to get back to work, and now that he had a truck of his own, he was champing at the bit to resume his search for undiscovered ruins.

Today's destination was a field of rubble he'd once visited following clues from the terminals left behind by Lion's Tail, Inc. The arrow pointing to his objective had seemed to be directing him underground, indicating the possibility of a ruin below the barren surface. Such a find would mean a treasure trove of relics—a dream for which many had braved the wastes and charted the East. The few who succeeded had become fabulously wealthy overnight, inspiring fresh waves of explorers to follow in their footsteps. Most, however, fell short and vanished into the wasteland with their broken dreams.

Fresh ruins weren't so easily found, and their perils were as unknown as their treasures—hunters lucky enough to stumble upon one sometimes ended up slaughtered by the hordes of monsters within. And while untouched sites often contained relics, nothing was guaranteed. Even successfully locating one might turn out to be a waste of effort. Still, it was a lucrative prospect, and with Alpha on his side, Akira felt sure he could pull it off.

"Y'know, I still can't believe I got my hands on a truck this quickly," he mused as he cruised excitedly through the desert. "Now I should be able to scope out new ruins without other hunters catching on too soon. Right?"

That's correct. Alpha nodded cheerfully from the passenger seat. *Or at least you don't have to worry about a rental car giving away your finds.*

Most rental vehicles logged their position and travel routes for easier tracking and retrieval. Naturally, the rental companies had access to that data, meaning that no discovery Akira made in a rented vehicle was safe from their notice. So he and Alpha had called off their search until they could get their hands on their

own transportation.

“Great! Then let’s get looking!” Akira then took another look at what Alpha was wearing and added, with a hint of frustration, “But seriously, can’t you pick a better outfit?”

Alpha sat beside him in the passenger seat of the desert terrain vehicle, her pure-white dress at odds with everything around her. Layers of fine, lustrous fabric swathed her divinely perfect figure, the striking purity of its hue making her seem almost sublime. Her pale veil—intricately embroidered—fluttered in the breeze, and beneath it her flowing locks formed breathtaking waves of radiance. And she sat as if she hadn’t a care in the world, although her impractical outfit should have caught on so many different parts of the truck that simply climbing into her seat would be next to impossible. She could never have pulled it off if she’d been more than a virtual image.



Oh, this doesn't do it for you? she asked, her smile as much in contrast to Akira's combat gear as the rest of her appearance. *I suppose it must not be to*

your tastes.

"That's not what I mean. You look so out of place it's distracting, and I'm trying to drive. Don't you see how risky that is?"

I'm running my support in the background, so the truck won't crash even if you make a mistake. Just lean back and enjoy the drive.

"I guess you've got a point, but I still don't like it." A slight frown creased Akira's face.

Alpha laughed. *We've been over this before, remember? I dress like this to make sure I get a reaction out of any human who can see me.*

"Oh, right. Well, I guess that getup *would* do the trick."

There were only so many things someone could reasonably do in a pure-white dress, so the outfit was certain to startle any unsuspecting person who caught sight of it in the wasteland. Akira could see the logic, but he was also still experiencing the dress's eye-catching effect up close, so he remained ambivalent.

Think of it as an exercise to improve your concentration. You shouldn't let something as minor as a strangely dressed woman in your passenger seat spoil your focus.

"Couldn't you at least go back to that maid outfit from before? That one wasn't as bad."

No. A maid outfit might be perfectly normal attire for a female hunter in the wasteland.

"Not in a million years."

Are you sure? You've run into more than one woman dressed that way yourself.

That much was true. He'd seen one hunter dressed as a maid draw stares in the tunnels beneath Kuzusuhara. Another had appeared with her in the lower district of Kugamayama City. Given enough time, the fashion might become commonplace. At the very least, many people had already seen a woman wear a maid outfit into the wasteland, and they might simply shrug if they

encountered another.

One day, Alpha concluded, *it may become normal for* all *hunters to dress like maids, not just the women.*

“D-Don’t you think that’s kind of a stretch?” Akira asked, rendered puzzled and slightly uncomfortable by this blow to his common sense.

I wouldn’t be so sure. Fashion is far more arbitrary than you think. For instance...

With a teasing grin, Alpha began spinning a tale of a hypothetical future. Some everyday clothes from the Old World, she explained, offered greater protection than present-day body armor. Maid outfits were no exception. So, what if a ruin yielded a massive stockpile of maid outfits? Or a machine that produced a virtually unlimited number of them? No matter how technically impressive the outfits were, excess supply flooding the market would drive down their price. Once it dropped below a certain threshold, maid outfits would be accepted as affordable, high performance body armor with an unfortunate aesthetic downside. Every cash-strapped rookie hunter would start wearing them—better to dress like a maid than fight in normal clothes and get murdered by monsters. And once enough hunters made that choice, people would get used to it. Eventually, no one would feel self conscious about wearing a maid outfit anymore, and they would become standard equipment for most hunters.

“Would that really happen?” Akira demanded, with a look of stunned consternation.

Absolutely, Alpha replied. *But only if my underlying assumptions prove true, of course. If you want a real example, take Old World combat gear. It looks completely bizarre to you, right?*

“You mean that thing you wore before? Yeah.”

Hunters near the Front Line have no problem wearing that sort of “Old World —style” gear. I’m sure that at first they just put up with the aesthetics because the specs were so high, but they got used to it over time.

“Huh. Then, I guess your maid story isn’t so far-fetched after all.” Akira was

convinced, although he didn't look entirely happy about it. He couldn't help picturing a world where all hunters wore maid outfits, from the washed-up failures in the slums to the patrol truck crews—and even the relic thieves who had attacked him beneath the ruins. And there he was, dressed as a maid just like the rest of them. No one questioned it—that was just how things were.

The mental image made him want to tear his hair out so badly that he forced himself to abandon it.

"Y'know," he muttered, "I feel like my common sense takes a hit every time I learn something new about the Old World."

What counts as common sense is always changing.

Akira and Alpha weren't quite on the same page, but they kept chatting anyway as they made their way across the wasteland.

The first thing Akira did when he reached the debris field was to park his truck behind a heap of rubble and cover it with a camouflage sheet. It wasn't active camo—nothing nearly that fancy—but it was colored to blend in with the terrain and would make his ride much harder to spot from a distance. Even so, Akira gave his covered vehicle a worried look.

"Do you think it'll be okay?" he asked, his expression contorting with the same fear he'd felt in Cartridge Freak—that his things would be found and stolen the moment he took his eyes off them.

Why even have a truck if you're too scared to step away from it? Alpha countered. *You've done what you can by putting the camo sheet over it, so accept the risk and move on.*

After a tense pause, Akira conceded, "I guess you're right."

Putting his worries aside, he began his investigation. The ground was covered in dirt and debris, and a look around turned up no sign of a ruin, so he moved on to scanning for buried entrances. He shifted his suit's sensor modules to his feet and focused them downward. Then he started to search in a gradually widening circle, centered on the subterranean arrow that marked the Lion's Tail installation in his view. But although he tested numerous settings in his

prolonged scan below the surface, the results—displayed in augmented reality—showed only that the ground beneath his feet was a mass of dirt and debris. Below that, he saw nothing but the wall of noise that meant he'd hit the edge of his effective scanning range.

"By the way, Alpha, how does my new scanner compare to the old one?" he asked. "Is it a lot higher spec?"

No, it's about the same.

"Really? But Shizuka said it was a cut above."

She must have been talking about the suit overall. That scanner you bought from Elena was fairly high-end, so while this suit's performance is a major step up from your last one, its scanner isn't much of an upgrade. Alpha added that Akira had only been able to afford his old scanner because Elena had sold it to him used, for next to nothing. It would normally have been out of his price range.

"Wow. I had no idea." Akira looked startled as he realized once again how much he owed Elena. He promised himself he would find some way to repay her.

Three hours into Akira and Alpha's search, they still hadn't found what they were looking for. At one point, they had located a subterranean cavity and dug down to it, hoping for a buried entrance. But the hole led only to the interior of a crumbling building, not to the tunnel system they sought. Although a warehouse would have been a windfall in its own right, the vast, empty space they uncovered seemed more like a parking garage—hardly fertile ground for relic hunting.

And still the search dragged on. Akira had traveled quite a distance from the arrow that marked their buried target when Alpha informed him that they had now thoroughly covered a wide area around it.

"We keep drawing a blank," he grumbled. "Why don't we just go back to where the arrow is and dig straight down?"

That wouldn't work, Alpha replied. *We'd need to bring in heavy machinery for*

such a large excavation, and we'd have to work slowly and carefully to prevent cave-ins and other damage.

"So, even if we did find a new ruin, we'd stand out like a sore thumb. We'd just be telling everyone else where to look."

Exactly.

Despite his growing frustration, Akira went on searching with deliberate care. While the circle he'd checked grew, he had no entrance to show for his pains.

"Alpha, say there was a shopping district here, with lots of ways in and out, like the one under Kuzusuhara," he mused. "Can you think of any reason why you wouldn't be able to see those entrances?"

Well, what if what we think is ground level actually used to be about three stories up? That might do it. Alpha added that the amount of rubble in the area suggested it had once contained numerous skyscrapers and other works of monumental architecture. Their collapse might have left a thick layer of debris. And if sediment had built up on that layer in the long years since, the original ground level—and the way into any tunnels below it—now lay buried deep beneath the surface.

Akira considered. "In that case, maybe we're looking in the wrong spot. We oughta check around the edges of all this debris. The layer of crap over the old ground might be thin enough for my scanner to pick something up out there."

All right. Let's give it a try. The pair changed tactics.

An hour later, they finally found what they sought.

Alpha pointed at the ground, augmenting Akira's vision with a view of what lay below. Under a comparatively thin stratum of rubble, he saw what looked like a stairway descending even deeper into the earth.

"Finally!" he exclaimed, breaking into a broad grin. "We found it! It's a long way from the arrow marker, but it looks like an entrance all right! And it doesn't even matter if it connects, as long as it takes us to a ruin!"

Given how far it goes, I doubt it just leads to some skyscraper's basement. Alpha added, *Of course, we won't know for sure until we take a look inside.*

That's one more reason to hurry up and clear this rubble.

"Yeah! What're we waiting for?!"

Akira grabbed a nearby chunk of debris. The fibers of his new, more powerful suit acted as artificial muscles, giving him the strength to lift it as if it were light as a pebble. Triumphantly, he hurled the massive slab away.

Near a thin wreck that resembled a five-story-tall billboard—the single surviving side of a crumbling highrise—lay what appeared to be the crushed remains of a sign. In horribly scuffed letters, it read, "Yonozuka Station South Entrance A27, for Kuzusuhara," and it was part of the rubble Akira had just flung aside.

At his feet, the head of a newly unearthed stairway was soaking up its first rays of daylight in a long, long time.

Akira peered inside, but he couldn't see the bottom. The boundary where his sight ended, swallowed by the darkness, seemed like a warning: "Stay out if you want to live."

Bringing home a horde of relics from an undiscovered ruin would make him a fortune. That thought had delighted him while he'd enthusiastically cleared the entrance—right up until he'd looked into its depths.

That elation was no more.

In its place, he felt the same sort of nervous tension that had marked his first foray into Kuzusuhara, armed only with a pistol. Naturally, he couldn't know yet what dangers lurked within this unknown ruin, and he was getting cold feet. The stairway seemed like the maw of some gigantic monster.

Keep cool, he told himself. *As long as I'm careful, I've got nothing to worry about. I've got Alpha to watch my back, and I can always leave if it looks dangerous.*

After a deep breath to psych himself up, he said, "Okay. Let's do this, Alpha."

Wait a second.

"What for?" he demanded, annoyed at this loss of momentum. Then he

quailed slightly when he saw how somber Alpha looked.

Akira, she said carefully, *if you suddenly lose sight of me down there, turn around and leave as fast as you can. Is that clear?*

"Y-Yeah."

No exceptions! If you can't see me, it means our connection is broken. If that happens, I want you to keep calm and prioritize reestablishing contact with me. Again, is that clear?

Akira froze for a moment. Then, with a stiff, strained expression, he said, "Hang on. You're saying I might lose touch with you if I go in there?"

Yes. Remember what I told you about how I can't scout as effectively in ruins or under them? That's partly because I lose signal strength there. If you go below a ruin other than Kuzusuhara, I might lose contact with you completely.

Akira was speechless.

It's not likely, of course, Alpha added. *But it's enough of a possibility that I thought I should warn you. So be extremely careful if it comes to that.*

Akira took another look down the stairway and felt himself freeze in terror. What if he suddenly lost Alpha—and all her support—while deep in a pitch-dark tunnel or under attack by a fearsome monster? He knew all too well how fatal that would be. Just knowing that he was looking at a place where it would be a real possibility rattled and unnerved him.

Should we call it off? Alpha asked gently. *There's nothing wrong with that. And our work won't go to waste—even if you don't explore this ruin yourself, you can always sell its location for a tidy profit.*

At that, Akira's expression hardened. But while he looked grim, he no longer seemed afraid. "Are you trying to talk me out of it because I'm too scared, or because it's just that dangerous?"

Both, Alpha replied, with a calculated smile. *Although mostly the former. Exploring a ruin when you're too frightened to think straight would be extremely risky.*

"Oh." Akira grinned back at her. "In that case, the expedition's still on. Will

and resolve are my end of our deal, remember?”

That was what he owed Alpha, even if it meant willing his quaking legs forward and resolving to put a bold face on his fear. If he could make himself do something, he had to go through with it. Alpha made up for what he still sorely lacked in skill, so it was his responsibility to provide all the rest himself. He’d promised her that will, motivation, and resolve were his burden to bear, and he was determined not to make himself a liar.

Without meaning to, he telepathically transmitted his memory of that moment. Alpha received it with a wistful smile.

Thanks for reminding me. All right, Akira. Let’s go.

Akira began to descend the stairs alongside her. Then he climbed back up them to the surface.

Akira?

“On second thought, I wanna bring some insurance,” he said. He returned to his truck, which he’d parked nearby, and detached the DVTS minigun from its mount. Then he swapped out its normal ammo belt for a high-capacity magazine, rendering the massive weapon portable. He had originally planned to leave the minigun behind, thinking that it was overkill for indoor combat, but now he’d changed his mind.

Armed to the teeth with two assault rifles, an anti-materiel rifle, and a minigun, Akira returned to the head of the stairs. Beside him, Alpha’s cheerful face looked as if she had something to say.

“What?” he demanded, a little awkwardly. He knew how silly he must have looked, psyching himself up for a descent into the tunnels only to immediately turn around and come back up.

Alpha gave him a look that said all she cared to. *Nothing. Being cautious never hurt anyone.*

Once again, Akira was ready. And this time, he took the stairway down into the ruin.

Chapter 71: The Fine Art of Selling Relics

Akira stalked down into the darkness, shining his light on a staircase that seemed to descend into the bowels of the earth, and which in fact led (he believed) to an undiscovered ruin. The passage was about four meters wide, with a high, intact ceiling, so he had no difficulty navigating it despite his bulky arsenal. The floor and walls were free of major cracks, and Akira saw no sign of encroaching vegetation either. Considering how long it must have been buried, the stairway was shockingly well-preserved.

Although Akira had dug out the entrance, he hadn't completely cleared it of rubble, so only faint shafts of daylight filtered through the cracks. Even so, the opening he'd come through stood out like a shining beacon in the dark passage when he turned back to look at it. Pointing his light down ahead of him, he found that its rays vanished into the inky depths without illuminating anything that suggested a bottom.

That was when Alpha said, *Turn off your light.*

Akira hesitated but complied. Immediately, pitch darkness swallowed him. He couldn't even see his own body. But he could still see Alpha clear as day, a silvery glow in the black tunnel. She raised her right hand, and the scenery around Akira took on living color, revealing even the tiniest cracks and stains on the walls in vivid detail, as if the noonday sun were shining only on his immediate surroundings.

"Whoa," Akira gasped in admiration.

I'm processing your scanner data and showing you the results in AR, Alpha explained with a self-satisfied smile. *Wouldn't you agree it makes for a much better view?*

"Definitely." Akira returned the grin. "Is it still dark deeper in because my scanner isn't strong enough?"

Objects closer to him seemed both brighter and more distinct, as if he himself were giving off light. And the dim, hazy terrain at the edges of his view faded

into still-unbroken blackness.

Sensor range is part of it, but processing priority also plays a role, Alpha replied.

“So, if there were monsters in the darkness up ahead, wouldn’t I have a hard time aiming at them, even if I knew they were there?”

Don’t worry. If that happens, I’ll focus the sensors on wherever they are. Try looking through your rifle sight.

Akira raised his A2D assault rifle and took aim at the depths of the passage. Through the sight, he could see the distance as clearly as the walls beside him. The device emitted light too faint for the human eye to detect—a feature of its night-vision system—and Alpha had analyzed the resulting visuals.

Another hushed “Whoa” escaped Akira’s lips. “Looks like I’ll be able to snipe in the dark no problem,” he said, impressed. “This is perfect.”

Of course it is, Alpha chimed in. *This is* my *support we’re talking about!*

Akira lowered his rifle and flashed a smile at his smug companion while, inwardly, he prepared for the worst. All this convenience would vanish if he lost contact with Alpha, and he needed to be ready to make a calm, cautious return to the surface if that happened. So he remained alert and on guard as he resumed his descent.

Given the slope of the stairway and the distance he’d traveled, Akira estimated that he was roughly four stories belowground when he finally reached the bottom and emerged into a long corridor. He let out his breath, then took a good look around and noted, to his relief, that Alpha was still with him.

“Is your signal gonna be all right?” he asked. “We’re a long way down.”

Don’t worry. This is nothing, she replied with a smile.

Reassured, Akira returned his attention to searching the ruin. The passage was quite clean, its floor bare of rubble, skeletons, and the remains of hostile beasts or machines. It had accumulated a layer of dust and grime, but that was

nothing to complain about. A pristine corridor would have been cause for alarm, suggesting that at least an Old World cleaning system was probably still operational—and that security robots now classified as monsters might be as well. Dirty floors, however, argued against the presence of active technology, and the undisturbed dust revealed that no organic threats had been here in a long time. The discovery, Alpha explained, immediately made this ruin seem much less dangerous. The lack of footprints also suggested that no other hunters had gotten in via another entrance—it looked more and more likely that this ruin truly was undiscovered.

Akira nodded, satisfied. “So no monsters or people have been in here? Throw in a load of relics, and this place’ll be everything I could hope for.”

This area seems to be a simple passage, Alpha informed him. *Let’s pin our relic-hunting hopes on any shops or storerooms we find up ahead.*

“Great. What’re we waiting for?”

Farther along the passage, Akira spotted what looked like a show window. Eager for relics, he jogged up to the glass-like panel and peered inside. A moment later, he froze in shock. Then, unable to control himself, he raced up to the wall and pressed his hands against it.

“Jackpot!” he cried gleefully, eyes sparkling. “Alpha, there are relics in here! And they look like they’re worth a fortune!”

He saw clothes without stitches or seams, although their elaborate, layered designs could not possibly have been fashioned from a single piece of fabric. A hexagonal plate—apparently some sort of data terminal—projected strange writing into empty air. The regular polyhedrons with translucent, geometric designs suspended within them must have been decorative objects of some kind. And there were more relics besides, all made of strange materials using unknown methods. Akira couldn’t begin to guess what most of them were for, but he could tell they were products of advanced Old World technology, and they looked *extremely* valuable.

In a rush to loot the shop, he glanced around for an entrance, but saw only solid walls.

“Where is it?” he demanded. “Where’s the door?! How come there’s no way

in?!” He found no hint of an entrance or opening in the seemingly transparent wall before him or in the interior backdrop behind it.

How had someone gotten the relics in there in the first place? Akira didn’t know, but he only cared about how he was going to get them out. And he arrived at an extremely primitive solution—he would just have to smash the window.

Just as he made a fist, however, Alpha said, *Akira, calm down.*

“You think busting in is too risky?” he asked nervously. “Like, maybe it’ll set off an alarm or something?”

A smash-and-grab approach might be safe in a truly dilapidated ruin, but one this intact could still have a security system in sleep mode. And blatantly antagonistic actions—like breaking through a show window—risked waking it up. Even so, Akira wasn’t about to give up on his hard-won find just because it might be dangerous. And anyway, he wouldn’t be any safer if he passed this up and went looking farther in.

So if he wanted relics, he would have to take the plunge and seize them somewhere. Why not here, close to the entrance? Even if he did trip an alarm, he could at least escape more quickly than if he tried the same thing deeper inside the ruin.

Akira resisted the lure of his own greed long enough to explain his reasoning to Alpha, but she merely shook her head.

“Is it really *that* dangerous?” he asked, scowling. “Or do you just think we should go deeper in and take a look around before we try anything?”

That’s not the problem, Alpha replied. *Removing those relics is physically impossible.*

“Wait, what?” Akira couldn’t hide his confusion.

I’ll make the visuals easier for you to understand. Calm down and look carefully. Alpha wore a rueful grin while she made the adjustment.

What Akira had taken for a view through a show window abruptly lost all appearance of depth.

“Huh?” he murmured, taken aback.

I prioritized terrain data to more or less disable the 3D effect, Alpha explained.

Akira still saw relics, but only as images on a flat surface. Racking his brains, he came up with a word that fit what he was seeing:

“A poster?”

An ancient advertisement, I suppose.

What Akira had taken for a show window was in reality a poster covering a section of wall. He had been confused by the ancient visual effects, which had advanced to a point where they were almost indistinguishable from reality.

He sighed. “Guess I got worked up over nothing.”

It happens, especially on your first visit to an unexplored ruin, Alpha reassured him. *Think of experiences like this as part of what gives hunting its charm.*

After a moment, Akira said, “Thanks,” and resumed walking.

A little farther in, Akira discovered an abandoned storefront. Its walls were clear as glass, affording him a good view inside from out in the passage. A quick glance revealed rows of display cases full of what he took to be relics—a major find. But his earlier experience had made him distrustful of appearances, so he looked to Alpha for confirmation before celebrating.

Don’t worry, she answered wryly. *This time, it’s real.*

“Yes!” Akira nodded, grinning from ear to ear.

An automatic door led into the shop, but it had long since ceased functioning. Akira grabbed it by the edge and put his suit-enhanced strength to work wrenching it open. The sturdy door moved slowly, even when subjected to the same force that had so easily shifted the rubble above. And although the pressure would have easily shattered ordinary glass, it neither cracked nor bent. Once he finally had it open, Akira stepped inside, relieved that forcing the door hadn’t triggered an alarm.

The display cases held a diverse assortment of goods. Not all, however, were equally well-preserved. The passage of time had reduced some to heaps of

dust, while others, stored in clear bags, looked almost suspiciously new.

"A bunch of these are no good, but that still leaves a big haul," Akira commented. "I don't see anything as exciting as the relics on that poster were, though."

This must have been a mass-market retailer that didn't deal in luxury items, Alpha agreed. *But these are still Old World goods, and that makes them relics. And since the alarm didn't go off, let's help ourselves to them.*

"Good idea. Between my truck and my suit, I should be able to haul a bunch of them!"

Once, before he'd gotten his hands on a powered suit, Akira had stuffed a large backpack full of as many relics as he could physically carry. He had staggered under the heavy load and griped about the unendurable pain it had inflicted on his legs. But thanks to his suit, such concerns were now a thing of the past, so he was fired up and ready to fill his bags to capacity.

Akira opened the backpack he was wearing and took out several more. Once he'd unfolded all of these rugged relic carriers, he dragged them around the store and began packing them with loot. He lacked the expertise to appraise his finds, so he simply took every intact relic that he saw.

One case held small electronic devices and things that looked like calculators (although he had no idea what any of them were really for), along with what seemed to be writing utensils and unnaturally pristine notebooks. Into a bag they went.

Some kitchen knives and other cooking implements had also survived. Although he felt a little crestfallen when Alpha informed him that the knives merely cut well and couldn't be used like some he'd found in the past, he still held on to them to sell.

He found tops, skirts, undergarments, handkerchiefs, and more in flat packaging—possibly vacuum-sealed. They looked like only thin sheets of cloth to him in their compressed state, leaving their cuts a mystery. And some of the packaging was opaque, so that he couldn't even tell what type of clothing it contained. Akira wondered if they were meant to be sold like this, and if the ancient people had really bought their clothes blind. Alpha explained that

customers would have been able to view the contents in AR but that this function had been lost to time. Because unsealing the relics might reduce their sale price, Akira packed them away unopened, wondering whether they contained examples of the distinctive designs he associated with Old World clothing.

Then there were bottles of liquid and containers of what seemed to be pills. Akira asked Alpha what kind of medicine he had found, but she replied that their labels were too badly damaged to identify. He wouldn't want to try any of them, but he decided to lug them back to the city anyway.

He also found jewelry and toys, which he likewise transferred to his bags, wondering as he did so if there might be any lucky charms among them.

After ransacking the store, he'd filled all the backpacks he had with him. Since he had no way to transport more relics, he decided to stop looking and return to his truck. As he made his way back along the passage, his multiple trailing backpacks cut long stripes through the dust behind him. The find was bigger than he'd dared to hope for.

"So, this is an unexplored ruin," he remarked contentedly. "No wonder every hunter dreams of finding one. I've barely even explored it, and look how much loot I've got already!"

It was well worth the trouble we went through looking for it, Alpha agreed, giving him an approving smile. *And I had no trouble communicating with you down here, so I'd say we hit the jackpot with this ruin.*

"Yeah, that's true! I'm really glad I didn't get cold feet about going underground."

He'd defied his fear and maintained his resolve, and the rewards more than reassured him that he'd made the right call.

After Akira trudged back up the long stairway to the surface, he still had one last job to do: reburying the entrance to the ruin. Even while excavating it, he had taken care to arrange the rubble so that the opening would be difficult to spot. He had only cleared enough room so that he could squeeze through on the way in, and he'd enlarged the passage just enough to accommodate his

backpacks on the way out. Even so, he took the trouble to replace the dirt and debris—he didn't want anyone else discovering his ruin, and it would be far better hidden if he filled in the hole.

The sun was setting by the time he finished. Exhausted despite his suit, Akira let out a long breath and surveyed his handiwork.

"Do you think it'll be safe?" he asked under his breath. He couldn't hide the fact that the ground had recently been dug up, and knowing that the entrance to a ruin lay beneath it made the telltale signs of disturbance seem more suspicious in his eyes.

You did your best to hide it, Alpha replied. *The rest is up to luck. We'll just have to hope that it stays hidden.*

After a brief silence, Akira said, "I guess you're right." He knew that he was unlucky, but he also realized that he'd done all he could, so he brushed his worries aside and headed back to the city.

◆

Once at home, Akira refreshed himself with a bath after his tiring day's work. Usually, he quickly succumbed to the pleasures of the tub, his mind dissolving into the hot bathwater. Today, however, his great success remained uppermost in his thoughts.

"How much do you think those relics'll sell for?" he cheerfully asked Alpha, who shared the tub with him as usual. "There are a ton of them, and they're mostly in good shape, so I figure they might be worth a lot. How about you?"

True to form, Alpha was totally nude, and ripples on the water's surface made her alluring figure seem to sway seductively beneath it. Then, to draw more of Akira's attention to herself, she shifted into a sitting position on the rim of the tub. As she rose, water droplets ran down her naked body, glistening on her smooth skin in a display both elegant and charming. Not that she was actually present, of course. Alpha's immense computing power merely generated the scene for Akira's benefit. It still wouldn't have killed him to acknowledge her beauty, but his reaction was as muted as ever, and he wasted yet another sumptuous feast for the eyes.

Don't get your hopes up, Alpha cautioned. *You can't assume you'll get a good deal just because you have a lot of well-preserved relics.*

"Really?" Akira asked. "But there are so many of them."

When you were going to Kuzusuhara, I directed you to a fairly careful selection of relics from deep in the ruins. You can't assume that all relics are equally valuable.

"Well, if you say so."

Besides which, demand for different types of relics can significantly affect sale prices. If you set your expectations too high, you're bound to be disappointed.

"Hmm... That's fair. Well, either way, we'll find out tomorrow."

Also, parcel them out when you sell them to Katsuragi. If you bring him the whole load at once, he'll wonder where you got it, and we don't want him getting any ideas about that ruin.

"Good point. I'll do that," Akira reluctantly agreed. Without realizing it, he had been building up a fantasy of the merchant's reaction to his massive haul of relics and the fortune it would earn him. But this talk with Alpha brought him back to his senses. And as his elation cooled, the focus it had sustained started leaching into the bathtub. Then a thought struck his hazy mind.

"Hey, Alpha," he said slowly, "what should we call that ruin we found today?"

Good question, she replied. *I suppose "Yonozuka Station Ruins" will do.*

"Fine by me. So, the Yonozuka Station Ruins..." The name of Akira's new discovery was the last thing he said before, as usual, the bath claimed him.

◆

Operating out of a truck that doubled as his mobile store, Katsuragi the arms dealer catered primarily to hunters. Most of his recent customers were involved with the temporary base being built in the Kuzusuhara Ruins, so he spent a lot of his time at the construction site. Today, however, his shop was parked squarely in Kugamayama City—Akira had told him to expect a relic sale.

The merchant had struck a deal with the young hunter. Akira would sell him relics, and in return Katsuragi would support Sheryl, the leader of one of the

slums' weakest gangs. Katsuragi knew that Akira had taken a temporary break from relic hunting due to a disturbance in Kuzusuhara, but he'd had no guarantee that the hunter would honor their agreement once he resumed his usual activities. So the merchant looked greatly relieved when Akira showed up wearing a backpack apparently bursting with relics.

Once he'd finished his appraisal, Katsuragi concealed his mental estimate behind a look that said, *What, is that all?* and announced, "I'll give you 2,200,000 aurum for the lot."

Akira looked somewhat less than pleased.

Katsuragi scrutinized the hunter from behind his usual professional smile, trying to divine Akira's thoughts while he chose his words with care. "You look like you don't like my offer. But you haven't threatened to pack up and take this lot to a Hunter Office exchange like you did last time, so I'd say you think it's in the ballpark. Is that fair?"

"More or less," Akira reluctantly admitted. After his discussion with Alpha the night before, he considered the offer disappointing but not outrageous.

Katsuragi read his mind—Akira could bring himself to sell at this price, but he wouldn't be happy about it. And allowing the hunter's dissatisfaction to accumulate would increase the odds that he'd take his relics elsewhere. Katsuragi hoped to avoid that.

"Well, I'm not trying to talk you into selling below a fair price," he continued, keeping his tone casual while he cautiously probed to discover exactly how deep Akira's dissatisfaction ran—and how much he could profit accordingly. "If you start selling your finds to someone else, I'll lose out big time."

"I wish I could believe you," said Akira.

"It's true! I'd like to keep us on friendly terms for a long time to come. If you want proof, look at how I've kept my promise to look out for Sheryl," Katsuragi declared. Then he adopted an uneasy look. "But, well, you know how it is. Propping her up isn't exactly cheap. So, if I'm being honest, part of me would be happy to make a little extra profit on this sale." He was, in fact, being honest, although he'd neglected to specify exactly how *much* "extra profit" he was talking about. "Still, like I said earlier, we'll both lose out if I stick you with an

offer you can't accept. So, since you don't seem that well-informed on the topic, let me give you a few tips on the fine art of selling relics."

Katsuragi gave Akira an understanding look, as if he fully appreciated the hunter's situation. "I think I can guess your problem—you've spent most of your time going after monsters, so you don't have much experience with the relic side of hunting. Because if you knew your way around making sales, you wouldn't have brought a lot of these relics to me."

"Think whatever you want."

"Well, even if I'm wrong on that point, it won't hurt you to listen to me. Old World relics sell for very different prices depending on who you bring them to. I offered you less than you'd like because I can't justify paying too much for a lot of these." Katsuragi smiled amiably and added, in a tone he hoped would tempt Akira's curiosity, "So, if you think my price is lower than it should be, I'll explain it in terms you can accept. Sound fair?"

Just how much could Katsuragi afford to skew the truth to his advantage once he'd gained Akira's trust? That was the question on the merchant's mind as he launched into his lecture on relic sales.

Many hunters brought everything they found in the ruins to a Hunter Office exchange without giving it a second thought. But for those who wanted the best possible deals, there were alternatives, though these required more time and effort. The law of supply and demand applied to relics as much as anything else—buyers would pay more for finds suited to their particular needs. And choosing what to sell to who was so complicated that some people made their livings by conducting relic sales on behalf of hunters. So some hunters left the whole headache-inducing mess to professionals, while others just stuck to the exchanges, where they might be paid less but could at least count on improving their hunter rank.

"If you're interested," Katsuragi added, "I could handle all your relic sales for you. What do you say?"

"I might take you up on that sometime, if I feel like it," Akira replied.

"Yeah? Well, don't forget it's an option."

The Hunter Office was under the umbrella of the Eastern League of Governing Corporations, and it would pay a premium for relics that its megacorporate backers were interested in—meaning anything they could use to reverse engineer Old World tech. The Office funneled such relics from throughout the East into corporate laboratories, where they were analyzed by armies of talented scientists and engineers. This was the backbone of technological development in the region.

Naturally, the rarest and most valuable finds went to the biggest corporations, with the result that their small and medium-sized business rivals found it nearly impossible to catch up. To close the technological gap, a smaller corporation would need to acquire relics by other means—which meant purchasing them from private individuals like Katsuragi.

"And that's why I'm just the man you want to come to with a relic like this," the merchant said, holding up an electronic gadget from Akira's haul. "Corporations buy them at high prices, so I'll pay a lot for them. Are you with me so far?"

"I guess so," Akira replied.

"If you find any more like this, bring 'em straight to me. I'll be ready and waiting."

Even relics of little scientific value could sell for high prices if the demand was there. In some cases, it was possible to reproduce an item using current technology, but not cost-effective. Being a product of the Old World could also add brand value. Such relics found their way to a range of specialized professionals who verified their quality, dressed them up for maximum appeal, and sometimes processed them into something else entirely before putting them on the market.

"I'm more or less the right guy for something like these too," Katsuragi explained, picking a kitchen knife and another cooking implement out of the pile of relics he'd appraised. "If I already have a sales route for something, I'll pay a decent price for it. They're nothing special, but being made in the Old World bumps up their value. They're also easy to hand off to other businessmen, which makes them right up my alley."

Katsuragi next held up a piece of thinly packaged clothing and frowned slightly. “And for the same reason, this stuff isn’t quite what I’m looking for. Sorry, but I don’t have a pipeline for getting this type of relic to anyone who’d want it.” After a suspicious look at the item, he added, “And Old World clothes can be a bit of a tough sell anyway. They were designed for ancient tastes, so some outfits are downright hideous by today’s standards. Sometimes not even the brand value of being Old World can save them. You know what I mean?”

“W-Well, yeah,” Akira admitted.

“Anyway, clothes go in and out of fashion all the time, and I don’t trust myself to know what’s trendy. A big business might buy these up anyway and store them in a warehouse until they’re fashionable, but I can’t. So, I’m sorry,” Katsuragi concluded. “I’ll buy these as a favor to you if you really insist, but I can only pay cut-rate prices for them. You see how it is.”

He kept the same expression while he studied Akira’s reaction. *Was that a little too obvious?* he wondered. *No, it doesn’t look like it.*

Satisfied, Katsuragi picked up other relics and changed the subject. “Now these, you’d be better off bringing to someone else.”

He held a small bit of jewelry and a sealed deck of playing cards.

Although hunters tried to sell all sorts of relics, not all found willing buyers. This was particularly true of items whose discoverers blithely assumed that anything from a ruin must be worth something. One such misguided sales attempt had brought Shizuka the lucky charm that Akira had later bought from her.

But even these relics occasionally commanded a high price. A certain type of collector would pay through the nose for some of them as examples of ancient art. That possibility kept hunters returning with what looked like junk—and arguing with merchants who refused to buy it from them.

Katsuragi sighed, recalling a similar experience of his own. “I won’t tell you that there’s *no* chance a collector would pay well for these,” he said, “but you can’t expect me to bank on it. Dealing in this stuff is like judging art, and I’ve got no eye for either. Of course, we’re good enough friends that I’d be willing to take them off your hands for free.”

“What would you do with them?” Akira asked. “You said they won’t sell.”

“Chuck them in a storeroom and show them to fellow merchants who fancy themselves connoisseurs and to agents working for collectors. If somebody wants them, they’ll at least owe me a little favor. Once enough Old World knickknacks pile up, I dump them in the wasteland, and that’s that.”

“Are you, er, sure that’s a good idea?”

“No one’s complained yet, although that’s partly because I’m careful about where I dump stuff. Anything I leave on the edge of the slums is gone in under a month. I’m guessing the locals take it.”

Such items filled the open-air stalls of the slums. No one objected, since the goods were technically trash, and anything that failed to sell wound up back in the wasteland.

“But the piles people dump deeper in the wasteland vanish too,” Katsuragi added. “No one can agree on why *that* happens. Some say that Old World cleaning robots secretly sweep them up, or that monsters eat them, or who knows what else. My money’s on the monster theory—some of the beasties out there eat *tanks*, so why not trinkets?”

Waste flowed from the city to the wasteland. Unwanted relics, corpses from the slums, and even living people were no exception. And whatever was needed—including both valuable relics and people who had demonstrated their skill—traveled from the wasteland into the city.

Like a microcosm of the entire East.

Katsuragi finished speaking and took another look at Akira. “So you see,” he said, “I can only pay you so much if I want to stay in business. You may not like it, but 2,200,000 aurum is my final offer. I can’t afford to go higher. But I don’t want to end our friendship because I lowballed you on your hard-won finds. So, how about I take only the relics that I’d make a good buyer for?”

Akira had listened attentively throughout the lecture—a promising sign, in Katsuragi’s view. And since the boy had accepted Katsuragi’s version of the facts, the merchant felt confident that he would have no doubts about this

offer.

"You can do whatever you want with the relics I don't buy," Katsuragi added. "Sell them to someone else, hang onto them for a while, or anything else you can think of. What do you say? I think it's a good deal for both of us." He beamed confidently, certain that his proposal would meet with no suspicion—after all, he had only mentioned the parts that would work to the hunter's advantage.

Akira considered briefly, then said, "All right. Let's go with that."

"Great! Then we've got ourselves a deal."

Katsuragi purchased the portion of Akira's relics they'd agreed on and deposited the payment in the hunter's account. Then, just as Akira was about to leave, he said casually, "Oh, one last thing before you go. I know I said you can do whatever you want with the leftover relics, but I recommend holding on to them for a little while."

"What for?" asked Akira.

"I'm working on building up my sales routes. So while I wasn't interested in those relics today, I might be able to pay you well for them sooner or later. You're not hurting for money, right? Then keep them around until you can get a good price. Remember: knowing when *not* to sell is one of the tricks to making the most of your finds."

"Huh. Okay, then. See ya." With a slight wave, Akira departed.

Katsuragi watched him go. Once the hunter was out of sight, the merchant's lips curled in a smile he could never show to customers. Then, in pursuit of still greater profits, he quickly messaged one of his professional acquaintances.

◆

Back in his own home, Akira laid out the relics Katsuragi hadn't purchased on the floor and groaned. He had an assortment of clothing, jewelry, toys, and relics he couldn't identify, and now he would have to figure out what to do with them all.

Alpha had told him to suit himself. Converting relics into cash was part of a

hunter's trade, but he didn't need to turn a profit on these just yet. He had just bought a full new set of gear, and while he would eventually upgrade again, she was in no rush.

So Akira racked his brains. Then, suddenly, he had an epiphany. "Alpha, what did you think about all that stuff Katsuragi told me?" he asked.

Well, he wasn't lying, Alpha replied.

"Yeah? Then maybe I really should wait a while before I sell these."

With a sly smile, Alpha added, *He wasn't being entirely honest either.*

"I know that." Akira returned the grin. "But he really is helping Sheryl, so I'll let some of his 'business efforts' slide—though I might reconsider if he goes too far." He realized that Katsuragi was a businessman and expected the man to do at least a little bargaining with his hunter clientele. So Akira had sat back and let the merchant make his move, believing that countering such maneuvers was part of being a skilled hunter.

Alpha looked a little taken aback. *You wouldn't have said that not too long ago. Are you feeling more confident?*

"Do I seem that way? Then maybe I am." Akira was grinning without realizing it.

Just then, his terminal registered an incoming call from Sheryl, mere moments after he'd mentioned her. He picked up, and her cheerful, yet somehow nervous, voice said, "Sheryl speaking. Is this a bad time?"

"Nah, go ahead," he replied.

"Oh, it's nothing important. Only, if you're free, I hoped you might pay a visit to the base." Sheryl explained that Katsuragi had told her about the new equipment Akira had worn to their recent meeting—and that she'd like to see him in it.

Her gang's security largely depended on having the patronage of a powerful hunter—Akira. Back when other organizations had viewed them as merely a gaggle of kids, word of their dangerous and slightly unhinged protector had been enough to keep them safe. Recently, however, the gang's ranks had

grown, and it had actually started making money thanks to Sheryl's sandwich shop venture and other projects. Rival organizations might easily start getting ideas—but they would hopefully think twice if Akira appeared at Sheryl's headquarters armed to the teeth. The mere sight of a well-equipped hunter would be a powerful deterrent, so Sheryl asked him to visit if he could spare the time.

"Sure," Akira replied. "I'll be right over."

"You will? Thank you so much! I'll be waiting." Sheryl sounded relieved as she ended the call.

Akira was just getting ready to set out when he caught sight of the relics still lying on his floor. Remembering the thought he'd had earlier, he stuffed the clothing and jewelry into his backpack.

What are you bringing those for? Alpha asked. *Planning to sell them while you're out?*

"Nah, I just thought they'd make great souvenirs."

Akira finished gearing up and headed to his garage with the backpack in tow.

Chapter 72: Souvenirs of the Ruins

Lucia and Nasya struggled to haul the corpse to the edge of the slums. Erio was with them, but he wasn't helping. The dead body had already been stripped of valuables, and what few ragged scraps of clothing it retained only served to make it easier to drag and carry. It had been abandoned on Sheryl's turf, and since slum gangs had a tacit duty to clean the streets under their control, the girls were en route to dump it in the wasteland.

They held one leg apiece, but Lucia was still fed up with dragging the heavy corpse. "Hey, Nasya," she said with a sigh, "how many does this one make this week?"

"I'm pretty sure this is the sixth," her best friend answered.

Lucia pulled a face. "That's a lot for such a small patch of territory. Why do there have to be so many?"

"I know this is a shitty job," Nasya said, forcing herself to smile and sound upbeat. "But look on the bright side: we're safe as long as we're stuck with it."

"I know, but still." Lucia heaved another sigh. Her friend's show of concern had cheered her up slightly, but she couldn't bring herself to follow Nasya's example and be content with making the best of their situation.

While cleaning was an important part of maintaining a gang's territory, no one would ever volunteer to lug corpses into the wasteland. So most organizations foisted the job onto unwilling grunts at the bottom of the pecking order, and Sheryl's was no exception.

New members usually took turns on corpse duty. But Lucia, while a recent recruit, had been stuck with the unpopular job since joining the gang. And Nasya was a relative veteran, well-liked by her comrades. Until recently, she had been regarded as a rising star, perhaps officer material. Yet now she spent her days hauling bodies alongside her friend.

Lucia bore the responsibility for their present circumstances. Back when she'd made her living as a pickpocket, she'd had the misfortune to lift Akira's wallet.

The hunter had detected the theft and nearly killed her, but after many twists and turns, she'd managed to escape him—for a time. He had caught her in the end, however, because she'd applied to join Sheryl's gang—without realizing that he was its patron. And now she found herself laboring as a new recruit with no idea why he'd spared her life.

The memory brought on a wave of guilt for involving her best friend. "I'm sorry, Nasya," she murmured, frowning sadly. "It's all my fault."

Nasya had been guilty of offering Akira's stolen money to Sheryl as an incentive to admit Lucia, although she hadn't known where the gift came from at the time. But while she couldn't have escaped punishment, she could have gotten off with a slap on the wrist if she'd admitted her ignorance and abandoned her friend. Nasya, however, had made no excuses. In fact, she had pleaded with Sheryl to spare Lucia. Now, despite her high standing, she found herself on permanent corpse duty as well.

Yet Nasya responded with a bright smile. "I can't take any more apologies. If you won't drop it, at least throw in a thank-you every now and then, for variety's sake."

Lucia smiled faintly back, cheered that her friend accepted her so nonchalantly. "Thank you."

"You're welcome! Now, there's no use crying over spilled milk. We're both still alive, so it's time to move on."

Together, the two girls formed a heartwarming tableau that reaffirmed their friendship and cheer amid the harsh realities of slum life—if one ignored the corpse they were dragging behind them.

Then Erio interjected.

"Er... Lucia, right? I don't know the details, but I heard you stole Akira's wallet. Out of all the people you could've gone after, why *him*?"

A scowl crossed Lucia's face. She didn't want to have this conversation. But despite his nonchalant tone, Erio outranked her in the gang, and he was there to keep an eye on them. So, with a note of fear in her voice, she replied, "I didn't know he worked with this gang."

“Yeah, but I mean, seriously?”

Lucia took the question as an attack, becoming even more frightened as she sank into gloom.

“I’m sorry,” Nasya cut in, bowing as she attempted to shift Erio’s attention to herself. “I know you’re not happy about what Lucia did, but I’m the one who invited her to join, and she’s hauling corpses every day to make up for it. If you have more to say, I’ll listen to it later, so please, let it rest for now.”

“Oh, I didn’t mean it like that,” Erio said hurriedly, shaking his head. “I’m not blaming you. I’m just curious. I mean, you wouldn’t go after just anyone’s wallet, right? So why Akira’s?”

He meant it as a simple question, but as far as the dejected Lucia was concerned, he might as well have asked why she was such a brainless good-for-nothing.

“I didn’t think he seemed like that good a hunter,” she answered feebly. “I’m sorry.”

“Excuse me, Erio,” Nasya interjected again. “I really think that’s enough.”

“No, I’m really not blaming you,” Erio protested, thinking that he’d picked the wrong way to ask. So, to win Lucia’s trust, he decided to tell her a little about himself. “You see, I screwed up with Akira once too. That’s why I’m kinda curious.”

Ruefully, but not without humor, he related the tale of his own mistake—how he’d picked a fight with Akira at their first meeting, not realizing what the hunter was capable of. Despite swinging at Akira from behind, he’d been instantly thrashed and nearly killed. Later, he’d seen the hunter at work and realized, to his dismay, what a reckless fool he’d been.

“Anyway, that’s how it happened,” he concluded. “I figured you might’ve pegged Akira as weaker than he was, just like I did.”

Lucia looked taken aback, but her fear seemed to have subsided.

“So, was I right?” Erio asked. “Did you think he’d be an easy mark? Oh, and don’t try to be all respectful. I get you’re nervous, but it honestly throws me

off.”

Lucia hesitated, but Erio’s concern for her feelings seemed genuine, so she told him the truth. “Well, yeah. I did think he’d be, um, an easy mark. He looked like a hunter, but only a rookie who hadn’t gotten all his gear together yet. I figured it’d be a cinch.”

“Huh. I wonder if there’s something about Akira that makes strangers underestimate him. The boss tells me to warn new kids about that, but if I’m being honest, a lot of ’em still don’t seem to get it.” Casually, he added, “Hey, mind if I tell ’em your story too? I’m on the hook if they screw up, so I’d be happy for anything that’ll make me more convincing.”

“Oh, sure. I don’t mind.”

“Thanks. I know it can’t be easy.”

There followed a lull in the conversation. Then, with a hint of embarrassment, Erio said, “Listen, Akira nearly killed me once too, and now I’m more or less an officer. So, well, don’t let it get to you.”

Lucia hesitated before replying, “Thanks.” Erio’s story had done something to restore her spirits, and her smile was a little brighter than usual.

“If you run into any trouble, talk to me or Aricia. We’ll at least hear you out.”

United by the fact that they’d each done something to piss off Akira, the trio seemed more relaxed as they continued their trek to the wasteland.

After dumping the body, the group stopped for a breather on the edge of the slums.

“Thank you for cheering up Lucia,” Nasya whispered to Erio, too quietly for her friend to overhear. “Sorry if I’m way off the mark, but you’re not getting any funny ideas about her, are you?”

Erio looked mystified for a moment. Then, wondering if he was being overly suspicious, he replied, “Just so we’re clear, I’m only into Aricia.”

“Okay, I’m glad to hear it.”

After a silence in which they both mentally reviewed their conversation, Erio

added, “Since you asked, I’m guessing some other guy *has* been saying things to her for the wrong reasons?”

“Several,” Nasya confirmed.

“Tell me or Aricia if they cross a line. We’ll at least remind them not to do anything stupid.”

“Thanks. Take your payment from me—I’ll at least make it worth your while.”

“Like I said, I’m only into Aricia.”

“Oh, right.”

Nobody said anything for a while, each having a lot to think about. At last, Erio sighed and said, “I’m guessing you already know this, but the boss told me to keep an eye on you two. And to kill you if you make a run for it.” This was why he accompanied them—and why the girls hadn’t been issued the guns that corpse bearers normally carried for their own safety. “I don’t want to shoot anyone in our gang—it’d make Aricia sad, for one thing—so I’m not gonna be happy if you run away just because some jackass gets dumb ideas and makes you desperate. And I’ll do my part to make sure that doesn’t happen for Aricia’s sake as well as mine. That good enough for you?”

“Sorry,” Nasya said slowly, her suspicions allayed by Erio’s account of himself. “I should have given you more credit. Thank you, Erio. And thank Aricia for me too.” She smiled from the heart, and he grinned back. Then her face turned serious. “Be honest with me. Do you really think Lucia will be okay?”

Erio considered. “Probably,” he answered, “although it depends on Akira.”

“That’s not exactly reassuring. I mean, you know what he’s like.”

“I know this sounds bad, but I think that if he was gonna kill her, he would’ve done it already. So, since she’s still alive, she’s probably in the clear. Not that I’ve got any clue what he’s thinking, obviously.”

Nasya relaxed. “You’ve got a point. And if you’re wrong, there’s nothing we can do about it, so I’ll go with that for now.”

“Well, just try not to do anything stupid.”

“I know! I won’t screw up, and I’ll make sure Lucia doesn’t either. That’s a

promise.”

At that point, Lucia noticed her companions chatting. “What are you talking about, Nasya?” she asked.

“Hmm? Oh, just about how we can make things better for ourselves,” her friend replied. “I’m guessing you don’t want to be on corpse duty for the rest of your life any more than I do.”

“Well, no, but—”

“Break time’s over,” Erio declared, supporting Nasya’s effort to avoid awkward questions. “Let’s head back.”

“Oh, okay.”

The trio were just setting out for their base in the slums when a wasteland truck drove up behind them. They moved to the side of the road, not wanting to block a hunter on the way back from an expedition, but the truck pulled up beside them.

“I thought I recognized you, Erio,” the driver said.

Erio looked startled, Nasya stiffened, and a terrified Lucia took cover behind her friend.

At the truck’s wheel sat Akira.

◆

Sheryl stepped out of her base to greet Akira. She had invited him partly out of her own desire to see him, but her main priority today was putting on a good show for her gang members and any other onlookers. So she’d gone a little overboard, ordering her best fighters to form up behind her in the gear she’d bought from Katsuragi. The cheap body armor (which would more or less stop a pistol bullet) and stripped-down AAH knockoffs weren’t much, but at least they looked more imposing than ordinary clothes and handguns. And while her forces still numbered in the single digits, they made a decent enough deterrent for a small slum gang.

She spotted some agents from other organizations loitering a short distance away. They were here for a look at Akira, drawn by info she’d leaked herself.

Then Akira's truck appeared, and all eyes turned to it. The rugged wasteland vehicle was nothing like the compact cars used for short trips along safe city streets. Its mere appearance conveyed a sense of the harsh desert and the rough-and-tumble hunters who earned their bread there. The CWH anti-materiel rifle and DVTS minigun mounted on its rear gun emplacements were clearly several cuts above any weapon used to settle quarrels in the slums. Bringing them into a gangland dispute would only end in a massacre.

The powered suit that Akira wore as he drove didn't look cheap either. Although negative reviews had made it a sales disaster, the model had originally been marketed to high-ranked hunters. Those unaware of its reputation saw it only as a powerful weapon, capable of smashing through walls and splattering human heads bare-handed.

And while Akira's arsenal alone would have made people think twice about messing with him or the gang under his protection, his reputation served as an even greater deterrent: he'd killed someone from an enemy syndicate and dragged the man's body into the gang's headquarters *before* he'd gotten his hands on all this gear.

No one was eager to pick a fight with someone *that* crazy.

Although Sheryl's gang was still small, recent rumors had it that the kids were thriving. And while their patron was a threat, he was often away from their base. So other gangs had started thinking that shaking down Sheryl would be worth the risk—at least until they saw Akira.

Sheryl, for her part, was glad that her plan seemed to be working. At the moment, however, she wore a more strained smile than she would usually have given Akira.

Wh-What are those girls doing in his truck?

Akira sat in the driver's seat, Erio filled the passenger seat beside him, and Lucia and Nasya occupied the back—an arrangement that ignorant onlookers might easily misinterpret. Sheryl was still struggling to figure out what to do with the girls. She couldn't give too much status to anyone who had stolen Akira's wallet, regardless of how talented they might be. Yet he had forbidden her to engineer their deaths, which meant that she couldn't afford to mistreat

them too badly either. And now, to top it all off, Akira was giving them a lift in front of her whole gang.

Managing the pair had just gotten even more difficult.

“Sheryl,” Akira called, bringing his truck to a stop in front of her. “Remind me: does your base have any place to park? Or would leaving the truck here be better for showing off my gear?”

“Th-Thank you for offering. I’d appreciate it if you’d park here, please,” Sheryl responded. Akira was her top priority, and she abandoned her worries about the girls as soon as he spoke to her. After telling her underlings to watch Akira’s truck—with strict orders to keep their hands off it—she accompanied him into her base.

Once they were out of sight, Lucia and Nasya let out a tremendous sigh of relief. Finally, the girls could relax.

After ushering Akira into her private room, Sheryl asked him why he’d arrived with her subordinates, keeping her tone casual. His simple answer—that he’d happened to spot them on the way—filled her with relief.

“Oh, I see,” she said. “Thank you for taking the trouble.”

“Huh? Well, I was coming here anyway,” Akira replied.

Based on his tone, she suspected that he had already lost interest in Lucia and Nasya. She would wait and watch a little longer, just to be sure, but then nothing would stop her from treating the girls just like the rest of her rank and file. Feeling optimistic, she looked forward to having one fewer stressful responsibility.

“By the way, is that your new gear? I don’t know much about these things, but it’s impressive,” she said, hoping to butter him up with a safe compliment. “You look great in it, and so strong too.”

“Yeah,” Akira replied. “I’m no expert either, but it’s all supposed to be good stuff. The suit’s not that popular—it’s a long story—but that made it pretty cheap. ’Course, I probably got a discount because I bought everything at once too.”

He sounded more pleased than Sheryl had expected (because she had unwittingly praised Shizuka's selection), so she decided to keep the conversation going.

"You got a good deal on it, then? That's nice. How much did it come to?" she asked, taking a cup from the table and bringing it to her lips—she wouldn't be able to chat as well with a dry throat.

"About eighty mil," Akira replied.

Sheryl avoided spraying her mouthful of drink everywhere only by a supreme effort of will. Maintaining a smile at the same time, however, was beyond her.

"What's wrong?" Akira asked.

After taking a moment to compose herself, she said, "Oh, nothing. So, eighty million aurum was, um, cheap?"

"Huh? Well, yeah."

Akira's truck was used, and his suit had been on clearance—Shizuka had fought to get him the best that his budget would cover. So he assumed that both would normally cost far more than he had paid for them and answered accordingly. Sheryl, however, heard only that eighty million aurum was nothing to Akira, or at least that he didn't see it as an exorbitant price.

"I remember you spent ten million on medicine when you were here the other day," she said hesitantly, concealing her shock. "Have you made any other purchases or payments lately?"

"Yeah, why?"

"Would you mind telling me how much you spent and what it was for? Oh, I was just curious, so I won't pry if you'd rather keep that to yourself." Sheryl did want to find out. But in her heart, she wasn't sure she wanted to hear his answer.

"I spent another sixty mil on, well, this and that," Akira answered evasively. He'd been about to mention his medical bills, but then realized that revealing *why* he'd needed such expensive treatment might breach his confidentiality agreement with the city. He also recalled that Sheryl had once asked him not to

tell her about his brushes with death.

"I...I see." Sheryl stiffened when she heard the sum. It meant that Akira was now in a position to spend 150 million aurum in just a few weeks. What would be the point of giving a measly million or two to a hunter like that? The realization shocked her to the core.

Silence followed. Sheryl had been the one driving the conversation—hoping not merely to chat, but also to deepen her bonds with Akira—and it floundered while she was stunned speechless. Akira was just wondering why she'd suddenly stopped talking when he remembered his gifts.

"Oh, hey," he said, "I brought you some souvenirs of my latest relic hunt." He reached into his backpack and pulled out flat, vacuum-sealed clothing and assorted jewelry from the Yonozuka Station Ruins. "I found these in a ruin, so for what it's worth, they're Old World goods. Pick any you like."

Jolted back to reality, Sheryl marveled at the items laid out on her table. "I'd love them, but, um, are you really sure about this? I mean, aren't Old World goods expensive? You might be better off selling them."

"Don't worry about that. I took 'em to Katsuragi, and he said a lot about how he won't buy some of these at a good price and the rest he won't buy at all, so I brought 'em home with me."

"I see. In that case, I'd be delighted to accept them."

While Sheryl appreciated presents, she felt nervous about receiving anything *too* valuable. And in the East, "Old World" was another word for luxury. So now, when she was already anxious about how little she could do to repay Akira, a gift of Old World goods made her more apprehensive than delighted. But once she learned, to her relief, that these relics weren't worth Katsuragi's time, she began happily choosing her favorites.

"Anyway," Akira added, "they're still relics, even if they're not worth much. I figure they'll serve as solid proof that you're close with a hunter. Make the most of 'em."

"That's true," Sheryl said slowly. "I'll put them to good use." She felt disappointed that he'd given her this present to help her run the gang, rather

than because she was a girl he wanted to please, but she didn't let it show.

◆

Sheryl showed Akira out, then returned to her room, flopped down onto her bed, and sighed. He had left soon after giving her his present, saying that he had other business to take care of. Although unable to detain him, she had allowed him to see how reluctant she was to part. She had longed to find some excuse for a prolonged hugging session, for another dip in the tub together, or even for him to stay the night.

Her disappointment was all the greater because, since he'd come on such short notice, she'd assumed he'd had nothing better to do.

Well, she told herself, *I should just be happy that he made a little time for me when he's so busy.*

Of course, that didn't make her any happier about missing her chance for even a brief embrace. For a little while, she lay there and sulked. Then she happened to glance to one side and saw Akira's gifts, still lying on her table. She picked a pendant from the pile and held it up to study, letting it dangle from the fingertips of her right hand.

The chain and body of the pendant were made of a silvery material. It picked up the light in her room and cast it back in complex patterns, a tribute to the intricate workmanship that had gone into making the object. Set into it was a clear, highly refractive crystal, within which Sheryl could make out an artistic design.

Although the jewel looked expensive to untrained eyes, its technological value was limited since present-day jewelers could craft similar pieces. Moreover, hunters often returned from the ruins with jewelry, thinking that it must be worth something, and the resulting supply glut reduced the market value of such relics still further. Very occasionally, one turned out to have been made using materials or techniques beyond the power of modern science to replicate, and it would then sell for a fortune. But most circulated at low prices.

After staring at it for a while, Sheryl held up another pendant in her left hand and compared the two. This was her previous gift from Akira, a bit of cheap jewelry from an open-air stall in the slums. Unsurprisingly, it paled in

comparison to the one in her right hand. Yet to her, the left-hand pendant seemed more valuable. Of course, that was only its worth to her personally—all other things being equal, any normal person would have chosen the one on the right. But for Sheryl, Akira's gift held a special meaning, which elevated the tawdry pendant in her eyes.

Perhaps it's the difference in who chose it, she mused. Sheryl had picked out the right-hand pendant herself, while Akira had selected the one on the left after a lengthy deliberation. It was a small point, and one she hadn't even considered at the time, but it meant the world to her now.

But Sheryl wasn't having much luck taking her mind off her frustration this way, so she turned her attention to her other gifts. She had chosen several clothing relics herself, after a warning from Akira: "I don't know what the clothes in these packages are like any more than you do, so they might turn out to look awful. If you end up with something weird, remember you picked it yourself. 'Course, I won't force you to wear it or anything."

Sheryl laughed, remembering how defensive he had sounded, and decided to try on her new clothes. Even if they really were hideous, she could at least cheer herself up by laughing at them.

The garments were sealed in compressed, airtight packaging, which she would naturally have to open before she could wear them. But the packaging was also preservative, and removing it would reduce the relics' value. Sheryl hesitated for a moment, then went ahead and broke the seal.

Immediately, the contents—which had looked and felt like a thin, rigid plate—began to rapidly expand and regain their softness. Out of the packaging burst clothing so large that Sheryl couldn't believe anyone had managed to squeeze it in there in the first place. Another pack contained a bra and panties.

Sheryl undressed completely and began by trying on the Old World underwear in front of a mirror. It went on smoothly but snugly, as if it had adjusted itself to fit her. It didn't pinch anywhere, and she had no complaints about how it felt against her skin either. Sheryl had never worn anything nearly this comfortable.

"Huh, I guess that's Old World quality for you," she mused. "Is this really not

worth much?”

Perhaps it was—by the standards of a hunter who could casually afford to spend 150 million aurum, or of the exchanges that bought up the relics. Sheryl grew vaguely uneasy as she wondered if that was what Akira had meant. To distract herself, she stopped admiring the underwear and tried on another Old World garment.

“Hmm... I’d say this one is... Well, it’s not bad.”

The adult-sized top and skirt didn’t adjust to her petite figure like the underwear had, so she looked like she was practically swimming in them. Their design also seemed a little out of step with modern sensibilities—not hideous, but not exactly fashionable either. They might have been in vogue in the Old World, but as she looked at herself in the mirror, Sheryl felt less than thrilled with them.

At the same time, the clothes were unmistakably relics, and if she wore them in the presence of keen-eyed observers, she could conceivably pass herself off as more than the leader of a minor slum gang. Akira was in the middle of a meteoric rise through the ranks of the relic hunters. If she hoped to repay him—and to keep him from abandoning her—then she would need to do her best to keep up as he aimed even higher. Before Sheryl knew it, she was plotting the next step in her gang’s expansion.

Then Erio appeared. This time, he remembered to knock and wait for permission before entering. He had come on behalf of Lucia and Nasya, who were anxious to explain why they had arrived in Akira’s car.

“What do you think of this outfit?” Sheryl asked, on the spur of the moment.

Erio gave it a cursory glance and replied, “Well, I dunno. It’s kinda iffy.”

“By the way, it was a gift from Akira.”

“I love it!”

Sheryl laughed, amused by her lieutenant’s sudden change of opinion. As she reflected that coming from Akira really did wonders for a thing’s value, her face settled into a contented smile.

◆

Elena and Sara had only swung by Cartridge Freak to resupply, but they ended up staying for a long chat since Shizuka seemed to have time on her hands. The shopkeeper played along, telling herself that she was humoring some of her best customers.

“Really?” she said. “So, you’re done with your job in Kuzusuhara? Would you say it took you a long time? Akira’s seemed to end pretty quickly.”

Unlike Akira, who had dropped out partway through the Yarata scorpion extermination, Elena and Sara had worked in the underground shopping districts until the end of the operation. The city had only recently finished destroying nests, clearing out relics, and installing security systems, making it possible for a skeleton crew to hold the area going forward.

“They counted on us for a lot, if you can believe it,” Sara replied, looking tired as she recalled their days in the tunnels. “So they didn’t want to let us go. And Elena kept accepting the extensions, which really drew out our contract. Isn’t that right, Elena?”

“The terms kept getting better,” Elena retorted, grinning unconcernedly. “What kind of negotiator would I be if I’d turned them down? And speaking as a scout, I liked that our pay went up the more thoroughly we mapped the ruins.”

“I wish you’d considered what the brawn of our operation had to say about it,” Sara grumbled.

“The monsters were almost wiped out by the end, so you got to take it easy too, remember? I pulled us out because you kept complaining, but I wouldn’t have minded sticking it out a while longer.”

“No way!” Sara looked seriously disgruntled.

“What was so bad about it, Sara?” Shizuka cut in, perplexed. “Patrolling with no monsters around sounds like easy work to me. But if you’re saying you miss having the chance to cut loose and fire off a lot of ammo, I’m right there with you—it’s good for business.”

Elena laughed at the joke but shook her head. “Nope. Sara couldn’t stand the city carting off every relic she found.” Amused, she explained that, according to

their contracts, all relics discovered in the course of the operation belonged to the city. No matter how tempting the loot, they had no choice but to stand by and watch while it was snatched out from under their noses. So of course Sara had stumbled onto find after find, and tearing herself away from them had been like pulling teeth.

Shizuka chuckled, picturing the scene.

“You grumbled about it too, Elena,” Sara countered, nettled.

“Of course I didn’t like it either,” Elena admitted cheerfully. “When did I say otherwise?”

Sara had just started sulking when Akira entered the store.

As Akira stepped into Cartridge Freak and saw Elena and Sara already there, he thought he’d come at the perfect time to hand out more gifts. He wasted no time fishing the jewelry and packaged clothing out of his backpack and explaining that they were souvenirs of a foray into the ruins.

The women looked at the items laid out on the counter with interest. They were all better judges of relics than Akira—even Shizuka, since she came into frequent contact with Old World goods—and these didn’t strike them as things to just give away.

“Are you sure we can have these, Akira?” Shizuka asked carefully. “They look awfully valuable to me. Maybe not so much the jewelry, but these packages are clothing, aren’t they? I buy Old World garments here, so selling them is always an option.”

“You buy relics too, Shizuka?” Akira asked.

“Yes, although it’s not my main business, so I won’t take just anything. I have a sales route for clothing through some of the people I buy stock from. Of course, since I don’t sell them directly, it takes a little while to convert them into money. So, what do you say?”

“No, thank you. I brought them as gifts, so you can have them. Besides, you’ve all done a lot to help me out, and I’d like to return the favor sometimes. So, think of these as a thank-you present.” His gratitude was sincere, but to

ease their minds, he added, “Of course, they’re just things another buyer turned down, so they’re not worth much. Hopefully, it’s the thought that counts.”

“Really? In that case, I’ll be happy to have them. Thank you, Akira.” Shizuka smiled, appreciating Akira’s tact and thinking it would be rude to reject his gratitude.

Seeing her happy made Akira glad that he’d brought the presents. Then he remembered something else.

“Oh, and I don’t know what’s in these. So, why don’t I open them here, and you can take whatever you like? It’d be kind of awkward if I gave you one as a thank-you and it turned out to look weird,” he said, choosing a package at random and breaking the seal. He could always dump any duds on Sheryl—clothes weren’t easy to come by in the slums, and ugly ones were still better than nothing.

The package contained women’s underwear.

Slight embarrassment settled over the gathering. To clear the air, Akira set the offending garments to one side and opened another package.

More women’s underwear.

In confused desperation, Akira tore open a third pack. Underwear again. At that point, he gave up—he didn’t have the courage to reveal a fourth set.

You’ve got enough for all of them, Alpha remarked.

Shut up, Akira snapped. The exchange jump-started his brain, and he slowly looked up from his hands to Shizuka.

“Umm... Listen, Akira...” she said awkwardly, her smile frozen in place.

“No, I didn’t know!” he protested frantically. “I thought they’d be regular clothes or handkerchiefs or something! Honest!”

“I, er, realize that. But, well... Oh, what should we do about this?”

Accident or not, the goods were still staring them in the face, and neither Akira nor Shizuka knew what to do with them. He couldn’t bring himself to politely offer this gift any more than she could bring herself to accept it.

Elena watched them both with amusement. Returning from a relic hunt with a load of women's underwear was hardly unheard of, so she was able to view the items as relics first and foremost and enjoy a good laugh at her flustered friends' expense.

Sara, meanwhile, took a more proactive approach. "Shizuka," she said, "if you're not sure whether you want those, do you mind if I take them?"

"Huh? Well, I don't see a problem with that," Shizuka responded. "Would that be all right with you, Akira?"

"Huh? Oh, sure," Akira replied. "I don't mind if you don't."

"Thanks! Happy to oblige." Sara greedily scooped all the undergarments off the counter, not even bothering to ask Elena before taking her share.

"Sorry, Akira," Elena said wryly, noting the boy's surprise. "You'll have to excuse Sara—she's been starved for underwear lately."

"O-Oh."

"'Starved'? Really? Couldn't you have found a nicer way to put that?" Sara cut in, frowning. But then she turned to Akira with an inquisitive smile. "So, Akira, where did you pick up these souvenirs? In the urban part of the Mihazono Town Ruins? Do you think there might be any more left?"

"Well..."

Seeing Akira hesitate, Elena stepped in. "Sara, you know better than to ask for relic locations so casually! Akira's just as much a hunter as we are, so you should at least offer to pay him for the info."

"I know, I know." Sara laughed off the reprimand, then approached Akira with a look of eager expectation. "So, what do you say? Will you tell me? Not for free, obviously—I can pay you in money or trade you some of our relic info."

Akira had hesitated because he wasn't sure whether it was safe to admit that his gifts came from the Yonozuka Station Ruins. But faced with such a hopeful look from someone who had saved his life, he quickly gave in. "All right. And you don't need to pay me—I owe you for so much."

"Really? Well, that's nice of you! But I'll get an earful from Elena if I take you

up on that, so how about we join you on your next trip there and work our butts off to return the favor?”

Sara shot a look at Elena, who nodded. The value of information was hard to pin down, and she thought this might be fairer than trying to set a price.

“Okay, I’d be happy to have you along,” Akira said, nodding back. “I got those relics from a store in the Yonozuka Station Ruins.”

The women looked puzzled. They had never heard of any such place.

“Akira, are you sure you didn’t get that name mixed up?” Elena hazarded. “I won’t tell you to memorize the name of every ruin in the area, but you should at least keep track of the ones you’ve been to. Sometimes explaining where your relics come from can help you get a better price for them.”

“Oh, sorry. That’s just my name for it. I found it the other day, and—”

“Stop right there.” Elena sternly surveyed the store. Sara did likewise, checking for other hunters. Once they saw the coast was clear, both women breathed a sigh of relief.

Akira was taken aback at their reaction, but Elena shot a meaningful glance at Shizuka. “I think we’ve stayed long enough for today,” she said, as if nothing were out of the ordinary.

“All right,” Shizuka responded, nodding to show she’d gotten the message. “Make sure you give Akira some pointers.”

“Akira, let’s continue this conversation at our house. Can you spare the time?”

“Oh, uh, sure,” Akira replied. “That won’t be a problem.”

“Then let’s get going. See you, Shizuka!”

Akira felt somewhat unnerved as Elena and Sara marched him out of the store. Still, Shizuka had been smiling faintly as she watched them leave, so he allowed himself to be led straight to their home.

Chapter 73: The Fruits of the Second Expedition

Elena and Sara ushered Akira into their home, then left him to wait in their living room while they changed out of their hunting gear. On his last visit, he had marveled at the contrast between the women's living space and his. Now he had a house of his own and had expected to be less impressed. But he found that their standard of living still obviously outclassed his, driving home for him how far he had to go.

When his hosts returned, Sara sat down across from Akira. Elena passed out drinks and was about to join them, but her partner's appearance gave her pause.

"Sara! I thought I told you to get dressed," she groused, though she realized that it was probably futile.

Sara wore only a shirt over her underwear, and she hadn't even buttoned it all the way up. Most of her skin—including her cleavage—was on full display.

"Where's the harm?" she countered. "I want to dress comfortably, at least in my own home. And don't worry—I don't mind a little ogling." Her lack of shame was more slobbish than seductive, but her enticing figure more than made up the difference.

"I'm thinking of Akira, not you."

"Really? Akira, am I *that* hard on the eyes?"

"Please dress how you like. I won't mind," Akira replied, attempting to will himself into indifference. "This is your home, and you told me how important it is to relax." He figured that he could ignore Sara's outfit if he really tried, since most of Alpha's weren't much better. Making a big deal out of it would only invite more teasing.

Sara looked surprised—and a little disappointed—to see that he really didn't seem bothered. His calm was only skin-deep, but his gaze didn't waver.

Elena chuckled as she sat down beside Sara. Then, turning serious, she cut to the chase. “Okay, let’s pick up where we left off at Cartridge Freak. The place you mentioned—Yonozuka Station—is a previously undiscovered ruin. Do I have that right?”

“Yes,” Akira replied.

Elena sighed for dramatic effect, then fixed him with a reproachful stare. “Akira, you can’t go around talking about things like that.”

“I thought it would be okay since we were in Shizuka’s store and you were the only other people there. Was that really such a bad idea?”

“Blurting it out to anyone you meet is a huge risk. Don’t you know how much info about untouched ruins is worth?”

“I didn’t blurt it out to just anyone,” Akira retorted earnestly. “I picked who to tell.”

“O-Oh.” Rattled, Elena and Sara exchanged a look. They’d assumed that Akira had been loose-lipped because he didn’t realize the value of his information. They were perplexed, but glad, to learn that he had known its worth and had chosen to share it with them anyway.

Elena recovered first, aided by her experience as their team’s negotiator. “We appreciate that,” she said, “but you should still have given more thought to where you told us. Cartridge Freak may have seemed safe to you, but it’s still open to the public. Sharing your discovery there was a bad idea.”

“Even though Shizuka owns it?” Akira asked.

“Yes. You can trust her, of course, but there might have been delivery people in the back room or other customers hidden behind the shelves. You should at least have asked Shizuka whether it was safe to discuss sensitive information.”

“Oh, I see your point. That was careless. Thank you for stopping me.” Akira bowed, reflecting that he’d really had a near miss.

“Don’t mention it,” Elena replied. “We’ve been hunters longer than you have, so the least we can do is give you pointers. Isn’t that right, Sara?”

“You said it!” Sara agreed.

Their brief conversation had gone a long way to soothe the women's nerves, but they still took big swallows of their drinks—and then let out large sighs to finish the job.

When Elena and Sara had promised to join Akira on his next trip to the source of his souvenirs, they'd had no idea that he'd been talking about an undiscovered ruin. They would be heading into uncharted and potentially dangerous territory—Akira's one foray notwithstanding—and Elena decided that they couldn't be overprepared. So she asked for a detailed account of his expedition, and his answer surpassed either woman's expectations.

"No monsters, *and* you found relics not far from the entrance?" Sara marveled, her hopes soaring. "Sounds like you hit the jackpot! Although it would be even better if we found more women's underwear deeper inside."

"I could bring you more of the Old World clothes I found," Akira offered, although mystified by Sara's underwear obsession. "I still have more at my place because I wasn't planning to sell them right away. You might find some in there."

"You mean it?!"

"Yes, although I don't know if you'll find what you're looking for."

"In that case—"

"Sara!" Elena cut in. "He's offering to take you to an untouched ruin, so try looking for your own underwear before you go begging! You took my share *and* Shizuka's, so you should be set for the time being."

"Oh, come on!" Sara retorted, cheerful but insistent. "I'm not saying I want them for free. I'll pay a fair price for them. That's more than Akira would get from an exchange, and it will mean fewer people know about his find. It'll be win-win!"

"You left out hunter rank. He won't gain any by selling to us."

"So I'll pay a little extra to make up for it. I could even help him boost his rank later if he wants. So, Akira, what do you say?"

Sara turned to their guest for an answer. But he seemed completely lost, so she decided to start over and explain everything from the beginning.

Sara was augmented, and her figure changed as she used up or replenished her nanomachine supply. The differences were especially noticeable in her breasts, where her nanomachine reserves were stored. So ordinary underwear wasn't anywhere near elastic enough for her. Sometimes her bras were so tight that they dug into her skin. Other times, her panties got so loose that they slipped right off her. And to make matters worse, most undergarments were too fragile to withstand her enhanced strength or the effects of her nanomachines and body armor.

What Sara needed was underwear that could shrink and stretch to match her drastically shifting physique while also being tough enough to withstand both the stress of an active, augmented wearer and the friction from rubbing against the rugged material of her protective suit. And although her extreme demands would give any contemporary clothing manufacturer fits, most Old World undergarments met them with flying colors. Naturally, she wanted every pair she could get her hands on.

But unsurprisingly, they didn't come cheap. The brand value of the Old World, added to the functional excellence of the underwear, made them hot commodities even among the affluent residents of the walled districts—and put them well beyond the reach of most ordinary people. And while some modern undergarments did meet Sara's needs, the tech and materials required to make them on par with Old World goods naturally resulted in even higher price tags—especially if they were comfortable or fashionable as well. They also came in extremely limited styles and quantities, making it hard for merchants to profit off of them (another reason why they hadn't caught on as substitutes).

So when Sara found women's underwear in the ruins, she tried to save it for her own use rather than sell it to the exchange. Many other female hunters did the same—it was far cheaper than buying what they needed. And Sara had hoarded quite a few pairs to ensure that she never ran out.

But then a string of jobs from the city had left her with no time to explore ruins, while also requiring frequent journeys on foot and battles with monsters.

Needless to say, this had caused her to wear through her collection at an accelerated pace. Now she was in the danger zone—down to her last few pairs. Ordinary underwear wore out too quickly to serve as a feasible replacement. So unless Sara found a new supply soon, she would be condemned to a life of going commando—hence her hunger for Old World garments.

After listening to Sara's account of her underwear situation with rapt interest, Akira found his gaze straying to the example she was currently wearing.

"Thanks for these," she said, noticing his stare. "I put them right to good use."

The realization that Sara was wearing his gift made it harder for him to ignore her state of undress. "Mm?" he responded belatedly. "Oh, you're welcome."

"Go ahead, take a good look!" she added, grinning at seeing him flustered. "Consider it a thank-you."

Akira didn't reply, but he did shift his gaze to Elena and ask, "So, what did Sara mean when she said that selling to her would keep news about my relics from spreading?"

Elena smiled ruefully and began to explain.

Hunters brought a myriad of relics back from the wasteland to sell at the exchanges. And by aggregating all that sales data, it was possible to discover roughly what sorts of relics came from which ruins. So when a large quantity of relics not associated with any known site turned up at an exchange, some people started searching for uncharted areas—or whole undiscovered ruins—that might have supplied them.

Of course, it wasn't easy to detect such finds unless their discoverers brought back unusual relics in bulk. And Akira could make his loot even harder to trace if he sold it to Sara rather than to an exchange. Yet as simple as such precautions seemed, many hunters drove massive shipping trucks into the ruins and returned with full loads of relics, anxious to capitalize while their discoveries remained secret. Although this naturally exposed them at once, few could bear the many perilous solo trips required to slowly extract every last relic without telling a soul.

Many other blunders could also reveal hitherto unknown sites. There were plenty of examples to show that the average hunter, happening upon untouched ruins, was not up to the task of concealing the find.

Akira's expression hardened when he learned that even well-concealed discoveries usually came to light before long. He hadn't expected to be able to hide his ruin forever, but he began to regret immediately selling some of his finds to Katsuragi and giving others to Sheryl. When he expressed his fears to Elena and Sara, however, they told him not to worry about it—word would get out eventually, no matter what he did. So Akira decided to take their advice.

As they discussed their plans for looting the Yonozuka Station Ruins, Elena and Sara noticed a slight movement of Akira's eyes. He kept looking from one to the other, comparing them without meaning to.

In contrast to Sara's bold—or just slovenly—shirt-and-underwear ensemble, Elena was plainly but neatly dressed. Her collar was buttoned up to hide her cleavage, her sleeves ended at her wrists, and her skirt covered everything from her waist to her ankles. There was something indefinably classy about her outfit, which seemed designed to conceal the lines of her body.

Neither woman minded Akira's gaze—they weren't wearing anything they felt ashamed to be seen in, and he wasn't ogling them like he was trying to size them up. Yet they knew how different they must look and couldn't help wondering what he thought, seeing them side by side.

Perhaps this is a little too formal, Elena mused after another look at her best friend. There was nothing scandalous about her own outfit, which showed no skin below her neck and almost seemed chosen to hide her figure. But by the same token, it might suggest that she was exceptionally sensitive to men's gazes.

Elena's powered suit was an extremely thin model of a type also called powered inner wear. So while it covered her skin, it left nothing to the imagination. She justified wearing it to herself on the grounds that the suit's high performance outweighed its aesthetic downsides—and besides, she kept it hidden under an armored coat. Akira, however, already knew about her

powered suit. Anxious to prove that it wasn't representative of her wardrobe, she had subconsciously chosen an especially formal outfit on this occasion.

When set beside Sara, however, the clothes made her look self-conscious—almost defensive. They seemed to say that she trusted Akira less than her friend did. Of course, it was too late for her to unbutton her collar or change into something more inviting. Sara would never let her hear the end of it.

Sara was going through a similar process of self-reflection.

Maybe I do kind of look like a slob in this, she thought. Sitting next to her fully dressed—almost prim—best friend, her excess of bare skin seemed more sloppy than it did alluring. Was Akira disgusted with her? Had her lack of decorum soured him on her charms? She couldn't help wondering. But it was too late to button up her shirt or put on more clothes. Elena would read her the riot act later.

So, after looking each other over, both women reached the same conclusion: they would give a little more thought to their choice of clothes next time.

Akira noticed a subtle change come over Elena and Sara as he hashed out preparations for the expedition to Yonozuka with them, but he could never have guessed the reason. Their discussion continued late into the evening, never breaking long enough for its more self-conscious participants to change their clothes.

◆

One week after his first visit to Yonozuka Station, Akira was fully prepared for a second expedition. He parked his car in the wasteland a considerable distance outside the city limits, then settled in to wait for Elena and Sara. His surroundings were completely deserted, and from his vantage point, he would have no trouble spotting anyone trying to shadow him.

Leaving the city at different times and meeting up in the wasteland as an added precaution had been Elena's idea. If they had spotted anyone definitely tailing them, they would have called this trip off. So far, however, Akira had seen nothing of the kind.

Looks like the coast is clear, he reflected. *Maybe I worried too much.* Someone with sharp instincts might have inferred the existence of a fresh ruin from the relics that he'd sold to Katsuragi and given to Sheryl. But to his relief, nothing in the intervening week had seemed to justify those fears.

Aren't you glad your bad luck didn't rear its head this *time?* Alpha teased from the passenger seat. As usual, her attire looked totally out of place in the wasteland.

You bet I am. Akira grinned back at her, unruffled.

Perceiving his confidence, Alpha added a note of challenge to her own smile. *Be that as it may, Elena and Sara should be here any moment, so it's time we got started too. But first, I want to ask you one last time: Are you sure about this?*

At Alpha's behest, Akira would be making this trip without any support from her, simulating what it would be like if their connection went down. She had presented it as emergency training. If Akira proved to himself that he could fight without her, she had told him, then he would be less likely to panic if circumstances left him with no other choice.

But Alpha also had another goal in mind. Akira still harbored doubts about his own abilities. And by forcing him to realize exactly what he was capable of, she hoped to curb his excessive humility.

Not long ago, Akira had butted heads with Katsuya's team over Lucia. Frustrated at his own perceived lack of skill, and blinded by self-loathing, he'd almost started a firefight with an enemy who significantly outgunned him. Alpha had diagnosed his condition as desperation, stemming from a belief in his own weakness, and had decided to build up his confidence a little. If Akira believed that he could earn Elena and Sara's approval without any help from Alpha, then he would behave more reasonably the next time such a situation arose—or so she hoped.

Akira was ignorant of Alpha's full plan, but he welcomed an opportunity to test his mettle. He also agreed with her that this was a golden opportunity to do so, since Elena and Sara would be there to bail him out if he really did lose contact with her while venturing deeper into the ruin than before. This exercise

was yet another reason why he couldn't wait to return to Yonozuka Station.

Yeah, I'm sure, he replied. *You can start now.*

All right, let's begin. Good luck, Alpha said, with a tender smile—that suddenly turned mischievous.

What? Akira demanded.

You can always call this off if you get too lonely. Just call my name.

Get started already! Akira scowled, nettled by the taunt, and Alpha vanished with a broad grin still on her face. Immediately, something felt off about his powered suit—it seemed just a bit heavier and less responsive than before. Alpha's support was gone.

Naturally, Akira now needed to do his own scouting. He lowered his display goggles, which had been resting on his forehead, and started scanning the vicinity. Although his truck also had its own onboard sensors, they were tuned to detect monsters approaching from a distance—meaning their sweeps were broad, shallow, and rough. His own scanner was better suited to going over his immediate surroundings with a fine-tooth comb, and it was linked to the vehicle's sensors anyway.

When the truck alerted him to a potential threat, he turned to look at it with his goggles on. Then his suit's scanner automatically focused its sensors in that direction and brought up a magnified view on his display. But as handy as these features were, they paled in comparison to Alpha's support. Akira found himself missing her already.

The activity his scanner had picked up was Elena and Sara's car, which was heading toward him. Akira waved and—thanks to his augmented vision—saw them wave back.

Right on time, he said. *I got here pretty early, just to be safe, but I guess top-notch hunters can keep a schedule even in monster-infested wastelands. What do you think, Alpha?*

He got no reply.

"Oh, right," he muttered. Without his connection to Alpha, he wouldn't be

able to see her familiar figure in AR or hear her telepathic voice. So, naturally, he would do without both for the duration of the exercise.

Akira grimaced. Alpha's answering voice had been a routine part of his life ever since their first meeting, and her absence hit him harder than he'd expected. He grumbled a bit to himself to mask his sudden loneliness.

◆

The hunters reached the rubble-strewn plain near the entrance to Yonozuka Station. Their first task was to dig out the route that Akira had found and then reburied. As the brawn of the group, Akira and Sara put their strength to work hurling chunks of debris off to the side.

Elena kept watch using her scanner, but she saw no sign of monsters or of rival hunters to interrupt the work. As she surveyed the excavation in progress and the surrounding terrain, a doubt crossed her mind.

How did Akira really *find this ruin? He said that he stumbled onto it by accident, but I find that hard to believe.*

Coincidence could only explain so much. In order to stumble upon the ruin, Akira must have been at least passing through the area. But why would any hunter do that? There were no other ruins nearby, and this place wasn't on the way to anything farther afield. And a buried entrance wasn't something one simply happened to find. An outpouring of monsters might have cleared the rubble from it just as Akira went past, but such an event would have left traces, and of these there were none. And Akira himself had confirmed that the ruin was free of such creatures.

Elena had assumed that she'd figure out how Akira could have uncovered the ruin by accident once she actually got there. Yet investigating the site only revealed more holes in his story.

I'd have had an easier time believing him if he'd said his instincts just went off and told him to look out here, Elena mused wryly. *Wait a second—"instinct"?*

She recalled how, during their patrol under the Kuzusuhara Ruins, Akira had seen through a swarm of Yarata scorpions masquerading as a wall of rubble. And although he'd credited his instincts for that discovery, Elena wasn't so sure.

She believed that he'd been hiding the truth—that he'd acted on definite information but couldn't share it. So, where had his data come from?

Elena had a guess.

I'm almost certain that Akira is an Old Domain User.

Users were able to access an Old World network known as the Old Domain, although no one knew exactly how their abilities worked. And some ruins dated from the same ancient period.

What if Users are able to pick up undiscovered ruins?

That made sense—or at least more sense than instinct or coincidence. After all, Akira had actually uncovered the hitherto unknown Yonozuka Station.

Elena found herself staring at him without meaning to. If she was right, then he was astronomically valuable—far more so than he probably realized. He might really even believe that he was acting on instinct.

In spite of herself, her mind turned to how she could exploit his ignorance. Part of her shouted to drop the idea immediately, but another, cooler-headed part continued to speculate anyway.

It might be hard for most people, since no Old Domain User is exactly trusting. But for us?

In a stroke of luck, they already had Akira's trust, and there were gaps in his knowledge of hunting. Elena couldn't help thinking how easily she might be able to get information out of him if she framed her questions in the right way.

How much would we make if this works? she asked herself. A treasure trove of relics from an untouched ruin would be worth a fortune. Even information on fresh ruins could sell for enormous sums if she played her cards right.

And with that kind of money, I could cure Sara.

Nanomachine augmentation had saved Sara from an almost incurable disease. But while she was no longer at death's door, neither was she cured, strictly speaking. The nanomachines merely maintained her dying body in a state of apparent health, and she'd been forced to periodically replenish them ever since.

The technology to cure her underlying ailment and guide her to a full recovery did exist, but the treatment cost was astronomical. Keeping Sara's condition from deteriorating was all that she and Elena could currently afford. So they stuck to relic hunting in the hope that success would eventually bring in more than enough money to cover a permanent solution.

But hunting was a perilous profession. They'd had plenty of disasters and more than a few close calls. Elena had sometimes doubted whether risking death in the wasteland to keep Sara alive actually made any sense, and whether they could really survive long enough to amass the fortune they needed.

And now, a shortcut to riches was staring her in the face. She studied Akira with the cold eyes of a negotiator, weighing the pros and cons.

Is it worth trying?

What could they expect to gain? Was it worth the odds? Akira had saved their lives, and Elena wanted to go on being good friends with him. Was the potential profit great enough to justify trampling on his trust? Elena wavered, not even aware of all the thoughts passing through her mind. But she knew that if it came to a choice between Akira and Sara, she would pick Sara every time.

Her expression took on a somber tinge. Then, just as her inner doubts began to twist and bias her thoughts, Sara called, "Elena! We found the entrance!"

She snapped back to reality.

"Is something wrong?" her friend added. "You've been frowning for a little while now."

Hearing the concern in Sara's voice, and seeing it on the face of the boy who'd once saved her life, Elena cracked a grin. "It's nothing. I've just had a lot on my mind. After all, this ruin is still basically unexplored, even though Akira's been inside once already."

"Is that all? Well, I hope you've figured out whatever was worrying you, because we'll be counting on your scouting in the pitch darkness down there."

"I know. You're in good hands. Akira, that means you'd also better follow my instructions once we're inside, okay?"

“Don’t worry, I’ll listen.” Akira nodded cheerfully.

Honestly, what’s gotten into me? Elena wondered, returning his smile. *Why should I force myself to choose between them? I don’t want Akira to hate me, and I* really *don’t want Sara to deck me for double-crossing someone we owe so much. Like hell I’m going to wreck our lives just because we’re a little short on cash!*

She banished the fears at the root of her doubts, telling herself that she and Sara had been on the rise since that day in the ruins. Their number one goal was to enjoy life together, and there was nothing fun about treachery. Firm in that conviction, Elena dismissed her earlier thoughts as a moment of weakness.

◆

The three of them gathered before the entrance to Yonozuka Station and peered inside. As before, the stairway descended into seemingly bottomless darkness. Akira focused on deep breathing to steady his nerves. Although he wasn’t alone this time, he was still about to explore a virtually unknown ruin without Alpha’s help.

Beside him, Elena pointed her rifle down the stairway and pulled the trigger. A small object launched from her weapon’s underslung grenade launcher and vanished into the darkness.

“What was that?” Akira asked.

“A support terminal. It doubles as an extension of my scanner.” Elena briefly explained that the device’s adhesive coating held it fast to whatever it struck. Once in place, it would relay data about its surroundings to her master system. Although it could only scan a short radius, and not in very high fidelity, it allowed Elena to gather intelligence from a safe distance. Even if she lost contact with the terminal shortly after launching it, the attempt could still provide useful information—such as alerting her to heavy pockets of colorless fog.

“They come in handy,” she concluded, “but I don’t normally use them because, for something that’s meant to be disposable, they’re not cheap. We can’t know what to expect in this ruin, though, so I decided to take the precaution and hope that untouched relics will justify the cost.”

Elena fired another extension at a nearby wall. Now she could monitor the entrance and alert her companions if monsters or other hunters showed up while they were still inside. It would also serve as a wireless beacon to mark the way out.

They had already synced their scanners together, so data from the sensor that Elena had launched down the stairs appeared on Akira's goggle display as well. It showed no sign of monsters. He agreed that the device seemed useful, but then he reflected that the cost of such conveniences must add up—and realized again how much he normally relied on Alpha to scout ahead for him.

"Well then, we'd better work hard to make sure this trip turns a profit!" he said, laughing to dispel any fears that it might not. Elena and Sara joined in. Then, as one, they entered what remained of Yonozuka Station.

The hunters illuminated the ruins as they advanced, emerging from the stairway and into a passage. This they followed until they found the poster covering an entire section of the wall. Their portable lights could not completely banish the darkness, even on the brightest settings. So although Akira knew what to expect, the 3D images of relics still looked real to him in the dim beams of their lamps.

Sara's eyes lit up at the sight of them. "Elena!" she cried. "Look what's just lying around down here!"



“They certainly do look valuable,” Elena agreed, breaking into a smile. But her face soon fell. “Hang on. Sorry, Sara, but you’d better give up on taking those

back with you."

"Why?" Sara demanded, frowning. "We found them, so we might as well take them. Don't worry—I can smash my way in there without breaking a sweat. Sure, it could set off an alarm, but someone's going to get at these things eventually, so it might as well be us."

"That's not what I mean. This looks three-dimensional, but it's just a flat image. They're not real."

"What?!" Shocked, Sara planted her hands on the wall and leaned forward, trying to get a closer look at the relics on the other side of the glass. Beside her, Elena adjusted her light so that it hit the wall from a slightly different angle. The shadows of the relics remained unnaturally static, making it easier to recognize the 3D image for what it was.

"No way!" Sara groaned, slumping, while Elena grinned ruefully beside her. Akira couldn't suppress a chuckle.

"Are you laughing at me?!" Sara demanded, whirling on him in indignation.

"S-Sorry," he said sheepishly, holding back his laughter. "I couldn't help it. I had the exact same reaction when I saw the poster."

Knowing that she wasn't alone restored Sara's mood. "There you have it, Elena," she said. "My reaction was perfectly normal."

"I see." Elena grinned and made no further comment. But the exchange had left her with a question. If Akira had done just as Sara had, then something must have told him that the relics weren't real, just as she had done for Sara. And she had an idea what that might be.

"Do you think this ruin is still online, Akira?" she asked casually.

"Huh? No, I figure it's probably dead. I mean, just look at how dark it is." Akira added that although he'd taken relics from what was left of a store farther in, its automatic door hadn't worked, and no alarm had sounded when he'd forced his way inside.

"Really? Then I suppose we won't have to worry about security systems. I'm so glad that Sara won't get us all killed when she spots underwear and

immediately smashes a case open to get it."

"Elena," Sara cut in reproachfully. "I would at least stop to check first."

"Would you? I'd certainly appreciate it." Elena's laugh ended the discussion, and she led her companions deeper into the passage. She tried not to dwell on her earlier doubts, telling herself that she must have been overthinking things.

Elena had suspected Akira of getting his information from augmented reality—some kind of guide that only Users could see. And if so, the odds were good that, despite appearances, this ruin remained functional. In that case, an active security system might well summon hostile robots. She'd questioned Akira to confirm her fears, but his response suggested they were groundless—the ruin was offline. Deciding that she had just been reading too much into things, she abandoned further speculation.

Better to let sleeping dogs lie.

◆

The expedition continued smoothly under Elena's command. The explorers found no cave-ins, no scattered rubble, and no sign of monsters. Except for the absence of light, the subterranean facility looked much as it once had. And thanks to its reasonable safety, they had soon managed to map a considerable section of it—large enough to exhaust Elena's supply of the miniature terminals that extended her scanner range, although she had brought plenty to counter the perils of an uncharted ruin.

After launching her last one, she judged that any further exploration would bring them dangerously far from the exit. She told Akira and Sara that it was time to call it a day and that they should return to the first store they'd come across. The hunters began retracing their steps, seeming more relaxed than they had at the outset. On the way, a frowning Elena voiced her opinion of the ruin.

"You know, Akira, I hate to say this, but this place you've found is trouble."

"Really? You think so?" Akira asked, taken aback. "It's got plenty of relics and no monsters, so I thought I'd hit the jackpot."

"Oh, there's no doubt about that," Elena replied. "But going by what we've

seen today, it's *too big* a jackpot. When people find out about this place, I wouldn't be surprised if it causes an uproar or two."

Seeing that Akira didn't follow, she broke it down for him. At present, darkness was about the only thing standing between the relics in Yonozuka Station and anyone who wanted to claim them. The ruin was probably rich and monster-free—a dream come true. But one person could only carry so much, and the longer they took to clean out the ruin, the more likely it was that someone else would discover it. Once word got out, someone would definitely try to claim every relic they could by throwing manpower at the problem. And a large workforce would be hard to miss, alerting even more people to the ruin's existence.

In most cases, hunters would then wait to gather intelligence about the new site—no one wanted to charge blindly into a den of monsters. That fear acted as a brake, preventing an army of hunters from immediately swarming a newly discovered ruin. But there were no monsters in Yonozuka Station. Hunters—even the rankest of amateurs—would flood into it at the first opportunity.

Then the killing would start. In the wasteland, it wouldn't take long before armed and less-than-noble hunters resorted to murdering each other for relics. The violence wouldn't stop, Elena concluded, until every last relic was gone or the whole ruin had become buried in corpses.

"Will it really get that bad?" Akira asked nervously.

"I'm only speculating," Elena replied. "Still, you can't deny the possibility."

"Well, no. I guess not."

"I'd say the odds are good enough that you needed a warning."

Akira frowned, thinking that he might have pulled the trigger on a bloodbath.

"Don't let it get to you, even if it *does* turn into a disaster," Sara chimed in brightly. "Someone would've found this place and kicked it all off sometime. The only difference is that 'sometime' is recently and 'someone' is you."

"You may be right." Akira's expression softened. He appreciated Sara's kindness, and her perspective made a kind of sense to him.

“And since it’s bound to happen,” she went on, “you might as well beat everyone else to the punch. Whoever brings a large group here first will walk off with the lion’s share of the profit. And since you found this ruin, I’d say you’ve earned that privilege.”

“Well, I’ll think about it. But for now, let’s focus on what we can haul off today.”

Sara laughed. “Sounds like a plan. Just thinking about driving home with a car full of relics has me on cloud nine.”

Hunters couldn’t afford to be saints. So the three of them set all other concerns aside and eagerly looked forward to the fruits of their day’s work.

◆

After hauling their finds from Yonozuka Station, the hunters filled in the entrance. The signs of two excavations and reburials were hard to miss, but Akira wasn’t worried yet. He doubted that anyone would dig up this much rubble out of curiosity just because they could see it had been disturbed.

“We’re done here, Elena!” he called.

“Great! Then let’s head home with our loot.”

Akira, Elena, and Sara drove away from the ruin with a fully loaded utility trailer hitched behind them. They chatted over the onboard communicators as they sped across the twilit wasteland, returning to the city by a circuitous route.

“You know, I never figured we’d end up taking whole shelving units back with us,” Akira remarked. “I know they’re technically relics, since they’re from the Old World, but still.”

The collapsible trailer that Elena and Sara had brought to transport relics could expand to hold as much cargo as a small transport truck. And it was currently piled high with shelving units from the store that Akira had looted on his first trip.

“Can you get a good price for things like that?” he asked.

“Yes,” Elena replied. “Some Old World display shelves have advanced preservation systems built in. And since that’s still a useful thing to have, you

can get good money for them. Remember how there were things that looked like food on some of these?”

“Yes, but forget rotting—that stuff had turned to *dust*. If the shelves were supposed to keep it fresh, those parts must be broken.”

“They could simply be out of power. And if they are damaged, they might be repairable. Even totally broken units are worth a lot, since they’re still good for reverse engineering.” Of course, Elena added, these also might be just ordinary shelving. But since they couldn’t appraise the relics on the spot, they had to trust to luck, instinct, and experience.

Akira sounded both convinced and impressed.

So, laughing, Elena threw in another explanation. “I bet you’re wondering why we only took shelves when there were so many other relics lying around. Well, there’s a good reason for that too.”

Akira stiffened, thinking that she had read his mind.

When hunters came upon shelves full of goods in the ruins, most, like Akira, took only the goods. Only a few carried off the shelves too. So shelving units were relatively easy to come by, even in well-explored sites. And if a hunter returned from a fresher ruin with nothing but shelves, many people would assume that they’d only taken the things in desperation because they couldn’t find anything better.

In other words, Elena had left Yonozuka Station with this particular truckload of relics to throw others off the scent. After all, what hunter would venture into an untouched ruin and take only empty shelving?

“Anyway, this trick may not do much,” she concluded, “but it should buy us a little more time before other people find out about Yonozuka Station.”

“Oh, so that’s why you did it! Thank you.” Listening to Elena with rapt interest, Akira had become keenly aware that he didn’t know enough to devise such precautions himself.

◆

In the wasteland, still far from Kugamayama City, Akira detached the trailer

from his own vehicle and hitched it to Elena and Sara's instead. The women planned to take another long detour on their trip home, passing through other ruins on the way to further conceal the source of their relics. They would even be the ones to sell the load of shelving units.

By most hunters' standards, this was rash—there was nothing to stop them from running off with Akira's share of the loot or fudging the sale price. Elena and Sara had told him as much before they'd suggested it. But Akira readily agreed. Katsuragi might get suspicious if he showed up with another haul so soon, and he didn't know where else to sell the shelves, so this offer was just what he wanted.

Elena and Sara promised to conduct the sale with care, delighted that Akira put such trust in them. They also agreed to team up on another foray into Yonozuka Station, though that would have to wait, since the women had other commitments. Akira was free to make more solo trips in the meantime, or not, as he wished. Frequent visits would attract more attention, but it was also essential to remove as many relics as possible while the site still remained secret. Elena and Sara told Akira that they would let him make that call, as the ruin's discoverer.

Once he watched them drive off, Akira was done hunting for the day. He took a breather in the driver's seat. Partly because he had just been chatting with Elena and Sara—albeit over their comms—it suddenly seemed extremely quiet.

Then he turned to his empty passenger seat and said, "Alpha."

Yes? And there she was, a knowing smile playing on her lips.

"Since you came when I called, I'm guessing training is over?"

You've already said goodbye to Elena and Sara, so I won't insist that the hunt lasts until you make it home. I assume you agree, or you wouldn't have called for me.

"You got me. Now, let's head back."

Akira drove in silence, as if he were avoiding something. Alpha beamed from the seat beside him, but he ignored her.

Were you lonely? she finally asked.

After a moment, he blurted out, “Yes!” He didn’t want to lie to Alpha, partly because of their deal, and partly because of the trust they’d already established.

After his outburst, he accelerated, doing his best to look annoyed.

Beside him, Alpha wore a merry smile.

Chapter 74: Sheryl's Shopping Trip

After his second relic-hunting foray into Yonozuka Station, Akira spent a few days patrolling the wasteland for run-of-the-mill extermination jobs. While he was at it, he carried out a bit of extra subterfuge. Before setting out, he hid a backpack full of relics from his first trip in his truck. Once out in the wasteland, he shifted the pack to a more conspicuous position and killed time hunting monsters. Then he sold the relics when he returned to the city, pretending that he had picked them up that day in some well-known ruin.

For added effect, he fired copious amounts of ammo at every monster he encountered, making it look as if he'd fought fiercely for his finds. He was also taking the opportunity to gauge how many rounds he would need to eliminate threats without Alpha's support, so he made a point to engage targets at relatively close range. Once, he even blasted a small pack of monsters into hamburger with a wild burst from his DVTS minigun.

Akira didn't know how much good these deceptions would do, but they had to be better than nothing—and they sure beat holing up in his house to practice controlling his sense of time. So he kept up his frequent expeditions.

Then, one day, Sheryl asked him to go shopping with her. Akira hesitated, but he was more or less free until Elena and Sara's schedule cleared up, so he said yes.

◆

Generally speaking, Kugamayama City became safer and more prosperous the closer one got to its center. So the best real estate in the lower district was right up against the city walls. Any slum kids caught loitering there would, of course, be kicked out by security—as corpses, if they tried to resist.

But the area around the Kugama Building was an exception. There, dingy visitors would be overlooked unless they did something blatantly suspicious. Since the building was home to the city's largest Hunter Office branch, both hunters fresh from the wasteland and rookies who had just escaped the slums visited it on legitimate business. Security couldn't justify turning them away

over a little dirt.

So Sheryl and her entourage waited for Akira beside the skyscraper. She wore the Old World clothes Akira had given her, hiding the fact that they didn't fit her with rolled-up sleeves, ties, belts, and an assortment of other ingenious tricks.

Erio had dressed in cheap body armor on loan from Katsuragi. It looked like something a rookie hunter might buy on a tight budget, so that was just what passersby took him for.

Aricia's clothes were quite nice—by slum standards. A close inspection would reveal stains and tears, but proper laundering and mending kept these signs of wear unobtrusive. So she at least looked clean and presentable.

Erio and Aricia fidgeted nervously, overawed by the towering building and the massive wall of which it formed a part, as well as the hunters and security guards nearby. Sheryl, however, stood calmly, as if this were perfectly normal. Her composure impressed her lieutenants. Here, they thought, was a *real* gang leader. In reality, Sheryl felt as on edge as either of them. The only difference was that she possessed the skill to hide it.

Akira showed up early. He wore his powered suit, but only because he owned no real street clothes. And he was surprised to find Sheryl already waiting for him.

"Wait, I thought we were meeting up at 1300," he said. "Did I get that wrong?"

"Not at all," Sheryl replied, beaming. "We just left early and happened to arrive here a little before you did."

"Oh, okay."

As a matter of fact, Sheryl's group had been waiting for an hour. She wouldn't have minded if Akira had kept *them* waiting, but the reverse was out of the question. With his arrival, they looked like two hunters out with their girlfriends—even if one couple's attire was of far better quality than the other's.

"Well, what are we waiting for?" Sheryl asked, swiftly twining a hand around Akira's arm. "I'd like to take a walk and decide which stores to visit as we see them. Would you mind?"

“Nope.”

Sheryl set off with Akira in tow, shooting Erio and Aricia a look that commanded them to tag along—which they did with some trepidation.

The group made its way through a lower district shopping area. Here, close to the walls, most of the businesses were luxury stores, and security was ever watchful. Sheryl never lost track of their surroundings as she chatted with Akira, and more than once she saw guards who appeared on the verge of asking them to leave. Whenever one seemed about to accost Erio and Aricia, she made a casual remark to show that the couple was with her and Akira. The guards always withdrew, but Sheryl could tell that she and her lieutenants weren’t ready for the shops in this area yet.

Their presence was tolerated today because they were with Akira, whose suit screamed “expensive.” But Sheryl couldn’t ask Akira to accompany them on every shopping trip. She needed to find the classiest shop that would be willing to admit them. So she kept her eyes peeled for likely candidates while she chatted with the hunter. Eventually, she selected a reasonably stylish clothing boutique.

“Akira,” she said, “let’s go in there.”

Akira looked at the classy storefront and reflected that he would once have gotten cold feet about entering it. But after dining at Stelliana, a first-class restaurant on one of the Kugama Building’s exclusive upper floors, it would take more than this to intimidate him. “Sure. Why not?” he replied, opening the door without hesitation.

Sheryl did her best to appear equally calm—a fitting companion to someone who must, after all, bring in so much money that he thought nothing of popping into a place like this.

The shop’s sign read, “La Fantola.”

◆

The clothing boutique La Fantola stood among some of the lower district’s higher end shops. Inside, its proprietress, Cascia, sighed over poor sales. She

wasn’t in the red, and she made enough to keep the lights on, but that alone couldn’t satisfy her. She had poured her blood, sweat, and tears into this store, and she felt it deserved to attract better clientele and reach new heights.

Cascia kept trying. She wore tasteful outfits made by her younger sister—who she employed as a seamstress—and her work ethic matched her ambition. Yet she hadn’t achieved enough to put a stop to her sighs.

Then a chime sounded. A customer! She turned toward the entrance, and her gaze hardened when she saw four children walk in. If they didn’t meet the standards she set for her beloved shop’s clientele, she would ask them to leave.

A boy, presumably a hunter, in an expensive-looking powered suit? Not a problem.

A girl wearing questionably fashionable clothes that probably didn’t fit—although she hid it skillfully? Well, the fabric didn’t look cheap, even though her shoes clearly were, so she could stay.

A boy in low-end wasteland gear and a girl in cheap clothes? Neither of them passed muster. But all four customers had entered together, so Cascia couldn’t just eject two of them. After a brief deliberation, she approached the group.

“Thank you for choosing our store,” she said, directing her winning smile mainly at Akira. “What brings you here today?”

“We’re, er, looking for shoes for her,” Akira replied. “That’s it, right?”

“Yes,” Sheryl confirmed, smiling confidently at Cascia. “I’m interested in other things as well, but I’d like to start with shoes.”

Cascia took another look at Sheryl’s shoes. She could tell at a glance that they didn’t measure up to the remainder of her outfit. “Of course. I’ll bring some out for you right away. And what can I do for the rest of you?”

“We’ll browse,” Akira replied. “Please take care of her shoes first.”

“Certainly, sir.” Cascia ushered Sheryl to a table and encouraged the others to take a look around. The two problem children probably couldn’t afford to buy anything, but the other pair should be all right, she mused as she left to fetch shoes for Sheryl to try on. And since they had brought such unpromising

companions, she hoped that at least one of them would have the decency to become a good customer.

◆

Sheryl stared seriously at the row of shoes on the table, racking her brain.

They're expensive, she thought to herself. *Maybe I shouldn't have gotten so hung up on finding a fancy boutique that wouldn't kick me out. A lower-end shop might have been a better option.*

Cascia read Sheryl's concerns on her face and swapped the assortment for less expensive pairs. Yet the prices remained so steep that Sheryl couldn't make sense of them.

How can they cost this much? It's not as if they'll enhance my strength like a powered suit. Or is it impossible to find shoes nice enough for this outfit without spending a fortune?

Sheryl planned to negotiate with many more people as she built up her gang. And she knew that first impressions—especially of clothing—could significantly sway the outcome. She wanted to go into her next meeting wearing the outfit Akira had given her. It might be cheap and a little too big for her, but, being a relic of the Old World, it would still lend significant weight to her bluffs. Yet she would need shoes of equal quality to achieve the full effect.

She could get around the size issue by explaining that the clothes were a gift from her hunter sweetheart. Her shoes, however, were inexcusable—her attempts to disguise their typical slum quality would fool no one. People would wonder why a hunter who cared enough to give her a set of Old World clothes would leave her in such shabby footwear when he could have given her a new pair to complete the outfit. But she couldn't beg Akira for Old World shoes, so she'd decided to provide herself with a suitable pair at her own expense. That was the purpose of today's shopping trip.

Sheryl went on agonizing over the problem, anxious to avoid being taken advantage of. She could technically afford the purchase—if she dipped into the two million she'd planned to give Akira. But she also had a gang to run, which meant that she didn't have the luxury of wasting a single aurum.

Akira had asked her to provide the children of the slums with decent meals and basic literacy. She had never had a way to repay his generosity before, so she had thrown herself into the work. But charity wasn't free, and she couldn't even call it an investment, since she had no reason to expect a return. To make matters worse, children who caught wind of the opportunity flocked to join her gang, adding to the expense. Even so, Sheryl couldn't stop—this was the one thing she could give back to Akira.

So, she asked herself gravely, did these shoes justify dipping into funds she needed for so much else? As she debated, the selection before her was replaced by yet another, even cheaper, assortment.

◆

While browsing with Alpha, Akira eyed a mannequin and the sample look it wore. Something about the display didn't seem to sit right with him.

What's the matter? Alpha asked.

Nothing really, he replied. *But this place is pretty fancy, right? So, those must be nice clothes.*

Yes, I suppose they must.

So, I mean, even I can tell that they're not like the clothes you get in the slums, but...I guess I expected more. I dunno how else to put it.

You mean that they don't seem particularly special, considering how much they cost?

Yeah, that's pretty much it. Why do you think that is? 'Cause I've got no fashion sense? Or maybe 'cause this is just a mannequin?

Maybe it will help if I model them for you. Alpha transformed her clothes into a copy of the mannequin's. Her sublime beauty and perfect figure showed the garments to better effect, but they still failed to move Akira.

I'm still not feeling these, he said. *They don't pack a punch like that time I ate at Stelliana.*

Well, that restaurant is on an upper floor of the Kugama Building for a reason—it's top-class even by the standards of the walled districts. I don't think that's

a fair comparison.

Maybe not, but I can't help it.

Akira looked at the prices. His reaction could be summed up in one word: "expensive." And while a meal at Stelliana was also costly, the feelings it inspired justified the hefty check. The clothes here lacked that spark. Of course, he knew that he couldn't simply compare food and apparel, but given the exorbitant price tags, he still felt that he should be able to feel *something* that set La Fantola's wares apart.

Alpha shifted into yet another ensemble. *What do you think of this, then?*

The outfit immediately struck Akira as sumptuous. Its design, like a cross between a dress and a military uniform, made the blue of its fabric pop. A three-layered slit skirt added a note of sex appeal without being crude.

Seems fine to me, he said. *I bet I could sell that for a good price if I found it in a ruin.* His mind was stuck in hunting mode—he was judging clothes by the standards he applied to relics—but he didn't notice.

If that's the only feeling this inspires in you, then it's too late. You've grown desensitized.

Desensitized? he echoed. *To what?*

To expensive Old World clothes.

Alpha explained that every item in her vast wardrobe was the very best the Old World had to offer. And because her clothing was entirely virtual, she could make the most lavish alterations without worrying about the cost of materials. The results left actual clothing in the dust—at least in terms of appearance. So constantly seeing Alpha dressed to the nines had desensitized Akira to luxurious garb, to the point that apparel on the lower end of fancy no longer made any impression on him. And because her style reflected the Old World, his sensibilities had also fallen out of step with current fads.

So, my fashion sense is *out of whack*, Akira grumbled, frowning even though her explanation seemed reasonable to him. He couldn't help wondering—a little nervously—if his sensibilities would eventually become even more warped in favor of Old World style. Would he get so used to outfits with underwear-

revealing gaps in the bust and hips that all other clothes would appear tacky to him?

Just then, Cascia appeared and said, “Sir, may I have a word?”

“Sure,” he replied. “Go ahead.”

“Pardon me, but would you mind telling me your budget for this visit? Your companion seems, well, quite concerned about price. I believe that we could suggest more appropriate items if you would provide us with at least a rough estimate.”

Sheryl hadn’t actually asked for something cheaper, but Cascia had been running a shop long enough to recognize the signs.

Akira immediately realized that she’d pegged him as a successful hunter out shopping with a girl he hoped to impress. She assumed that, while Sheryl would choose what to buy, he would be the one paying for it. And with the augmented vision Alpha provided him, he took in Sheryl’s expression at a glance. Her face bore the marks of intense inner conflict as she frowned worriedly down at the shoes on the table.

Although he could have corrected the shopkeeper’s mistake, Akira suddenly thought better of it. He considered briefly, then answered, “Give me a call if it looks like she’s going to go over a million aurum.”

For a moment, Cascia froze, stunned both by the amount and by his implication that it wasn’t a hard upper limit. At last, she said, “One million aurum, sir?”

“Yeah. I’ll pay with my hunter ID—although I can make a withdrawal if you only take cash.”

“No, we accept payment by hunter ID. May I have your card for confirmation?”

Many stores asked hunters to present their IDs in advance, since hunters were prone to losing the cards in the wasteland or damaging them in combat. Cascia, however, was asking so that she could confirm Akira’s ability to pay, and she hadn’t put much effort into disguising that fact. A short-tempered hunter might have flown into a rage, taking her request as an insinuation that she

didn’t think he had that kind of money. Cascia would never normally have been so careless—it showed how shaken she was. Nevertheless, she managed to quickly fix a pleasant smile on her face and feign composure.

To her secret relief, Akira presented his ID without a fuss. She took it, scanned it with her store terminal, and checked the result.

“I apologize for the inconvenience,” she said, returning Akira’s ID with the brightest smile she could muster. “I promise to present your companion with the best possible selection for your budget. If you need anything, please don’t hesitate to mention it.” She bowed courteously in parting.

What did you say that for? Alpha asked, giving Akira a bemused look.

Huh? Oh, you know. Akira reckoned that it couldn’t hurt to double-check his sense of fashion and see what clothes were going for, as well as determining the value of Old World garments as both commodities and relics. Such experience could serve him well in his career as a hunter down the road. So he’d decided to spend a little to test his theory. Only, for better or worse, Akira’s financial sensibilities had grown by orders of magnitude—including his definition of “a little.”

◆

Cascia left Akira and went straight into her shop’s employees-only back room. There, she exchanged her customer service smile for a businesswoman’s glee and cried, “Selene! Are you awake?”

Cascia’s younger sister rose groggily from the nap area. “Don’t shout like that, sis,” she grumbled, scowling. “You know I was up working all night.”

“Never mind that! Change your clothes, make yourself presentable, and get out there with me as soon as you can!”

“*You’re* supposed to be on customer duty right now, remember? So let me sleep—I can barely keep my eyes open.”

“Just hurry up! And I told you to call me ‘ma’am’ when we’re in the shop!”

With a muttered “Ugh,” Selene reluctantly began changing into the clothes she wore when dealing with customers. Cascia rushed back to the sales area as

soon as she felt certain that her sister wouldn't just return to bed.

◆

After much grim-faced deliberation, Sheryl was finally about to make a decision. The selection offered to her had grown slightly less expensive each time it was refreshed, but those replacements had stopped a while ago. She took that to mean that she was now looking at the most affordable shoes in the store.

More delays won't help me! she decided. *I've got to make up my mind!*

Three pairs of shoes sat on the table before her—all big-ticket items, as far as she was concerned.

I'll buy one of these! I can't afford more! But which?! How about these?!

But no sooner had Sheryl set her sights on the pair of her choice than Cascia whisked it off the table, removing it from the running. While she looked on in bewilderment, the other shoes likewise vanished, to be replaced by a fresh selection.

Sheryl inspected the new arrivals, thinking that the store must have carried something cheaper after all. Then she gave a start—these were clearly luxury items, in a different price range than anything she'd seen so far.

"E-Excuse me," she said, "I really, um, appreciate you showing me these, but—"

"Miss, please forgive me for offering you such a poor selection," Cascia cut in before she could finish her request to see the last set of shoes again. To Sheryl's consternation, the shopkeeper continued apologetically, "Although I realize it was indiscreet, in order to better meet your needs, I took the liberty of asking your companion to estimate your budget for this visit."

Sheryl soon realized that Cascia was talking about Akira, but that only exacerbated her confusion. What did he have to do with it?

"I sincerely regret that we can only offer you items worth far less than you are prepared to spend, but we nonetheless have every confidence in the quality of our selection. Now, if you'll excuse me, I will be right back with some other

options as well.” Cascia beamed at Sheryl, then bustled off to replace the comparatively inexpensive shoes she’d removed from the table with more of her finest products.

Sheryl was left in a bewildered daze. As soon as she recovered, she began combing the store for Akira, who she hoped would tell her what was going on.

Akira had found the men’s undergarments. Picking up a pair, he felt mildly impressed that even the packaging was nothing like the cheap pairs he was used to. This was more in line with what he expected from a classy boutique.

Maybe I should at least buy new underwear, he mused.

I won’t stop you, but I wouldn’t recommend wearing it under your suit, Alpha cautioned. *Unless it’s made tough for hunters, you’ll wear it out in no time.*

Guess not, then. Akira returned the package to the shelf, figuring that his money would be better spent improving the quality of his wasteland outfit than on luxury items he’d only don around the house.

Then Sheryl appeared, looking flustered.

“Something wrong?” he asked.

“Not exactly,” she replied. “But, well, would you mind joining me over there?”

Puzzled, Akira followed Sheryl to the table of sumptuous footwear, wondering if anything had gone awry with the payment.

By the time Akira finished explaining what had happened, Sheryl wore a slight frown. She could accept that Cascia had presumed he would be paying, and that he had not only gone along with her assumption but had set a rather high figure to ensure that the shopkeeper wouldn’t show Sheryl only her lowest-end goods. But then Akira added that he really wouldn’t mind paying for her. She didn’t even have to pay him back if she didn’t want to, and he’d let her take her time if she did.

“Well, that would be a tremendous help,” Sheryl admitted hesitantly. “But are you really sure?”

“Yeah,” Akira replied, as carefree as she was cautious. “You’re buying this stuff to support your gang, right? I don’t really get how that’s gonna work, but I’ll help out. Think of it as payback for the big favors I asked you to do for me.”

Sheryl hesitated, but only briefly. Her mind made up, she gave Akira her best smile and said, “Very well. I think I’ll take you up on that generous offer.” Why couldn’t he give it to her, at least in part, as a gift to a girlfriend? She tried to look on the bright side—he was actively investing in her gang, after all. She was already indebted to him many times over, and if she hoped to pay him back with interest someday, she would need all the seed money she could get.

In any event, the more Akira invested in her, the more he would eventually want in return. Those expectations would strengthen the ties that bound them, making it harder for the hunter to cut her loose on a whim. So Sheryl put herself even deeper in his debt, determined to keep their relationship intact no matter what form it took.

◆

Once Selene was dressed up to meet customers, she joined her sister-slash-boss in bringing Sheryl the most costly items in the store. She still wasn’t quite awake, but when she saw Cascia’s enthusiastic salesmanship, how seriously Sheryl studied the goods presented to her, and Akira’s expensive-looking powered suit, the wheels in her head began to turn.

Hmm... Cascia’s laying it on a little thick, even for a hunter who does seem like he’s loaded.

For relic hunters, striking it rich overnight was a real possibility. And even with those who didn’t catapult themselves into the ranks of the ultrarich, suddenly having more money than they knew how to use wisely easily warped their spending habits. Others lost all sense of the value of currency due to the astronomical cost of their equipment, or spent lavishly to relieve stress after close calls in the wasteland. Some even became addicted to the pleasure of wasting huge sums to show off.

Naturally, such hunters made extremely good customers. But by the same token, it was difficult to rely on them for repeat business. Given their profession, they might die at any time.

What if a shopkeeper devoted their energy to securing a particularly munificent hunter as a regular customer, reckoning that the eventual benefits would more than justify a few short-term losses? Even if they succeeded, that hunter might always die the next day, rendering all their efforts wasted. Arms merchants and other businessmen who regularly dealt with hunters knew how to hedge against such risks, but the typical business owner found striking the right balance challenging. Most shops of this sort, therefore, did their best to make the most out of each transaction with a hunter, without expecting it to lead to more.

Selene knew all this, so Cascia's attitude didn't strike her as all that unusual. She assumed that her sister wouldn't have insisted she put in an appearance unless they had a good reason to give these customers special treatment. And since she left the business decisions to Cascia, she didn't dwell on it.

But then she finally woke up completely and took a close look at Sheryl's outfit.

Hang on, are those Old World clothes? They don't fit her, though.

Selene frowned slightly in spite of herself. The girl had dressed to hide the fact that the items were too big for her—arguably distorting the designer's intent. And as a clothing designer herself, Selene couldn't help feeling bothered.

After resuming her customer service smile, she suggested, "If you like, miss, I could tailor your clothes for a better fit while you make your selections. How does that sound?"

Akira was the first to respond. "Will that be okay?"

"Selene is an excellent seamstress," Cascia cut in, cheerful, confident, and eager to assuage the doubts of her paying customer. "As the owner of this establishment, I can recommend her with complete sincerity. Her work is sure to satisfy you."

Selene, who had interpreted the question differently, sighed and said, "I realize that your companion is wearing products of the Old World—relics, in other words. You're right that even simple size adjustments may cause some to regard them as present-day goods and reduce their value as relics. Altering the design would carry an even greater risk of that. If you consider the garments

primarily as assets, I can't recommend it."

Cascia's smile became somewhat strained as she fixed Selene with a look that demanded, *Why are you discouraging them? You're the one who suggested tailoring!*

Reading her mind with the kind of fluency only possible from years of working together, Selene retorted with a look of her own, *Why aren't* you *the one warning them, then, "ma'am"? What if they don't realize and come after us for damages later?*

I-If you're worried about that, then you should let me decide what services to offer them in the first place!

Then, what did you wake me up for?!

Sheryl, meanwhile, had a different concern. Akira was a hunter like any other. So although he'd given her these relics as gifts, she worried that anything she did to lower their value might still offend him.

"What do you think, Akira?" she asked, hoping to sound him out on the subject.

"I don't care how much the relics are worth," he answered. "They're yours, so you can do whatever you want with them. But what'll you wear while you get them altered? Doing anything major to clothes has to take a while, right?" This had been more or less the extent of his initial question, although he did also wonder, among other things, how much the tailoring would cost.

The same doubts belatedly dawned on Sheryl. If the work took multiple days, she would need to visit the boutique again to pick up her clothes. But she had nothing else to wear on that return trip—in slum clothes, she risked being chased off before she even reached the store. And while she could ask Akira to accompany her again, she wanted to avoid troubling him too often.

Observing the pair, Selene concluded that they didn't seem to mind the loss of value, so she offered a new suggestion. "If it's a change of clothes you're worried about, why not try on something from our store while you wait? If I start measuring now, I should have your outfit ready by this evening."

Sheryl thought it over and asked Akira to accompany her until then. He

agreed, so she went ahead and ordered the alterations. The cost had yet to be determined—Selene would study the Old World garments in detail and draw up a quote before proceeding further.

◆

Selene showed Sheryl into her workroom at the rear of the store. After taking all the measurements she needed, she handed her customer off to Cascia, who led Sheryl back to the front room. Then Selene took another good look at the clothes she would be working with, down to the least detail. The sisters had dressed Sheryl in one of their finest outfits—which they hoped the girl would decide to buy—but Selene doubted whether their best was worth as much as these.

In terms of design, the ensemble was slightly out of step with current trends. Yet its finely wrought fabric and all other material components were products of incredible technology. The designers of that age had put their very best into these clothes, and the resulting quality convinced Selene that these were indeed creations of the Old World. Thrilled to be working on such apparel, she started considering how she would alter them.

Sheryl had asked Selene to completely remake the garments—if resizing would reduce their value as relics anyway, then she preferred to change up their design as well. And once Selene touched her cutter to the cloth, there would be no turning back. She needed to plan exactly what she would alter—and how much she would charge for it—before she began.

Once she arrived at a general idea, it was time to puzzle out the details. So puzzle she did—and then puzzled some more. After one more round of intense puzzling for good measure, Selene reached out and called Cascia on her store terminal.

◆

Back on the sales floor, Cascia showed Sheryl a variety of other clothing. So far, however, Sheryl had made no contributions to the boutique's bottom line—not on account of the prices, but due to Akira's muted reactions.

She modeled every outfit suggested to her, pausing each time to observe the response. Erio and Aricia liked everything she tried. The boutique dealt in

luxuries, and Cascia was directing her to its finest items, so the slum children were simply wowed by all they saw. Akira, however, never showed the remotest sign of enthusiasm. So Sheryl kept passing up outfits and asking Cascia for others to try on.

The girl would have liked praise from Akira, but what she really wanted right now were clothes that would impress people and give her the upper hand in negotiations. And although Akira's offer to pay had practically eliminated her spending limit, buying clothes that were merely expensive wouldn't do the trick. To successfully negotiate with a wide range of people, she needed something that even untrained eyes would recognize as high-class, but that would also strike a chord with experts accustomed to haute couture. Sheryl didn't believe her own fashion sense was up to that task—especially since she had never purchased anything even approaching this price point—so she wanted her companions' reactions as a barometer.

But Erio and Aricia wouldn't be much help—the praise of slum children told her nothing useful. She couldn't take Cascia's responses at face value either, since the shopkeeper was motivated to butter up her customers in order to make sales. If Sheryl put too much faith in her flattery, she might end up buying an outfit with only a large price tag to recommend it. So she focused on Akira.

Although Akira had started out as a slum dweller like Sheryl, he had already risen so high in the world that he could handle 150 million aurum—a fortune—without batting an eye. If he was unimpressed, it might very well be because he was a connoisseur. So Sheryl modeled one set of clothes after another, looking for some sign from Akira that would justify the sum she planned to spend on negotiating clothes.

Cascia realized what Sheryl was thinking and devised a plan. "Sir," she said to Akira, "would you care to trade places with me and choose an outfit for your companion?"

"Me?" Akira asked, startled.

"Try as I might, my best suggestions don't seem to satisfy her. So, as much as I hate to admit it, persisting in this approach will only tire her out. What do you say? It will at least offer her a change of pace." Cascia was cordial yet insistent.

She reasoned that if Sheryl were basing her decisions on Akira's reactions, then she couldn't ignore anything he picked out for her. And once Sheryl made even a single purchase, no matter how small, it would become easier to steer her into making more.

"I dunno..." Akira hedged. He had no confidence in his fashion sense, so he tried to signal that Sheryl would be better off choosing her own clothes—until her expectant gaze shut him up.

Sheryl was on board for several reasons, all of which showed through in her expression. She was willing to take an outfit that might prove a poor fit for negotiations as long as Akira chose it for her. She was also just plain thrilled to wear something he'd selected for her. And if he picked out anything truly bizarre, she could always decide not to buy it in the end.

Erio and Aricia watched Akira with interest too, leaving him feeling like he had nowhere left to run. Then Alpha threw him a lifeline.

Would you like me *to choose, Akira?* she offered.

Would you? Thanks, Akira replied. Then, a moment later, *Wait, what kind of outfit are you gonna pick?!* He didn't want her to select something in line with the Old World tastes that informed her own wardrobe.

But Alpha laughed off his concern. *Don't worry! I only have this store to choose from. Nothing on these shelves is going to look like what you're afraid of.*

I guess not, he grudgingly admitted. *Okay, then. Go ahead.*

I won't disappoint!

Reassured by Alpha's confident smile, Akira said, "Okay, Sheryl. Give me a second to pick something out."

"Thank you. I appreciate it," she replied, delighted—and blissfully unaware that Alpha would be making the actual decision.

Akira made a circuit of the sales floor, assembling a complete outfit for Sheryl. To anyone watching, he appeared to merely glance at the merchandise before grabbing an item at random. Cascia, who had followed him to offer any advice he might need, wasn't sure what to make of it. Even an amateur with no eye for

fashion would show at least some hesitation when faced with so much choice, but Akira's short, efficient movements betrayed none whatsoever.

Sheryl joyfully accepted the clothes and was about to vanish into the changing room when, to her surprise, an uncertain-looking Akira said, "I can help you put them on, if you'd like. Would you?"

"Yes, please!" Sheryl answered enthusiastically, before he had a chance to change his mind. She hadn't expected such an offer from Akira, but she certainly welcomed it.

Akira froze for a split second. Then he gave a small sigh and accompanied Sheryl into the changing room. Something about his manner seemed to say that, since she hadn't refused, he had no choice.

Helping customers change was normally Cascia's job. But since Akira had taken her place, she waited outside with Erio and Aricia. Akira was the first to emerge, followed by Sheryl in her new outfit.

"Wh-What do you think?" she asked.

Sheryl looked lovely, although not in the cute or charming way expected of a girl her age. The clothes created a sense of demure propriety, yet subtly hinted at feminine charm beyond her years. They even seemed to possess a refined sharpness that made her beauty shine even brighter. And the faint, embarrassed flush in her cheeks stirred admiration and sympathy alike in all who saw her.

"You look wonderful," Cascia replied, entirely without flattery.

At the same time, she struggled to hide her surprise. *How could clothes chosen so haphazardly bring out her potential so well, even if they did come from my store?* she wondered. As the owner of a fashionable boutique, she felt that Akira had shown her up somewhat by coordinating her wares in a way that she had never thought to suggest. Nevertheless, she mentally praised his acumen.

Erio and Aricia also responded with greater enthusiasm than they had to any outfit thus far.

Even Akira looked Sheryl over in the clothes he had supposedly chosen and

said, “Yeah, I’d say that’s pretty nice. What do you think, Sheryl?” Faint praise, but it was definitely *something*.

“Yes, I love it!” Sheryl replied. “I can’t tell you how happy I am.”

“Yeah? I’m glad you like it.”

“Thank you *so* much for choosing this wonderful outfit for me.” Sheryl then turned to Cascia and added, “I’d like to start by buying these.”

“What? O-Oh, yes, of course! Thank you for your purchase,” Cascia replied, swiftly regaining her composure and her pleasant smile. Then, right as she psyched herself up to make even more sales, she got a call from Selene.

“If you’ll excuse me, I’ll just pop over to check on the tailoring. I’ll be back in a moment.” Cascia departed, inwardly fuming at her sister’s poor timing—although she let none of her frustration show.

Sheryl looked elated. Akira had not only chosen an outfit for her but also complimented her in it—a dream come true! And Akira himself felt quite pleased to see her so taken with his gift.

Well? Alpha demanded, noting his good humor with a smug grin. *Is my fashion sense amazing or what?*

It’s amazing all right, Akira admitted, *although I thought you were just going to point out what clothes she should wear, not how she should wear them. I got stuck dressing her because of that, you know?*

That’s all part of fashion sense. Anyway, she didn’t seem to mind, so why complain?

Because I *mind.*

Oh, come on. You’ve already taken a bath with her!

Unable to argue the point, Akira fell silent. Then he took another look at Sheryl. He really did like her outfit. So, he reflected with relief, although his fashion sense might be dull, it had not yet been wholly corrupted.

◆

Cascia returned to Selene’s work room, expecting to find the alterations

already well underway. But although Selene had completed her preparations, she was holding off on doing anything more.

"What gives?" Cascia demanded irritably. "I thought you called me because you ran into a snag, but you haven't even started yet. I was on a roll out there!"

"Sorry, ma'am, but I want your input," Selene replied. "This is a decision for a businesswoman, not a seamstress."

"What do you mean?"

"I'm asking you whether I should really go ahead with remaking these garments."

"What? Yes! Get to it!"

"Hear me out first. Then, if you're still on board, I'll get to work."

Seeing that Selene looked both serious and professional, Cascia became equally earnest. "All right," she said. "Tell me what's on your mind."

"First," Selene announced, "just resizing these will cost three hundred thousand aurum."

"Three hundred thousand? Remaking them from the ground up shouldn't come to that much!"

"They're from the Old World, remember. That bumps up the price a *lot*. The quality of the fabric is so high that even adjusting the measurements takes top-notch materials and skill."

"I see. Charging so much for a simple resizing certainly would be a problem. But you agreed to completely remake the garments, remember? Can't you find a workaround?"

"That will cost 1,500,000 aurum."

For a moment, Cascia was speechless. Then, "Did you say a *million and a half*?! Selene, tell me you're joking!"

"I don't joke about tailoring," Selene retorted.

Seeing her sister's annoyance restored Cascia's composure. "All right," she relented. "I'm sorry. But please, give me more detail. Are you saying that we

should only resize the garments after all, since more extensive alterations will cost too much?”

“Personally, that’s exactly what I *wouldn’t* recommend.” Selene went on to explain why she needed the owner to make this call.

Selene could simply resize the clothes to fit Sheryl, but she had serious qualms about the outfit that would result. The clothes had been designed for an adult and to suit Old World tastes. Merely cutting them down to child size would ruin the design. And while Sheryl had more or less pulled off wearing the oversized garments, she wouldn’t be able to apply the same skill when they fit her exactly. In other words, Selene would be taking time and money to render the clothes less valuable not only as relics, but as fashion. She would do that if ordered to, but as a professional, she couldn’t advise it.

When it came to remaking the garments, design wasn’t an issue—but quality was. The fabrics were simply too good. Only the finest materials would hold up beside them, and Selene *would* need to add material if she were to adapt the clothes to current fashions. Working with such high-end materials also required an equally high degree of skill—which Selene refused to sell cheaply. That was another factor raising the price. So, although she favored this course, she had held off on starting work because she didn’t know if the customer would agree to pay for it.

“So, what’ll it be, ma’am?” she concluded. “I don’t want to take money for tailoring no one will be happy with, especially since it won’t be cheap, and I doubt he’ll drop a million and a half aurum for the full course. So if you ask me, our best bet is to give the clothes back and tell them we’re sorry.”

“He did say to ask him if the bill was about to go over a million aurum,” Cascia mused. “Still, it *would* be tricky.”

“He actually said that?! No wonder you were so worked up!”

While Selene gaped in shock, Cascia pondered. Eventually, the proprietress said, “Selene, what do *you* want to do?”

“Huh? If it were up to me, I’d say give me the million and a half.”

Cascia considered. “All right. It can’t hurt to ask.”

“Wait, seriously?” Selene goggled at her sister. She’d expected this to end with the two of them bowing apologetically to their customers.

“I’d do almost anything to make this place a success,” Cascia said sternly, “but I won’t leave your sewing skills to rot.”

Selene gave a start at this earnest declaration. Then she broke into a smile. “Thanks, sis.”

“Remember, I’m only going to ask! If they say no, you’ll have to live with that!” Cascia snapped, scowling to hide her embarrassment. “And it’s ‘ma’am’ while we’re at work!”

“Yes, ma’am! I’m counting on you!” Selene called cheerfully as her sister went back to face Akira.

◆

“Sure,” Akira replied offhandedly once Cascia had explained the situation to him. “I’ll pay a million and a half on top of the million I already okayed.”

The boutique owner couldn’t conceal her astonishment and confusion. Despite what she’d told her sister, she’d seriously doubted that the hunter would agree to such costly alterations. But she’d still been determined to make an effort and had come prepared to argue her case.

She hadn’t needed to.

Nevertheless, she soon covered her shock with a winning smile. “Thank you very much, sir. As we are dealing with precious Old World relics on this occasion, we cannot accept cancelations once scissors have touched the fabric. We must also request payment in full before we begin work. Will that be an issue?”

“Nope. Here.” Akira pulled out his hunter ID without hesitation.

Cascia took it and processed the payment without giving away how nervous she really felt. “I am truly grateful that you think so highly of our seamstress.” Hesitantly, she added, “Would you mind telling why you agreed to pay such a substantial amount on the spot? To be perfectly frank, I had anticipated that you would at least attempt to negotiate.”

Akira considered, although not deeply. “I figured, if that’s what it costs to hire a professional, then who am I to argue? It’s like maintaining and repairing my gear—I don’t want to deal with faulty work just because I cheaped out and cut corners. So when someone tells me what a service will cost, I see it as a yes or no choice.”

“You don’t say, sir?”

Cascia took another look at what Akira was wearing. Although it was technically apparel—her specialty—she was no expert in powered suits. Even to her untrained eye, however, his looked costly. She reflected that, despite his apparent youth, he must have been both skilled and experienced to afford it. That would explain why he viewed tailoring in terms of his own profession.

And speaking of which... “You mentioned maintaining your equipment,” Cascia ventured. “May I ask how much you paid for what you’re wearing now? Merely to satisfy my professional curiosity—I do specialize in clothing, after all, though of a somewhat different kind.”

“This? Well, I bought it as part of a set. The suit on its own cost, er... Give me a sec.” Akira struggled to remember.

“Oh, I don’t need the exact figure,” Cascia reassured him. “I’m simply interested, so an estimate or the price of the whole set will do.”

“Okay, then. The whole set cost eighty million aurum.”

Cascia fought hard not to do a spit take and only barely succeeded. Akira had spoken indifferently, but the sum he’d named was astronomical. But she had her pride as a saleswoman, so she swallowed her surprise, smiled ingratiatingly, and said, “Thank you for satisfying my curiosity. Hunters certainly do spend a lot on equipment. Now, if you’ll excuse me for a moment, I’ll just pop into the back and tell my seamstress to begin work on your order.”

Cascia departed, reminding herself that she couldn’t afford to embarrass herself in front of a customer. She managed to keep her expression under control until she got clear of the sales floor.

Back in the work room, Cascia finally blurted out, “Selene! He said yes! One

and a half *million* aurum!”

“What?! You’re joking!” Selene exclaimed in spite of herself. While she’d appreciated her sister’s zeal, she hadn’t really believed it would pay off.

“I never lie about business!”

“Oh, right!”

The sisters laughed together for some time before their excitement subsided. Selene got over it first and exhaled—too much mirth was exhausting.

“So, how’d you talk them into it?” she asked, starting to worry that Cascia might have accepted some kind of catch. She found it hard to believe that her sister could be *that* persuasive.

“I explained the situation, and he just said yes,” Cascia replied, calming down as well. “Then I casually asked that hunter what his gear cost, and he said *eighty million* aurum. I suppose one and a half million doesn’t seem like much compared to that.”

“So much?! I guess successful hunters really do spend a fortune on equipment. Go on, ma’am. Get out there and seduce him!”

“Stop talking nonsense and get to work. That hunter thinks your expertise is worth one and a half million, so you’d better live up to his expectations. I’m not kidding.”

“Don’t worry. I don’t need *you* to tell me to take this seriously.”

Seeing Selene fired up over her first big job in ages, Cascia smiled from the heart.

Chapter 75: Katsuya and Sheryl

Sheryl's shopping trip to the boutique La Fantola hadn't come to an end when she'd ordered the alterations for the Old World clothes Akira had given her. Erio was now feverishly picking out an outfit for Aricia. As they were more or less officers in Sheryl's gang, the pair would need to look the part. Yet at present, they still dressed like slum kids.

As a fighter, Erio could get by renting gear from Katsuragi, but Aricia didn't have that luxury. And since even the cheapest clothes in the boutique were opulent by slum standards, Sheryl had decided to make the most of this opportunity and buy her something out of the gang's coffers. Erio was thrilled to dress up his girlfriend, and Aricia found his antics entertaining.

Akira was observing the two of them from a table where he sat chatting with Sheryl when, out of the blue, Alpha said, *Why don't you take a moment to top off your ammo supply? We have plenty of time until the alterations are finished.*

Now? he asked.

Yes, now.

Can't it wait? I'm not exactly running low, and it's not like I'm going to the wasteland after this.

Don't procrastinate. It's important to take care of these problems as soon as you think of them.

But I just visited Cartridge Freak the other day. If I make another trip so soon, Shizuka will wonder what I'm doing to burn through so much ammo. So I'd be better off waiting—unless you know a reason to hurry? Akira trusted Alpha's advice enough that any justification she gave would have convinced him to go.

But Alpha replied simply, *None.*

So, it can *wait?* he asked, nonplussed.

If you say so.

Akira didn't dwell on their strange conversation, but Alpha soon piped up with

another suggestion: *Why don't we go sell Shizuka some relics? She told you that she'll buy Old World clothing, remember? Let's bring her what you've got left at home.*

That can wait too, he retorted. *What's gotten into you?*

I just thought that, since you bought such expensive clothes, you might as well sell some to make up the difference. I don't know why you decided to spend two and a half million aurum, but you'll eventually run out of money unless you turn a profit on your relics.

Er, well, I did have a reason, Akira answered defensively, thinking that he was being admonished for wasteful spending. *I wanted to find out if my fashion sense was just dull, or hopelessly screwed up. Being more aware of that stuff will come in handy next time I sell Old World clothes—or at least, that was the idea. I mean, I guess you could say I did it to satisfy my own curiosity, but is that really such a big deal?*

In that case, Akira, I think selling clothes to Shizuka would help you answer that question.

Good point. I'll bring some with me next time I go for ammo.

You know, some people say it's lucky to get things done as soon as you think of them.

Akira pondered this. *I didn't think of it, though*, he argued. *You did. And you don't care about luck and stuff, do you?*

No, I don't.

See? So, let's save it for later.

If you say so.

Akira was starting to find Alpha's behavior suspicious. He couldn't explain it, however, so he merely wondered. But then she began another suggestion.

Akira—

Seriously, Alpha, what's with you today? he demanded.

Why don't you ask if they buy Old World clothing here? she finished. *It can't*

hurt to find more buyers.

Okay, Akira replied slowly, *I'll ask.* He felt bad about rejecting too many of Alpha's suggestions in a row. Besides, having more outlets for his goods really wouldn't be a terrible idea. So he told Sheryl to excuse him for a moment and went to talk to Cascia, who was helping Erio and Aricia pick out clothes.

Cascia answered that although she didn't deal in relics per se, she would purchase Old World clothing depending on its quality. In essence, she would treat the relics solely as vintage apparel. Naturally, such transactions would neither appear on Akira's Hunter Office resume nor contribute to his hunter rank. But if he didn't mind that, then she was willing to do business.

Akira thanked her and was just about to rejoin Sheryl when Alpha spoke up again. *Why don't you try selling her some articles now?*

You mean go home and bring something back? he asked.

Why not? You're just killing time until the alterations are done, so use that time effectively.

Well, okay, Akira reluctantly agreed. Alpha's behavior had been bugging him for a little while now, but he couldn't bring himself to confront her about it.

He paid Cascia everything he currently owed her, explaining that he would step out to fetch some Old World clothing. Then, after letting Sheryl know what was up, he left the store.

Outside, he looked around, trying to remember how to get home.

Come on, Akira, Alpha called, cheerfully leading the way.

Huh? Are you sure that's right? he asked doubtfully. She seemed to be going in completely the wrong direction.

But Alpha simply laughed. *It's a better route, accounting for traffic. Let's go.*

After a moment of hesitation, Akira said, *Okay*, and set off after her. But he still looked puzzled as he headed home.

◆

Sheryl regretted Akira's departure. He'd said that he wouldn't be gone long,

but losing this rare chance for a friendly chat made her sigh nonetheless. Even so, she was in a good mood, so she smiled and struck a few subtle poses in front of a nearby mirror.

Most of the time, Sheryl looked in mirrors merely to inspect her appearance—a valuable negotiating tool that she'd worked hard to refine. Viewing her reflection also made it easier to assess herself objectively. But when she saw herself dressed up in the clothes Akira had chosen for her, her feigned smile became genuine. She couldn't help it.

Good, she thought, *I should have no trouble negotiating in this. Maybe the way I stand needs a little work?*

She tried on a variety of postures and expressions, seeking combinations that would trick people into seeing her as someone with enough clout to afford her clothes, someone used to a life of luxury—someone who definitely was not a girl from the slums. But that, too, quickly devolved into savoring the outfit as a gift from her boyfriend. The deeper she fell into her revery, the more a dopey grin spread across her face—until she caught sight of it in the mirror and snapped back to reality.

"Oops," Sheryl muttered, restoring the elegant smile that she'd crafted with such diligent practice.

Then a chime announced the arrival of a new customer. Hoping that Akira had returned, Sheryl instinctively turned her beaming face toward the door. But the newcomers were a boy and two girls—Katsuya, Yumina, and Airi.

◆

Katsuya was browsing the lower district's shops with Yumina and Airi—or rather, they were dragging him along. His neat, trim attire was lightweight hunting gear, but it didn't call to mind the constant violence of the wasteland—merely suggested a fashionable hint of it. Yumina and Airi seemed exuberant in their everyday wear, like any other girls their age who had done their best to dress up.

Cascia looked them over and judged them acceptable customers. "Thank you for choosing La Fantola," she greeted them, with her usual winning smile. "How may we help you today?"

The sudden question flustered Airi, who'd been overawed by the atmosphere of the boutique and was already a little on edge.

Yumina also thought the shop looked expensive, but being naturally plucky, she didn't feel particularly unnerved. "We'd, um, like to take a look around at the clothes here," she answered for her teammate. "Is that okay?"

"Of course," Cascia replied. "I'll be here if you need me, so please don't hesitate to call for me if any of our wares meet with your approval."

The girls wanted to jump right into browsing, but Katsuya grumbled tiredly, "Come on, Yumina, don't you think it's time for a break?"

"What do you mean?" Yumina retorted. "We just got here. How lazy can you be?"

"Lazy? This is the *fifth* store today! And you only walk around all of them without buying anything."

"It's not our fault we didn't find any clothes we liked. Stop whining and keep up. Remember, you promised to stick with us all day today because you owe us one."

Yumina smiled cheerfully, even as she dredged up old debts. Katsuya was accompanying the girls to make up for his incendiary remarks when he'd clashed with Akira over Lucia. By needlessly antagonizing Akira, he had nearly plunged them into a firefight.

"Yeah, yeah. I remember." Katsuya resigned himself and grinned back. He recognized that they would all have been in danger if Yumina hadn't smoothed things over, so he'd meant to do his best to humor her today—but he found her enthusiasm a little overwhelming.

Of course, he did enjoy going out with two girls he was so close to. He complimented them every time one of them tried on a new outfit, and he had fun picking out clothes and accessories with them. But by the fifth store, it was getting exhausting. He felt like he could use a break.

"I should've thought harder about my gear," he muttered. "Maybe a pistol would've been good enough."

Even Katsuya knew better than to join his female friends on a shopping trip fully kitted out in his powered suit, like he was headed into the wasteland. Nevertheless, he'd figured that he ought to bring *some* combat gear in case things went south and he needed to protect them. So he'd borrowed a lightweight powered suit designed to be unintimidating and covered it up with a jacket. He also carried a bulky rifle meant for combat in the wasteland.

But since this wasn't a hunting expedition, he would need to pay for energy packs out of his own pocket. So he'd switched off his powered suit to avoid wasting energy—and now he was feeling its weight. Traipsing merrily around the lower district in this getup had slowly sapped his strength. Not that he'd told Yumina and Airi this. *It's only shopping*, he'd figured. *How bad could it be?* But by the time they entered La Fantola, his fatigue was coming to a head.

"What's the matter, Katsuya?" Yumina asked worriedly, noticing his exhaustion. "I'm sorry, have you been going along with us while feeling under the weather?"

"Oh, er, well..."

Katsuya swallowed his pride and came clean, earning him exasperated looks from his companions.

"Seriously, Katsuya?" Yumina demanded.

"You don't need a powered suit in a shopping district this close to the walls," Airi added. "And you shouldn't wear one on a date, anyway."

Katsuya laughed to cover his faux pas. The girls joined in and let it slide—they understood he'd bothered to weigh himself down with gear for their sakes.

"Oh well," Yumina said. "I guess you'd better take a breather."

"Sorry," Katsuya replied. "I'll go sit at one of those tables for a bit. Holler if you need me for anything."

Just as he started to leave, Yumina called, "Katsuya!"

He turned to see her and Airi smiling at him.

"We're happy you wanted to protect us. Thanks," Yumina said a little bashfully. Airi nodded in agreement.

Katsuya grinned to mask his embarrassment, then hurried off to take a break.

◆

La Fantola had two tables, each of which could seat four. Katsuya glanced at one of them when he got closer, looking for a place to rest. A boy and girl (Erio and Aricia) were already sitting there. They were so obviously a couple that he couldn't bring himself to intrude on their intimacy, even though there were still open seats at their table.

So he turned to the other table, where only one person was waiting. "Do you, um, mind if I sit here?"

"Not at all," Sheryl replied, giving him an elegant smile that suggested she was the daughter of some prestigious family.

Katsuya froze in the act of pulling out a chair, dazzled in spite of himself. Sheryl was a natural beauty, and through tireless effort had perfected her entrancing expression. Although she only used samples, the slight regenerative properties of her costly soaps had rejuvenated her skin and hair until they shone. And Alpha had flawlessly coordinated her outfit. The combined effect of all this pierced Katsuya's heart. If someone had told him that she was an affluent resident of the walled districts visiting a lower-district shop out of curiosity, he would have believed them without question.

"Aren't you going to take a seat?" Sheryl asked, puzzled by his sudden pause.

"Huh? Oh, yes, I will." Katsuya snapped back to reality and somewhat awkwardly sat down.

Sheryl bobbed her head to him and smiled again. He returned her smile nervously.

Sheryl felt Katsuya staring at her more than once after he arrived at her table, but not in an unpleasant way. She had no problem with an attractive boy admiring her, especially in the clothes that Akira had picked out for her. After a while, however, his constant glances started to grate on her. She waited for him to strike up a conversation, but Katsuya held his peace.

At last, Sheryl decided that she would have to take matters into her own

hands. “Are you out shopping with friends today?” she asked, friendly and cheerful.

Belatedly, Katsuya merely replied, “Huh?”

“I only ask because it appeared as though you arrived with a group.”

“O-Oh, right. Yeah, I’m with friends.”

“Is that so? Do you frequent this neighborhood?”

“D-Do I...? Oh, well, often enough, I guess?”

Sheryl enjoyed seeing the reactions she could get out of Katsuya with only a look and a smile. He was almost comically receptive to her charms. At the same time, she thought, *If only Akira would give me signs as clear as this. Maybe I really am doing something wrong. Or was it just my clothes that were holding me back? He seemed to like seeing me in this outfit, so I might have a real shot with him now.*

She decided to test her theory on the boy sitting across from her.

“Would you mind telling me a little about this part of town?” she asked. “You see, this is actually my first visit.”

How far could she get this boy to fall for her? Sheryl thought the experiment would make a good test of her skill and help her to kill time until her escort got back. So she turned on the charm as if she were talking to Akira and said, “My name is Sheryl. Would you kindly tell me yours?”

“I...I’m Katsuya.”

“Katsuya? What a lovely name!”

Katsuya blushed and grinned awkwardly, looking maybe even a little shaken. Sheryl took note of his reactions even as she gave a cheerful yet elegant smile.

◆

Yumina was with Airi, checking out clothes. She took a garment off a shelf, unfurled it to get a good look, and found she liked the design. Then she checked the price tag and summed up her thoughts in a single “Whoa!” After returning the garment to its place, she added, “These are nice, but they’re as pricey as I

was afraid they'd be."

"What do you expect at such a high-end place?" Airi said, nodding in agreement. "Still, I bet they have something that'll impress Katsuya."

"You're probably right. And I doubt we can afford to shop anywhere fancier than this, so we might as well look around a little more."

Although they had visited several other clothing stores before La Fantola, they had yet to buy anything—Katsuya hadn't seemed particularly impressed by what they'd tried on. Sure, he'd complimented them on how they looked. But when each outfit got more or less the same reception, his praise sounded hollow, even if he meant every word.

Yumina and Airi were buying new clothes so they could dress up for Katsuya. They wanted something that both he and they could be genuinely excited about, even if it cost them a little extra. So they had gradually moved to nicer and nicer shops until they'd finally arrived at La Fantola, a real luxury boutique. Unsurprisingly, the prices were getting to be too much for their budgets—not so high that they couldn't afford an outfit as a treat to themselves for all their hard work hunting, but high enough that buying one would take courage.

Both girls felt that if their expensive purchases couldn't impress Katsuya, the greater cost would magnify their disappointment. They needed to show him their choices before they bought anything. So they waited, thinking that he would be back from his break at any moment. But he failed to appear.

"He's late," Yumina grumbled. "This is too long for a breather."

Airi concurred. "I'll check on him."

"Thanks."

Airi set off and soon returned alone.

"Where's Katsuya?" Yumina asked, confused. She had expected them to come together.

"Flirting," Airi reported. And although she rarely let her feelings show, her displeasure now was unmistakable.

"*Excuse* me?" demanded Yumina, as Airi's annoyance spread to her.

◆

Katsuya was chatting away with Sheryl, amazed to discover that conversation could hold such delights.

“So then I raced to where our rescue target was,” he was saying. “There were monsters there too, of course, but I was really on a roll for some reason, and they didn’t give me as much trouble as I’d thought they would. I’m so glad I managed to get everyone out safely.”

“That’s amazing!” Sheryl gushed. “You did all that on your own? Those people in distress may have been terribly unfortunate, but they’re lucky you were on call. I suppose that each cloud has its silver lining. After all, it’s not every day that a hero comes to the rescue just in the nick of time. I imagine they must idolize you.”

“You think so?”

“I most certainly do. I know that I would in their place. But above all, I’m glad that you and they both came through the ordeal safe and sound. That was the best possible outcome—one can hardly celebrate being rescued if their rescuer suffers instead. Don’t you agree, Katsuya?”

“Yeah, I do.” Katsuya smiled with genuine delight. Sheryl seemed equally overjoyed by his own safety and that of the people he’d saved.

Katsuya did most of the talking, while Sheryl listened pleasantly, occasionally chiming in to express an opinion or to show that she was paying attention. Nevertheless, she dictated the flow of their conversation. Katsuya had begun with the local area, describing the lower district and its shops. But Sheryl dropped a few subtle hints, and before he knew it, he’d started telling her about himself. He told her that he was a hunter, that he worked with Druncam, about the monsters he’d fought in the wasteland and the relics he’d found there. He recounted joys and sorrows, good times and bad. He delved into the experience he’d gained as a hunter, speaking cheerfully, boastfully, wistfully, regretfully. As he went on, he even divulged feelings that he would normally have kept to himself.

And Sheryl seemed to empathize with all of it. When he told of being attacked by monsters in the wasteland, she listened anxiously, concerned for Katsuya’s

safety. When he told how he'd slain the beasts, she rejoiced at his survival and praised his performance. She listened delightedly to tales of the fun he'd had finding relics with his team, although she also seemed regretful, as if she wished she'd been there herself. She shared his frustration at past outrages. When he groused and grumbled, her elegant face fell in sympathy, then she applauded him for his determination to overcome his difficulties.

This breathtakingly beautiful girl seemed to share all Katsuya's values. She laughed with him, pouted in sympathy at his anger, consoled him for his sorrows, and listened to everything he said with friendly enjoyment. He felt so at home talking to Sheryl that he lost himself in the conversation and went on happily revealing more about himself.

◆

Sheryl sensed something off about her discussion with Katsuya. She realized that she was essentially just entertaining him—helping him to enjoy the sound of his own voice. And in her opinion, the key to doing that well was understanding what he wanted. She gave him acceptance when he wished to be understood, agreement when he sought to make a point, and praise when he hoped for a compliment. His desires were her opportunities.

To pull that off deliberately, she needed to understand his wants. Even compliments could sting when they were unwelcome, while a stream of insults could come as a blessing to someone who desired it. Supply had to match demand.

But it wasn't easy to know exactly what a given person was looking for. People barely understood themselves, much less strangers. Amid the communal life of a slum gang, Sheryl had honed the art of divining the intentions and desires of others from slight tells and choices of words that they weren't even aware of. The skills she had thus acquired had saved her on many occasions.

She was applying some of those lessons to her chat with Katsuya, and at first, she thought they were working, since the boy seemed more than happy to keep talking to her. But as the conversation wore on, she began to have doubts—her skills were working *too* well.

That's strange, she reflected. *I've never been so totally in tune with what*

someone else is thinking. It's like he's telling me everything he wants in the background without putting it into words or body language.

At the same time, she was also puzzling over another mystery. Katsuya was quite good-looking, and as far as he told her, he had fought hard to save his fellow hunters, no matter the danger. Druncam's leaders seemed to think highly of his skill as well. Instinctively, intuitively, she formed a high opinion of him as a handsome, skilled, and good-hearted hunter.

At the same time, the cold, calculating side of Sheryl—the part that sought to pump people for information with which to manipulate them and tip negotiations in her favor—was forming its own opinion of Katsuya. And its conclusions were dramatically less flattering than her intuitive assessment. The latter was far too glowing.

Something quite apart from reason and logic was biasing her in his favor, and she couldn't even tell what it was—hence her unease.

But despite her inner confusion, her smile never faltered. She went on chatting with Katsuya. And all the while, her intuition commanded her to think even more highly of him. Unwittingly, she found herself speculating that getting to know such a capable hunter might be a boon to her gang. Her thoughts leaped forward, skipping steps. To establish a deeper connection with Katsuya, she would ask him out to eat with her. Like a couple, they would head to the restaurant arm in arm.

Was she imagining this, or was something *making* her imagine it? She found it hard to tell, but she pictured the scene nonetheless—or was she viewing it?

Sheryl was walking with Katsuya down a road she couldn't recall ever having seen. How happy they seemed together, she thought, observing herself as if a stranger. Then Akira walked toward them from the other end of the street, and his eyes met hers. In Sheryl's imagination, Akira didn't speak or even change his expression—he simply turned around and cut her out of his life.

She snapped out of her vision, unable to suppress a little scream. For just an instant, she froze, body and face rigid with terror. Quickly, however, she realized that none of it had been real and exhaled a sigh of relief. Yet her heart was still racing, so she took several deep breaths to calm herself.

“Are you okay, Sheryl?” Katsuya asked worriedly.

Looking at him, Sheryl found that the sense of wrongness she’d felt had vanished. She now saw the boy before her as just a promising young hunter, intuitively as well as logically.

“I’m fine,” she replied, smiling. “Please forgive me if I startled you.”

Katsuya smiled back, relieved. “Oh, good. Did something happen?”

“No, please don’t worry. A fright I once had merely returned to mind, that’s all.” Sheryl couldn’t exactly admit that Katsuya had gotten her dumped by Akira in her own imagination, so she attempted to deflect his concern. But this wasn’t one of her better excuses. Imaginary or not, she was still reeling from her bone-chilling experience.

Katsuya couldn’t help wondering if she really felt as well as she claimed. Sometimes, he reflected, just telling someone about a problem made it more bearable. So after a moment of indecision, he said, “I don’t know what you’ve been through, but if you need anyone to talk to, I’d be happy to—”

“I’ve got to hand it to you, Katsuya,” a new voice interrupted, tinged with fury. “Ditching us to hit on some other girl takes guts.”

Katsuya turned to look behind him and saw Yumina with a determined grin on her face.



◆

In a restaurant near La Fantola, Katsuya desperately pleaded his case to his teammates.

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have done that. But you’ve gotta believe me—I really wasn’t hitting on her!”

After catching Katsuya in the act (she believed) of ditching her to flirt with another girl, Yumina had made only that one brief remark to him and then marched straight out of the boutique. Airi had gone with her—not even she could defend Katsuya under these circumstances. Katsuya had left Sheryl with a hurried “See you later” and run after the girls, finally managing to catch up to them in a nearby restaurant. He had been apologizing profusely ever since.

Yumina shot him an irate glare while she wolfed down food to blow off steam. “So it’s not your fault because she talked to you first? Is that it?”

For once, Airi was looking reproachfully at Katsuya as well.

“I’m not saying that,” he protested. “I really am sorry. I just got caught up in the conversation and missed my chance to leave. Honestly, that’s all that happened!”

Katsuya was outnumbered two to one, and he knew he was in the wrong. So he simply begged for forgiveness.

Yumina knew exactly why she was angry. She’d known Katsuya a long time, and she could tell that he wasn’t trying to weasel his way out of trouble—he understood he’d screwed up, and he was sorry. And since he could be kind of an airhead, she suspected that he really hadn’t meant any harm. Normally, she would have called him hopeless and left it at that. These things came with the territory.

But she couldn’t bring herself to do that this time, and the reason was obvious.

That girl was gorgeous*!* Yumina brooded while she listened to Katsuya’s excuses. *She had great fashion sense too, and her clothes looked like they cost a fortune. Could she be from inside the walls? If people like her shop at that store, maybe we seemed really out of place.* She sighed. *Katsuya sure appeared to be*

enjoying himself. A lot of girls think he's into them when he's not, but the way he looked at her...

Yumina was angry because she felt jealous, and she knew it.

Ugh! This train of thought won't go anyplace good. Enough! Cut it out! I worked hard for this date, so I'm not going to ruin the mood myself! End of story!

Yumina wanted to remain at Katsuya's side, but she refused to let jealousy take hold of her. So to clear the air, she fixed him with a stern look and said, "Katsuya, do you repent ditching us?"

"Yes! I've learned my lesson!" he cried desperately, spotting his chance to make an apology stick.

Yumina watched him, then she laughed and relaxed, as if to let bygones be bygones. "All right, then! I was acting a little hardheaded too. Sorry."

"No, it was my fault. I'm sorry, Yumina." Katsuya looked relieved that the storm had passed. Then he tensed, and his gaze shifted to Airi. She stared back indignantly.

"You ditched her too, so don't expect any help from me," Yumina chimed in.

"R-Right."

Yumina looked on in amusement as Katsuya groveled before Airi this time.

Once Katsuya somehow managed to restore Airi's good humor and the group returned to its usual camaraderie, Yumina found it in herself to discuss their experience in La Fantola without rancor.

"So, are your standards really *that* high when it comes to clothes?" she pressed, adding that they hadn't bought any yet because nothing they tried seemed to make much of an impression on Katsuya.

"No," Katsuya replied, recalling Sheryl's outfit. "Still, those *were* pretty incredible."

"Well, I know what you mean. I wonder what kind of ultrahigh-end store you need to go to for clothes like hers," Yumina lamented, certain that such luxuries

were out of their reach.

That jogged Katsuya's memory. "Actually, she said she bought them there."

"Really? We must not have looked hard enough."

"Then, let's look again," Airi suggested.

"Good idea. I'm in."

And so, Katsuya, Yumina, and Airi decided to return to La Fantola.

Chapter 76: A Close Call

Akira returned to La Fantola with a selection of Old World garments from his house, puzzled to see that nothing unusual had happened in his absence. Alpha's directions had taken him far out of his way, both going and coming.

What'd you send me on that detour for? he demanded as he entered the boutique.

For your safety, Alpha replied smugly. *Thanks to me, you got here without any trouble.*

Since when has the lower district been a danger zone?

That's a good question, no?

Alpha's strange behavior perplexed Akira. But it seemed harmless enough, so he sighed and dismissed it from his thoughts. Sheryl greeted him with a smile, and he resumed his seat at her table.

Just then, however, a frown creased Alpha's face.

What's wrong? he asked.

Akira, she replied, *promise me that no matter what happens, you won't make a scene.*

Where'd that come from? What happened? Akira pressed. From her tone, he inferred that she wasn't anticipating an attack. But he had rarely seen Alpha look so annoyed, and it piqued his curiosity.

Just please keep a cool head. And ask Sheryl to play along with whatever you say.

Seriously, what's going on?

Just do it!

Akira didn't understand the orders, but he obeyed. "Sheryl, er, whatever happens, follow my lead."

"What?" Sheryl was taken aback by the strange request. But she had no

reason to refuse Akira, so she smiled and said, “All right, I understand. You can depend on me.”

Just then, Katsuya’s team reentered the shop. Akira’s and Katsuya’s eyes met, and animosity began to fill the air.

“What are *you* doing here?” Katsuya muttered.

Akira thought the same thing. And the purpose of Alpha’s strange instructions finally dawned on him.

Did you say all that stuff so I wouldn’t run into this guy?

Alpha sighed. *Yes.*

Then why not just say so?

What did you expect me to say? Alpha demanded, incensed by Akira’s flippancy. *“Let’s go so that we don’t bump into the guy who you nearly started a firefight with when I warned you not to”? Would you honestly have taken that advice?*

Oh, right, Akira replied guiltily. When it came to that reckless confrontation, he had seen the error of his ways.

I’m sure you thought I was being a pain when I suddenly began suggesting you go top off on ammo or sell relics, but I did my best to avoid conflict without letting you know he was even here.

I...I get that.

And if you had only listened to me during your last *encounter, I wouldn’t have had to go to all that trouble. Do you understand that?*

Yes! I understand! Don’t worry! I won’t start anything! You don’t have to tell me again! Jeez. Akira didn’t want to sit through what promised to be an interminable lecture.

His firm response convinced Alpha to back down. *I’m glad we’re on the same page*, she said. *Now, let’s put on a little act to defuse the situation.*

Akira sighed again and turned back to Sheryl. Ignoring the Druncam hunters, who were now right beside them, he reluctantly placed his relic-stuffed

backpack on the table in front of her. “Here are the goods,” he said. “Check ’em.” Then, wondering what the hell “the goods” were, he opened the backpack.

Sheryl had almost nothing to go on, but she drew her own conclusions from the tension between Akira and Katsuya, and she read Akira’s signals. She looked into the backpack, closed it, and then replied, with the air of someone who had the upper hand and knew it, “As you say. I hope that we will continue to develop a fruitful partnership.”

There was an edge to Akira’s voice as he responded, “So do I.” Then he stood up and moved to Erio and Aricia’s table. The pair gave him baffled looks, of course, but he warned them under his breath to keep their mouths shut.

Katsuya didn’t know what to make of this scene. When he’d first spotted Akira with Sheryl, he had rushed to her aid, foreseeing a repeat of Akira’s altercation with Lucia. But as he watched, it became clear that Sheryl was in command of the situation. So he didn’t butt in to protect her, and no conflict ensued.

“Won’t you take a seat?” Sheryl invited, startling him out of his daze.

“Huh? Oh, well...” Katsuya hesitated. He had sat with her the last time she’d asked—albeit nervously. Sharing a table with a refined beauty who dressed well enough for a resident of the walled districts had daunted him. Now, however, although her appearance hadn’t changed, she wore an air of command. The likes of Akira were mere peons to her.

Yumina and Airi looked at each other and nodded. Then Airi sat at Sheryl’s table, and Yumina left to join Akira’s.

Katsuya was still trying to work out what had just passed between the two girls when Sheryl urged, “Please, have a seat. This one is free.”

“Oh, right.” Katsuya obediently sat down. He couldn’t explain why, but he found it hard to refuse.

◆

Erio and Aricia were seated facing each other across the table when Akira

joined them. And since the table could accommodate up to four people, the only vacancy left was across from him. So Yumina naturally sat there, and Akira found himself face-to-face with the girl who had shaken him to his core.

"Do you need something?" he asked, mentally scrabbling to work out why she had chosen his table. "I'm not gonna start anything here, if that's what you're worried about."

"I wanted to tell you that we won't start anything either," Yumina replied.

"Oh, okay, then. Roger that."

Akira assumed that Yumina would leave now that she'd said her piece. But to his surprise, she remained seated. Still, they weren't close enough to strike up a friendly conversation, so silence descended on the table. Erio and Aricia, who as yet had no idea what they'd gotten mixed up in, didn't want to risk putting their feet in their mouths and bringing Akira's wrath down on their heads.

"I'm, er, sorry about last time and stuff," Akira said eventually. "Last time" meant the incident with Lucia, while "stuff" referred to the time he'd taken Yumina hostage in the underground ruins. But since mentioning the latter would violate Akira's agreement with the city, he merely gestured at it without quite crossing the line.

Yumina looked mystified, then caught Akira's meaning. "Don't mention it," she replied, flashing a smile. "It seems like we both had our hands full down there, and hunters run into unforeseen difficulties all the time. So I'll forget about it, and I'd appreciate it if you would too."

Akira looked startled for a moment, then he grinned back. "Sure thing. Thanks."

The tension at the table ebbed away. To Erio and Aricia's relief, a fight no longer seemed to be in the cards. Emboldened by Akira's lack of animosity, Yumina decided to push her luck.

"By the way, are you still after that girl?" she asked. "I remember you said she wasn't off the hook. I know you might not want to hear this, but should you really be getting so hung up on a run-of-the-mill pickpocket?"

No sooner had she spoken than she worried that she'd said too much. But

Katsuya had expressed concern about what had become of Lucia, and she figured that making this offhand inquiry had to be less risky than letting him comb the slums in search of the girl. If she got a favorable response, she could relay it to Katsuya later and allay his fears. If not, she could always keep it to herself. And Akira's reply did come as a relief—although it wasn't at all what she had expected.

"Oh, her? I'm done worrying about her."

"Really?" Yumina pressed. "Well, I guess you can't let yourself get worked up over every little thing."

"Yeah. I got my money back, so that's that. Whether she gets herself killed picking more pockets or goes off and lives happily ever after somewhere, it's all the same to me."

Yumina frowned slightly. Akira had answered so casually that she found it hard to believe he was lying. In which case, Lucia really *had* stolen Akira's wallet, and Katsuya had helped her get away with it. For the time being, she decided, Katsuya would be better off not knowing that. She wouldn't put it past him to insist on getting to the bottom of the imbroglio and cause even more headaches in the process. But while she hoped to let the matter rest, she couldn't completely hide her anger at the girl who had fooled Katsuya and landed them in such a mess.

"What's wrong?" Akira asked, noticing the change. "Oh, did your bosses want to talk to her or something, since you were representing Druncam when you helped her? In that case, I guess it'd be a problem for you if I killed her."

"No, no," Yumina replied. "I was just wondering what became of her. I'm sure she must have it rough if she needs to pick pockets to survive, but that's no excuse for stealing, and it doesn't mean we have to provide her with some other way to live. It would be a different matter if we knew her, but trying to save every total stranger we meet would run anyone ragged. I think helping someone out is a noble and kind thing to do, but not if it ends up crushing the person doing it." As she watched Akira nod along, Yumina thought worriedly of Katsuya. Not for the first time, she swore that she would stop him before he got to that point, even if it killed her.

Such subtleties were lost on Akira, but her words nonetheless struck a chord with him. “That’s true,” he agreed. “I admire people who can stick their necks out like that, but everyone has a limit.” Jaded though he was, he still found the thought of such a selfless individual inspiring. But that was all—he had absolutely no desire to become one.

◆

“Were you able to patch things up with your girlfriend?” Sheryl asked Katsuya pleasantly once he’d taken a seat at her table.

“Huh?” Katsuya stared blankly, uncomprehending.

Sheryl glanced over at Yumina. “Not yet, I see. You really mustn’t stop to chat with other girls while you’re on a date,” she said, with an impish smile that captivated Katsuya all over again. Then he realized who she meant by “girlfriend” and began to panic. Before he could deny it, however, Sheryl added insult to injury. “I realize that having more than one lover is sometimes tolerated, but you should still show some restraint. Or perhaps you have so many that you’re looking to cut back?”

“N-No!” Katsuya exclaimed, scowling. He was offended, but no longer so much in awe of Sheryl and her inexplicable command over Akira. “Yumina’s not my girlfriend, and I *did* apologize to her for taking a little too long of a break. Don’t make it sound weird.”

“Is that so?” Sheryl replied with a hint of amusement. “Then I suppose I won’t be cross with you for suddenly running off when I was certain you were in the middle of flirting with me.”

Katsuya thought back on his own behavior earlier and blushed, realizing that he couldn’t blame anyone for taking it that way. “O-Oh. I, er, really didn’t mean it like that.”

“Why, that’s even worse. If you weren’t doing it consciously, then I suspect you’ve left many others with the same mistaken impression.” Sheryl turned to Airi. “Am I wrong?”

“No,” Airi answered firmly with a nod.

“Huh?” Katsuya spluttered.

“I thought as much,” Sheryl continued. “Are you all hunters as well? It would be a shame if someone shot him over an affair of the heart.”

“I always carry medicine just in case,” Airi volunteered. “High-end stuff too, so unless they nail him in the head, I can patch him up in time.”

“Wait, what?!” Katsuya reeled. He wanted to believe Airi was joking, but her inscrutable expression made that difficult. So, for his peace of mind, he changed the subject. “By the way, Sheryl, I saw you talking to that guy earlier. What was that about?”

“Merely business,” she replied. “Pay it no mind.”

“Business? Here? And didn’t you say you’ve never been to this neighborhood before?”

“I did, and I haven’t. It suits me to conduct each of my transactions in a different location. It’s sound policy in some lines of work.”

“But I thought you bought those clothes here.”

“I did. This boutique has a lovely selection, don’t you think? Isn’t that what brought you all here?”

“W-Well, yeah, but...” Katsuya faltered. He knew that Sheryl was dodging his questions, but he found it hard to demand answers in the face of her cordiality.

Then she smiled invitingly and said, “Have I piqued your curiosity?”

“Wh-When you put it like that, well, yeah.”

“In that case, kindly consider it a secret and go on wondering about it.”

“What? Why?”

“Aren’t secrets lovely? All I need to do is withhold information, no matter how trivial, and your curiosity will keep me in your thoughts. And this is a golden opportunity to do exactly that. So please, continue to ponder.” Sheryl laughed mischievously.

Katsuya blushed slightly. “Didn’t you just warn me against saying things that might give people the wrong idea?” he demanded, fumbling for a counterargument.

“It’s all right when *I* do it.”

“Why?”

“Because while you lead people on unconsciously and indiscriminately, I do so deliberately and choose my targets with care.”

Katsuya’s blush deepened. He knew that Sheryl was teasing him, but he was too shaken to come up with a retort.

“If that displeases you,” she concluded, “I suggest you reexamine your own conduct, now that you’ve been made aware of it.”

Katsuya’s face stayed bright red. He couldn’t argue.

Sheryl judged that she had done enough. Whatever Akira wanted to hide, Katsuya was now too mystified to pursue it. Without meaning to, she looked over at Akira with a smile that said—more plainly than she intended—that she wouldn’t mind some praise for a job well done. But then her smile froze for a moment. Akira was talking to Yumina, and he seemed to be enjoying himself.

The mere sight of Akira having a friendly chat with another girl wasn’t enough to move Sheryl—or at least, not enough to shock her. But when he seemed so unguarded while doing it? That was a different story.

What? she wondered. *Why? How? What’s going on?*

“Katsuya,” she said, “if you’ve made up with your companion, why is she sitting at the other table?”

“Umm...” Katsuya faltered. He assumed Yumina had a reason, but he couldn’t guess what it was. He had been meaning to ask her about it later.

“She’s talking to that guy so he doesn’t get into another fight with Katsuya,” Airi supplied.

“*Another* fight?” Sheryl echoed. “Do they have a history, then?”

“Not much of one, but yeah.”

Sheryl wanted to know what constituted that “not much” of a history. But Airi wasn’t inclined to elaborate, so she directed her questioning look at Katsuya.

“We had, er, a little disagreement,” he said. “I didn’t know you knew him, though.”

So, there *had* been a fight, although its details remained a mystery, Sheryl thought as she took another look at Akira. Sure enough, he seemed quite at ease in Yumina’s company.

Why is he acting so friendly with someone he’d come into conflict with? Was it really no big deal? But then, why would she bother going over there to keep him busy?

“If it was a minor quarrel,” she probed, “then I would think it better to keep your distance to avoid antagonizing him again.”

“Oh, well, everyone has different standards, but I’d say things got pretty heated,” Katsuya admitted sheepishly. “I think Yumina wanted to at least try talking matters over, and she figured that he wouldn’t make a scene here.”

Sheryl grew even more confused. *It doesn’t make sense. Why would Akira be off his guard with someone like* that*? Really, what’s going on?*

As she wondered, she saw Yumina finish her chat with Akira and get up to rejoin Katsuya. Sheryl thought she detected a hint of regret in Akira’s expression as he watched her go. She realized that her emotions were in turmoil, and her cold, calculating side sounded the alarm—she would probably give herself away if Yumina joined the conversation while she was this rattled. So Sheryl decided to withdraw.

“Katsuya,” she said, “I see your friend is returning, so permit me to excuse myself. And in any case, I have a little more business to transact.”

“Really?” Katsuya replied. “I was hoping to ask you a few questions about your clothes when Yumina gets here.”

“I think that helping her to choose the perfect outfit will be a valuable experience for you. And having the answers handed to you would spoil the fun.”

“L-Like I told you,” Katsuya mumbled, “Yumina and I aren’t like that.”

Sheryl flashed him one last, impish grin, then took the backpack and set off

into the rear of the shop. She had a sale to make on Akira's behalf, and she also needed to warn Cascia and Selene not to give the game away—her performance wouldn't hold water if Katsuya's team learned that Akira had chosen her outfit. And most of all, she needed to calm down.

What was she talking about with Akira? she asked herself. *What could I say to make him open up to* me *like that?*

She knew that she would never be able to subtly coax the answers out of anyone while she was this shaken.

◆

Once Yumina rejoined Katsuya and Airi, the three of them resumed browsing La Fantola for clothes. This time, they actually bought something. Cascia had outdone herself (galvanized by Alpha's ability to coordinate an outfit), and Katsuya had been enthusiastic, so the girls left the boutique thoroughly satisfied.

"They weren't cheap, but I'm glad we found such nice outfits," Yumina declared. "Aren't you, Airi?"

"Yes," Airi replied, "although you're right—they weren't cheap."

Once Yumina felt confident that Katsuya thought they were talking clothes, she whispered, "So, what was that Sheryl girl like?" She had never gotten a chance to speak with Sheryl herself—the other girl had still been in the back of the store when they'd left it.

"She was pretty, her clothes looked expensive, and she had a way with words," Airi reported. "And..."

"And?"

"I don't think she's into Katsuya."

"Really? That's unusual." Yumina looked surprised. Women generally found Katsuya attractive—sometimes inexplicably so. She would have expected any girl who'd kept up such a lively chat with him to walk away at least a little interested.

"Just a hunch. I can't prove it," Airi replied, although she felt fairly sure she

was right. Sheryl had seemed to enjoy toying with Katsuya, but Airi suspected that she'd had a different motive, and that fun had had nothing to do with it.

"I see. Well, anyway, thank goodness we got through that without any trouble."

"For real."

Both Yumina and Airi considered Sheryl's disinterest part of their cause for relief. Neither girl could bring herself to welcome yet another rival.

"Yumina, Airi," Katsuya interjected, "what are you so happy about?"

"I'm not telling," Airi replied.

"What do you mean?"

"Sheryl said secrets keep people interested, so this is mine." Airi was making a play for Katsuya's affection, but such subtle appeals were lost on him.

"Come on," he pressed, confused and a little annoyed. "There's no secrets between teammates."

"Fine, then. We were talking about how Sheryl warned you about going around hitting on girls by accident."

Katsuya spluttered in shock.

"That's some awfully kind advice, coming from a total stranger," Yumina said, playing along, although this was all news to her. "Don't you think that was nice of her?"

"Y-Yeah," Katsuya answered, doing his best to laugh it off. At the same time, the word "secret" made his thoughts turn to Sheryl even more.

You know, he reflected, *considering how much we talked about, I don't know the first thing about her—just her name. And that she must be rich, I guess, since she can afford such nice clothes.*

He wouldn't have been surprised to learn that she came from the walled districts. But as for where she actually lived, he had no idea. Mentally reviewing their conversation, he could recall not a single personal detail. He kept racking his brain for answers until he realized that Sheryl's secrecy had indeed kept her

in his thoughts.

Well, I sure can't stop wondering about her, he mused, with a rueful grin. *I wonder if this means she outfoxed me.*

In his mind's eye, Katsuya saw Sheryl laughing at him. But she looked so pretty, and seemed to be having so much fun, that he didn't mind one bit.

◆

After Katsuya's group went home, Akira left Erio and Aricia's table and went to sit by himself. He was still pondering what to do about the Yonozuka Station Ruins.

Sheryl remained in the back, discussing alterations with Selene. The seamstress had shown a keen interest in the clothes Akira had sent Sheryl to have appraised, and had proposed remaking them as well. She'd wanted to use multiple Old World garments as materials to create Sheryl's new outfit. Naturally, that would increase the expense, and just as naturally, Sheryl had objected. Selene had talked her around by offering to accept any leftover fabric in lieu of additional payment.

Akira had agreed to the deal. He had never been dead set on getting a high price for the relics—he'd only offered them at Alpha's suggestion, and even that had turned out to be a pretext. He'd been willing to let his finds be cut up for raw materials and had felt curious to see what kind of incredible outfit would result.

Once that had been settled, Sheryl had stayed with Selene to work out the gist of the design, while Akira had returned to the sales floor. There, he'd sat down to mull over the ruin where he'd obtained the garments he was giving up.

Think I should make another trip to Yonozuka Station? he asked, looking across the table at Alpha. *Without waiting until Elena and Sara are free, I mean.*

He hoped for a yes-or-no answer, but Alpha said only, *If you want to, I think you should go for it.*

But it'll take a lot of trips to clear out the whole ruin on my own. I'll have to dig up and rebury the entrance a bunch of times too, which'll make it that much easier to spot.

True. You do need to consider the risks.

Exploring with a group and taking all we can on each trip would be more efficient, but who can I trust to hunt relics with me? Just Elena and Sara.

Another good point. I'm sure Katsuragi would get a crew together for you, but the ruin would stop being secret pretty much as soon as you told him about it.

You can say that again. Akira shot another glance at Alpha.

Guessing what he wanted, she laughed and said, *Make up your own mind, Akira! Stop trying to coax me into deciding for you.*

Come on! he replied, forcing a grin. *I just can't figure out what I oughta do.*

As Elena and Sara said, there are a lot of ways to mishandle an untouched ruin, but there's no clear right answer. I don't mind running a risk-return analysis if you ask me to, but you can't dump the whole decision in my lap.

I mean, I see your point, but still.

Think it over as best you can and make your own choice. Don't worry—I'll support you in whatever you decide.

While Alpha welcomed unswerving obedience to her advice, she couldn't allow Akira to become so dependent on her that he wouldn't act without orders. If Akira relied on Alpha to do all his thinking for him, he would be helpless as soon as he lost contact with her. In the worst case, he might waste away where she'd left him, unable to make up his own mind even to move. That wouldn't suit her purposes—especially as the job she ultimately had planned for Akira would require him to perform while cut off from her. So, to teach Akira to be flexible as well as obedient, she cheerfully urged him to choose for himself.

Fine. Gimme a little more time to think it over, Akira replied. The thought that he'd improved enough to be trusted with some decision-making power brought a smile to his face.

Of course, he reflected privately, *I've only got two options—make a bunch of trips myself or wait until Elena and Sara can go with me.*

Akira couldn't see himself getting together a large enough team to clean the

ruin out in one fell swoop. If manpower were all he needed, he could have brought the matter to Katsuragi. But how would he keep people from talking? He certainly didn't trust the arms dealer that far. Katsuragi wouldn't hesitate to cut ties with a young hunter for the riches of an untouched ruin. The same went for almost anyone, unless Akira could give compelling reasons why they shouldn't—or *couldn't*—betray him.

And who'd be in trouble if they betrayed me*? No one I can—*

Before Akira could finish the self-deprecating thought, Sheryl returned and sat down across from him. He couldn't help staring at her, his mind whirling.

Is something wrong, Akira? Alpha asked.

No, he replied. *It's no big deal.*

"It's about the alterations," Sheryl said. "Selene would like a little more time to work, if it's all right with you. She says that if we wait until after the shop closes, instead of until early evening, the clothes will turn out that much better. What do you think?"

"It's up to you," he answered. "It's not like I'm gonna wear 'em. But if waiting is all it takes to get something better, I say go for it." He paused as a realization set in. "Oh, you mean I'd have to wait with you. Well, I guess I don't mind. I didn't have anything planned for today, anyway."

"Thank you so much!"

A moment passed, and Sheryl began to wonder why Akira was gazing at her so intently.

"Do you, um, need something?" she ventured, delightedly striking a pose to show that she welcomed more staring. This might be a sign that he was falling for her, so she didn't want him to stop now.

But Akira said, "No. It's no big deal."

He looked more like he was seeking confirmation of something, Sheryl realized. But although his scrutiny now made her a little nervous, she couldn't guess what motivated it. Confusion soon turned to unease, which recalled the vision she'd seen while talking to Katsuya: Akira cutting her loose and never

looking back. She trembled in spite of herself.

“U-Umm...” she began, desperate for something to prove her fears unfounded. “Be honest. Wh-What is this about?”

“Well, you see,” Akira replied, “I was hoping you’d do me a favor. I won’t force you, but—”

“All right! I’ll do it!” Sheryl exclaimed, not even waiting to hear what it was he wanted her to do.

“Y-You will?” Akira said, startled and a little unnerved by her enthusiasm. “But, I mean, I think you should at least let me explain before—”

“I’ll do it.”

“It’s, er, pretty dangerous, and you’d have to keep it absolutely secret.”

“I don’t mind. I’ll do it!”

“O-Okay, then. Thanks.”

Akira was Sheryl’s patron, and as he saw it, she still needed his protection. She thus ought to have a stronger incentive than most to keep faith with him. So he’d hit on the idea of bringing her—and her gang—in on his plan to clean out Yonozuka Station.

He had made two forays into the tunnels and encountered no monsters. That made them safer than most ruins—probably safe enough for ordinary children to carry off their relics. It might be heavy work without powered suits, but Akira figured the kids would manage. He himself had hauled relics from the heart of Kuzusuhara back to the city without one.

Nevertheless, relic hunting in the wasteland could always prove deadly, and Sheryl might prefer offending him and losing his protection to losing her life. So he’d tried running the idea by her, half expecting her to refuse. He wouldn’t tell her that this was a fresh discovery, of course. Sheryl was no hunter and probably not well-versed in ruins, so he’d planned to let her believe that they would be going to some well-known site. But her immediate acceptance, and the way she stuck to it despite his warnings, convinced him to share a little more.

Just to be on the safe side, however, he decided to offer her a choice. “All right, I appreciate the help. But tell me: Would you rather stay in the dark about this project or know the whole story?”

“Which would you prefer?” Sheryl asked.

“I’m good either way, so pick whichever option works better for you. If you don’t know what you’re helping me do, you can always plead ignorance if things go south. But if I fill you in on the details ahead of time, I think you’ll be able to do a lot with that info. And of course, I’ll sweeten the deal if you use that to help make this work.”

From Akira’s tone, Sheryl gathered that he genuinely wouldn’t mind either way. So, without hesitation, she chose the option that would allow her to work more closely with Akira and prove her worth to him. “Please tell me everything!”

“Okay, but we can’t talk about it here, so it’ll have to wait until after we leave the shop. Oh, hang on. It’ll be night by the time your clothes are ready. Wanna save it till tomorrow?”

“I’d rather learn the details as soon as possible, so if it’s up to me, then please tell me right after we depart. But I don’t mind waiting if you have other plans.”

“Got it. After we head out tonight, then.”

“Thank you.” Sheryl bobbed her head to Akira, happy that he had put her needs first, then went to inform Selene that he’d agreed to give her more time to work.

◆

The group got all their other shopping done while they waited, then settled in to pass the time with more chitchat. Akira listened with keen professional interest to what Sheryl had gleaned from Katsuya about Druncam’s operations.

“Huh. So Druncam hunters leave all their relic sales to the syndicate?” he asked. “They’re not allowed to make any private deals?”

“That’s right,” Sheryl replied. “The syndicate pays each hunter a base rate according to their rank. Any bonuses are merit-based.”

All Druncam hunters passed their incomes on to the syndicate, Sheryl explained, supplementing what she had heard with her own conjectures. That went for profits from relic sales as much as pay from jobs. Then they each received a share of the organization's total income—minus its operating expenses—in proportion to their contributions. It was practically a salary. The hunters' base pay was counted as an operating expense—an attempt to bring a measure of stability to their otherwise unpredictable earnings. By providing an income to injured hunters unable to work while convalescing and to trainees who didn't bring in much money on their own, this system kept the whole syndicate running smoothly.

That was only the basic principle, of course. Individual hunters could set the percentage of their earnings that went to Druncam, and veterans like Shikarabe kept a lot for themselves. But there were trade-offs: the smaller a portion of their income a hunter contributed, the lower their base pay, so these old hands would receive a mere pittance when they were too injured to work.

Rookie hunters, on the other hand, were forbidden from making such adjustments. Ostensibly, this was because the young and inexperienced might not survive the struggle of living on reduced pay and couldn't reliably earn enough to compensate. But while Druncam had convinced the rookies that it had their best interests at heart, the policy was also designed to accustom them to placing the full benefit of their achievements at the syndicate's disposal. This put more power in the hands of those who divvied up pay despite never setting foot in the wasteland. And the syndicate's desk jockeys reaped the lion's share of the benefits.

"A salary for hunting?" Akira mused. "I can't quite picture it."

"I imagine the system has its downsides," Sheryl replied. "But hunters' incomes are notoriously unsteady, so the stability it offers must be quite attractive. Of course, the benefits aren't evenly distributed, so it's probably also a cause of generational conflict among Druncam's hunters."

"Running an organization sure sounds tough."

"Yes, it certainly is," Sheryl agreed with slightly greater emphasis than was strictly necessary, thinking of her own role as a gang leader. She watched for

Akira's reaction, but to her disappointment, he didn't seem to catch her drift. In the end, all she accomplished was making herself sigh.

Alpha smiled at the exchange, but she was out of Akira's sight, and he didn't notice.

◆

It was after midnight, and La Fantola had long since closed for business, but Akira was still in the boutique, waiting for Sheryl to return.

When she finally emerged from the back room, she was blushing faintly. Selene stood beside her, beaming with the satisfaction of a job well done. Sheryl stopped in front of Akira, gave him a bashful and slightly nervous smile, and said, "Wh-What do you think?"

She was wearing the clothes that Selene had just finished making for her: a sumptuous, bespoke ensemble crafted from the materials of multiple Old World garments—and designed expressly for Sheryl. No ordinary outfit could hope to match its impact.

Even Akira couldn't help but gasp in admiration. "Whoa! Yeah, you look amazing."

At his compliment, Sheryl beamed with joy and embarrassment, and her radiant smile made the clothes appear even more luxurious.

This was worth the million and a half aurum you spent on it, Alpha remarked, nodding cheerfully.

You said it. Although it's probably not a good sign if my fashion sense is so dull that nothing cheaper than that seems special, Akira replied, poking fun at himself a bit. Then he reached a decision. *Okay, that settles it! Next time I find Old World clothes in the ruins, I won't even* try *to appraise them myself! I'll leave that to the experts!*

So, that's the conclusion you spent two and a half million aurum to reach?

What's the matter? I need to know what relics are worth, and realizing that I've got no clue how to judge them is part of that.

"Does our work meet with your satisfaction, sir?" Cascia inquired.

“Yeah,” Akira replied. “To be honest, it’s better than I expected. I’m happy.”

“Your praise is the best payment we could hope for. If you ever have occasion to commission another garment, please call on us again. And thank you very much for choosing La Fantola.” Cascia bowed courteously. Inwardly, she breathed a sigh of relief that her sister had managed to pull off this highly lucrative job.

◆

Once she had shown the group out of her boutique, Cascia removed her business mask and let out a deep breath.

“At last that’s over!” she exclaimed. “I haven’t been that blown away by what a successful hunter can make in a long time. I mean, two and a half million aurum in one day? Or more than that, if you count the charges he canceled out with those Old World clothes.” Tired but satisfied, she suddenly recalled her sister’s enormous contribution. “Frankly, Selene, I didn’t think you had it in you. When did you learn to make clothes like that?”

“I even surprised myself,” Selene answered proudly. “Her potential, the quality and variety of garments I had to work with, my skill, and a timely flash of inspiration all came together to make a miracle. If I’m being honest, I probably couldn’t pull that off again.”

The explanation satisfied Cascia—then panicked her. “What do you mean you couldn’t do it again?! I told him to hire you again next time! He’ll expect the same level of quality!”

“I don’t know what to tell you. Anyway, I’m going to turn in. Don’t wake me.” Selene went back into the boutique, looking thoroughly contented and intent on sleeping like the dead. She hadn’t been fully rested when her sister had gotten her up for this job, and pouring her heart and soul into Sheryl’s outfit had left her exhausted.

Cascia followed her, looking fretful. She couldn’t help worrying what she would do if Akira came back asking for more clothes of equal quality, but she assured herself that it would all work out—today’s business would make an excellent advertisement for La Fantola.

◆

After leaving the boutique, Sheryl asked Akira to escort her and her lieutenants back to their base. She assumed that he would come inside with her to discuss the details of his request. But he instead went home and returned in his truck, picked up Sheryl, and drove out into the wasteland.

She was taken aback, of course. He'd told her that secrecy was essential, but she hadn't expected the matter to call for such strict precautions. And she was even more shocked when he explained that he had discovered a new ruin and wanted her to help him cart off its relics. Put in those terms, it sounded simple, but Sheryl realized just how valuable—and how dangerous—such information could be.

Chapter 77: Sheryl's Gang Goes Relic Hunting

Sheryl had another scheme in the works. Her gang had been whispering about it for three days now, although—as with her sandwich shop plan—a strict gag order forbade them to ask or speculate about anything she didn't choose to share. Yet the kids felt optimistic, confident that their leader was thinking up another profitable venture. So when she called up Erio and the gang's other fighters one by one, few saw any cause for worry.

And even those few foresaw little danger. Sheryl told them only that they would be going into the wasteland to help Akira—and to their relief, she would accompany them herself. Besides, selling sandwiches at Kuzusuhara had technically been a foray into the wastes as well, and they'd gotten used to that.

Then the appointed day arrived. Just after midnight, Sheryl and her underlings assembled to wait for Akira near where the slums met the wasteland. Sheryl herself wore a coat appropriate for the wasteland—not armored, but serviceable protection against airborne sand—over the clothes that Akira (or rather Alpha) had chosen for her at La Fantola. Her outfit was a strategic decision—she hoped to look like a wealthy woman setting out for another city with her escort of hired guards.

Erio and the gang's other young fighters wore body armor and carried guns. Both were cheap, but still technically suitable for combatting monsters in the harsh desert.

Also present were Lucia and Nasya.

"Don't worry," Nasya said brightly, giving her nervous friend a light squeeze. "You'll be fine. Erio said that you're off Akira's radar now, remember? So hang in there and focus on getting through today."

"R-Right." Lucia nodded hesitantly, clinging to Nasya's clothes.

Nasya looked over at Sheryl. Unlike the rest of the group, these two had received no explanation along with their orders. Sheryl had only told them to

repay their debts to Akira. So, despite her reassuring words to Lucia, Nasya knew they had little cause for optimism.

For her friend's sake, however, she hoped she was right.

Sheryl noticed Nasya's gaze and turned. But although their eyes met, Sheryl looked away again without apparent concern. In a sense, Nasya's wish *had* come true—Sheryl now barely cared whether the girls lived or died. If they survived this venture, she would consider their atonement complete and treat them like any other members of her gang. And if they perished gathering relics from the Yonozuka Station Ruins, she felt confident that Akira would not blame her. Sheryl would be happy to accept either outcome as long as she could finally put this nuisance behind her.

After a short time, Akira appeared in his truck, a little on the early side. The vehicle was loaded with ammo and fully prepped for a wasteland expedition.

When it came to a halt, Sheryl ran up. "Akira!" she exclaimed joyfully. "Thank you so much for agreeing to work with us today!"

"I'm pretty sure that's my line," Akira replied wryly. Then he looked around, puzzled. "Where's your truck? I don't see it anywhere."

"It should be here soon. I scheduled it for our planned departure time."

Right on cue, a semitruck appeared. Although it appeared sturdy, it wasn't exactly built for wasteland driving, as it lacked both armor tiles and onboard weapons. This was a delivery truck, meant to operate in urban areas or to make short trips between nearby cities with an armed escort. It pulled up beside Sheryl, and Darius climbed down from the driver's seat. As Katsuragi's business partner, his job included running security, so Katsuragi had entrusted him with this delivery to Sheryl.

"Like we agreed, this is as far as I go," he announced. "That won't be a problem, will it?"

"Not at all," Sheryl replied. "Thank you very much."

Darius spotted Akira and cracked a grin. "I thought you were crazy, going out to Narahagaka with just a bunch of kids, even if they are armed. But of course, I was forgetting Akira."

Narahagaka was a small city to the west of Kugamayama. And since the most dangerous monsters tended to live furthest east, west was a relatively safe direction to travel. In fact, a hunter could drive from Kugamayama to Narahagaka more or less risk-free, as long as they chose their route carefully. Even so, it would be perilous for Sheryl and her underlings to attempt the trip alone.

“Please don’t mention him to anyone,” Sheryl reminded the merchant, smiling.

“Yeah, yeah, I know,” Darius reassured her. “Anyway, take care. And Akira, the walls of this trailer are pretty thin, so don’t count on them for protection. See you round!” With that, he set off toward the lower district on foot.

Sheryl bowed and watched him until he was out of sight. Then she steeled herself, turned to her subordinates, and barked, “Get on board! It’s time to go!”

The kids opened the trailer’s rear door and piled into the back. Then Sheryl boarded Akira’s truck, Erio climbed into the cab of the semi, and the entire party set out for Yonozuka Station.

◆

Lucia, Nasya, and the other grunts sped across the midnight wasteland in the back of the semitruck. Although it would normally have been pitch dark inside the boxy shipping trailer, the kids had brought their own lights to see by. That didn’t make the ride any more comfortable, however, so they did their best to weather the long trip by using cardboard boxes as makeshift seats.

Occasional bursts of gunfire outside told them that Akira was engaging monsters. The sounds brought home that they were really in the wasteland, which set the passengers on edge. Sheryl had given them permission to sleep on the journey, but few managed to take advantage of this perk.

Nasya made Lucia lie down to conserve her strength. While she watched her friend sleep, a boy who had spent most of the ride fiddling with a data terminal approached her and asked, “Hey, how come you two are with us?”

Noting the distrust and annoyance in his gaze, Nasya did her best to answer without antagonizing him. “We’re only following the boss’s orders.”

“And what orders were those?”

“She told us to repay our debts to Akira.”

The boy snorted. “Yeah? Well, better make it count, then.”

“We know.”

The boy moved away, still looking disgruntled, and returned to his terminal. But Nasya realized that several of the others were also eyeing them with displeasure or suspicion. She avoided their gazes, adopting an attitude of penitence.

Nasya knew exactly what they were thinking. No one on board was sure what Sheryl had in mind, but if she needed to sacrifice someone, Nasya and Lucia would be first on the chopping block. And the fighters worried that they were equally expendable, given that they’d been placed in the same group as the two girls. In a gang predicated on Akira’s patronage, antagonizing the hunter carried serious consequences.

Lucia really couldn’t have chosen a worse pocket to pick, Nasya reflected. *But since that hasn’t gotten us killed yet, I’d like to think that we still have luck on our side.* Noticing her confidence falter, she gave her head a shake. *No, luck* is *on our side, so we’ll get through this somehow. I have to believe that. We’ll survive this together. Right, Lucia?*

At that thought, Nasya felt renewed determination. Enheartened, she lay down beside her friend and closed her eyes. She needed to conserve her strength too.

◆

“That was incredible!” Sheryl gushed as Akira landed yet another shot from his moving vehicle in the dead of night. “It’s too dark to see, and the truck keeps shaking, but you killed that monster in one shot! I always knew you were something special!”

Of course, she couldn’t see his target through her binoculars, let alone tell whether he’d hit it. Still, a dot had vanished from the truck’s scanner display, and Akira had lowered his rifle, so she assumed—correctly—that one shot had done the trick.

But Akira only responded, “I guess.” He sounded bitter, almost annoyed, as if he couldn’t even be bothered to answer her politely.

“Er, ok.” Sheryl offered no more compliments. Her smile remained frozen in place, but mentally, she was tearing her hair out.

Was that a bad time for a compliment? she asked herself. *But he seemed happy the first time I praised his shooting. How was that any different?! I can’t tell!*

Sheryl knew compliments would only win her affection if the recipient wanted to hear them. With Akira, however, she could never figure out what to say or when to say it.

Despite Sheryl’s praise, Akira looked conflicted.

Well, aren’t you a ray of sunshine, Alpha remarked. *It wasn’t such a bad shot, you know?*

Thanks, Akira replied. *So, how far would it have gone wide without your support?*

About ten meters to the left.

That much, huh? Akira sighed to himself. He had aimed as well as he could, clearing his mind, using his powered suit to steady his rifle, and even slowing down his perception of time, but he still hadn’t come close to hitting the target.

You realized you couldn’t have made the shot yourself when you saw it hit, didn’t you? Alpha added, kind and encouraging. *That’s a sign of improvement. I’m impressed.*

You think so?

I know so. Of course, you’re nowhere near being a perfect sharpshooter on your own, and I won’t pretend otherwise. You’ve got a long road ahead of you, but you are *making progress, so keep at it.*

Akira’s marksmanship was indeed improving by leaps and bounds. Although he didn’t realize it, Alpha’s superhuman precision had merely given him unreasonably high expectations.

Sounds like a plan, Akira replied, his flagging spirits restored. He climbed back into the driver's seat and let out his breath. Then he happened to glance over his shoulder at the semitruck.

"Sheryl," he said, "about that truck—"

"I did everything I could think of to disguise what we're doing, so you shouldn't have to worry about anyone tracing it to this ruin."

"O-Oh, okay." Akira faltered, taken aback. He'd only been going to ask where she'd rented it from.

Sheryl went on to explain that after Akira had broached the idea of relic hunting in Yonozuka, she had taken every precaution she could manage on short notice. As far as anyone else was concerned, she and her gang were bound for Narahagaka City. She had even started an argument with her sandwich-ingredient supplier, demanding lower rates and taking issue with the shipping costs, in particular. Her supplier couldn't take that lying down, so he had refused, expostulating on the difficulties of transportation. And after more tit for tat, he had challenged her to make the shipping run herself—playing right into Sheryl's hands, of course.

She had accepted the challenge and secured the supplier's promise to consider giving her a discount if she successfully made a round trip to Narahagaka herself. He insisted she cross the wasteland in an ordinary delivery truck that he would provide—a real wasteland vehicle would have made the trip too easy. Naturally, Sheryl had maneuvered him into this offer as well. So, although she was using a borrowed truck, she wouldn't have to worry about anyone tracing its route later, like she would have if she'd rented one geared toward hunters.

As for Akira, he was ostensibly her guard on this shipping run. She had even gone to the trouble of posting a job so that it would appear on his Hunter Office profile. And she had sworn Darius and Katsuragi to secrecy on the grounds that, by hiring Akira, she was arguably breaking her promise to brave the trip herself. That excuse had stopped the merchants from wondering why she was slipping out of the city with Akira in the middle of the night—she'd let them believe she was putting her thumb on the scales to help make her run to Narahagaka a

success.

“Makes sense. We should be fine, then,” Akira said, nodding. He was impressed by the lengths to which Sheryl had gone to keep Yonozuka Station a secret.

“I could have added a few more touches if I’d taken my time,” Sheryl replied. “But that wouldn’t matter if someone else found the ruin in the meantime, so I compromised.”

“W-Well, that’s fair enough.” If this was a compromise, then what must proper secrecy look like? Dejectedly, Akira reflected on how sloppily he had planned his own trips to the ruin.

“We won’t actually go to Narahagaka, so I’ll fail to make my shipping run,” Sheryl added. “But don’t worry—this won’t leave a stain on your record. I only hired you as security, so you won’t have failed your job as long as I report you kept me safe.”

“R-Really? Thanks.”

“It was the least I could do.”

Sheryl’s efficiency made Akira keenly aware of his own shortcomings.

You’ll need to learn to handle that side of things yourself one day, Alpha chimed in, smiling pointedly. *Although I’d say that day is still a long way off.*

You got that right, Akira admitted, taking care that Sheryl couldn’t see his rueful grin. *Let’s take it slow and steady.*

◆

The group took a circuitous route to Yonozuka Station. Sheryl had suggested this precaution to keep her subordinates in the truck from using their travel time to guess the ruin’s position. She couldn’t hide the detour from Erio, since he was driving, but that struck her as a reasonable compromise. She had settled for warning him in no uncertain terms that he was a dead man if he talked.

Of course, Erio wasn’t actually driving the truck—Alpha was. Akira had lent Erio his spare data terminal and told the other boy to connect it to the vehicle’s OS so that she could take the wheel. Erio thought that the truck must have

high-end driver assistance, considering how smoothly it ran despite his lack of experience.

Once they arrived, the kids still had more waiting to do. Akira needed to unbury the entrance again before they could start hauling relics out. His suit-enhanced strength made quick work of the rubble. Sheryl and Erio watched him shift it in awe, while the crash of falling debris terrified the children still inside the truck.

When the way was clear, Akira peered inside. Thanks to Alpha, he could see clear to the bottom of the dark staircase in augmented reality.

Huh? he said. *Hey, Alpha, I thought you said everything outside my scanner's range would stay dark, since you only have its data to work with.*

That's right, Alpha replied. *I couldn't see all the way down using your scanner alone. But the miniature terminals Elena set up are still online, so I'm using them to fill in the gaps.*

Wait, you mean those gizmos Elena shot all over still work? Where do they get their power from?

They must not use much energy while they're in standby mode. And I still have access, since you linked your scanner to Elena's and Sara's last time, so I woke them up just now.

Makes sense. So, you'd know if there were any monsters in range of them?

I would, and I don't detect any.

Good.

The coast seemed clear, so Akira decided it was time to start relic hunting in earnest.

"Sheryl," he said, "get the lights out."

"Right away!"

The semi's trailer doors opened, and children emerged carrying lights. These were cheap models, only good for illuminating small areas, but they'd brought a lot of them. Akira stuffed the lights into his backpack, entered the ruin, and began installing them on the route to the kids' destination. He knew there were

no monsters inside, so he threw caution to the winds and descended the stairs at a brisk clip.

◆

Before dawn, the young gang members were ushered off the truck and assembled at the entrance to Yonozuka Station. Sheryl then ordered them to enter the ruin, follow the trail of lights to their destination deep within, and return with relics. The instructions were simple, but that didn't mean they would be easy to carry out.

"All right, then, get to it," Sheryl said cheerfully and clapped her hands.

No one moved.

Sheryl switched to her "gang leader" voice and repeated, "Get to work."

The children flinched and exchanged looks, but nothing more.

"Don't be afraid," Sheryl told them in a softer tone. "Akira already went inside and even set up lights for you, and he said he's taken care of any monsters down there. All you need to do is pick up relics and carry them out. So relax, it's no big deal."

The kids did relax slightly, but even so, none of them stepped forward. They weren't hunters. Even the boys, who had been warned what to expect, got cold feet now that they had actually crossed the wasteland to the sound of gunfire and stood before a ruin. Such places, according to accepted wisdom, were little more than dens of monsters.

"I see," Sheryl said, once more with the threatening tone of command. "In that case, we'll leave you all here and go home. And next time, we'll bring people with some work ethic—Akira has no patience for slackers. Goodbye!"

The boys' alarm grew when they saw Sheryl walk back toward the truck, with Akira close behind her. Yet gazing grimly into the ruin's mouth was still the most they could manage.

Then someone called, "Wait!"

Sheryl turned to see Nasya with her hand in the air.

"Wait," the girl repeated. "We'll get your relics."

“Get going,” Sheryl replied.

Nasya headed toward the stairs, dragging her terrified friend behind her. “Please, Lucia!” she pleaded, staring hard at the other girl. “Come with me! I’ll sacrifice myself to save you if I have to, so at least give it a try.”

Lucia was still trembling, but with an effort of will, she clenched her fists, wiped the fear from her face, and nodded.

“Thank you. Now, let’s go.” Nasya gave Lucia the best smile she could manage. Then the two of them entered the ruin together.

“I take it the rest of you don’t mind being left behind?” Sheryl said, giving the boys a glacial look. “Fine, then! Get lost! But leave your gear here—it belongs to the gang. If you walk off with it, I’ll consider it stolen. And not from me—from Akira.”

The boys shifted their attention to Akira. He looked disinterested. But in their eyes, this meant he just didn’t care whether they lived or died. And given that he had once killed a member of a rival gang and then stormed into its headquarters, such was a natural conclusion to draw. One by one, they resigned themselves and trudged into the ruins. It wasn’t long before they were all inside.

Sheryl let out a faint sigh of relief. “I’m sorry,” she told Akira. “I thought I’d chosen my people more carefully.”

“No,” Akira replied, “I took too much for granted. Now that I think about it, this *is* a ruin. And although I told ’em there are no monsters inside, it’s not like they’ve seen that for themselves. I can’t blame ’em for getting cold feet.” The boys’ reactions had reminded him that ruins were places to be feared.

They didn’t have to wait long before survivors emerged from the dreadful tunnels. Nasya and Lucia had been the first to enter, and the backpacks they’d been issued were now stuffed full of the relics they’d sought. Although both girls were physically and mentally exhausted, they had returned unscathed.

They set their packs down in front of Sheryl and opened them for inspection. After she and Akira had seen the goods, Sheryl smiled contentedly and said, “All right, put those in the truck. Repack them all in cardboard boxes and stack them

all the way to the back."

Lucia nodded and set off toward the container in silence, too tired to give more of an answer.

Nasya hesitated, but remained.

"Yes?" Sheryl asked curtly.

Nasya wavered again, then bowed not to Sheryl, but to Akira. "Please, could you let this settle the score for us—or at least for Lucia?"

"Huh?" Akira said. "If this is a gang problem, you oughta talk to Sheryl, not me."

"The boss ordered us to repay our debt to you."

It took Akira a moment to realize that she was talking about Lucia stealing his wallet—he had considered the incident settled, even if no one else did. "Oh, so that's what this is about. Okay, we're square. Sheryl, they're all yours from now on."

"I understand," Sheryl replied. "Nasya, tell Lucia she should be grateful to Akira."

"Thank you very much!" Nasya bowed deeply to Akira, then set off toward the truck, staggering slightly under the weight of her backpack. Despite her exhaustion, she was beaming and eager to tell Lucia the good news.

Sheryl, however, looked puzzled. Akira's decision didn't sit right with her.

Something about it didn't seem like him.

"Are you certain about this, Akira?" she ventured. "If I accept that those girls have paid their debt and treat them accordingly, Nasya will become an officer in my gang, and then Lucia will be under her command."

"I don't think that stuff is any of my business," Akira replied, "but if that's what you wanna do, I don't see a problem with it."

"All right," Sheryl said slowly. "I understand." She had no reason to argue with Akira, but she still felt that something, somewhere, was off.

Although, speaking of things that don't feel quite right, she mused, *Akira*

allowing Lucia to live in the first place was weird enough. I was too flustered to realize at the time, but he must know that letting them off that lightly could cause problems down the road.

For the next little while, Sheryl brooded on this strange feeling, which had appeared to trouble her just when she'd thought she had finally rid herself of a tricky problem.

◆

The relic hunt continued smoothly and safely. Akira remained on the surface, scouting for enemies, but even as the sun climbed past its zenith, he saw no sign of monsters. Neither did Elena's miniature sensors detect any threats belowground. So the only thing standing in the children's way was the fatigue they accumulated hauling heavy relics along dimly lit tunnels and up a four-story flight of stairs, then taking only a brief rest before descending once more.

Akira wouldn't have volunteered to do this type of heavy labor in his powered suit, but Sheryl's underlings were making do without even that kind of support. Watching them out of the corner of his eye, he recalled how exhausted he'd felt back when he'd been lugging relics out of the heart of Kuzusuhara. But the kids' hard work was paying off, and the trailer was now packed half full of relics. True, the haul might not be as valuable as it appeared, since they were taking whatever they could lay their hands on without stopping to appraise their finds. Nevertheless, Akira felt satisfied.

Relic hunting really does go a lot faster with a big team, huh? he mused. *And the best part is, I don't have to worry about anyone stealing relics off my truck while I'm down in the ruins.*

You're such a worrywart. Alpha laughed beside him. *I won't deny it's a possibility, but you'll have to give up on hunting solo if you let it bother you too much.*

I know. Still, better safe than sorry.

Akira could conceal his own truck with a camo sheet, but the semi was too bulky to hide. He had to worry about monsters wandering by and wrecking it or other hunters stumbling upon it and carrying off its precious cargo. At least, Akira wasn't enough of an optimist to ignore that risk, however remote it might

be.

And as if to underscore his caution, his truck's scanner detected company.

Two vehicles inbound, Alpha reported.

Roger that. Akira turned toward the trailer and shouted, "Sheryl! Two trucks are heading this way! Keep your head down!"

"All right!" Sheryl immediately commanded her subordinates to stop loading the truck and begin concealing the ruin.

◆

A large semitruck made its way across the wasteland. It wasn't designed for the harsh environment, although the bus accompanying it theoretically was. The pair of vehicles wasn't so different from those in Akira's group.

The truck driver—a man called Dale—sighed and grumbled, "Damn it, what the hell did we have to take this job for?"

"You have to ask?!" the man in the passenger seat retorted, laughing. "Because we're up to our eyeballs in debt, of course!"

Dale scowled. "*I'm* sure as hell not."

"What, you wanna pretend your debt's not that bad? It was bad enough to land you here, so fat difference that makes!"

"I'm not in debt!" Dale snapped, nettled by his companion's mocking tone.

"Good one! So, what'd you take this gig for, then? You think you're the one honest hunter out here with us? Now *that's* funny!" The man roared with slightly drunken laughter.

Dale gave up on trying to reason with him and settled for mentally cursing the cause of his predicament.

Screw the intermediary who saddled me with this piece-of-shit job! I'm gonna make a stink about this!

The East played host to many hunting-adjacent professions and professionals. One such group, known as intermediaries, performed a wide range of services, from connecting hunters with jobs to organizing teams and arranging for

temporary personnel. Dale had registered himself with a type of intermediary known as a referral agent.

Trustworthy companions were a precious commodity in the wasteland, but they weren't easy to find. Hashing out payment and scheduling posed challenges as well. That was where referral agents came in. Many hunters employed their services because, with a good agent's introduction, they could more or less count on even complete strangers to watch their backs. No honest agent would agree to register or represent a hunter who displayed poor conduct (including those whose partners routinely went missing or died). The same went for anyone who proved to be a troublemaker after a previous referral. Thus, competent agents weeded out the bad apples and kept only the more dependable hunters on their books. And thanks in part to the ELGC's efforts to prevent hunters from becoming heavily armed bandits, being registered with a well-respected agent was also a feather in any hunter's cap.

In this case, a referral agent had connected Dale with a relic hunting crew in need of a temporary member to fill a vacancy. Hunters often banded together for safety when looting particularly dangerous ruins. Sometimes the agents even organized such parties themselves, although not all recruitment efforts garnered enough interest to move forward. So Dale had accepted the offer, assuming that a vacancy had left one such group with fewer people than it needed to operate.

He could not have been more wrong.

The main force of relic hunters rode in the desert bus.

"I shouldn't have to remind you that your next payment's almost due, Guba," snapped Kolbe—the group's leader and supervisor—at the commander of the work team.

"I know," Guba replied with an irritated scowl.

"You'd better. I hope you *also* know that the relics in that truck won't cover it."

"I know! Now shut up!" Guba shouted, losing his cool.

Kolbe seemed unfazed by the outburst, but he ended the conversation with a curt nod.

Guba and the rest of the hunters doing grunt work with him were deep in debt. To pay it off, they'd been forced to search for relics in ruins too far to reach on foot. The semi's trailer was full of loot, but selling the lot wouldn't even begin to cover what they owed.

Dale was behind the wheel of the semi because he was debt-free. Kolbe had recruited him separately because he needed a driver who wouldn't run off with the loot to escape from debt—a fact that he hadn't shared with the rest of the team.

Guba was a passably skilled hunter. His competence had earned him his place at the head of the collection team and permission to wear a powered suit. But his debt had outgrown his abilities—the interest alone had ballooned to the point that it was only a matter of time until he found himself forced into an even more dire situation. He might be given a simple cyberization procedure—leaving him no more effective than before, but without control of his own body—and sent deep into perilous ruins as an expendable pawn. Or he might be used as a test subject for unapproved combat drugs. There were other possibilities as well, but they all amounted to the same thing: he would be stripped of his rights and put through hell to pay off his debt.

Guba knew that better than anyone, and he was starting to panic.

Shit! I could at least make a dent in my debt if these pieces of trash weren't so useless! I oughta kill 'em all!

The only thing stopping him from doing *that* was the team's contract—in the event of a member's death, the survivors would shoulder their debt. Thus, while the hunters didn't trust each other, self-interest drove them to help each other anyway. Yet this system didn't eliminate fatalities. Death was just a fact of hunting, and since everyone on this team owed more than they could possibly repay, none of them was exactly at the top of their profession. So the party sometimes returned from a relic-hunting expedition deeper in debt than when it had set out.

I've gotta do something, Guba told himself. *Of course, stumbling onto an*

untouched ruin would solve all my problems. He knew he couldn't hope for such a lucky break, but he was so desperate that he couldn't help dreaming of it anyway.

Just then, they got a call from the semi.

"I've got a reading up ahead. Vehicle approaching."

The truck had better instruments than the bus Guba's team rode in, since it carried more valuable cargo. As a result, its crew were the first to notice incoming traffic.

Guba looked up ahead and, sure enough, saw a wasteland truck driving toward them. But it was smaller than their vehicles, so he expected it to make way for them. He was about to put it out of his mind when the truck stopped dead, blocking their route.

"What the hell?" Guba muttered.

The truck then sent a standard short-range transmission, which the bus driver put through to their onboard mic.

"The vehicle I'm guarding has suffered a breakdown and stopped up ahead," said a voice. "Sorry, but you'll have to go around. Do you read me? If you can hear me, say something." Akira began again, "The vehicle I'm guarding..."

◆

Hmm... Doesn't look like they're changing course, Akira remarked, surveying the hunters' vehicles from on board his own truck. *Maybe they can't hear me?*

Maybe, Alpha replied. *Or they could simply be ignoring you.*

What a pain.

Akira knew that the other group was under no obligation to detour around him. In the wasteland, people only got out of each other's way because they worried that getting too close could spark a fight. No one would change course to avoid someone they took for small fry. And if they were the suspicious sort, they would be wary of bandits trying to steer them into a trap. Staying the course was the safest bet for any shipping convoy.

So Akira remained in his truck, waiting to see what choice the other drivers

would make. Eventually, they came to a halt.

Kolbe, Guba, and Dale climbed out.

They're arguing about something, Akira murmured, eyeing the men with suspicion. *But what?*

The trio made straight for him.

"What'd you bother stopping for?" Dale demanded, not bothering to hide his annoyance. "We could've just driven around him."

"I give the orders," Guba retorted, bristling. "Don't question 'em."

Dale looked at Kolbe, but Kolbe only gave his head a shake and said, "Sorry, but I put him in charge of the hunters. For now, anyway."

He implied that this might change if Guba fell behind on his payments, which did nothing to improve the hunter's mood. Guba marched up to Akira, quickly sized the boy up, and asked, "Was that you on the comm?"

"Yeah," Akira replied. "I know this isn't your problem, but would you mind going around?"

"It's a big road. Let us through."

"You can get past pretty much anywhere you want. I'm just asking you to do it a little off to the side."

"I don't see how that's *our* problem."

Akira hesitated, unsure whether the man was just full of himself or whether he was making this difficult for a reason. After a moment, Akira hardened his expression slightly and ventured, "What do you want?"

Guba smiled, thinking that the boy had given ground. "I want you to make working around *your* problem worth our while."

"Just out of curiosity, how much?" Akira asked, shifting gears now that he knew the men had stopped to shake him down.

"How's, oh, a million aurum sound?" Guba answered, pointing to their forces in the bus behind him. He just wanted to extort some quick cash and hoped

that showing he had numbers on his side would expedite matters. He didn't actually expect to get one million aurum, of course, but he was desperate for money, and even an extra hundred grand would help him make his next interest payment. That much, at least, seemed like a reasonable sum, considering he had the boy seriously outgunned.

But a hint of something dark and cold entered Akira's expression. "No thanks," he said. And then, as if it were the most natural thing in the world, "Killing you all would be cheaper."

"You wanna say that again?" Guba glared at Akira, assuming that the boy was trying to out-bluff him.

Tensions were mounting, made worse by the harsh wasteland around the pair, when another voice snapped, "Hey, lay off! You've gotta be *kidding* me! *This* is what you had us stop for?! Brain-dead assholes like you give the rest of us hunters a bad name!"

Dale's interjection brought a look of surprise to Akira's face. It also drew a distinction in his mind between Guba and the rest of the group.

While Kolbe grimaced, Guba bridled. "Can it!" he snapped. "You're not the boss of me!"

"I'm a hunter, which is more than you can say for yourself, you two-bit bandit! And I'm not gonna help you rob anyone! No way in hell!"

As he watched Guba and Dale arguing without him, Akira revised his earlier judgment, realizing that not everyone in the group was there to extort him. He exhaled, then said, "So, will you change course or won't you?"

Kolbe made the decision. "All right," he said ruefully, with a faint smile. "We'll go around. Sorry about this. Guba, let's move."

"Hey!" Guba snapped. "You promised you wouldn't second-guess my orders!"

Kolbe's tone turned severe. "Only when they're about hunting relics. You'd better believe I'll step in when you're about to get someone killed doing anything else. Now, come on!"

Guba scowled, but he backed down, intimidated by Kolbe. The sight brought a

cheerful grin to Dale's face.

The men returned to their vehicles and changed course. Akira watched them go, then started his own truck and drove back to rejoin Sheryl and her gang.

◆

Kolbe's group forged ahead, giving Akira's a wide berth. Guba stared sullenly out the windows of the bus. He practically spat when he caught sight of Akira's trucks, then pulled out his binoculars for a closer look.

He saw a girl beaming at the young hunter who had pissed him off, and more kids carrying cargo out of a shipping truck. As he observed them, his irritation gave way to suspicion.

What kind of group is that? he wondered. *They're all brats. And why are they carrying stuff* out *of the truck? If the kid's supposed to be guarding the vehicle, what do they wanna empty it for? Some kind of mechanical trouble?* Guba watched and wondered.

Then, out of the blue, it hit him.

Hang on, where'd the stuff they unloaded go? I can't see it anywhere. Is it behind some rubble?

Guba's frown deepened as he racked his brain, but then Kolbe called, "Hey, stop ogling kids and start planning our next relic hunt! If you think I'll let you go home without a decent haul, you've got another thing coming."

"I know!" Guba snapped and shifted his attention to choosing their next target. Yet he couldn't focus—something about the children nagged at him.

◆

"I see," Sheryl said cheerfully after Akira had explained the situation. "I'm glad it didn't turn violent."

"Yeah, we're lucky they gave up so easily," Akira agreed. "Wait, Sheryl, how come your guys are moving the relics *out* of the truck and back into the ruins?"

"I thought I'd try a little trick in case they came all the way here." Sheryl led Akira to the ruin's entrance and pointed down the stairs. Cardboard boxes of relics were piled high on the landing. "This way, even if they look inside, we

should be able to pass it off as only a cellar."

Sheryl explained that the wall of boxes hid the depth of the staircase beyond them. And although the containers didn't quite reach the ceiling, they would pass a quick inspection with the nearby lights off. If asked about their activities, Sheryl would say that they were temporarily shifting their valuable cargo to a cellar they had found near at hand for protection.

"Makes sense," Akira said, impressed. "But won't it block us from bringing up any more relics? Are you gonna move it all every time someone needs to get through?"

"Don't worry—I left a section of empty boxes for people to pass through. I could also tell everyone to leave the relics they find in the tunnel at the foot of the stairs."

Akira nodded, satisfied.

Alpha, he asked, *do you think I should've at least covered the entrance with a camo sheet when I was exploring down there before?*

That's a question of risk versus return. Alpha elaborated that if he pulled a camouflage sheet over the entrance behind him, anyone who discovered it would also realize that they'd stumbled upon something that someone else wanted to hide, potentially piquing their curiosity. And since the way into Yonozuka Station didn't look like much from a passing vehicle, he might actually be better off hoping that people would simply overlook it.

Huh. Are you sure?

Remember all those entrances to underground rooms that you found in the rubble over there and then abandoned? I suspect places like that are fairly common.

Oh, now I get it!

With that, Akira's doubts were settled, although he reflected gloomily that there was so much he never seemed to think of.

◆

Guba sat in the rattling wasteland bus. He was still trying to plan his team's

next relic hunt, but his thoughts kept drifting to Akira's group—until inspiration struck.

"Hey, I've got an idea," he called to Kolbe. "Let's return to where those kids were."

"Huh? What for?" Kolbe demanded.

"He said their truck broke down, right? We'll tow 'em back to town, maybe even guard 'em—for a price. It'll be an emergency job, so we might get a good payday out of it. What do you say?"

Kolbe thought the idea had merit, but he replied, "It'll never work. You already tried to shake them down, remember? There's no way they'd hire us. And you've only got your own stupidity to blame."

But Guba smiled. "I already thought of that. Sure, they wouldn't take help from *me*, but what about that guy who laid into me? What's his name, again? Dale? If we pretend he outranks me and have him make the offer, I'd say we've got a decent shot." Seeing that Kolbe was ready to reconsider, Guba added, "Hell, you could use me as an excuse. You know, 'Sorry about how rude our guy was. We'll give you a good deal to make up for it.' And hey, we should run the plan by that guy too. Get his opinion."

Guba called up the truck and explained his idea to Dale. In response, he got criticism of a different sort.

"Who's to say they're still there?" Dale asked. "And if a tow was all they needed, that kid would've done it with his truck."

"Even if they're gone, it couldn't hurt to double back and check," Guba countered. "And their shipping truck might be loaded with something too heavy for the kid's vehicle to tow. If that's their problem, then between our truck and the bus, we should be able to handle it."

"Well, I don't know..."

Dale saw no problem with the idea itself, but he worried that if they ended up guarding the children, he would be deviating from the duties he'd signed up for. It would be like rewriting his contract in the middle of a job, and as a hunter, he was leery of that kind of change.

But then Guba added mockingly, “What, you don’t wanna go out of your way to help? Was that Good Samaritan act all talk?”

“What?! Fine. I’m in.” Dale sounded angry, and he was rising to a taunt, but he had agreed.

Guba smirked and returned his attention to Kolbe. “Come on, give me the okay. I wanna pay off my debt as much as the next guy, and there’s no guarantee our next haul will be any good, so I don’t wanna pass up a chance to turn a profit. Please?”

Reluctantly, Kolbe said, “All right. Have it your way.” He felt vaguely uneasy, but given his position, he found it hard to refuse any plan that might reduce the hunters’ debts.

“Great! Okay, you heard the man! Turn us around!” Guba’s exuberant cry filled the bus. His fellow hunters wondered at his enthusiasm, but not one of them guessed what he was really after.

Chapter 78: A Certain Someone's Scheme

Akira, Sheryl, and the other kids were nearing the end of their expedition. Cardboard boxes full of relics were piled high in the tunnel nearest to the entrance of Yonozuka Station. The kids had gathered so much that there would be no room for them in the trailer once it was all loaded. Sheryl informed Akira that the only things left to do were to load up their loot and go.

"Great," he replied, smiling with satisfaction. "Then we'll head out as soon as all the relics are on board."

"The lights are still in place," Sheryl pointed out. "What should we do with them?"

"Why not just leave 'em? They'll still be good on our next trip, assuming nobody finds this entrance before then."

"All right. In that case, I'll only switch them off."

"Thanks."

Sheryl turned to leave, ready to issue new orders, when Akira called her name. She glanced back to find the shadow of a bashful grin on his face.

"I really appreciate the help," he said. "You're a lifesaver."

For a moment, Sheryl looked stunned. Then she beamed.

Well, someone's *in a good mood*, Alpha remarked, with a pretense of her usual cheer.

'Course I am, Akira replied. *I mean, did you* see *all those relics? Sure, they grabbed everything in sight, but even if half of this haul is basically trash, the other half should still be worth a lot. I wouldn't be surprised if it nets me fifty mil.*

That's all?

What do you mean, "all"? Fifty mil is nothing to sneeze at. I mean, I know there's no guarantee it'll sell for that much, so I might be getting ahead of myself. But there's no harm in hoping, is there?

Akira's cheerful answer did nothing to justify whatever it was that Alpha was concerned about, so she laid that matter aside for the moment. Then she adopted a knowing grin and set about fanning the flames of his anxiety.

You can hope all you like, but don't do more than that until you actually have the money. Knowing your miserable luck, anything could still happen.

Maybe you shouldn't tempt fate like that, Akira replied uneasily, his tense expression proof that Alpha had succeeded. He knew she was teasing, but he couldn't bring himself to laugh it off after all he'd been through.

Then Alpha said, *Stay on your toes!*

Hey, I'm not gonna relax till we're back home, so stop saying things to make me— Suddenly, Akira noticed the grim look on Alpha's face and immediately turned serious as well. *Have we got company?* he asked. *Monsters?*

No, trucks. The group that gave you trouble earlier is returning.

You're right, it is *them. What'd they turn around for?*

I don't know—that's why you need to stay on your toes.

Fair enough!

Akira apprised Sheryl of the situation, then climbed back into his truck to ward off Kolbe's team.

◆

Akira parked a short distance away from Sheryl's group and waited to see what the men would do. They stopped as well, and once again Kolbe, Guba, and Dale came out to meet him.

"What do you want?" he demanded, not even trying to sound welcoming.

"Don't be so nervous," Guba replied, grinning foolishly. "Sorry about last time, but you'll like our new offer."

"What makes you think I wanna hear it?" Akira snapped, his tone shifting from wary to warning. "Get lost."

Guba seemed to flinch, retreating a step and raising his hands slightly. "No need for threats. Dale and Kolbe here are the ones who wanna talk to you. I just

tagged along to say sorry. Okay?”

Dale heaved an exasperated sigh and gave Akira an apologetic look.

“I’m Kolbe, and he’s Dale,” the third man said ruefully. “This idiot’s named Guba, but you can forget about him.”

“Oh, come on,” Guba grumbled.

“Shut up. Now, please just hear us out. If it’s a no-go, we’ll turn around and leave. A fight’s the last thing we want.”

“Sorry our resident idiot pulled that dumb stunt earlier,” Dale added. “We’re hoping this offer will make up for it, but we don’t want to cause you any trouble. Please, give us a chance.”

Akira listened to Dale explain Guba’s proposal with growing suspicion.

Think we can trust this guy, Alpha? he asked.

He at least doesn’t appear to be lying, she replied. *I suppose it’s safe to say he’s in earnest.*

And the others?

Why not ask?

Akira glared at Guba and demanded, “Is all that true?”

“Ask *them*,” Guba replied, grimacing. “I’d be happy to tell you we’re on the up and up, but you wouldn’t take my word for it, would you?”

“Not a chance.”

“See?”

Kolbe sighed. “Quiet, you. Now, we do feel bad about what happened last time, but we’re not here purely out of the goodness of our hearts. We want to get paid, either for a tow or a guard job. But of course, we *will* give you a discount by way of apology for this screw-up. What do you say?”

Alpha?

He means it too.

Huh.

Akira felt conflicted. Since their truck hadn't actually broken down, the men's kind offer was just a nuisance. But he couldn't think of a good reason to refuse their well-meaning apology, and doing so when he was supposed to be stranded in the wasteland seemed unnatural.

"Er, thanks, but no thanks," he said, trying to come up with a convincing excuse. "I can't go into details because it's a personal issue, but I don't think my employer would agree to that."

He waited to see how the men would take this, and Dale responded with another good-faith offer.

"I don't want to pry, but maybe you should at least run it by your boss first? They must trust you a lot, since you can make that kind of call. Still, there's protocol to observe. Am I wrong?"

"Well, you've got a point." Akira hesitated.

"Would you let us pitch our offer to your employer?" Kolbe pressed. "If they turn us down, we'll depart. Personally, I always think it's best to leave contracts to the people in charge. Don't you?"

Akira agreed, but he still fumbled for another excuse. The best he could manage was: "In that case, I'll need to ask you to disarm. That includes all your guns and your suits' energy packs. I can't budge on that, since my job is security. So if you don't like it, give up."

He patted himself on the back, thinking that no one would willingly part with their weapons in the wasteland. But his self-satisfaction was short-lived.

"Here you go," Guba said. And to Akira's surprise—as well as Dale's and Kolbe's—he held out his gun and energy pack.

"Just so we're clear," the man added, grinning slyly and pointing behind him, "that bus is full of our buddies. We won't be armed, but don't forget about them."

Dale disarmed next, not wanting to let Guba outdo him.

Kolbe, however, scowled and shook his head. "Sorry, but count me out. You two go alone."

The pair who met Akira's conditions waited for his reply.

Akira couldn't believe what was happening, but he stuck to his word. "Okay, get in," he said at last, mentally kicking himself for his careless offer. Once again, he bemoaned his own lack of foresight. His gloom deepened a little later, when he realized that he should have had Sheryl come to the men instead of the other way round.

◆

It was only a short drive back to the semitruck, but a brief terminal message brought Sheryl up to speed before the group arrived. She greeted Dale and Guba with her coat off, displaying her fine clothes without appearing ostentatious, and listened to Dale explain their proposal as if she were hearing it for the first time.

When he finished, she bowed and said, "Although I deeply appreciate your generosity, per the terms of a prior contract, I cannot engage your services. So, I beg your pardon, but please withdraw."

Dale was startled—Sheryl wasn't at all who he'd been expecting. The contrast between her hint of polished elegance and what he saw as a cheap shipping truck aroused his suspicions, but he was more concerned at finding a girl like her stranded in the wasteland.

"I'm a hunter, so I know to take contracts seriously," he said. "But are you sure? There's no safe place to wait around out here in the wastes."

"Thank you for your concern, but I have security. And although contractual obligations prevent me from revealing the details, I have made other arrangements as well."

"By 'security,' do you mean just him? I don't see anyone else." Dale glanced at Akira. The boy seemed fairly well-equipped, but not especially capable. He certainly didn't seem like the kind of expert who could guard this apparently upper-class girl single-handedly.

But Sheryl beamed and said, "You needn't worry. I have the utmost trust in Akira's ability." Her radiant smile made it plain that she spoke entirely from the heart.

Dale gave a start, almost charmed, then chuckled gently. “I see. Well, if that’s how things are, then we won’t wear out our welcome. Have a safe trip home.”

“Thank you very much.”

Dale turned to Guba. “Hey, we’re leaving!”

“Hm? Oh, right,” Guba replied—the first words he had spoken since the men’s arrival, and the last before they departed.

Dale stared curiously at Guba as they made their way back to the bus. He couldn’t understand why his companion had been so eager to disarm if he wasn’t going to contribute anything to the exchange.

“What’d you bother tagging along for?” he asked.

“Oh, you know,” Guba replied. “I just wanted to see what his boss was like.”

Naturally, his real motive had been nothing of the kind.

After escorting the men partway to their vehicles, Akira had returned their weapons and turned around. Now he was en route to rejoin Sheryl.

Is that really all it takes? Should I just have said, “I can’t agree to that, and I can’t tell you why. It’s against my contract”? he grumbled, sighing—all the more deeply because he realized that his flimsy excuses had only complicated the situation.

A word of warning, Akira, Alpha cut in gravely. *Allowing them to leave alive may be dangerous.*

Huh? Why? They couldn’t know about the ruin.

Not yet, maybe, but they may catch on eventually. Alpha added that Guba had spent the entire meeting with Sheryl inspecting his surroundings—including her shipping truck. If he saw through their lie and realized the vehicle hadn’t broken down, he might conjecture that they had a good reason for stopping here. At the very least, he would grow curious about the location, raising the possibility that he would return to search it later. And even if he wasn’t looking specifically for the entrance to Yonozuka Station, he might very well find it.

Akira couldn't help glancing back at Dale's and Guba's defenseless backs. Slowly, he asked, *But that's still just a worry, right?*

Yes, but it's also a definite possibility.

How far should Akira go to prevent something when he didn't even know how likely it was to happen? He pondered the question, but it didn't take him long to reach his conclusion.

I'll leave them be. One of them was only trying to be nice, and I still wouldn't feel right silencing the other guy just 'cause he might be onto this place. He had nothing definite to go on. And even if the men found the ruin as he feared they would, well, that was life. Akira's moral compass told him that murdering people to preserve his secret was the wrong thing to do.

Do you think I'm being too soft? he asked.

Alpha chuckled. *Everyone had their own standard for these things. I'll be satisfied as long as you're sure about what you want.*

Akira considered, then grinned as if a weight had lifted from him. *Good to know.*

◆

While Akira and Sheryl watched her subordinates pack relics into the trailer, he told her why he feared that Yonozuka Station might not remain secret much longer.

"I'm sorry," Sheryl said, bowing. "Perhaps I didn't handle that as well as I could have."

"Well, it's still only a possibility," Akira replied. "Don't beat yourself up about it. If all the steps you took aren't enough to hide this place, then it was always a lost cause anyway."

"I'm glad to hear you say so."

"By the way," he added, "what would you think of us in their shoes?"

"That's a good question. They would have to assume that we stopped our shipping truck for a reason, which could only be taking on or unloading cargo. And in such a desolate location, the natural inference would be that we have a

place to either hide or exchange valuable and dangerous goods, I suppose."

"What kind of goods would be that risky?"

"Well, let's see..." Sheryl thought for a moment. "Relics embezzled from a Hunter Office exchange?"

"Oh, yeah! You wouldn't wanna get caught with *those*."

While they chatted, the children finished loading the trailer. Akira was thinking that he'd better bury the entrance again, just to be safe, when the nearby remains of a building caught his eye. Due to some quirk of its construction, only the parts along one of its walls remained. The sight gave him an idea, which he promptly ran by Alpha.

It's possible, she replied, *but are you sure you want to do it? You'd never be able to dig it up again without help.*

Yeah, I'm sure, said Akira. *This place is big enough that there's bound to be more entrances if I look for 'em. So we might as well seal this one off.*

All right. In that case, let's really cut loose! Alpha smiled, and Akira grinned back at her.

Akira returned to his truck for his CWH anti-materiel rifle, then headed out to the building and used his suit-enhanced strength to steady the weapon. The structure might be on its last legs, but it was still a product of Old World construction. If left to nature, it would remain standing in its ruined state for some time to come. But human hands could hurry it along.

Akira took careful aim and fired. His powerful proprietary bullet bored into a fragile bit of architecture, and cracks radiated outward from the impact site. Alpha had studied the building through Akira's scanner and calculated the most effective places to target it in order to bring it down. The shock of each shot reverberated deep within the walls, dramatically weakening the whole structure.

After Akira emptied two magazines into the precarious building, it began to creak. Small fragments were already beginning to crumble from the walls.

That's enough prep work, Alpha announced.

Okay, Akira replied. *Then, let's see what my new suit can really do!*

He stowed his CWH and took up a position beside the building, grinning his head off. Then he sank into a combat stance and drew in a long breath. As if in sympathy, his suit ramped up to its maximum output.

Then, with a sharp cry, Akira drove a devastating kick into the structure. Recoil from the blow cracked the hard, paved ground beneath his pivot foot, while the wall shattered and sank in around his striking one. A wave of destruction rippled outward and engulfed the whole building, leaving it listing to one side.

Not enough for you, huh?! Akira shouted mentally. *Have another one!*

He followed up with a roundhouse kick to the wall. A deafening crash filled the air, and the shock spread through the building. A section of weakened wall collapsed, and the structure tilted even more sharply.

That still *didn't do it! This thing's built tough!*

Finish it off with your next hit! Alpha instructed.

Sure thing!

Akira focused, dilating his sense of time until the world moved in slow motion. Reflecting that the falling rubble seemed to be almost suspended, he braced himself with both feet, canceling out the backward momentum from his last kick. Then he lunged forward, using his speed to power up his next strike. By temporarily increasing his suit's energy consumption, he was able to draw on strength far beyond that of any normal human, and Alpha's support allowed him to multiply that destructive power with the skilled movements of a master. The resulting kick was the mightiest blow that he could currently deliver.

It hit home, and the shock of its impact pulverized his entire target into a heap of debris—beneath which the entrance to Yonozuka Station lay well and truly buried. When the dust settled, it revealed Akira stretching with a look of satisfaction on his face.

This new suit packs a punch, he said. *Was whoever started bashing it really*

unhappy with this *performance?*

Well, they didn't have my *support*, Alpha replied smugly, *so you never know, they might have given it a fair assessment.*

Yeah, yeah. I appreciate your help. He laughed, and she joined in.

◆

Sheryl watched the building collapse from a safe distance. She had expected something to happen when Akira told her to stand clear, but the sight still surprised her. A few moments later, she realized that he had done it to seal off the entrance to the ruin and felt even more amazed that he would go so far to hide it.

Beside her, Erio watched the same spectacle with a look of anxiety. "Boss," he asked slowly, "did Akira do that?"

"He must have," Sheryl replied. "He wouldn't have warned us to move back for our own safety otherwise."

"B-But what's the point?"

"Who knows? Maybe he merely felt like it." Sheryl guessed that Akira had completely sealed the entrance to minimize the risk of anyone else discovering his untouched ruin, but she couldn't very well say so.

"Seriously? Who does *that* just for kicks?"

"True enough. You know that Akira recently bought a new powered suit, right? I suppose he wanted to test its capabilities."

"So he just up and demolished a *building*?" Erio was about to protest the implausibility of this explanation, but then he realized that he wouldn't put it past Akira. "Man."

"Isn't he amazing?"

"Y-You said it."

All the children had seen the building fall, but only Sheryl felt unalloyed wonder. The others looked on tensely, their awe tempered by varying degrees of annoyance and fear.

Once Akira rejoined them, the group turned back toward the city with their trailer full of relics. Since they had somewhat overstuffed the semi, Lucia and Nasya rode with Sheryl in Akira's truck. Although nervous, the girls once again rejoiced that the hunter had pardoned them.

◆

Not long after the children left the buried entrance to Yonozuka Station, Guba arrived in a car of his own.

"That's weird," he muttered, puzzled. "This oughta be the place."

His onboard navigation system told him that he'd reached his destination, but he saw no sign of what he was looking for—not even the spindly shell of a building, which he'd thought would make a good landmark. And although he drove around searching for his goal, it continued to elude him.

"Damn it! What's going on?"

Maybe his nav system was on the fritz, he thought. But when he drove back to his starting point and retraced his steps from memory, he found himself in the same place.

"This can't be happening!" he roared. "I *know* this is the right spot! What the hell am I doing wrong?!"

Guba believed that he was looking for a secret warehouse of some kind. Rumors abounded of corporate insiders heading out into the wasteland to strike illicit deals or divert goods to desert caches. Insurance fraud was another possibility—transporters and guards would collude to hide a shipping trailer, sacrifice only their truck's cab to a monster attack, and then report the whole vehicle as lost. And Guba suspected that he had stumbled upon just such a scheme.

A hunter could rob a criminal's hidden storehouse without much fear of reprisal, since finds in the wasteland were fair game. And while the people they robbed would naturally hold a grudge, few would start a fight with a hunter to settle it.

Guba felt confident that Sheryl hadn't seen through his plan during their meeting. Too many questions from someone like him might arouse suspicions,

but that goody-goody Dale had done all the talking, and Sheryl had responded to him normally enough. And even if the girl had realized what Guba had in mind, her truck would only hold so much. Guba doubted that she could empty a warehouse large enough to be worth building in the wasteland.

He had made this first trip alone. He could always bring in more people if the job seemed too big for him, but ideally he would keep all the profits for himself. But he couldn't even find the supposed warehouse. And unless he acted quickly, its owners might decide to play it safe and move their goods somewhere else. So he frantically went on searching—without anything to show for it.

"Shit! This *has* to be the right place!"

Guba's panic led to mounting frustration, which only made him panic more. Then, in the midst of this vicious cycle, his terminal received a call from someone whose name jerked him back to his senses. After a brief hesitation, he picked up and snapped, "What do *you* want?"

"My, what a greeting!" a cheerful woman's voice replied. "And here I went out of my way to let you know I have info for sale."

"Do you think I could afford it? Or that I'd buy from you even if I could?"

"Is that so? Well, I won't force you. Bye-bye!"

"Wait!" Guba shouted in spite of himself. He knew that the woman on the other end of the call was bad news, as many of her former associates had discovered to their cost—but she was also too good at her job to ignore. With his one shot at escaping debt slipping through his fingers, he was desperate enough to say, "I'll at least hear you out."

"I'm told that a certain hunter hired a group of slum children to help him gather relics."

"So what?"

"You're so slow on the uptake. That means his destination was safe enough to enter with children and so full of relics that he needed all the help he could get to move them all."

Huh? That reminds me of something, Guba thought, his wheels turning.

"I suspect he discovered an unexplored area in some ruin," the woman continued. "Although not even I can tell you where exactly."

What was it? I almost had it for a moment there. What's bugging me? What am I trying to remember?

"But I *do* know who the hunter is and who the children are. That old rumor about a child bringing relics to an exchange never came to anything, but this info is solid."

A hunter and some slum kids? When I checked out that truck through my binoculars, the hunter and the girl in the fancy clothes had other kids with them. And they were carrying something—probably underground. That's why I thought they must have a secret warehouse.

"They have you scrounging up relics to pay off your debt, right? So, I'm guessing you could use a tip on where to find a whole trove of them."

Relics... Could that have been a ruin, not a warehouse?

"And if you follow that hunter and his band of children, they just might lead you to a fresh area of the ruins."

A fresh area...or a whole new ruin? What if they were carrying in supplies to help with the exploration? And if it's big enough to need all that and *safe enough for kids to work in...*

"Wouldn't you like to know who that hunter is? I won't tell you for free, of course, but don't you think the info would be worth adding a little to your debt? Now, about the price—"

"Quiet!" Guba snapped.

"Hey!" the woman exclaimed. "What—"

"Just shut up!"

Guba took another look around him and checked his car's nav system. Then he stared at where the building he'd used as a landmark should have been. He tensed when he spotted a heap of rubble that might easily have been its remains.

Remember! he urged himself. *What was his name?! I know the girl said it! Remember! Remember! Remember! It... It started with "A." Then what? A... A...*

"Akira," Guba said at last. "That hunter's name is Akira, isn't it?"

"Wait, how do you know?!" came the shocked woman's voice from his terminal. "Where did you buy that info?!"

Guba burst into a roar of laughter. He could still hear the woman shouting at him over his terminal, but he didn't care. After ending the call, he gazed at the mound of rubble with a grin of wicked delight.

"There's a ruin under there!" he cried. "That was the entrance, but he covered it up in case we caught on! And he knocked down a whole building to do it!"

Guba started his car and tore off back to the city at top speed.

"Did he bury it because he'd cleaned the place out?!" he asked himself. "No! If he already had the relics, he'd leave it alone! He buried it because there's still a huge haul down there! And he must have a plan for getting it out!"

Guba was face-to-face with the very real possibility of not only clearing his debt but striking it rich as well. And he didn't hesitate to reach for it.

"I'll make it mine! All mine!" he yelled. To seize this golden opportunity, he would do *anything*.

Meanwhile, in Kugamayama City's lower district, a woman smiled mischievously down at her terminal and said, "Good luck."

Then she placed a new call.

"It's me. He probably went for it, so I'd like you to confirm. Bye!"

She chuckled to herself, imagining a certain person gambling for their own success—and never realizing that she was on to them.

Chapter 79: Tragedy Strikes Sheryl

Once they reached the city, Akira's group stopped at his house and unloaded their cargo into his garage. Storing relics at Sheryl's base in the slums would have been too risky, even with Akira watching out for her gang. Then Akira escorted the group home, and they all dispersed for the day. The sun had set, and Sheryl had a truck to return, so they agreed to divvy up the spoils in the morning. Sheryl saw Akira off.

Despite the powered suit he wore, Akira was exhausted. He ate, took the edge off his fatigue with a bath, and then went straight to bed.

The next day, Akira returned to Sheryl's base to discuss their recent expedition. He went fully kitted out, since she had mentioned that the sight of his wasteland truck parked out front acted as a deterrent. He drove out into the wasteland, circled the city, and was just about to turn into the slums when Erio called.

That didn't happen every day, he reflected as he picked up and said, "It's me. What's up? I should be there in—"

"Akira!" Erio shouted. "Sheryl's been kidnapped!"

"Say what?!"

Never mind the unexpected messenger. The real surprise was his message.

◆

Sheryl was dressing in her room. In preparation for Akira's arrival, she chose the outfit that La Fantola had made her out of Old World garments. These were her best clothes, and she normally kept them safely tucked away for important negotiations. But entertaining Akira was arguably her most important job, and this outfit had made a strong impression on him. So, hoping to deepen their bond, she slipped into the clothes that had cost one and a half million aurum in seamstress fees alone and settled down to wait for him.

Then one of her subordinates knocked frantically on her door.

“You may enter,” she said. “What’s wrong?”

“Boss, hunters—not Akira, *different* hunters—just showed up asking to talk with you,” the boy replied, with a look that told her this was no courtesy call.

“I understand,” she said, frowning. “Have they told you who they are or what they want?”

The boy timidly shook his head.

“And where are they now?”

“At the front door.”

“Round up the fighters and tell them to arm themselves—we need a show of force, even if it’s only a bluff. I’ll join you all soon. Can you do that?” Sheryl gave the boy a reassuring smile.

A little calmer, he nodded and left to call his comrades.

Sheryl turned grave again and sighed.

Whoever they are, they don’t sound friendly, she reflected. *Akira will be here soon, but I’d better stall them until he arrives.*

Sheryl told herself that encounters like this came with the territory, as her patron couldn’t always be on hand to deal with them. Once she was mentally prepared, she left her room—not taking the time to change clothes, since she doubted she could afford the delay.

The hunters were waiting for Sheryl at the entrance to her base. There were three of them: a hooded man, a man in a full-face helmet, and a man with the right half of his face mechanized. Judging by their gear, they were neither washed up nor wannabes—whatever their personal qualities, they gave off the distinctive aura of those accustomed to working and killing in the wastes.



“I hear you have business with me,” Sheryl said, looking sharply at them to avoid being daunted. “What is it?”

The hunters exchanged looks. Then one of them pushed back his hood, revealing his face.

Sheryl gasped. “I know you!”

“Long time no see.” Guba grinned, neither contemptuous nor respectful. “I’ve got a question for you. Come with me.” He grabbed Sheryl’s arm, and the other hunters raised their weapons.

Just then, the first of the gang’s fighters to finish gearing up arrived on the scene. When he saw what was happening, he started to raise his own rifle, shouting, “Hey! What the hell do you think you’re—”

A hail of bullets killed the unfortunate boy instantly, leaving his sentence unfinished. The powerful anti-monster ammunition didn’t just penetrate his cheap body armor; it shredded the gear and the flesh beneath, splattering both across the floor.

Erio ran in a moment later, but he immediately flung himself backward, avoiding the enemy fire. The nearby walls and floor were so full of holes that they threatened to collapse. Children’s screams filled the air, but none of the hunters batted an eye.

“Stand down!” Sheryl shouted to her gang.

Guba was dragging her out of the base. His companions fired a few more warning shots before they followed him.

Some time after the last gunshots faded, the children timidly poked their heads out. The blood spatter and bullet holes covering the walls and floor spoke volumes about the threat their enemies posed. More time passed before Erio got over the fear of his brush with death and called Akira.

◆

Akira looked grim as Erio finished his account.

“Let me get this straight,” he said. “You don’t know who took Sheryl, why they did it, or where they are now, and you can’t even guess. Is that about right?”

“Yeah,” Erio confirmed. “I’m sorry, but we’re totally in the dark.”

“Okay, then. Let me know if you figure anything out. See ya.”

“H-Hang on a sec! That’s *it*?!” Erio shouted, desperate for his gang’s patron to take action and stung by Akira’s seeming indifference.

“Well, what do you *expect* me to do with that info? Anyway, I’ll look for her. Bye.” With that, Akira ended the call.

“Alpha,” he said, “I’m not expecting much, but can *you* find Sheryl with what he gave us to go on?”

That’s impossible, even for me, Alpha replied.

“I figured.”

Akira would have gone to Sheryl’s rescue if he knew where she was—he had, after all, promised to help her. But things wouldn’t be so easy if he had to find her first. The city was a big place, and so was the wasteland. Even the slums were too sprawling for him to search alone, and he wouldn’t sign up for a wild goose chase.

He was still debating what to do when Alpha added offhandedly, *If you’re going to rescue Sheryl, head that way. Her kidnappers are driving through the wasteland.*

Akira gave her an ambivalent and slightly accusatory look. “What happened to ‘impossible’?”

I couldn’t locate her based on Erio’s report, she explained brightly, *but it’s entirely possible using other data.*

“Yeah? Okay, then. Sorry I asked wrong.” Akira’s grimace intensified, but with his destination clear, he had no reason to hesitate. He swerved his truck and slammed on the accelerator to blow off steam. “You said that way, right? Let’s go!”

◆

Guba and his cronies drove a wasteland truck without even the skeleton of a roof. It was designed to accommodate large heaps of cargo or to leave its occupants free to attack. Guba pushed Sheryl into the back seat, then sped out of the slums and into the wasteland.

While en route, he asked one of the other men to take the wheel and shoved Sheryl roughly into the truck bed. Then he faced her again and said, “Thanks for waiting. Now, let’s get down to business. I’ve got some questions for you.”

“I don’t know what you want,” Sheryl replied, glaring daggers at the hunter, “but do you honestly think I’ll talk?”

“Okay, first question.” Guba ignored her and seized her right hand. Then, without saying anything more, he broke her pinky finger. As he watched Sheryl’s face contort in pain, he asked, “How do I get into the ruin?”

After a moment, Sheryl replied, “I don’t know.”

Guba broke her ring finger. “Where’s the entrance?”

“I don’t...know,” Sheryl answered, still glaring at the man even as her face and voice trembled in agony. He immediately snapped her middle finger, and her expression grew even more strained.

“Don’t be like that. Where is it?”

“I...don’t...know.” Sheryl tensed in fear, expecting her index finger to be next, but she never stopped glaring at her captor.

Guba, however, now seemed pleased by her response—unlike his companions, who were starting to look doubtful. Sheryl couldn’t help sharing the hunters’ confusion. And then Guba startled her again.

“So, you *do* know!” he exclaimed jubilantly. “What a relief! You see, even though we grabbed you and all, I was a little nervous that you might be out of the loop.”

“I told you,” Sheryl retorted through gritted teeth, “I don’t know anything.”

“Oh, you know all right. I’m sure of it. At least, you know enough about what I’m after to understand my question, or you would’ve asked what I was talking about.”

At that, something other than agony entered Sheryl’s expression—exactly as Guba had hoped it would.

“If you really didn’t know anything,” he continued, “you would’ve acted confused. But you clearly understood the question and told me that you didn’t

know the answer. You're a good actress. You would've fooled me if I hadn't met you before in the wasteland. Still, acting while you're in pain ain't easy, so you didn't think quick enough to pretend like you didn't know what I was talking about. That's why I broke your fingers. It was the right call."

Guba was genuinely impressed with Sheryl, who continued to glare at him through a haze of pain—although she was less furious and more fearful than she had been mere moments earlier.

"Now I'm sure that there's a ruin out there. And since I've never heard of it before, it's got to be undiscovered." Guba broke Sheryl's index finger at last. "So, let me ask you again: Where's the entrance? And I'm not talking about the one under all that rubble. There's another way in, and you know where it is. Tell me."

"I...I don't know."

Sheryl's thumb snapped too.

"Come on. You'd need heavy machinery and a ton of time to dig up the entrance you used yesterday. A big job like that'd be difficult to miss, and it'd give away the ruin you worked so hard to hide. But you gave up on that entrance like it was nothing, so you must know another one. Make sense?"

Weakly, Sheryl repeated, "I don't know."

"Man, talk about stubborn." Guba took Sheryl's left hand, and she shuddered in spite of herself. "Once I'm done with this hand, I'll move on to your arms, so you might as well cut your losses and talk now. How about it?"

"I don't...know."

A scream of pain escaped Sheryl as her pinky and ring fingers broke together.

"You're running out of chances," Guba threatened. "If I get through both arms and both legs and you *still* haven't talked, I'll dump you in the wasteland. Then I'll give up on trying to keep this quiet and dig up that entrance. Sure, other hunters'll realize it's there, but the early bird gets the worm. I can still count on a good haul of relics. So, don't get any silly ideas that you might survive this if you keep your mouth shut."

“I don’t know.”

Sheryl’s iron will wiped the smile off even Guba’s face. He was about to break her remaining fingers and thumb all at once when one of his companions interjected.

“Who *does* know, then?” asked the man called Vegaris, his words clearly audible despite his full-face helmet. “That hunter, Akira?”

“I don’t know,” Sheryl repeated.

“He’s the one who found the ruin, right? And he brought you in to help him clear it out. Am I wrong?”

“I don’t know.”

“What were you doing there, then? Tell me.”

“I don’t...know,” Sheryl persisted, cold sweat streaming down her tormented face.

A thought struck Kennit, the cyborg. “Hey,” he cut in, “what’s your name?”

“I don’t know.”

“That’s the only thing she’s said this whole time!”

The hunters looked at each other, taken aback. They might be able to see through false but concrete answers by picking apart contradictions, but a single answer repeated ad nauseam regardless of the question might as well be silence. How were they supposed to tell when Sheryl was lying? Her reactions might have offered some clues, even if she continued to deny everything, but her agony so overshadowed every other sign now that any tells were nearly impossible to discern.

In a fit of rage, Guba grabbed Sheryl by the collar and yanked her toward him. “Hey!” he roared. “There’s a ruin out there, right?! A fresh one?!”

“I. Don’t. Know.” Sheryl sneered through her mask of pain.

“Y-You little...!”

Was she scoffing at him for desperately chasing a ruin that didn’t exist, or was it an act to make him doubt the existence of a genuine prize? Guba couldn’t tell.

“Cool it,” Kennit cut in. “Everything points to there being an undiscovered ruin. And even if there isn’t, we’re probably still talking about a secret warehouse full of loot. That’s why we agreed to go in on this with you. So, don’t kill our lead for no good reason.”

After a tense moment, Guba said, “Okay. You’re right.” He released Sheryl, and she crumpled to the truck bed, no longer strong enough to stand.

“Anyway, Guba,” Kennit continued, “we were going to drive straight to the site. Is that still the plan?”

“Yeah. I was hoping to use a different entrance, but if she won’t talk, then we’ll have to figure out how to shift that mountain of debris or find another access point ourselves.”

“Either way, I think we’ll need help.”

“The more people we bring in, the more ways we have to split the loot. I didn’t even want to ask you two if I could get away with it.”

Vegaris and Kennit laughed at Guba’s evident anguish. Like him, they had been roped into the relic-hunting group to pay off their debts. And although Guba’s leadership skills had earned him a higher place in the pecking order, they outmatched him in a fight. He equaled them only in the number of zeroes on the sum he owed.

Guba had chosen his allies for their combat ability, since there was no guarantee that the entrance they sought would lead to a safe area in the ruin. It was even possible that its discoverer had sent the kids from the slums ahead of himself to test its dangers.

The truck jolted as it took a sharp turn.

“What was that for?” Guba demanded, turning suspiciously to Kennit in the driver seat.

“Another truck’s coming toward us fast from the opposite direction,” Kennit answered. “I swerved to get out of its way.”

“Oh. Well, this is no time to take risks, so— Whoa! What the hell?!”

“The oncoming truck changed course to match us! He should’ve slowed down

to make way!” Kennit looked confused. Sure, the other truck could have swerved in the same direction coincidentally as it tried to avoid a crash, but he couldn’t understand why it hadn’t braked even slightly. He checked his instruments in case there were monsters on the other driver’s tail, but he didn’t see any.

Not seeing what else to do, he swerved again to give the oncoming truck a wide berth. Yet once again, it matched his course. And far from braking, it was *gaining* speed.

“That asshole!” Kennit exclaimed as the truth finally sunk in. “He’s trying to ram us!”

Guba jerked around to stare at the other truck, and his face twisted in shock as he recognized its driver.

“It’s him!” he screamed at the sight of Akira at the wheel.

Kennit did his best to avoid a collision, but it was already too late. The trucks were hurtling toward each other too quickly, and Akira was working against him. He gave up on trying to steer and yelled, “Everybody out!”

All three hunters immediately dove from the vehicle—too quickly to take Sheryl with them. A moment later, the trucks cannoned into each other, and the massive collision sent Sheryl flying.

◆

The crash flung Sheryl clear of the truck. Time slowed to a crawl as she sailed through the air, and she forgot even the pain in her hands as it dawned on her that she was doomed.

But I tried so hard, she thought. *Akira even thanked me yesterday.*

It hadn't been much, but she had finally earned a measure of Akira's respect and trust—enough to give her visions of a smoother road ahead. And now, almost immediately, those hopes were dashed. That thought disheartened Sheryl even more than her own approaching death.

That didn't last long, did it? Sheryl lamented, gazing at the blue sky with a sad smile on her face.

Then she was secure in Akira's arms.



“Huh?” she mumbled, unable to believe her swift change in fortune. But just then Akira landed, and the jolt snapped her back to reality.

“Good,” he said. “Looks like you’re safe.”

“What the...?!”

But she soon felt more confused than ever. In her surprise, she’d forgotten about the ache in her hand, but now Akira’s movement as he held her made it feel even worse. Add to that Akira’s casual tone and how he’d immediately taken off running with her in his arms, and it was no wonder she felt disoriented. She squawked in pain and bewilderment as he carried her on.

◆

With Alpha tracking Sheryl’s position, Akira had circled around ahead of the other hunters, dead set on ramming their truck and wrenching her free of their clutches before he did anything else. As he saw it, asking the men to surrender would be a waste of time and only end with them using Sheryl as a human shield. He could snipe them from a safe distance, but he was up against multiple targets, and he wasn’t confident that he could get them all before the survivors killed her. Even if he pulled it off, she might still die when the driverless truck spun out of control. And if he chased the group from behind, they would have time to shoot at him while he closed the distance. He’d have a hard time catching up, let alone rescuing Sheryl.

Why not come from the front instead? So Akira found himself racing straight at Guba’s truck. He had run the idea by Alpha, and she hadn’t vetoed it, so he figured that it couldn’t be such a bad plan.

Both vehicles were equipped with armor tiles, but their systems could only do so much to cushion a head-on collision and couldn’t protect the passengers from inertia. A helpless Sheryl went flying out of the hunters’ truck, and she would have suffered worse if she hadn’t been wearing her new clothes. Some Old World garments outperformed modern body armor, and the materials that had gone into Sheryl’s outfit insulated her from the shock of the crash. Alpha had also fine-tuned the angle of the collision so that Sheryl would be thrown clear as safely as possible. So, in that sense, she escaped the vehicle unscathed.

Akira then leaped from his own truck, caught Sheryl in midair, and landed on the ground. Even before the crash, he’d been focusing on controlling his perception of time so that he could line up his suit-enhanced jump with her

trajectory in slow motion. This maneuver was still a little too much for him alone, but Alpha's support made it a snap.

With Sheryl secure, Akira immediately left the scene, sprinting into cover behind nearby debris. There, he set her down on the ground and inspected her again for injuries.

"Great," he said with a sigh of relief. "Nothing major."

"Thank you for saving me," Sheryl replied, so taken aback that she actually felt calm. "But, um, these seem rather major to me," she added wryly, holding up her seven broken fingers.

"Oh, yeah. I guess that is pretty bad."

Akira thought back to when he'd been told that only torn-off arms, shredded legs, and the like constituted serious injuries—and how he'd reacted. His definitions, he reflected ruefully, had come a long way.

"Open wide," he said, reaching for medicine.

"Oh, well," Sheryl faltered, "I wasn't trying to imply—"

"Just open up."

Sheryl obeyed, and Akira shoved pills into her mouth. She swallowed them with some difficulty.

The recovery capsules, priced at two million aurum a pack, had an immediate effect even when taken orally. First, the pain faded from Sheryl's hands in a matter of seconds. Then medical nanomachines congregated in her fractured digits and went to work. She was still staring at her hands in astonishment when Akira grabbed them.

"Huh?" Her voice rose a pitch, but her surprise at this gesture from her crush was nothing compared to the shock that followed.

"This is gonna hurt a bit," Akira added as he started realigning her twisted fingers.

"What?!" Sheryl yelped, expecting agony. But true to Akira's warning, the capsules dulled her pain to a mere twinge. And once her fingers were pointing the right way again, they healed even faster.

“I guess that’s good enough for first aid. Take a few more to be safe.” Akira emptied another dose into Sheryl’s hand, then stowed his medicine. “Now, hide here while I go kill those guys. It’s not safe to move, and don’t think about poking your head out either.”

“Not safe?” Sheryl couldn’t help repeating incredulously. “But those men were thrown out of the truck too.”

“No, they bailed on their own.”

“Even so, they must be dead or badly injured!”

“They’re all alive, and they don’t have a scratch on ’em,” Akira replied, shaking his head at Sheryl’s common sense. Then he darted out of cover to put an end to the men.

Left behind the rubble, Sheryl murmured, “Is this normal for hunters?”

Her expectations were dictated by the environment she lived in, and she’d just gotten a fresh reminder of how freakish those from beyond its bounds could be.

◆

Guba and his cronies braced themselves before they slammed into the ground. It wasn’t pretty, and they didn’t land perfectly. But thanks to their own strength and their suits’ protection, they got off with only a few aches and pains.

Guba lay face-first on the ground. “The hell is wrong with that brat?” he grumbled, staggering to his feet and scowling around him. “Hey! You both in one piece?”

His companions rose too and began assessing their situation.

“Yeah, somehow!” Kennit called. “But who *was* that kid? Hey, Guba! You sounded like you recognized him back there.”

“I do. He’s Akira, that hunter who said he was running security for the girl.” Guba paused. “Don’t tell me he came out here to rescue her?” He looked around for Sheryl but couldn’t see her. Then he checked farther afield, thinking that the crash might have thrown her a good distance, but still no luck.

Vegaris trained his rifle on Akira's truck and checked the driver's seat—which, of course, was empty. "I don't see this Akira kid," he reported. "The girl's missing too, so maybe he grabbed her and ran for it? No, hang on. Would he have rammed us if he was out to save her? Guba! Are you sure you recognized the kid?"

"Yeah, I'm sure," Guba replied, his tone less certain than his words. "But I don't get why he rammed us either. Maybe he wanted to save her, and maybe he wanted to shut her up permanently, but that seems like a waste either way."

The men were all stuck on the same question. But just then, their scanners detected an approaching threat, and they all immediately took cover behind their truck, ready for anything. Before long, they recognized Akira coming toward them and settled in for a fight to the death.

◆

Akira dashed out from behind the rubble, but he couldn't claim to be running well. He was operating his suit without Alpha's aid, and its superhuman strength was getting the better of him. He relied on slowing his perception of time to keep moving, certain that he would tumble to the ground if he let his concentration slip for even a moment.

His movements normally felt frustratingly sluggish in this slow-motion world, unable to keep pace with his thoughts. With his suit on, however, he could move so fast that his thoughts seemed to lag behind. He lacked the experience to take this difference in stride, and it showed in his awkward, jerky movements.

Seriously, Alpha! Akira shouted telepathically, grimacing at his own shortcomings. *You'd better bail me out in a pinch!*

You're in good hands, Alpha assured him, smiling as usual. She kept pace beside him, seemingly unaffected by his altered sense of time. *But do the best you can, okay?*

I know!

Alpha had directed Akira to eliminate the hunters on his own. *I'll step in if things get really dicey*, she had cheerfully promised, *so see how well you can*

fight without my support. Akira had initially objected that this was no time for tests, but she had retorted that this was, in fact, a perfect opportunity. His opponents posed an appropriate challenge and genuinely wanted him dead—what better training could he ask for?

So Akira sped toward his new "training partners" to end their lives. He moved in a wide arc, since a direct approach would leave Sheryl's hiding place in their line of fire. And as he ran, he hefted his DVTS minigun. As soon as he'd settled on ramming the other truck, he'd detached the gun from his own and slotted in its high-capacity magazine. He had taken his CWH as well and now wore the anti-materiel rifle slung on his back. The weight of both weapons slowed him down.

He then scanned the area around the trucks with greater precision and managed to detect three enemies, although not clearly. And since he was operating without Alpha, he couldn't see them through the trucks either.

But at least he knew they were there.

He lined up their approximate position in his sights and squeezed the trigger. The minigun's barrel whirled, firing bullets faster than his eyes could follow. He had reduced its firing speed so that he wouldn't burn through his ammo too quickly, but it still unleashed a storm of projectiles on its target.

The bullets struck both trucks, rapidly chewing through their armor tiles. Impact conversion luminescence flashed faintly as the force fields reacted to incoming fire, but it quickly flickered out before the sheer ferocity of his onslaught.

On the other side of the trucks, the men speculated about their opponent's capabilities while the crack and whine of gunfire rang in their ears.

"That's a lot of bullets," Guba said. "Some kind of minigun, maybe?"

"He must be wearing a pretty nice suit, then," mused Kennit. "A cheap one couldn't handle the weight and recoil."

"Well, it's nothing we can't handle," Vegaris decided. "Let's kill him quick. Cover me."

“You got it!”

Vegaris darted out, and his companions moved to support him.

Akira was firing his DVTS wildly, trying to zero in on his enemies’ position. Then he spotted Vegaris emerging from behind the truck and focused his barrage on this promising target. Even if his aim was a little off, he figured the sheer quantity of bullets would make up for it.

But Vegaris weathered the assault. His powered suit was specced for defense, and the minigun bullets ricocheted off its thick armor plates. Then Akira gasped in surprise as Vegaris raised a minigun of his own.

Immediately, Akira hooked his toes under a chunk of debris and kicked, flinging it up as a shield in front of him. Vegaris’s barrage struck it dead-on, whittling the wreckage down to nothing in next to no time. Akira, meanwhile, dove to one side, shooting back as soon as he got clear of his enemy’s line of fire. His bullets, however, still did almost nothing to Vegaris. The man merely flinched slightly as he prepared to shoot again.

Akira broke into a suit-enhanced sprint, once again escaping the minigun’s line of fire. He kept ahead of the barrage and narrowly dove behind some cover —this time the last vestiges of a crumbling building. He might not have made it if the impact of his own shots hadn’t thrown off his enemy’s aim, he reflected, looking grim as he exhaled.

How can he shrug off all those shots without a scratch? he grumbled. *I mean, I’m sure they did* some *damage, but still.*

The individual rounds we bought for your DVTS’s high-capacity magazine are on the weak side to keep prices manageable, Alpha happily informed him. *Use your CWH against that target.*

Yes, ma’am. Ruefully, Akira added, *And let’s spend a little more on ammo next time.*

Mentally, at least, he’d known that cutting costs meant sacrificing safety, but that wasn’t the same as experiencing it firsthand. On the other hand, always preparing for the unexpected would leave him broke in no time. So even at

times like this, Akira's bad luck haunted him in the form of unwelcome surprises.

Suddenly, his hands jerked upward of their own accord and fired a burst from his minigun. The bullets intercepted a grenade, and the whole nearby area felt the shock of the ensuing explosion.

That was a close call, Alpha remarked, grinning smugly at the dumbfounded Akira.

Thanks! he shouted, snapping back into action.

The other hunters had waited for Vegaris's minigun to draw Akira's attention before launching their attack. Kennit had fed Guba the coordinates to their target, and Guba had fired the grenade. But to their mutual surprise, the boy had still countered it.

"Hurry up and fire the next one," Kennit urged.

"You got it," Guba replied.

The men had brought plenty of ammunition, since they had planned to enter an unknown ruin, and they would use as much as necessary to take Akira out of the picture.

Chapter 80: The Value of Information

Akira kept on the move, always looking for an opening to counterattack. But grenades from above and bursts of minigun fire from the side hindered his movements. And since either would prove fatal if he stayed still, evading always demanded the lion's share of his attention.

Nevertheless, he did get off a shot at Vegaris with his CWH. The armor-piercing bullet struck the man's full-face helmet, but it still wasn't enough. Vegaris reeled, and his helmet cracked, but his wounds were far from mortal.

Damn it! Akira cursed. *I should've used proprietary ammo!*

He had kept his CWH magazines loaded with ordinary AP rounds, since the expensive alternative was overkill in the desert near Kugamayama, but now his economizing had come back to bite him. He did have a magazine of proprietary cartridges—but it was still in his truck, out of reach.

So he resigned himself to firing off more AP rounds. He slowed his sense of time before he pulled the trigger, allowing himself to line up the shot at his leisure. And not for nothing—he scored direct hits on Vegaris's torso and legs.

But the resulting damage was minimal. Although they knocked Vegaris off his feet, the man sprang back up and resumed firing like nothing had happened. And meanwhile, the grenades kept coming.

Akira's position was far from enviable, and he scowled at both his enemies' strength and his own weakness. While he was outnumbered three to one, these hunters were clearly less dangerous than the relic thieves he'd fought beneath Kuzusuhara, and he had upgraded his gear significantly since then. Despite that, he was still only an even match for them. Thus, he felt keenly aware of how far he had come—and how far he still had to go.

On your right, Alpha chimed in.

Got it! Akira replied heavily. If she was offering advice, it proved he wasn't ready to win this without her support yet. But the fact that she hadn't done more was a sign of his growth, he told himself.

He turned his full attention back to the battle.

◆

Kennit had succeeded in flanking Akira, using Vegaris and Guba as decoys. He'd let his companions do all the attacking, supporting them only with his scanner while he stealthily moved into position. Then he slowly and carefully raised his sniper rifle. Akira had focused his sensors on Guba and Vegaris while he struggled to fend them off. So although Kennit was in range of Akira's scanner, the man felt confident that he could remain undetected as long as he kept his own movements to a minimum.

Akira's powered suit didn't look as well-armored as Vegaris's, and Kennit's ammo packed a punch. Any hit he landed would seal his victory. It might not kill Akira outright, but it would slow the boy down and leave him an easy target—no threat to the men, Kennit thought as he steadied his aim. He focused, cautiously waiting for Akira to enter his crosshairs. He wanted this shot to count.

Then he saw Akira through his sight.

Got him!

But just as Kennit began to pull the trigger, Akira looked him in the eye. Kennit froze in shock—only for a moment, but long enough for Akira to aim his CWH.

Their shots rang out almost simultaneously. Kennit took an armor-piercing bullet between the eyes and died instantly, a look of surprise still on his face. Akira, who'd had advance warning, narrowly evaded the sniper shot.

Vegaris realized that Kennit was down when his ally's stream of scanner data abruptly cut off.

Kennit! Don't tell me the kid got him?!

Vegaris couldn't hide his shock. He knew Kennit was more than his match in a blind shoot-out, with each trying to zero in on the other's positions while concealing his own. Yet the other man had just lost under what should have been ideal conditions.

Guba's grenade attacks had lost precision as well. Without Kennit's data, using extremely high-angle fire to drop explosives directly on top of his enemy had become nearly impossible. Reduced to launching grenades in the general direction of whatever Vegaris was shooting at, he attempted to make up for accuracy with quantity.

As a result, fumes from countless explosions began to settle over the area. They even affected Vegaris's scanner, reducing its ability until he lost track of Akira entirely.

"Shit! Where is he?" the man muttered, strafing the area with his minigun and bracing for a counterattack. He had already proven that his suit could withstand his enemy's shots, so he would wait for the boy to strike, then respond with focused fire.

But Vegaris never got that chance. Akira didn't take another shot—he closed in, using the grenade fumes as a smoke screen. When he burst into the open, Vegaris was slow to react. As the man turned his bulky weapon, Akira darted into melee range and lashed out with a kick.

Vegaris didn't suffer a scratch from the blow, but he couldn't avoid taking a fall. While he tried to scramble upright, Akira jammed the CWH against his helmet, keeping him on the ground.

"I bet it'll work at *this* range," Akira said.

Fire burst from the rifle barrel—lined up precisely with the crack left by his earlier shot. At point-blank range, the AP bullet punched through the tough helmet and dyed its interior red.

"Kennit! Vegaris! Answer me, damn it!" Guba screamed into his communicator, looking grim. The comms still worked, but he got no response—a clear indication that both his allies were dead.

"Shit! Who knew the kid was this good?!"

Akira certainly hadn't seemed like anything special to Guba. Sure, he'd had pretty nice gear, but selling relics from an untouched ruin could easily have paid for that. A mediocre hunter with a high-end kit, Guba had thought. Good for a

kid, maybe, but no more.

Clearly, *that* assessment had been more than a little off.

Deciding that he didn't like his odds in a fair one-on-one fight, Guba contemplated escape.

Does the truck work? he wondered. *I might as well check.*

It seemed possible, since wasteland vehicles were built tougher than everyday cars, and Guba's had been plastered with armor tiles. So Guba carefully picked his way back to the trucks and luckily reached them without alerting Akira.

He immediately checked to see if his would start, but his luck didn't go *that* far.

"No dice, huh?"

Time for Plan B. He looked around for a weapon. Unfortunately, Akira's truck contained only ammo, while his own was packed with exploration gear. Guba felt a growing suspicion that he was out of options and would have to fight. Maybe he could at least take Akira down with him.

Then an object that had fallen from the truck caught his eye, sparking a new thought in his desperate mind. Such an idea would never have occurred to him normally, and he certainly wouldn't have attempted it in a battle he saw any hope of winning. But now it at least seemed better than a suicidal last stand.

Guba picked up the object and loaded it into his grenade launcher. Then he checked his current position and the local terrain on his truck's still-functional nav system. Finally, he launched the threat magnet, as it was known, in the direction where he judged it would have the most impact.

◆

When Guba appeared to run for it, Akira returned to Sheryl. He couldn't race off in pursuit and leave her stranded in the wasteland. So he filled her in on what had happened and asked what she wanted to do next.

"If you don't mind," she answered timidly, "I'd like to give up on catching that man and go back to the city."

“Are you sure?” Akira pressed. “If we let him go now, we may never get another shot at killing him.”

“Eliminating assailants is important, but dying in pursuit of them would defeat the purpose. I, um, don’t mean that you’d die, but I might. I’m sorry, but I want to live.” Sheryl dipped her head politely.

She considered her opinion perfectly natural, but it came as quite a surprise to Akira—another reminder of how abnormal his own sense of things could be.

“Well, okay,” he replied. “I get that. Let’s head home, then. We don’t have anything to drive, so that’ll mean either walking or calling someone like Katsuragi for a ride. Which would you rather do?”

Sheryl hesitated. “I’ve been wondering, Akira: Why did you ram them with your truck? I mean, didn’t that wreck it?”

“It saved time, and I figured it was my safest bet.”

“I...I see.” Sheryl’s smile became somewhat strained. She’d wanted him to say he’d rather lose the truck than her—but she couldn’t really interpret his answer that way.

The truck is *wrecked, right, Alpha?* Akira asked.

I tried to be careful with the collision and hit the brakes just before impact, so its condition might surprise you, she replied. *But the control system went down, so I can’t operate it remotely in its current state.*

Really? I guess I’d better check it, then.

The last target is near the trucks, so be careful if you do.

Oh, so he was hoping to dive out of here too. Thanks for the heads up. Akira turned to tell Sheryl that he’d pop over to check on his truck—and kill their last enemy while he was at it. But then Alpha’s expression turned grim.

Akira, she said, *I’m about to resume full support for you.*

Akira paused. *Okay. Is something wrong?*

A large group of monsters is approaching. They don’t pose much threat individually, but there are a lot of them, and Sheryl is with us, so be on your

guard. And if you don't want her to die, pick her up and bring her along.

Got it!

"Sheryl," Akira said gravely, "this is gonna be a little risky. So whatever happens, just stay calm and hold on tight." He wrapped his left arm around her, holding her close.

"Y-Yes?" Akira's warning, his embrace, and seeing his face so close to hers made Sheryl look equal parts bashful and confused, but she still managed to reply, "Yes, of course!"

All right, Alpha, back me up!

You've got it! Alpha beamed confidently.

Akira grinned back at her. Then, still holding Sheryl, he broke into a run.

◆

Guba stood beside the trucks, still launching threat magnets.

Such devices came in all varieties, but they all did one thing—attract monsters. The gadgets emitted lights, sounds, heat signatures, vibrations, signals, scents, and other stimuli of interest to the wasteland's denizens and were used primarily to lure creatures out of inconvenient locations or to temporarily relocate them. The finest models on the market could minimize attenuation and attract hordes of monsters even in a thick bank of colorless fog. Some activated instantaneously, others used timers or sensor triggers.

And some could even be launched as grenades.

Naturally, threat magnets needed to be handled with care. They could easily call every monster in the vicinity down on their users' heads otherwise. But that was exactly what Guba wanted—he was gathering a horde to sic on Akira. If the boy had come to rescue Sheryl, then he would have to protect her as well as himself, forcing him to go into battle with a handicap. And even if he hadn't, Guba stood a better chance of taking him out in a free-for-all than he did mano a mano. So he planned to fire every threat magnet in his truck, setting their area of effect to the maximum when such settings existed and scattering them as far and wide as he could manage.

He didn't know if monsters would actually come, of course—that was up to luck. But he was willing to gamble, and he won the first hand. His truck's instruments detected a swarm of monsters.

Guba switched to launching threat magnets toward where he suspected Akira was. The boy might not actually be right there, but he had to be nearby, and now the monsters were sure to come this far. The rest depended on Akira's next move. Would he come here, gambling that his truck still worked, or would he run away from the swarm? Guba waited for his answer.

And it came. Akira ran toward the trucks with one arm around Sheryl.

Once Guba confirmed this on his scanner, he grinned defiantly and popped a capsule into his mouth. He was ready to play his ace in the hole.

◆

Akira dashed toward the trucks with his CWH in his right hand and Sheryl in his left. Alpha's support was in effect now, so he could see Guba clearly through the vehicles, but the man made no move.

Think he's onto us? he asked.

It doesn't matter if he is, Alpha replied. *Let's finish him off quickly.*

Good idea!

Akira couldn't shoot Guba from his current position—the trucks would act as a shield. He could technically fire through them, but then his vehicle would be even less likely to work afterward, so he preferred not to. With that in mind, he kept closing in.

Still Guba didn't move. Akira could either go over the trucks and strike him from above or circle around and attack from the side. He chose the former—it seemed more likely to catch his opponent off guard.

Guba remained motionless as Akira reached the men's truck and prepared to vault over it. But then the vehicle flipped up, its top side forming a wall in his path.

Akira instinctively slowed his sense of time to a snail's pace. The truck would have struck them instantly at normal speed, but while the world almost seemed

to stand still, he was able to run up it, swiftly avoiding the mass of metal careening toward them. He kept hold of Sheryl as a final hop brought them clear.

Then Akira gaped. Guba had leaped up too, his weapon at the ready, and they were face-to-face.

◆

Guba had taken a type of speed stim. It would last for a few seconds at most—but to him, the time would seem at least a dozen times longer, and his senses, reflexes, and concentration would improve as well. The brief duration made this expensive and potent combat drug challenging to use effectively. Taking it while waiting for an enemy to appear was a waste, and there often wasn't time to do so after combat began. So it was almost worthless—unless used wisely and in a moment of crisis.

Guba had timed his dose perfectly.

He had originally planned to save it until the monsters struck, since no one could keep track of every opponent in a melee that forced them to deal with countless threats at once. If Guba took his stim then, his dilated perception of time would allow him to analyze the situation at his leisure and make processing threats more manageable. He would have used that extra bit of leeway to attack, catching his enemy off guard.

But Akira had been about to reach the trucks well ahead of the monsters. Guba didn't think he could win a firefight with someone who had killed both Vegaris and Kennit. At more or less melee range, however, he thought his speed stim would give him the upper hand. So he swallowed it just before Akira arrived. The moment it took effect, he drew on his suit's strength to kick his truck over. He then jumped himself, aiming to leap over the tumbling vehicle.

His suit propelled him off the ground and above the truck in a split second of real time. But to Guba's accelerated mind, that moment was more than long enough to ready his weapon. In fact, the process felt frustratingly drawn out to him. Everything seemed to flow so slowly that he could track the truck's undercarriage as he shot past it. And in that rich instant, while he flew over the truck, he also trained his weapon's muzzle on Akira.

When Guba saw his opponent too stunned to react, he knew that he had won. And just then, overpressure bullets from Akira's A2D assault rifle hit Guba's gun, arm, and throat.

Guba had been a step ahead of Akira, but Alpha had been laps ahead of Guba. She had guided Akira's suit as he leaped, making him let go of his CWH in midair and quickly swap to the A2D. She had also been perfectly aware of Guba's movements, calculating the arc of his jump and predicting the precise moment when he would be in Akira's range of fire but Akira would still be outside of his, which allowed her to line up her shot in advance.

As soon as the man entered her line of fire, she destroyed his weapon and the arm that wielded it. Then she had gone for his throat—the most vulnerable target she could shift her aim to in the brief window while the assault rifle chambered its next round.

The whole sequence of events lasted only a fraction of a second, but to Alpha, it was all the time in the world.

Thanks to the effects of his stim, Guba could perceive exactly what was playing out in front of him. Before he died from his punctured throat, he saw Akira aim the A2D at his forehead.

Whoa, he thought, awed by the ease with which his opponent had surpassed him despite his stim. *No wonder Vegaris and Kennit couldn't ta—*

Before Guba could finish his thought, a bullet to the head ended it—and him—forever.

◆

The men's truck flipped over, Akira landed, and Guba's corpse thudded to the ground minus most of its head. Despite his altered perception of time, Akira hadn't been able to follow the split-second battle, but he was at least able to piece it together in retrospect. He stowed his assault rifle, plucked his CWH off the ground where it had fallen, and let out a deep breath.

Thanks, Alpha, he said.

Don't mention it, she replied with an easy smile.

Akira set Sheryl down in the back seat of his truck and began checking it over. The vehicle's front end was somewhat crushed, but the damage seemed slight, considering the speed it had been traveling at the moment of impact.

Man, this thing's tough*!* Akira said. *I guess it really is built to handle the wasteland.*

The armor tiles on the contact surface are all gone, so they probably did their bit to dampen the blow too, Alpha chimed in.

Those tiles sure come in handy. Now, will it run?

Akira tried starting the engine, and the truck immediately began rattling.

It works! Then he added hesitantly, *But is it safe to ride?*

It certainly won't be comfortable, since the frame is slightly bent. Still, I think you'll find it preferable to running from that *on foot.* Alpha pointed to the horde of monsters that Guba's threat magnets had brought rushing toward them.

Good point. Okay, let's move!

"Sheryl!" Akira barked.

"Yesh?!" she answered, still too befuddled to speak straight, though their brief exchange began to bring her out of her daze.

"We're getting out of here! It's gonna be a bumpy ride, so hold on tight!"

"Understood!" Sheryl "secured" herself by clinging to the back seat. Then the truck sped off—rattling so violently that she flew out of it. A squeal of surprise and confusion escaped her in midair before Akira swiftly grabbed her and pulled her back into the vehicle.

"Okay, try again," he said, once more keeping his left arm around her.

"R-Right!"

Akira then climbed into the back of the moving truck and surveyed the swarm. Monstrous beasts, reptiles, insects, and an assortment of creatures even more bizarre had banded together to chase him down.

They're gonna catch up to us, he said. *Can't we go any faster?*

We're already going as fast as we can, Alpha replied. *The truck runs, but it's not in good shape, and skillful driving can only compensate for so much. So take them out and get them off our backs!*

Yes, ma'am! Akira gripped his DVTS minigun in his right hand and fired a wild burst into the swarm. If the beasts were threatening to overwhelm him with numbers, he'd overwhelm them with ammo.

Monsters dropped like flies, unable to withstand the merciless storm of bullets. Flesh tore, scales cracked, and exoskeletons shattered. Against an enemy whose weapon was quantity, not quality, the minigun proved itself an efficient instrument of one-sided slaughter. As Akira beheld the devastation, he recalled the last time that a swarm of monsters had set its sights on him.

If only I'd had this thing back then, he said with feeling.

Although Akira had been with Katsuragi and Darius at the time, he'd still faced the beasts with only a stock AAH assault rifle. He wouldn't have survived that desperate struggle if Elena and Sara hadn't come to the rescue.

Well, you have it now, Alpha replied, with a reassuring smile. *So stop dwelling on the past and look on the bright side! Gearing up is part of becoming a better hunter.*

True. I guess it shows how far I've come! Akira grinned and kept on firing.

Sheryl clung to him as she watched one creature after another disintegrate. She felt as terrified as she did relieved, but she couldn't afford to relax her grip —the thought of slipping loose scared her even more.

Before long, the horde was no more. Its reinforcements dried up once the truck left the threat magnets' range, so once Akira mopped up the stragglers, he was in the clear. That done, he slowed his truck and settled in for a somewhat smoother drive back to Kugamayama.

By the time he reached the city, the sun was low on the horizon, and his truck was in even worse shape. He dropped Sheryl off at her base, then drove home before it broke down completely.

◆

Akira was in the bath, recovering from the day's exertions. But although he had abandoned himself to the pleasures of a good soak even more completely than usual, he still looked exhausted.

"Man, I still can't believe they kidnapped Sheryl to make her tell them the way into Yonozuka Station!" Akira sighed deeply, remembering the account that Sheryl had given him on the drive home. "But I guess I shouldn't be surprised. Who wouldn't threaten a slum kid if they could get an untouched ruin out of it?"

You shouldn't let it get to you. Sheryl knew the risks when she agreed to help, Alpha consoled him cheerfully. As usual, she was "in" the tub with him.

"I know, but still."

And we killed all three of her attackers, which should make anyone else think twice about targeting her. You can't spend all your time at her base in the slums, so you might as well settle for that.

Akira could see her logic and even agree with it, but it wasn't enough to lift the hint of gloom from his face.

Seeing this, Alpha brought up an example from his past. When he had first agreed to support Sheryl, not everyone had believed her claim to have a hunter patron. A group of those who doubted it had planned an assault on her base—but Akira had been watching them from the shadows. After massacring the would-be attackers, he had warned the fence-sitters to keep their hands off Sheryl and left.

Remember what you said then? You don't have time to guard Sheryl round the clock, but a scare should help keep her alive. The rest is up to her.

"Yeah, I did say that."

She did get unlucky this time, but not so unlucky that she couldn't pull through. It's as simple as that.

Akira considered. "Maybe you're right." Apparently satisfied, he flashed a rueful grin and added, "I guess Sheryl and I could both use more luck."

Well, you *have me, so you don't need to worry. We'll make our own luck!*

Akira chuckled at Alpha's smug grin, his gloom dispelled. "Whatever you say."

◆

Sheryl was also taking a bath, recovering from the day's exertions. This wasn't her scheduled time, but she had exercised her authority to kick out her subordinates and commandeer her base's tub for a private soak.

"I'm *exhausted*," she murmured.

She'd gotten no time to rest after Akira had dropped her off—there had been too much work waiting for her. She had calmed the shaken children. She had pacified Katsuragi, who had caught wind of the disturbance. She had explained how Akira had rescued her, killing all of her attackers in the process. And her efforts had paid off: sometime after midnight, her gang had finally returned to business as usual.

"I should have taken this more seriously."

Sheryl had thought she understood how much the location of an undiscovered ruin was worth. But she had never dreamed that anyone would storm into the headquarters of a hunter-backed gang—even a small one—and carry someone off in broad daylight just because they *might* know something about it.

For the time being, I'd better keep a low profile and make sure I can always get in touch with Akira. Luckily, the relics are all at his house, so I shouldn't have to worry about anyone raiding my base to get them.

She racked her lightly boiled brain for solutions, but the reality was that with her feeble forces, she would always be a step behind the threats confronting her. Even calling in Akira was a reactive measure.

If that ruin became common knowledge, I'd lose my value as a source of information. But then that would cause problems for Akira.

Sheryl frowned. She felt certain that Akira hadn't given up on relic hunting in Yonozuka Station. He might even know other ways in and out, although he hadn't mentioned any to her.

I guess I'd better discuss plans with him later.

Even after all she'd been through, Sheryl wouldn't refuse an invitation to a second expedition. Next time, however, she planned to make a better job of it.

◆

Kolbe's bus pulled up near where Guba and his companions had met their end. He ordered his debt-ridden hunters to clear the area of monsters and retrieve the men's corpses. Soon, he had three bodies lined up before him—badly damaged, but with enough of their flesh and effects left to identify.

"Okay, good work!" he announced. "Get back on the bus, and I'll join you in a sec. Oh, and don't worry—I'll make sure you guys don't have to deal with their debts. Your pay for this will even count against what you owe."

With faint sighs of relief, the hunters climbed back aboard the bus.

Once Kolbe was alone outside, he pulled out his terminal and said, "It's me. I found Guba's body. Looks like his target fought back."

"Oh, really?" a woman's cheerful voice answered from the device. "Well done! I've already deposited your fee. Check for yourself."

Kolbe seemed to hesitate for a moment. "So, what were you trying to make Guba do by feeding him info?"

"Whatever do you mean?"

"I can tell you put him up to *something*."

"I haven't sold him any info in a while."

"Who says you sold it? You made up some excuse to get him to hear you out, then you slipped in info about something you figured he'd have a lead on." Kolbe spoke with conviction—Guba could never have tracked down a girl that quickly after one brief meeting in the wasteland otherwise. "So, what did you tell him? Some story about an undiscovered ruin?"

"Wh-What are you talking about?"

"Give the theatrics a rest." Kolbe sighed. "But if that's how you wanna play this, I guess there really might be one out here." He had been fishing for information when he'd suggested a ruin. *Something* had driven Guba and his two accomplices to increase their already considerable debts by buying

equipment and information, then storm the headquarters of a hunter-backed gang in broad daylight and abduct its leader—all in a big hurry.

“Oh? Does that idea ring any bells?” the woman replied, her upbeat tone revealing that her moment of panic had indeed been feigned.

“I don’t need to answer that. But if you want to hear my thoughts on something else, I’ll be happy to oblige. I’m guessing someone hired you to find out if a hunter called Akira is really any good.”

“Whatever gave you that idea?”

“I hear that gang’s been doing well lately, considering how small it is. I bet a lot of people would love to knock off its patron and steal the whole organization if he turned out to be a pushover. Am I wrong?”

“I deal in information, so I can’t reveal the details of my transaction for free. How much will you pay to find out?”

Kolbe snorted. “I’m not buying.”

“Oh, really?”

“Goodbye,” Kolbe said. But before he could end the call, the woman threw in one last, breezy remark:

“If you’re going after the relics, I suggest you act quickly. This is one of those cases where the early bird gets the worm. Oh, but you couldn’t do it yourself, could you? Still, delegating is always an option.”

“Mind your own business!” Kolbe angrily ended the call, cutting off the woman’s laughter with it. He clicked his tongue as he stowed his terminal, then he resumed speculating about her motives.

So, now she’s leaking info to me too. What’s her game?

Then, although he knew the woman to be a vicious schemer, he caught himself imagining the undiscovered ruin—and clicked his tongue again.

◆

In the city’s lower district, a woman was speaking cheerfully into a handheld terminal.

“Yes, an undiscovered ruin. Pretty juicy info, wouldn’t you say? And I hope you appreciate that I wouldn’t share this with anyone else.”

She listened to the curious—though guarded—answer before continuing, “No, I won’t deny that it’s unconfirmed. But surely even the possibility is worth something, isn’t it? I won’t force you to buy it, of course. But don’t you want to help Druncam’s young hunters achieve something that will let them stand up to the old guard?”

This time, curiosity got the better of caution. The woman smirked.

“Yes, take your time to think it over. I understand that you can’t agree to my asking price on the spot. Oh, but remember that my business is first-come, first-served. And don’t forget that I brought this to you first. Well then, Mizuha, I’ll be waiting for your answer.”

The woman ended the call, then immediately started another one. “It’s me. I have news that’s sure to interest you...”

She went on talking happily for a long time and to a great many people.

Chapter 81: The Unexpected

A week after his expedition to Yonozuka Station with Sheryl, Akira paid another visit to Elena and Sara's house. Their schedule had finally opened up, and he wanted to discuss relic-hunting plans with them.

The women greeted him warmly and showed him into their living room. While he wore his powered suit as usual, they were both in everyday wear. Elena was dressed a little more casually than she'd been the last time, while Sara had buttoned up her top and donned a pair of tight-fitting pants. Akira met these outfits with a sigh of relief—for once, he wouldn't have to worry about letting his gaze wander. The women sensed his reaction and felt equally relieved—although a small part of them wished they'd made more of an impression.

Regardless, they got right down to business, starting with the current state of the ruins.

"First off, Akira, I have some bad news," Elena said. "Other hunters have caught wind of Yonozuka Station."

"What? Really?"

"Yes. So, would you tell me if you have any idea how they could have found out?"

Akira hesitated.

"No need to go into detail," Elena added, sensing his reluctance. "Just tell me if you have a guess. I'd like to at least know that much, since if you have no idea, then Sara and I might have slipped up somewhere."

"Well...I can guess," Akira admitted, looking vaguely guilty.

"I see." Elena gave him a reassuring look. "Well, don't beat yourself up about it. Word was bound to get out sooner or later. And sorry if it turns out to be our fault—although we did try to be careful."

"No, the leak was probably on my end, but thanks for trying to make me feel

better about it.” Akira broke into a grin, his regrets seemingly behind him, and the women smiled back.

“So, returning to the matter at hand,” Elena said. “Right now, hunters are swarming around Yonozuka Station, looking for a way in. But something about this doesn’t sit right with me.”

“How do you mean?” Akira asked. If the ruin was now common knowledge, then surely they had bigger concerns.

“Well, maybe I’m just overthinking things, but I feel like this rumor has spread too fast, and too many people have acted on it.”

If another hunter had discovered the ruin, Elena explained, they wouldn’t blab about it—having less competition would work in their favor. Moreover, this wasn’t a ruin that anyone could just stroll into—any entrance to it would have to be found and then excavated. And using heavy machinery at the site would be a hassle, since the equipment would need to be arranged for, transported, and guarded. Finally, Elena’s investigation had turned up no hard evidence of the ruin’s existence, meaning that most hunters should still be on the fence about it. But that didn’t square with the number of people who had actually started searching—hence her unease.

“So, uh, are you saying that we’d better hurry?” Akira asked, still a little lost. “Or that something stinks, so we’d better call it quits?”

Sara frowned. “Both. Also, I hate to bring our preferences into this, but while we’re ready to take on monsters to get at relics, we’d rather not fight other hunters for them if we can help it.” Given the number of hunters flocking to Yonozuka, there was every chance that they would start killing each other over the ruin’s precious contents. And knowingly joining the fray would be a major departure from the way Elena and Sara chose to approach their work.

“So, what do *you* want to do, Akira?” Elena asked gravely. “We promised to make another trip with you, and we won’t abandon you. So please, no ‘Don’t force yourself to come along if you don’t feel like it.’”

“Although we’ll butt out if you think we’d be a burden,” Sara added with a gentle smile.

“No, of course not!” said Akira. “If anything, *I’d* slow *you* down.”

“Then count on us to help in any way we can!”

“Oh, er, thanks.” Akira felt like he’d been played, but he didn’t mind. With a wry smile, he accepted that Elena and Sara would be joining him on his next visit to Yonozuka Station.

“So, um, back to the big question: What should we do?” he continued. “You think it smells fishy, right, Elena?”

“Yes, but I also think that’s not much of a reason to pass up a chance at an untouched ruin.” The women wanted to snap up that treasure trove of relics as much as the next hunter—a desire that Akira could fully appreciate.

After talking it over, they decided to wait for three days and see what happened. They would use the time to prepare, then make another assessment once they arrived at the site. If they found a bloody battle between hunters, they would leave and go looking for relics in another ruin. Otherwise, they might explore Yonozuka Station as normal. But they also made plans for a range of other possibilities—for instance, if no one else had found the entrance yet, they would join the search for a different one.

In the end, Akira felt satisfied that they had their bases covered.

Elena and Sara saw Akira to their front door and said their goodbyes. But just as he turned to leave, Elena said casually, “By the way, Akira, what do you think of our outfits today?”

“Huh? Well...” Akira looked them up and down again and saw nothing amiss. Was Elena interested not in fashion sense but in how well their clothes suited the occasion? He looked down at himself. “Should I have come in normal clothes instead of my powered suit?”

His off-the-mark answer put a conflicted look on Elena’s face, but Sara picked up the slack with a smile that was only somewhat forced.

“Good question! I won’t tell you what to do, but be careful you don’t end up afraid to go outside without your suit on. I mean in safe areas, of course.”

“Okay, I’ll watch out for that. Goodbye!” Akira bobbed his head and left.

Spotting traces of a frown still lingering on Elena’s face, Sara gave her a grin that spoke volumes. “Maybe you should have let your hair down a little more.”

“I’ll think about it,” Elena replied, a touch regretful—and maybe a little miffed.

Sara burst out laughing.

◆

A massive machine carved away at the mountain of rubble that covered Yonozuka Station. Its four-wheeled chassis supported a torso that housed its cockpit, and from which two-pronged hands reached out to shift enormous chunks of wreckage. Multiple transports were parked nearby, surrounding the site, and armed guards patrolled the perimeter.

The force was roughly thirty strong, all young hunters.

Beneath the rubble lay the entrance that Akira had buried. He hadn’t toppled a building onto it for nothing—the pieces of debris were too large and numerous for ordinary hunters to remove, even with powered suits. But this group had brought in heavy machinery to solve that problem.

And Katsuya’s team was among them.

“Hey, Yumina, do you think there really is a ruin under all this junk?” he asked.

“Beats me,” Yumina replied. “Still, Mizuha must have good reasons to think so, or she wouldn’t have gone all out like this.” Mizuha, as a Druncam executive and the young hunters’ boss, was the one who had ordered them to the ruin.

Katsuya turned to his other companion. “What do you think, Airi?”

“If there was definitely an undiscovered ruin here, Druncam would commit everyone to it. Since they only sent rookies like us, they must not be sure.”

As Airi had observed, the force consisted entirely of young hunters, and specifically only those who Druncam’s desk jockeys wanted to push. Of Shikarabe and the other adults, there was no sign. Mizuha had even arranged for the heavy machinery herself.

What was more, the entire operation was officially classified as a training exercise. Only Katsuya's team knew that they were really going to dig up a ruin. Katsuya was still fuming about the syndicate sweeping the disturbance beneath Kuzusuhara under the rug, so Mizuha had shared this bit of intelligence by way of an apology.

"But it might be down there, right?" Katsuya countered, looking on the bright side.

"I never said it couldn't," Airi replied. "Mizuha might be hiding info from the old-guard execs so that we'll get all the credit." She also supposed their boss could have jumped the gun based on a rumor—but Airi kept that possibility to herself.

Katsuya nodded happily and turned his expectant gaze to the rubble. "I sure hope we find a ruin!"

As the mountain of debris slowly but steadily shrank, hope swelled in his breast.

◆

From a distance, a man bitterly watched the operation underway.

"Damn!" he spat. "Druncam's already taken the whole place over!"

Orsov, as he was known, had replaced Guba as the leader of the relic-hunting team. And it was no coincidence that he'd picked this site as his next target.

"Kolbe!" he yelled into his terminal. "What the hell is going on?! How'd they beat us to it?!"

"How should I know?" came the weary reply from his superior, who was sitting out this expedition. "They probably just got the info some other way and acted on it faster than you did. I did tell you about the ruin, so don't come crying to me because *you* dragged your feet."

The acerbity of that last remark shook Orsov. "C-Cut me some slack! You can't expect me to rush off chasing info that vague!"

"You're the team leader. Making those calls is your job, not mine," Kolbe snapped. Orsov scowled as his boss continued, "I only gave you that tip in the

first place because you asked me for leads on a good haul. So if you don't like my idea, go somewhere else. I don't give a shit where you work." He hung up.

Orsov felt furious, but the other man outranked him, so the most he could do was glower.

Another man on the team asked, "So, what's our next move?"

"Gimme a few minutes to think," Orsov said slowly. "You lot search the area while I come up with a plan. Get going!"

The men did as they were told, although they resented Orsov's high-handedness. He hadn't been their leader long, and they only obeyed him because he had Kolbe's approval.

Before long, more rivals began to appear. Orsov's team and Druncam weren't the only ones who had somehow learned of the ruin and come looking for it. Hunters of all stripes, in groups ranging from a few to a few dozen, started purposefully scanning the area and sifting through the rubble. As Orsov watched them and heard about their activities from his men, he began to rethink his plans on the assumption that there really was a fresh ruin to be found here.

Was that tip-off legit, then? Sure, Druncam got here ahead of us, but I thought it was weird that they only sent kids. But what if that's just an advance force, and their primary team will come later? Shit! If only I'd gotten on this sooner.

The more credence he gave to the rumor, the more his frustration grew. And it turned to anger when he got another call on his terminal—from his boss, he assumed.

"Kolbe!" he barked. "What do you want?!"

"Kolbe?" an unfamiliar woman's voice replied. "No, my name is Viola. I deal in information."

"You're an info broker?"

"Yes. I meant to call the leader of a relic-hunting team. Is that you?"

"Yeah," Orsov admitted guardedly.

"Lovely. I don't know what I would have done if I'd gotten the wrong person.

I’m calling to deliver the info as promised. Is now a good time?”

“What promise? What are you talking about?”

“Hm? That’s strange. Didn’t Kolbe tell you? I’m supposed to deliver additional details about the undiscovered ruin.” Viola paused. “You know what? I’ll just call Kolbe myself and check that—”

“No, I remember now! I just got it confused with something else for a sec! Go ahead! I’m listening!” This was all news to Orsov, but he immediately decided that knowing it wouldn’t hurt. He listened with an excited smirk as Viola continued.

“Really? All right, then. First...”

In a certain lower-district office, Viola was finishing her conversation.

“So, you see how it is,” she said. “I’m counting on you.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll pass the message on to Kolbe,” Orsov replied. “And please call me directly if anything else comes up. Kolbe gets cranky when I bring him in on every little thing.”

“I understand. Bye now!” Viola ended the call with a big grin on her face.

◆

Once the three days they’d agreed to wait were up, Akira, Elena, and Sara left for Yonozuka Station as planned. Akira rode with the women, since his own truck was out for repairs. Although its frame hadn’t been bent badly enough to justify buying a replacement, the damage was still too severe to patch up quickly. He’d gotten Shizuka to put him in touch with a mechanic, telling her only that he’d gotten in an accident. She hadn’t entirely believed him, but recalling his history of rash maneuvers and seeing that he was unhurt, she’d concluded that the truck had taken a blow for him and let him off with a warning to be careful.

Akira had originally planned to rent a car for this trip, but Elena and Sara had offered to give him a lift instead. They might end up only scoping out their destination, depending on what they found when they reached it, so the

women argued that a second vehicle would be overkill. Their bulky truck could fit Akira's CWH and minigun—including their mounts and ammo—with room to spare, so he'd taken them up on their offer.

Although the large truck ran into monsters more than once as it crossed the wasteland, the hunters had no difficulty closing in on Yonozuka Station.

"Have you found out anything new about the ruin, Elena?" Akira asked.

"Only that the entrance is clear now. The reports were too jumbled to learn anything else."

"'Only' that much? You mean you'd normally be able to find out more?" Akira added that just getting details about the entrance seemed pretty impressive to him. Any hunter would try to keep an untouched ruin under wraps, so he doubted that anyone would advertise proof of this one's existence.

"I wouldn't be so sure about that," Elena replied. "I don't know much about what to expect in this situation, since we've never been lucky enough to discover a ruin ourselves, but something about the info I've found seems off—artificial, I suppose."

The hunter grapevine was awash in conflicting reports, she said. The ruin had multiple entrances—or only one. It had yielded a wealth of relics, or none at all. Explorers had found it teeming with deadly monsters or totally safe. It was tiny or vast. Fierce fighting had broken out or merely a few scuffles. The only thing they all agreed on, as far as Elena had been able to learn, was that Yonozuka Station definitely existed.

"Well, this *is* a fresh ruin we're talking about, so someone probably is trying to control what info gets out," Elena concluded. "Still, what I could find seems kind of lopsided."

She couldn't point to anything specific, but the information circulating about Yonozuka Station seemed designed to divide the hunters seeking it. To the proactive—or the desperate and rash—the message was "Hurry! If you don't move fast, someone will beat you to the punch!" Less ambitious hunters and those who could afford to take their time instead heard "Don't rush. It's too risky to go in without thorough research and preparation." The upshot was that the former had already reached the ruins, while the latter lagged far behind.

Elena supposed that Yonozuka Station must now be crawling with desperate, shortsighted hunters who obeyed only the law of the wasteland in their struggle for its troves of relics. The confident and powerful wouldn't arrive and establish order in the ruin for a long time to come. And due to the waiting period they had agreed on, Elena, Sara, and Akira would fall into neither group.

If Elena could have revised their plans, she would have arranged to reach the ruins with the second wave of hunters. The only thing stopping her was the fact that Akira had more in common with the first group, and she didn't want to make him wait any longer.

"Of course, this is all just speculation," she added. "We won't know how things really are until we get there ourselves. So, Akira, let's be as careful as we can."

"I understand."

Akira's clear, earnest answer brought a smile to Elena's face.

Then Sara chimed in. "By the way, Akira, what exactly happened to your truck? You only mentioned that you crashed the front end into something. Don't tell me you hit a monster with it out here?"

"Well, something like that," Akira replied with a ghost of a grin.

Sara let out a short burst of laughter. "I know it's a wasteland truck, but if you did that on purpose, you'd better think twice next time. The jolt hits harder than you'd think—although you probably already found that out the hard way."

"Y-Yes, you have a point."

Sara cracked up, thinking that she'd guessed correctly.

Elena laughed with her, adding, "She's right, you know. Sara tried that with a rental car once, and we had hell to pay."

Akira couldn't help staring at Sara, who smiled but wouldn't meet his gaze. "What was so bad about it?" he asked.

"You see," Elena said, "Sara thought that *fighting* monsters was too much work, so—"

"Forget that, Akira! We've got company!" Sara cut in. "Mind taking care of

this one for us? It's a great chance to see what you can do with your new gear."

"All right!" Akira knew that she was trying to distract him, but he happily seized his CWH.

Elena spotted the relief on Sara's face and couldn't suppress a chuckle.

Alpha, Akira said as he lined up the monster in his sights, *help me out if it looks like I'm gonna miss.*

You've got it, Alpha replied. *I could even make sure you bring it down with one shot if you like.*

Nah, Elena and Sara would ask questions if you went that far, but it'd also seem weird if I went with no support at all at this point.

All right! Then you'd better try hard so you don't need my help with much.

I know.

Through his rifle sight, Akira watched Alpha blithely pointing to his target while he focused and took aim. His enemy was a metal sphere, roughly one meter across, which scuttled across the desert on legs that emerged from an opening in its surface. It slowed, along with the rest of Akira's world, as he concentrated and pulled the trigger.

His armor-piercing bullet struck the robot in the dead center of its round body, shattering a circular lens that must have been either a camera or the firing port for some kind of beam weapon. The legs crumpled, unable to withstand the impact, and the now unsupported sphere tumbled to the ground, no longer functional.

"Nice shot!" Sara exclaimed. "I'm impressed, Akira."

Alpha, did you give me any support? Akira asked.

No, none, Alpha replied.

Realizing that, while the shot might have been a fluke, he'd made it himself, Akira accepted Sara's praise with a smile. "Thank you."

"Okay, now it's my turn," Sara said. "Elena, send me the data."

"Coming right up!"

Sara raised her weapon, Elena corrected her aim, and a bullet burst from the gun barrel, tracing a straight line to its target. The projectile punched through a round body at high speed, destroying another identical robot in a single shot.

“That was amazing!” Akira exclaimed.

“Well, we’d be in trouble if we couldn’t handle a little thing like that.”

The women happily accepted his compliment. Privately, however, Elena felt uneasy. She had never heard of such hostile machines in this area before.

◆

When the group reached the area around Yonozuka Station, they couldn’t hide their surprise. The bullet-riddled corpses of fearsome beasts littered the ground, as did the remains of robots, their armor now thoroughly perforated. Here and there amid the carnage were the wreckage of heavy machinery and the corpses of hunters. A massive battle had been fought here.

Then Akira spotted a hole near a dense cluster of bodies and debris. It was a way into the ruin, but not the one that he had buried. When he got out of the truck, rifle at the ready, and peered inside, he saw stairs beyond the dirt and rubble from which they must have been excavated. This was a far cry from the entrance that Akira had found merely blocked by debris.

“What should we do, Elena?” he asked.

“Let’s start by taking a look around up here. The ruin is underground, but given the state of things, it might be wise to map the surface first.”

“Okay.”

All three began scanning the area aboveground. Before long, they uncovered several more apparent entrances to the ruins—including a vertical shaft five meters across. And everywhere they went, there were dead hunters. The quantity of monster remains told them that these people had brought plenty of firepower, prepared for the dangers of an uncharted ruin. Yet they had still lost their desperate battle.

Sara looked over some of the monsters and groaned.

“Is something wrong?” Akira asked.

“Hm? Oh, I recognize some of these things, and I was just thinking that they don’t normally live around here.” Sara pointed to a meter-long corpse. Although it resembled a spider at first glance, the details of its anatomy marked it as something else entirely. It was also a cyborg of sorts, with machines making up parts of its body.

“So, you’ve seen these before? How dangerous are they?”

“It depends—they vary a lot from one to another. The ones we fought while helping with the base construction were no pushovers, even by my standards.”

“They’re that strong?”

“Well, they do live pretty deep in the ruins. But if these things have started nesting out here in the wasteland, the entire local monster population might be in for a shakeup.”

Akira took a look around at the other fallen beasts, but he saw none of the same species. “This is the only one like it I can see. Maybe it wandered here on its own for some reason.”

“Maybe. But for now, remember that things like it have been here and stay on your toes.”

“Right.”

The group continued scouting the surface, and in about an hour, their map was more or less complete. They then headed toward the entrance that Akira had buried under a mountain of debris.

The head of the stairway was fully exposed, and the wrecks of heavy machinery and other vehicles lay scattered nearby—along with a plethora of monster and hunter corpses. In fact, the bodies seemed slightly more numerous here than elsewhere.

This was already far more than they had bargained for. All three of them realized that their previous experience in Yonozuka Station would now be almost no advantage at all. But if they were going to risk it anyway, then this entrance was their best bet. This was where they had begun charting the ruin’s interior, so they wouldn’t be going in entirely blind.

Akira, Elena, and Sara stopped at the head of the stairs to discuss whether they should go on. They all had their reasons to hesitate, but Elena noticed that Akira seemed to be holding back.

Lightly, she asked, “What would you do if you’d come here alone?”

“Alone? Well...” Akira considered. He had Alpha on his side, and he could count on her to stop him if they ran into trouble underground. He would still have time to turn back then. “I guess I’d go in, since I’d have already come all this way.”

Elena and Sara exchanged a glance. Then, looking pleased, if a bit rueful, they turned back to Akira.

“Okay,” Sara said. “Let’s go in, then.”

“Huh? You mean just because I said so?” Akira asked, thrown for a loop. “I don’t know if that’s such a great idea.”

“We’re glad that you’re concerned for us,” Elena replied, with an edge to her smile. “But we’re hunters too, and we’ve been doing this longer than you have. So, I hate to put it this way, but being treated like liabilities doesn’t feel great, even if it comes from a good place. Does that make sense to you?” She actually felt more pleased than annoyed, but she chose to emphasize the latter reaction.

“I, er, didn’t mean it like that,” Akira faltered.

“Then, we’re all set,” Sara said, laughing. “You’re not worried about us slowing you down, so going in with us should be safer than going in alone. Am I wrong?”

Akira would have gone on alone without a second thought, but he’d been hesitant to drag the women along with him. At their reassurance, however, he set aside his worries and replied, “No, you’re right. Let’s go!”

With that, they set out, cheerful and resolute, on another foray into the ruins of Yonozuka Station.

◆

Now that they were ready to explore, Akira, Elena, and Sara made their way

down the same long staircase they had taken before. Akira wore a backpack full of ammo, gripping his anti-materiel rifle in one hand and his minigun in the other. Although his suit gave him the strength to support this heavy load with ease, its bulk still gave him some difficulty as he descended the transformed staircase.

Unlike on his last trip, the underground passage was clearly lit. The shadows indicated the illumination came from above, but he saw no lights when he looked up. And while the lights that he'd planted on his last visit were still on the floor, they'd been smashed in the course of a struggle. The stairs were also littered with dead monsters, many of which had been destroyed beyond recognition. Bullet holes riddled the walls, floor, and ceiling, and the light revealed traces of explosions as well.

"This ruin must have still been online," Elena mused as she inspected the carnage. "And these shots were fired toward the entrance, meaning that the hunters must have stood farther inside while they fought off monster incursions. However..." She trailed off.

Akira thought for a moment and ventured, "Could the ruin have activated its defense systems because monsters got too far inside?"

"That's possible, although the hunters who went that deep might also have triggered something. They might even have led the monsters to the heart of the ruin while they were trying to get away."

"Which means we have to worry about running into monsters deeper in too. So much for a safe ruin."

"Well, that's usually how it goes." Sara smiled consolingly. "Just think of this as a relic hunt like any other."

They cautiously stepped off the stairs and into the passageway, then headed for their first objective, relying on the map they'd made on their last visit. As they moved, a frown creased Elena's face.

"What's wrong?" Akira asked.

"Part of the tunnel is blocked off. I'm guessing that something shifted when the lights came on, but this makes our map a lot less reliable."

Sara took a look around and grinned. “There are other ways to go. We’ll be fine!”

“True,” Elena admitted. “Let’s keep going.”

They continued, revising their map as they went, until they reached the remains of a store that they had marked but not looted on their last visit. Here, too, they found the aftermath of a clash between hunters and monsters.

“Sara, Akira,” Elena said, frowning. “I’m picking up monsters ahead.”

Sara and Akira acknowledged her warning, readied their weapons, and took up defensive positions on either side of Elena. For her part, Elena raised her own rifle and shifted her scanner’s range to prioritize detecting targets in front of them.

Then beasts flooded in from the far end of the corridor. Not only mammals and reptiles but insects and even monstrous plants swarmed toward them, each letting out its distinctive cry and pounding the floor in its own way. Carnivorous flora that had learned to run moved thick roots like legs. Cyborg creatures whose flesh had rotted to reveal the machinery beneath raced ahead with their jaws gaping wide. Waist-high insects scurried along the walls and ceiling on their many legs, side by side with equally large lizards.

Elena swiftly identified them all, marking as priority targets beasts with machine guns and other ranged weaponry. She then relayed the data to Sara and Akira, efficiently directing their offensive. Her companions obliged with an unrestrained barrage, filling the tunnel with a hail of bullets meant to tear their enemies apart. The devastating projectiles hit the swarm head-on, blasting it beyond all recognition.

Akira had replaced the ammo in his DVTS minigun’s high-capacity magazine since its last outing. The new rounds cost at least twice as much, but their efficacy justified the price. As long as he ignored the expense, his firepower problem was solved.

Any monsters tough enough to survive the barrage met with armor-piercing shots from his CWH, aimed precisely at their most vulnerable points. The bullets punched through thick shields of flesh and muscle to destroy the vital organs they protected. And since Akira was fighting with Alpha’s full support, every

shot he fired was calculated to crush the swarm with maximum efficiency.

“How are you holding up over there?!” Sara called, taken aback by his performance.

“I’m fine!” Akira shouted. “Everything’s under control!”

“Great! You must have gotten pretty good if these things are no trouble for you—a lot of them normally turn up deep in Kuzusuhara!”

“What?! Are that many of them really serious threats?!”

“Yup! Hell if I know what they’re doing here, though!”

“Thanks for the heads up! I’ll be careful!”

Hearing Akira’s spirited response, Sara decided that she couldn’t let the less experienced hunter outdo her and redoubled the ferocity of her assault. Like Akira’s minigun, her automatic grenade launcher wasn’t meant to be fired without an emplacement, but her augmented strength allowed her to wield it easily. She sent a burst of grenades streaming into the heart of the swarm, and a string of explosions engulfed her enemies, wiping them out of existence.

“Sara?!” Akira squawked. “Are you sure it’s safe to fire that down here?!”

“Don’t worry!” she hollered back. “These Old World ruins are built tough, so we’ve got nothing to worry about.”

Akira did worry briefly, but then he remembered that even his CWH proprietary rounds had merely put a few cracks in the walls of Kuzusuhara Town’s buildings. Seeing that Sara had a point, he dropped the issue.

Just then, an unlucky explosion hurled a monster straight at Elena. She swatted it aside with a roundhouse kick and snapped, “Sara! I don’t care how tough the building is—watch where you’re shooting!”

“Sorry, Elena!” Sara called, grinning.

Elena sighed. “Honestly.”

Akira chuckled. Now that he saw how handily the women dealt with the situation, he realized that he need never have worried about getting them involved.

The hunters wiped out the swarm without further incident. Elena waited another ten seconds for new hostiles to appear. When none did, she relaxed and said, “Okay, it’s over. That was easy, considering how outnumbered we were. Still, there were quite a few of them.”

“You can say that again,” Akira replied. “I’ll be spending a ton on ammo.”

Since the passage they stood in ran almost perfectly straight and the monsters had rushed them from the far end of it, simple long-range fire had been enough to finish the fight. But that didn’t mean it had cost them any less ammunition—especially in the case of Akira’s minigun. Elena could see that his forced smile concealed genuine financial worry.

“Good point. Let’s make sure we bring back enough relics to cover the cost!” she said encouragingly. She was thinking of the haul that the number of nearby storefronts promised. As she and her companions looked around, however, their smiles became increasingly strained.

“Well,” Elena added, “I’m sure we’ll find some left if we search carefully.”

The place had been scarred by intense fighting before they’d arrived, and they had just bathed it in another fierce battle. The ruin itself was sturdy, but the shops and relics it contained might not be. There was a good chance that they had just ruined any number of potential finds. The three of them exchanged a wry look, then got to hunting.

Chapter 82: The Ruin's Security System

Akira, Elena, and Sara sifted through the remains of the shopping area for relics. Conditions in the ruin were nothing like they had anticipated, but they were still hunters looking to turn a profit, and they needed to find something to put them in the black on this venture. So they pushed aside both the rubble of partially demolished shops and the bodies of the monsters and hunters who had died there, seeking objects of value.

Luckily for them, a surprising number of relics were left for the taking. Most, however, had come through the nearby battles worse for wear. Akira gingerly lifted a pair of women's underwear and found it stained with what he took to be monster blood, its packaging torn open by a bullet. He tossed it onto some nearby debris, figuring that it wouldn't sell for anything back in the city.

But Sara took notice. "If you don't want that, mind if I take it?"

"Huh?" Akira said. "But look at the shape it's in." Then he recalled that Sara was supposedly starving for undergarments. Even so, he couldn't believe that she was desperate enough to need a pair like these.

She noted his look of surprise and pulled a face. "Just so we're clear, I'm not planning to wear them as is. I'll send them to a specialized repair service, and if I'm lucky, they'll come back good as new—and cheaper. Sometimes the service even offers to buy them, if they're in good enough condition."

"Oh, I see. In that case, help yourself."

"Thanks." Sara stuffed the underwear into a clear bag, which she then deposited in her backpack. Akira watched her curiously.

"You brought separate bags for that?" he asked.

"Hm? Well, yeah. Don't you? Old World packaging is tough, but it's usually showing its age, so I recommend you start. The pricier bags are good for a few uses." Sara then saw that Akira looked confused. "Wait, do you know what this is?"

"What do you mean? It's a bag, right?"

“I mean, yes, but more specifically, it’s a relic storage bag.”

Such bags were among the tools hunters used to transport relics. Many valuable finds were fragile, and there were a wide range of specialized storage containers on the market. Some shielded precision machinery from vibrations, while high-end examples could even stop bullets. They weren’t exactly cheap, but they saw widespread use as a means to preserve relics and ensure a high sale price.

Of course, plenty of hunters also considered the bags too much hassle to bother with, so they weren’t a necessity. Sara had initially assumed that Akira was one of those who didn’t want to take the trouble. She was taken aback to learn that he’d never even heard of storage bags before.

“That’s really something you can buy?” he said. “Huh. Maybe I should get some.”

“I’d say it couldn’t hurt,” Sara replied. “They also come in handy for carrying dirty relics like this. But don’t move anything from Old World packaging to a storage bag—a lot of the time, whatever you found it in offers better protection.”

“I see. Thank you for the tip!”

Searching for relics alongside other hunters, or even just talking about how to handle finds with them, would normally provide plenty of chances to learn about storage bags. But Akira hadn’t had those normal opportunities, Sara reflected with a twinge of pity. A shadow passed over her face, but she soon brightened, opting to play the part of the experienced mentor.

“All right, since we’re out here, I might as well share more little tricks of the trade. I have been at it longer than you, after all.”

“Would you? I’d really appreciate it.” Akira returned her smile without noticing her moment of gloom. Then Elena joined the conversation, and both women shared lessons that his life had afforded him precious few chances to learn. Talking in this way, they continued hunting for relics together.

◆

The battle and the subsequent search had left the hunters with quite a haul.

And since they were still far from exhausted, they once again faced a choice between going on and turning back. Using their remaining strength to pursue further riches and conserving it for a safer return were both valid options.

"So, what's our next move?" Elena asked, wanting to make sure they were all on the same page. "Given the number of relics here, I think it's safe to assume that the ruin is still mostly untouched. We can probably earn more on this trip if we stick it out a little longer."

Akira looked down the passage toward where the monsters had come from. According to his memories of their first map-making expedition, another shopping area lay that way. It would be a bit of a walk, but well worth investigating.

"This is normally when I'd suggest we keep going and you'd try to talk me out of it," Sara said. "Would you mind telling me why you're leading the charge today?"

"Because for once, we can't just come back later," Elena replied. "There's no chance that these relics will still be untouched on our next visit."

If they packed up and left now, then according to her reckoning, they couldn't return for at least three days. They would need time to rest and resupply before they could attempt another expedition. By that time, the hunters waiting for more information would have finished their own preparations and set out for Yonozuka Station, and they weren't likely to leave these troves of relics lying around, ripe for the taking. What was more, the first wave of hunters might have taken most of the monsters down with them, making this a golden opportunity for any relic seekers to follow in their wake. Not even Elena could justify passing that up just to make their trip marginally safer.

Akira pondered the same considerations as he listened. But they couldn't stand around debating in a ruin forever, so he suggested, "How about we keep going until we hit the next set of shops? We'll look for relics there and then call it a day, no matter what we end up finding."

"I don't see a problem with that," Elena answered reservedly. "But what's your reasoning?"

"If we get lucky at the next spot, like we did here, then I think we'll end up

with at least as many relics as we can carry back. If we don't find much left, then we'll be out of luck for today, so we should leave while we still can."

Elena studied him and decided that he wasn't holding anything back. "All right, that sounds like a plan. Any objections, Sara?"

"Nope! Chances like this don't come everyday, so I say we make the most of this one!"

They all nodded and started walking deeper into the tunnels.

"So," Sara whispered to Elena, "what was that about?"

"Hm? Well, remember that time Akira suddenly hurried us along in the tunnels under Kuzusuhara?" Elena replied. "I just wondered if this suggestion was similar."

"Oh, so that's it."

Elena and Sara dismissed their misgivings. Neither they nor Akira had any way of knowing whether Alpha had held her tongue for a purpose.

◆

Akira, Elena, and Sara reached the next shopping area safely, although—thanks to a blocked passage that forced them to take a slight detour and several run-ins with monsters—the trek took longer than they would have liked. They found their destination littered with more corpses. Dead monsters far outnumbered dead hunters. But while the latter had clearly fought hard, that hadn't spared them from a grisly fate.

"Akira, Sara, I'm getting a life reading," Elena said, scanning the area. "Be careful."

Her companions turned their weapons toward the direction she indicated—a door resembling a warehouse delivery entrance. It was cracked open but too banged up to move normally.

And from that crack, a voice called, "Hey! Is someone there?! I know you're out there! Say something!"

Akira and the women exchanged glances, then approached the door.

"Yes! We're saved!" the man inside exclaimed when he spotted them through the opening. "I'm begging you, open this door and get us out of here!"

This man, Levin, was the leader of a group of hunters who had taken shelter beyond the door. But although it had shielded them, battle damage had rendered it impossible to open, leaving them in dire straits. Unwilling to waste away in the ruin, Levin had been waiting and watching for the arrival of fellow hunters ever since. Now that his saviors had finally come, he was elated.

Elena, however, remained wary. "What are you doing in there?" she asked through the door.

"We were running from monsters, but now we're stuck!"

"What's it like inside? Do you have a lot of room to move? How many of you are there?"

"Huh? Well, yeah, it's pretty big. Some kind of warehouse, I reckon. And there's five of us, including me. But who cares about that? Let us out!"

"Five?" Elena considered. "That's not very many."

"You think so? I'd say it's about average for a relic-hunting team. Syndicates

work in larger groups, of course.”

“No, I mean that’s not very many compared to the number of dead hunters out here. I’m guessing you shut yourselves in there to save your own skins, everyone else be damned.” Elena glared through the crack in the door.

Levin winced. “Wh-What else could we have done?! Standing our ground against those odds was suicide, and no one else was close enough to get through the door in time!” He kept piling excuses upon excuses. “And as team leader, I had a duty to put my comrades’ lives first! I couldn’t expose them to danger for some people in the same line of work who just happened to be nearby! You’ve got to understand that!”

“I see. That does sound fair.”

“R-Right?!”

“But wouldn’t it be equally fair for us to leave you in there? I’m sorry, but my comrades’ lives are my top priority too. I don’t want them getting attacked, so I’m keeping unplanned contact with other hunters to a minimum.”

“O-Oh, come on! You’ve gotta be kidding me!”

Elena took Levin’s panicked scream as a sign that he actually was in trouble and unlikely to suddenly turn bandit. She relaxed just a bit and asked her companions, “So, really, what should we do?”

“Well, I guess we could at least open the door for them,” Sara replied.

“Yes,” Akira agreed, “I don’t see a problem with that.”

Elena nodded. None of them minded rescuing a harmless group—the women out of the goodness of their hearts, and Akira because he hoped good deeds would bring him good luck. The wasteland was a harsh place, but how cruel the people there had to be came down to personal circumstances, strength, and ability to cope. Elena and Sara had what it took to save strangers without letting their guard down, and Akira recognized their skill.

“So, how do we get it open?” Elena asked.

“Good question.” Sara looked the door over and grinned boldly. “Let’s kick it down.” She then took up a position in front of the blocked entrance and

shouted to the people inside, “Get back from the door or go down with it!”

Once Levin’s group had scrambled clear, Sara drove a devastating kick into the obstruction. A deafening crash testified to the force of her blow as the door bent further out of shape.

Upgrading to better nanomachines had increased her already augmented strength. (And shortened the lives of the cheap underwear she’d once worn, fueling her hunger for Old World garments.) She had also replaced her body armor when her old suit could no longer keep up with her. Kicking a door out of its frame was a cakewalk for her now, as her sturdy gear insulated her from the force of her own mighty blows even as they crumpled the durable Old World construction.

Sara unleashed another kick. The door bent even more, but it remained sufficiently intact to block passage.

“It’s tougher than I thought,” Sara declared, startled to be encountering so much resistance.

Akira took up a position beside her, signaling his intentions with a look. The pair grinned at each other in mutual understanding, then assumed combat stances and kicked out as one. Most people couldn’t even lift the weapons that these two each wielded with ease, and not even an Old World door could withstand a blow with both of their strength behind it. Since this one was already damaged, their blows smashed it apart.

Akira and Sara peered inside with satisfaction. Levin’s group looked from the crumpled door to the two hunters smiling in the doorway and grimaced.

The stranded hunters didn’t look especially relieved to be out of the warehouse at last. They weren’t clear of the ruin yet, and the monster and hunter corpses scattered all around them left no illusions about the danger they were currently in. On top of this, their rescuers had just demonstrated power that they couldn’t hope to match.

Nevertheless, Levin and his comrades were genuinely grateful. They were also eager to keep themselves alive and avoid provoking the new arrivals.

“Thank you,” their leader said. “We owe you one. I was starting to worry that we’d never get out of there!”

“You’re welcome.” Elena’s smile remained in place as she continued, “Now, I’m sorry about this, but get away from us as fast as you can. Sifting through a ruin for relics with hunters we’ve never met before isn’t on our to-do list.”

“O-Okay.” Levin flinched as he took another look around. “But before we go, would you mind telling us what it’s like outside the ruin and what you ran into on your way here?”

His face fell as Elena described how the surface was also carpeted in dead hunters and monsters, and how her group had fought off a swarm in the tunnels. Then, with his best attempt at a winning smile, he suggested, “If things are as bad as all that, then maybe we ought to take running into each other here as a sign. How about we join forces to pick up some relics and then—”

“No,” Elena interrupted. “We understand your situation, but would *you* team up with strangers who ran and hid while other hunters got slaughtered?”

“I guess not,” Levin admitted, his smile starting to wither under her glare.

“Then get going, and at least stay far enough away that we don’t have to worry about you. If you loiter nearby anyway, we’ll take that as a sign you plan to attack us.”

Levin’s crew frowned and looked at each other but made no move to leave.

“Sorry,” Sara added, “but we’ve been through a lot, and it’s given us trust issues. So if you hang around, we’ll start getting suspicious.” She dropped her smile. “Unless you’d rather settle things here?”

That rattled Levin and his comrades. Yet they were running low on ammo and didn’t feel confident that they could even make it to the surface without help. And after what Elena had told them, they doubted that their vehicle was still in working order. So they were all desperate to secure an escort back to the city. After a whispered debate, their leader steeled himself and began negotiating for their very lives.

“All right,” Levin said. “In that case, we’ll put up an emergency listing right here. I’m begging you, answer it. We’ll do whatever we can to sweeten the deal

—we just don’t want to die. Please?”

“I don’t know...” Elena exchanged a look with Sara.

“Me neither,” her partner replied, caught equally off guard by this request.

Elena took out her terminal and checked its network access. But inside an underground ruin, she was unable to connect to the Hunter Office.

“Just so we’re clear,” she said, “we can’t make this an official contract because there’s no signal down here. But if you try to take advantage of that to bullshit us, you’ll regret it.”

“I’m a hunter too!” Levin snapped. “I know what it means to promise an emergency listing through the Office!” Despite everything, he couldn’t help looking annoyed, and not without reason. Falsifying a job offer counted as defrauding the Hunter Office, even if it was still only a verbal agreement and had not yet processed through formal channels. Such an offer carried more weight than an ordinary promise.

And since Elena and Sara knew that as well as any hunter, they were suddenly more willing to consider the job. Picking up on their change in attitude, Levin immediately pushed forward. “Now, let’s talk pay. How does three million aurum sound? There’s three of you, so that makes a mil apiece.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Elena replied with an affronted look. “There are five of *you*. So how about...”

“Five million?” Levin thought that was a bit steep, but beggars couldn’t be choosers. Secretly, he felt relieved that his rescuers were willing to bargain at all —until he heard Elena’s counteroffer.

“*Fifty* million.”

Levin and his companions were aghast. “H-Hang on!” he pleaded. “You’ve gotta know that’s crazy!”

“What’s crazy about charging extra for an emergency job? If you don’t like it, make your own way home. We won’t force you.”

“Y-Yeah, but—”

“And you should know how bad things are in this ruin even better than we do.

Isn't that why you turned your back on fellow hunters and hid? And you'd still be trapped if we hadn't come along. You can't expect a million aurum to buy you a safe return to the city under these conditions."

To drive her point home, Elena continued, "If we take the job, we'll uphold our end of the bargain. But we don't know how many monsters we'll run into on the return trip. Three million might not even cover our ammo costs and other expenses."

Levin had no counterargument. She was backing him into a corner.

"Since you couldn't force that door open," she went on, "you must not even be wearing powered suits. You're asking us to guard hunters who came here *that* ill-prepared all the way back to the city? I'll admit that I'm charging extra because this is an emergency job, but I don't think my asking price is unreasonable. Do you?"

Her offensive crushed Levin completely.

Akira was watching Elena negotiate, fascinated, when Alpha spoke up.

Watch out for threats from that direction.

She sounded serious, so he instinctively turned his gun where she pointed. It took a moment for Elena and Sara to do likewise, and Levin's group was even slower to respond.

Monsters? Akira asked.

No, a person, Alpha replied. *But given their movement speed, they must be running. I can't tell whether monsters are chasing them—your scanner isn't precise enough at this distance.*

Roger that!

The barrel of Akira's weapon was trained on a corner in the passage. The tunnel beyond was out of range of his scanner, so he couldn't see through the wall, even with Alpha's support. He waited calmly for the potential threat to arrive.

Elena had picked up an entity approaching on her sensors as well. Akira's

response time struck her as unnatural, but she reflected that he'd behaved similarly in Kuzusuhara and shelved the question for another day.

When something did emerge from around the corner, it caught the hunters by surprise. It was a stray shot—not a bullet but a short ray of light flying through the air. The beam hit a wall, triggering an explosion. Or at least that was how it looked to Akira.

Alpha, what the hell was that?! he demanded.

It's called a laser bullet, she replied. *A directed, high-energy burst that reacts with the colorless fog in the atmosphere as it travels. That reaction converts a portion of the energy to light, creating the appearance of an extended beam. What looks like an explosion is actually—*

Let me guess—getting hit by one's a bad idea?

Without the appropriate force-field armor, an injury would be unavoidable.

Got it!

More and more laser bullets flew from behind the wall, and Akira didn't need anyone to tell him that something was shooting them at someone. A moment later, that someone rounded the corner and ran straight toward the hunters.

"I know her!" Akira cried, eyes widening in shock as he recognized Yumina.

When she had turned into their tunnel, she'd left the shooter's line of fire, and the laser bullets had stopped. But it wasn't long before several metallic spheres, each roughly a meter in diameter, rolled rapidly into view. Legs sprouted from their surfaces, scraping and sliding on the floor, and the spheres came to a halt. Each one had a laser-bullet launcher in the center of the front of its round body, and after a moment to steady themselves, they trained their launchers on Yumina.

"Get down!" Akira shouted.

Only then did Yumina notice the other hunters. She was surprised to see familiar faces—and even more surprised to find them pointing guns at her—but that only slowed her by a fraction of a second. She quickly dropped, and Akira pulled the trigger before she even hit the floor. His anti-materiel rifle sent an

armor-piercing bullet through the air just above her—and straight into the deadly lens of one spherical robot, destroying it.

Elena and Sara joined in, wiping out more machines. The closer a sphere was to lining up a shot on Yumina, the sooner it went down in a hail of bullets.

Yumina herself crawled sideways across the floor, grimacing at the rounds whizzing over her head, and pressed herself against a wall to escape the hunters' line of fire. Then she gingerly picked herself up and ran along the wall.

Once hitting her was no longer a concern, Akira broke out his minigun, and Sara her automatic grenade launcher. A storm of bullets and explosions buffeted the killer security bots, reducing every last one of them to scrap in the blink of an eye.

Akira lowered his weapon and exhaled. *What were those things, Alpha?*

Part of this ruin's security system, I suppose, she replied. *They were lightly armed, though, so I doubt they were meant to handle anything serious.*

Akira frowned. *What do you mean, "lightly armed"? They had those laser bullets.*

Well, they couldn't make them too *weak. Even nonlethal enforcers meant to deal with civilians still need to be able to at least help suppress a riot.*

Wait, "nonlethal"? I thought you said I'd die if one of those hit me.

They're nonlethal by Old World standards.

Oh. So, even regular people in the Old World could survive shots like that? To Akira, it seemed clear why they'd made their clothes so tough. Thus did his misconceptions about the past continue to worsen.

Yumina walked up, breathing heavily. Levin's team had retreated to their warehouse, only poking their heads out to watch, but they slunk back out when they saw that the fighting was over.

When Yumina reached Akira, Elena, and Sara, the first thing she did was bow. "Thank you so much for saving me! That was a really close call."

"Don't mention it! We're just glad you're okay," Elena replied. Then she asked the question troubling her whole team. "But why are you alone? Weren't

Katsuya and Airi with you?”

Yumina’s face contorted in sorrow. Then she bowed again, more deeply and emphatically than before. “Elena, Sara, please! Save them!”

The desperate urgency of her tone left no doubt in the women’s minds—or in Akira’s—that the situation was grave.

Chapter 83: The Cost of a Wish

The wasteland above Yonozuka Station was still peaceful when its entrance finally emerged from under the mountain of rubble. The young Druncam hunters who had been looking on raised a cheer, then excitedly began preparing to enter this uncharted ruin. But they couldn't allow just any hunter access to their find, so most would remain above on guard duty while only a small party explored the tunnels. And Katsuya's team was the first to go in.

The staircase stretched into the lightless bowels of the ruin. But the ancient darkness didn't disquiet Katsuya as he descended with Yumina and Airi—his heart swelled with curiosity and anticipation. His face grew puzzled, however, when his light revealed a landing and the portable lighting fixture set on it.

"Is that a lamp?" he asked. "What's it doing here?"

Airi cautiously approached the device and tried the switch. Sure enough, it flared to life, illuminating its surroundings.

"It still works," she reported.

"Looks like it," Yumina agreed. Then a mystified look came over her. "Wait, what is a portable light doing in an undiscovered ruin?" She checked the object and soon discovered that it was not of Old World make but a cheap modern-day model.

"What's going on here?" Katsuya asked with growing consternation.

But Yumina said, "For now, let's just keep moving," so they all continued deeper into the ruin.

They found several more lights on the stairs, all still operational. But as the passage steadily brightened, Katsuya only became more bewildered.

"Hold up," he said at last. "Yumina, Airi, this ruin *is* uncharted, right?"

"The entrance was buried under rubble," Airi replied. "You saw us dig it up."

"I know, but still."

The three of them advanced down the stairs, switching on lights as they went,

although Katsuya never stopped wondering aloud. By the time they reached the passage at the bottom, the thrill of discovery was completely gone from his expression, and his bafflement had given way to outright suspicion. When he and his teammates shone their lights along the passage, they found that the line of portable fixtures continued.

"Well," Yumina said, forcing herself to smile, "it looks like someone beat us to the punch."

"It sure does." Katsuya heaved a sigh, his disappointment plain on his face. He'd already begun to suspect as much, but losing the experience of being the first to enter an unknown ruin still came as a blow.

"We can't change that, so let's focus on what we *can* do. We know that almost no one has heard of this ruin, so we can still expect a good haul of relics."

"The experience still counts," Airi added. "It won't matter that we're not first as long as we leave with the loot. And this ruin's data isn't on the market, so just exploring and mapping it will be an achievement."

Cheered by his teammates, Katsuya shook off his funk and beamed with enthusiasm. "You're right. Okay! Let's do this thing!"

The three young hunters resumed their investigation, switching on more lights as they followed the trail deeper into Yonozuka Station. They ranged around the tunnels, celebrating when they came upon a shop or storeroom and sometimes lamenting when it turned out to be picked clean of relics. Their portable automapper charted a considerable section of the ruin as they went.

"It's about time we headed back to check in with the others," Katsuya said, pleased with the fruits of this first foray. "We'll need help to carry all the relics left here, anyway."

"And there are no monsters," Airi added. "I like this ruin."

"It was worth moving that mountain of wreckage to get in," Yumina agreed. "We've got a map now, and everyone must be dying for a look, so they'll be furious if we don't take our turns standing guard up top. We'd better hurry."

They cheerfully set out for the surface, elated by the thought of what they

would achieve that day.

Then Katsuya thought he heard a scream. He knew that he couldn't have—even straining his ears, he could detect no sound in the ruins except for his own team's footsteps. But he hadn't heard it with his ears, and he hadn't imagined it. It wasn't a voice. It wasn't even a sound. Yet it was a cry for help. Before he knew what he was doing, Katsuya had broken into a run.

"Hey, Katsuya?!" Yumina shouted.

"I've got a bad feeling!" he hollered back. "Let's pick up the pace!"

Airi quickly chased after him, and Yumina followed suit with a scowl that said, *Again?*

They were still racing through the interminable tunnels when they came back into the range of their fellow hunters' comms. Immediately, they heard familiar voices screaming and calling for backup.

"Katsuya, we need help! If you can hear this, get back here ASAP! Katsuya! Please! If you can hear this—"

"It's me! I'm on my way! What happened?!"

The panicked fear in the caller's voice instantly gave way to delight. "F-Finally! We got through! Katsuya, we're begging you, please hurry! We've got monsters! A whole horde of them! There are so many that—"

"I'm coming! Wait for us!"

Katsuya was about to end the call when Yumina cut in firmly. "Calm down and tell us your exact situation. What's the size of the swarm? Give me a rough estimate."

"Lots!" the voice replied. "Way too many to count! So we need you back here fast!"

"So, you definitely don't have the firepower to hold out on your own?"

"Yeah! We don't stand a chance! So hurry up and—"

"And you expect just the three of us to turn that impossible situation around?"

“Huh? W-Well, with Katsuya on our side...”

Yumina pulled a face. If her comrades were this desperate for Katsuya to return, then they weren’t just planning to abandon the entrance and pull all the Druncam hunters out. They were seeking any ray of hope amid their peril.

“I see,” she said. “Can you withdraw immediately, leaving us behind?”

Katsuya couldn’t help turning to stare at her even as they ran. Airi grimaced, but not because she found fault with Yumina—she had only just realized how bad things were on the surface.

When no reply came, Yumina demanded, “Answer me. Can you do it?”

“It...It wouldn’t be easy. B-But maybe if Katsuya was here.”

Yumina immediately recognized this wishful thinking for what it was. Sternly, she barked, “Abandon your position and fall back into the ruin! Now!”

“H-Huh? But—”

“Move it! The faster you fall back, the sooner you can join forces with Katsuya!”

“U-Understood!”

With that, the call ended, leaving Katsuya gaping at his teammate.

“Yumina?” he asked. “What did you do that for?”

“I don’t know exactly what’s going on either, but it sounds like monsters are overrunning the surface, so we’d better all take a defensible position inside the ruin. That should at least be safer than fighting it out at the entrance.”

“But why—?”

“Questions can wait! We’re going to save everyone, remember? If you’ve got time for wondering, you should be using it to focus.”

Katsuya saw the sense in that, so he left off talking and ran on to rescue his comrades.

Airi matched pace with Yumina and whispered, “Is it *that* bad up there?”

“Probably,” Yumina answered. “Even a retreat must seem too risky—

otherwise, they would have told us to hurry back so that we could all get out of here.” What would make her comrades afraid to pile into a personnel carrier and make a break for it? She nervously pictured the surface absolutely teeming with monsters.

“Then going back will put us in danger.”

Yumina grinned ruefully. “I know. But try telling that to *him*.”

Airi nodded, and the two of them ran grimly on in Katsuya’s wake.

By the time the team neared the entrance, the other Druncam hunters were reaching the foot of the stairs. Those already at the bottom fired back up the way they had come, providing cover for their companions still hurrying down. The lights on the steps and in the tunnel showed them exactly what they were aiming at.

Those following the trail of lights in the passage spotted the new arrivals and let out a cry.

“Katsuya!”

“Over here! Hurry!” Katsuya shouted, beckoning to his comrades as he moved to join those providing covering fire.

Yumina and Airi exchanged a glance, then Yumina doubled back to lead the others to shelter, while Airi went to support Katsuya.

Two young hunters remained by the stairs, determined to keep shooting until all the rest got clear. Katsuya reached them just as the monsters did. The avalanche of beasts, which kept charging even after they’d been shot and continued tumbling forward even in death, instantly engulfed all three of them.

Airi, lagging a few steps behind, was spared the same fate. She screamed and opened fire. But no matter how many monsters she killed, their corpses remained, piling on top of each other as more and more hurtled down the stairs. Grief suffused her expression as she lost all hope of rescuing her team leader.

Then he burst free of the swarm, kicking dead beasts aside.

“Katsuya!” she exclaimed as her face lit up.

“Go on ahead!” he shouted, hurling the comrade he’d been carrying into her arms. “I’ll hold them off here!”

“I’ll stay with—”

“No! Take him and go! I’ll catch up to you in no time!” Katsuya’s tone and expression radiated sorrow. “Please. Just go.”

Airi hesitated for a moment, then made up her mind. The other hunter was unconscious. He wouldn’t make it unless someone carried him, and Katsuya would never abandon a comrade. If she defied orders and stayed, Katsuya would fight to the bitter end to keep their escape route open. She had no time to convince him to let her take his place.

“Hurry!” Katsuya urged.

Unless she acted, they would all die. If she wanted Katsuya to escape, she told herself, she would have to start by taking the unconscious hunter and going as far and as fast as she possibly could. So to save Katsuya’s life, she left him behind, her face an anguished mask of sorrow.

◆

When the landslide of monsters engulfed Katsuya, he knew that he was doomed. His first instinct was to look up, but he saw no light. The fixtures on the stairs were all broken, and the beasts’ bodies blotted out the sunlight. His exceptional combat talent told him that there was no way out, and he could find no reason to doubt it.

In the face of his approaching death, his concentration heightened, drawing out his final moments. His world faded to white as he tuned out everything irrelevant to his survival.

If Katsuya had been alone, he would have listened to his talent and abandoned hope. But he had comrades nearby, engulfed by the same swarm. Giving in meant that they would die with him, that he would get more of his friends killed. That thought kept him going—barely. He knew that there was nothing he could do, but he chose to fight back against that realization.

No! I’m capable of more than this!

Casting about wildly for something—*anything*—to turn things around and save his comrades, he hit upon his own innate potential. Shikarabe had more or less acknowledged that he had skill. (Or so Katsuya had been told—he hadn't actually heard it from the veteran hunter's own lips.) Katsuya detested his arrogant ex-mentor, but the man knew his job, and knowing that he considered Katsuya a diamond in the rough—his superior in potential, if nothing else—counted for a lot.

Subconsciously, Katsuya had always felt that he had more in him. Diligent training and combat experience, he believed, would unleash his potential, propelling him to new heights. But now he deliberately focused mind. If mere desperation to save his comrades wasn't enough, then he would knock his latent potential out of bed and force it to awaken *now*.

"Someday" isn't good enough! I need it now! Now! *I don't care what unleashes it or if it comes at a price! I'll pay anything! Just give me strength! Right here, right now!*

In that bleached-white world of total concentration, he pointed his rifle into the maw of an oncoming monster and fired wildly. His own gunshots rang in his ears, distorted by the leisurely passage of time, as he struggled and wished.

Beside him, a girl was smiling.

A moment later, Katsuya kicked out at the monster ahead of him, almost without meaning to. He had never practiced such maneuvers, but his suit-enhanced strength drove his foot home in a swift, sharp strike, like an advance on mastery to come. The blow both killed the beast outright and deflected its momentum, sending it careening past when it would otherwise have landed on top of him.

The recoil from the kick knocked Katsuya off-balance—or at least he thought it did. But even as he panicked and seemed to fall, he evaded a monster lunging from another direction. Then he spotted one of his fellow hunters lying nearby, knocked out by a blow from a monster, and instinctively reached out. Katsuya was determined, and even though his own hand seemed surprisingly sluggish to him, he managed to grab hold of his fallen comrade.

One more to go! I see him!

Katsuya stepped forward to rescue his remaining friend—or tried to. But Katsuya's body sprang in the opposite direction.

What?! He pleaded with himself, *Wait! He's still in there!* But the very advance on his talent that he'd wished for was forcing him to retreat, as if to say that he would never make it in time. Kicking monsters aside, he burst free of the encircling swarm.

A moment later, he watched through their closing ranks as the beasts tore apart the hunter he'd failed to save. Whatever it was that he'd been hearing, that voiceless cry for help, it vanished in a silent scream along with his friend's head. He was about to cry out himself when Airi called his name.

Her voice brought Katsuya back to reality, if only barely. He left the unconscious hunter in her care, then settled in to hold the line. He kept his weapon trained on the swarm, slowing its advance alone while he gradually gave ground.

Damn it all!

He realized that he was fighting better than ever before. He could see every move his enemies made. His shots seemed drawn to their targets. So, despite the mass of creatures surging toward him, he felt completely unafraid. He was in perfect form.

But he took no pleasure in that.

Did I abandon a comrade?!

Katsuya had never been so capable. His dormant potential really did seem to have awakened. Yet he had still failed to save his fellow hunter. Part of the new and improved self he'd wished for had coldly decided that he was too late—and had written off a comrade. He had fled. He had abandoned a friend in need. Katsuya could hardly believe that he had chosen such a course of action without even realizing it.

"Is this all my enhanced self is good for?!" he raged. "Is ditching a friend and running for it my true potential?! Am I supposed to call that an improvement?!"

But he never stopped shooting, his countless bullets transforming his enemies into corpses with maximum efficiency. More beasts pushed past their fallen

vanguard, advancing down the ancient passage.

“Damn it! Damn it! Damn it all to hell!”

Tears streamed down Katsuya’s face as he fought. He was now performing so superbly that he could pause, dry his eyes, and swap magazines in the face of the swarm. Yet even with his newfound skill, he had failed to save a companion.

That knowledge tormented him.

The wide passage was still far more confined than the surface, and every monster he killed made it narrower, slowing fresh waves of enemies. At last, he could afford to turn his back on them. Sensing that it was time to retreat, he stopped firing and broke into a headlong dash. Now that he could no longer take out his feelings on the beasts, his look of grief became even more pronounced.

Had Katsuya really chosen his own actions? He couldn’t tell. Such was the price—at least in part—of his wish.

In a blank white void, a girl was smiling.

◆

If Orsov were to try to excuse his conduct, he would say that he hadn’t meant to take things so far. Of course, he would never get a chance to tell his side.

Viola had suggested to him a way to prevent Druncam from monopolizing the ruin. If the syndicate seized control of the entrance, other hunters would struggle just to get inside. But with this plan, Orsov could step in before that happened.

It would be easy to wait for the rookies to clear the entrance and then eliminate them, but doing so was guaranteed to make an enemy of Druncam. Orsov couldn’t open fire on a transport marked with the syndicate’s logo and then expect them to believe that he hadn’t known who he was messing with. Druncam had a reputation to maintain, and an attack on even its least experienced members would be met with a thorough investigation, followed by uncompromising retribution at the hands of heavily armed veteran hunters.

But if Orsov let the Druncam team be, then in the worst case, the syndicate

might carry off every relic in the ruin. Even if other entrances existed—and they might not—finding and excavating them would take time. So, how was a hunter to drive the Druncam rookies away from the entrance while keeping their own hands clean? Provided that they were willing to play fast and loose with morals in the wasteland, the answer was relatively simple: get monsters to do the dirty work. Simply lead a swarm to the entrance, and it would force the Druncam team to retreat, leaving the way clear for other hunters.

Controlling access to a ruin was difficult at the best of times. Anyone attempting it needed to maintain a guard in the deadly wastes twenty-four hours a day, all while watching for monster attacks from within as well as without. Add the threat of hostile hunters into the equation, and it wasn't hard to see why most would-be monopolies ended up getting dislodged.

Druncam's expectations of relic hunting in this as-yet-undiscovered ruin must have been through the roof, but the organization still had nothing more to go on than a rumor—not credible enough to waste their heavy hitters on. As Orsov and every other hunter in the area saw it, the syndicate had sent its rookies as a scouting party. If the kids actually found a ruin, then the old hands would race to the scene. So to keep the find out of Druncam's hands, someone would have to undermine their claim in the period between the entrance coming to light and the veterans' arrival. Druncam could still claim to have discovered the ruin, but attempting to reoccupy an entrance that they had already abandoned would provoke too much enmity from their fellow hunters.

So Orsov and his crew laid the groundwork for their engineered monster attack. While they monitored the progress of the heavy machinery digging away at the rubble, they set up a trail of threat magnets to an area more densely populated with dangerous beasts, prepared to activate the devices as soon as the entrance was clear. But when the work was done, one of Orsov's men started to get cold feet.

"Hey, are you really sure about this?" he asked. "It feels like crossing a line."

"Don't worry," Orsov replied. "No one'll find out. As far as anyone'll ever know, a bunch of hunters made a fuss looking for a way into a new ruin, and that brought a pack of monsters down on their heads."

“I get that, but I still don’t know about this.” Siccing monsters on fellow hunters didn’t sit right with the man. He wouldn’t speak out against it openly, but he did feel bothered enough to grumble.

Realizing this, Orsov adopted a placating grin. “They say Druncam coddles those kids and kits ’em out with high-end gear. They can handle a little monster attack.”

“Maybe, but—”

“We’ve just gotta give ’em a scare—make ’em think that they can’t hold down the entrance long-term. If they get stubborn and stand their ground, we’ll lend ’em a hand taking out whatever shows up. Then they’ll owe us one, and we can use that as leverage to talk ’em into letting us inside. See? It’s no big deal!”

The other man gave in and allowed himself to be convinced. He had his own debts to worry about, and he wanted the relics likely to lie in an untouched ruin as much as Orsov did.

Orsov laughed and went back to watching the Druncam team. When the young hunters’ shouts alerted him that they had found the entrance at last, he activated his threat magnets. Of course, that didn’t summon a horde of monsters on the spot. Even if the beasts took his bait, they would take time to arrive. And how many eventually showed up would be a matter of chance. If he got unlucky, only a handful would answer his call.

He waited, praying for success. Then his scanner registered a threat, and he couldn’t suppress a smile. Soon, however, his face turned disbelieving and finally froze in panicked terror.

“Orsov!” one of his men shouted. “We’ve got trouble!”

“I...I know!” Snapping out of his daze, Orsov called his crew back to their vehicle and ordered it to set off as soon as they were all aboard. The onboard sensors showed more monsters than he’d believed possible.

“What the hell is going on?!” someone demanded. “Sure, we set off threat magnets, but there’s no way they could trigger *this*!”

“Who cares?!” Orsov snapped. “Just get us out of here!”

The wasteland bus sped off in the opposite direction from the swarm. Then the driver suddenly slammed on the brakes.

“What are you doing?!” Orsov shouted. “Move it!”

“You don’t understand! They’re over here too!”

Fighting had already broken out ahead of the bus, and the men could see other vehicles fleeing the scene.

“Change course! Now!”

“I’m trying!”

The bus couldn’t make tight turns, but the driver was making do. While he adjusted its heading, the smallest and fleetest-footed creatures closed in, and the hunters opened fire on them from the windows.

“There’s too many of ’em! What the hell is happening?!”

“Don’t ask me! Just floor it! If they break the bus, we’re done for! We could never get clear of this swarm on foot!”

The bus windows bristled with weapons as the hunters shot wildly to keep the swarm at bay. Their enemies were frail and went down quickly, but the creatures just kept coming. Despite the plentiful reserves they kept on board, the hunters found themselves dreading running out of ammo in the face of this onslaught.

At long last, the bus raced off in a new direction. The dead monsters beneath its wheels made for a bumpy ride, but the flood of relief that its passengers felt at escaping outweighed any discomfort.

Then came another halt. The hunters pushed forward, meaning to give the driver a piece of their mind. But their complaints died on their lips, giving way to a hushed “Here *too*?”

They beheld more hunters driving toward them with countless monsters in pursuit. Orsov’s team didn’t even have time to turn their bus around before the swarm engulfed it. For a while, the crack of gunfire told of their desperate resistance. But in the end, it too faded.

The situation was much the same everywhere near Yonozuka Station. Swarms of monsters converged on the ruin from all sides, forcing hunters to make a stand.

This was no coincidence. Threat magnets had lured the beasts here, and Orsov's crew had not been the only group to use them. Many hunters had been just as desperate to stop Druncam from monopolizing the contents of this untouched ruin. Acting on similar information, they had all been guided into carrying out the same plan. And that wasn't all. Some had even raced through the desert with active threat magnets on their vehicles, then burst onto the scene trailing crowds of monsters behind them.

Everyone who'd received a tip had independently arrived at the same conclusion: The site was crawling with hunters in search of an undiscovered ruin and the treasure trove of relics within. They were packing more than enough firepower to fight off even a large swarm. In fact, they would annihilate a small one before it could dislodge the group laying claim to the entrance. So they had all tried to err on the side of attracting more monsters—which had led to a staggering number of beasts flocking in from a vast area around Yonozuka Station. Most were small fry, easy pickings on their own. But not even hunters armed to the teeth against the perils of an unknown ruin could withstand an onslaught of this magnitude.

The young Druncam hunters holding the entrance turned and fled into the tunnels, and the monsters poured in after them. Other hunters soon followed, preferring the ruin to being stranded on the surface. The creatures pursued them too. Before long, Yonozuka Station had swallowed up everything battling above it.

◆

Yumina led her comrades to an ideal place to hole up, directed them to establish a temporary base there, and then rushed back to aid Katsuya. Then she met Airi, alone except for the injured hunter she carried, and lost control.

"Where is he?!"

Hesitantly, Airi replied, "Holding them back."

Yumina almost demanded to know why Airi hadn't stayed behind with him,

but her teammate's grief-stricken look and their unconscious comrade more or less answered that question. Instead, she said gently, "Okay. Everyone else is back that way, so drop him off there and then come back me up. And try to be quick!"

Out of consideration, she didn't tell Airi to wait with the others. Yumina could tell that Airi was desperate to rejoin Katsuya, and she wanted to do what she could to help her teammate relieve her stress and focus on that goal.

Airi nodded silently and hurried on.

Yumina set off in the opposite direction. Due to the lights they'd turned on in the passage, she was able to run flat-out without losing her bearings. She would have been hard-pressed to cover as much ground in darkness, with only her own light and her scanner's night-vision mode to see by. Barreling into an unseen monster would also have been a real possibility. So as she raced along the tunnel where she would have had to tread warily in the dark, she gave thanks to whoever had installed the lights.

Then she spotted Katsuya ahead and beamed. He was safe. But then she steeled herself and moved to the side of the passage, placing him out of her line of fire, and trained her gun on the darkness behind him. Whatever monsters might be closing in, she was ready for them.

She focused her scanner forward, increasing both the range and accuracy of its threat detection. Only once she was certain that their enemies were still a long way off did she lower her weapon in relief.

Katsuya came up beside Yumina, but there, to her surprise, he stopped.

"What's wrong?" she asked. "We need to hurry." She had expected Katsuya to dash past her, after which she would turn to follow him. The enemy wasn't right on top of them, but they still didn't have time to linger.

Peering closer, she saw that her crush looked beaten and distraught. There were even tear stains on his face. Finding an old friend had released the tension holding him together, leaving her beloved at a standstill.

Yumina took Katsuya's hand and asked no more questions. "Come on, let's go. Everyone's waiting." She smiled and gave him a somewhat forceful tug.

Katsuya stumbled forward a step. Then he was running again.

Yumina led him back to the rest of the Druncam group as fast as she could. She didn't know what had happened, but this was neither the time nor the place to give Katsuya a hug. So, for both of their sakes, she needed to get him to safety.

She never let go of his hand.

The whole group was delighted to welcome Katsuya back. Airi had already told them how he had stayed behind to halt the swarm alone, and they showered him with undiluted praise and gratitude.

But a sad smile was the best that Katsuya could manage in reply. Then, saying that he was tired and needed a rest, he entrusted the defense of this makeshift stronghold to his comrades and practically collapsed onto the ground. Both mentally and physically, he was at his limit.

Yumina assumed command and oversaw the continued fortification of their position. The group occupied the remains of a sturdy-looking shop, which they surrounded with barricades thrown together from its contents. And they stood watch in shifts, alert for any hostile presence.

The young hunters kept their cool and waited for the situation to die down, united in the hope that Druncam would dispatch a rescue party now that they had lost contact.

◆

While the hunters had been struggling aboveground, they regained the upper hand once the battle moved into the ruin. None of the monsters near Yonozuka Station had ever posed much of a threat individually, but a tsunami of them crashing in from all sides had been overwhelming. Within the tunnels, however, they could attack only from certain directions and in limited numbers, and so the defenders easily dispatched them.

Many hunters also temporarily joined forces to meet the crisis. And some had come prepared for prolonged combat, packing greater firepower, high-capacity magazines, and more to brave the unknown ruin. Even those who had fled the sudden onslaught found the will to fight once more as their panic subsided. Before long, they saw this as merely another ruin—albeit with a few more monsters than most. Gradually, the surviving hunters lost themselves in their excitement over the untouched remnants of the Old World that surrounded them. They had just escaped disaster, so morale was high, and the relics were plentiful enough to stoke their greed.

Even so, the hunters didn't turn their guns on each other over the loot. They all knew that anyone still alive was a force to be reckoned with, and few of them were eager to fight their recent allies. And most importantly, the ruin was unexplored—if someone beat them to one good spot, they could always hope to find an even better site farther in. Latecomers simply pressed on past those already at work. In this way, the explorers delved ever deeper into the ancient metro station with hardly any infighting to speak of.

At one point, a hunter named Charlés and his team reached a tubular tunnel, roughly thirty meters from wall to wall, which ran beneath the wasteland. A boarding platform hung in midair, supported by a thin, metallic substance. Given its height, the vehicles that had once passed through here had to have been immense—and to have levitated under their own power.

The sheer scale of the place awed Charlés's team as they crossed a suspended passage to the platform. Approaching its edge, they shone their lights into the tunnel. A massive door sealed off the way forward. The sight was breathtaking, yet the hunters frowned and grumbled.

"What is this place? It looks impressive, but I don't see any relics."

“Getting to see things like this is one of the perks of being a hunter, but at the moment I’d rather have something I can sell. What now? Should we give the place a quick once-over?”

“What for? I don’t see any buildings or anything else that might be hiding relics.”

Their lights and flares only revealed more of the tunnel walls. They did find another exit from the platform, but no sign of the relics they sought. So they lingered on the platform, idly debating their next move.

Without warning, a woman appeared. The hunters instantly left off talking and trained their guns on her, so swiftly she had no chance to resist. It was no fluke that the team had made it this far. But the woman was unfazed. She merely smiled pleasantly at them, wearing what looked like a uniform in the style of the Old World.

Charlés studied her, watching to see what she would do. Then his scanner clued him in as to her identity. “A hologram,” he murmured. “A ghost of the Old World!”

As she was only an image, the woman didn’t seem to pose much of a threat, and the hunters relaxed, voicing their speculations.

“Wait, you mean this ruin’s still functional?”

“Even if it is, she can’t be much more than a guide for this area.”

“Welcome to Yonozuka Station,” announced the woman. “This metro station is not active at the current time. Error code D-408237458264...”

The confused hunters waited while she rattled off the interminable error code.

“Welcome to Yonozuka Station. This metro station is not active at the current time. Error code D-937574309326...”

A flicker of comprehension dawned on Charlés and his team.

“This thing’s out of order!”

“Well, maybe that’s for the best. If she did work, she might not think so kindly of us.”

They tried asking a few questions, just in case the woman could lead them to relics, but she merely repeated herself. Their suspicions confirmed, the hunters grimaced.

“Let’s get going. We didn’t come all the way down here just to stare at a babe. We’re hunters, and we’ve got better things to do in a ruin.”

“True enough. Let’s move!”

All at once, the whole area lit up, bright as midday. The startled hunters braced for combat, but nothing else happened. Again they relaxed as the woman droned on, “Welcome to Yonozuka Station. This metro station is not active at the current time. Error code E-49374769264...”

“Why’d the lights come on?” one wondered. “Did any of you guys do anything?”

They were all shaking their heads in denial when the ground beneath them shook.

Then Charlés spotted something. “Hey! The tunnel’s opening!”

Slowly but surely, the massive door had begun to unseal itself. The hunters stared, surprised, yet eager for the treasures that might lie beyond. But when something emerged from the tunnel, the hunters scowled.

“Monsters?! Shit! They’re coming in this way too!”

“Watch out! Those things are no pushovers!”

As the beasts flooded through the opening, something else startled the already-grim hunters. A section of the tunnel wall slid open and disgorged a stream of round security bots, which promptly started blasting laser bullets into the swarm.

“Is that...the ruin’s security system?” one hunter wondered aloud.

“All right!” another cheered. “Go on! Let ’em have it!”

The others joined in rooting for the robots as well-placed laser bullets sent monsters flying. Only Charlés remained silent, with a sour look on his face. He had a bad feeling about this.

Shortly thereafter, his fears proved justified. A metallic sphere emerged from the ceiling and landed on the platform. The machine spun on its vertical axis, sprouting legs to steady itself, and came to a stop with its laser-bullet launcher pointed right at the hunters.

But Charlés had seen this coming. He immediately opened fire on the sphere. It toppled, full of holes. And while it still got off a shot, the beam went far wide of the hunters and struck the tunnel wall. Charlés gave the machine a kick, crumpling its rounded surface and sending it plummeting off the platform. It crashed into the floor and remained still.

The team smiled bitterly. This ruin's security was unmistakably out to purge them as well as the monsters.

"That figures! Let's get out of here!"

They turned and ran as fast as they could, even as more creatures swarmed out of the tunnel and more security bots appeared to combat them.

The hologram woman, now all alone, continued to repeat, "Welcome to Yonozuka Station. This metro station is not active at the current time. Error code F-3495357875894..."

◆

Yumina asked Airi to watch over the sleeping Katsuya, then left with two other hunters to investigate the nearby area. The sounds of fighting, which they had overheard earlier from within their makeshift stronghold, had died down, and although they patrolled the tunnels for a while, they saw no sign of monsters. Escaping the ruin on their own started to seem like a real possibility.

But should they all make a break for it, with the relics they'd found while fortifying their position, or send a small party topside to call Druncam for assistance? Yumina suggested that they rouse Katsuya and run the decision by him, so she and her companions agreed to turn back.

Suddenly, the ruin lit up, catching them off guard. They knew the drill when it came to unforeseen circumstances, though, so they picked up the pace—until they ran into a fresh difficulty.

A wall blocked their route back to their comrades.

“Wh-What should we do, Yumina?” asked one young hunter.

“The only thing we *can* do: search for a way around.” Hearing her companion’s panic, Yumina did her best to sound calm. Then her scanner flashed an alert. “Watch out!”

All three of them took aim in the direction of the approaching threat. But when a spherical robot came into view, rolling quickly down the passage toward them, they couldn’t hide their astonishment. Pegging it as hostile, however, they decided to shoot first and ask questions later.

Although some shots ricocheted off the rounded armor, the trio’s focused fire began dealing damage. But not enough to halt the sphere, which kept hurtling toward them. Sensing that she couldn’t evade its charge, Yumina stopped shooting and sank into a melee combat stance.

Then she took a single step forward and drove her fist into the metal with all her might.

The punch landed slightly off target, but it still had the force of her powered suit behind it—and the robot’s own momentum as well. Yumina’s fist crushed the machine. No longer a sphere, the mangled remains flew up and over her, crashed into the ceiling, and fell.

“Yumina! Are you okay?!”

“Of course not!” she snapped, gritting her teeth and grimacing against the ache in her right hand. “Now get moving! You two go in front!”

“O-Of course!” The ruin’s abrupt illumination and the monster attack had disoriented the other young hunters, but Yumina’s sharp orders shook them out of their confusion, at least for the moment. They obeyed her, taking the lead and hurrying forward.

Yumina followed, swallowing recovery capsules and looking grim.

This arm’s broken, and it won’t heal in a hurry. I guess I’ll just have to put up with it.

The medicine Druncam supplied to its rookies wasn’t cheap, but it didn’t run to a million aurum a pack either. Yumina’s right arm would be in no shape to

fire a gun for a while. That might make her a liability even if they did find their way back—which was far from a given if walls had sealed other passages as well.

So she came to a decision.

“Listen,” she said. “I’m going to try to get outside and call Druncam for a rescue. What about you two? Will you come with me?”

Her companions exchanged uneasy looks. “No,” said one. “I think we’d all better head back to base.”

“You saw that sealed-off tunnel. I’m saying this because I don’t know if we *can* get back.”

“But that goes for reaching the surface too, doesn’t it?”

“That’s right. It’s a question of which one we wander around trying to reach. We can’t stay safe behind our barricades forever now that weird new monsters are showing up, and I say we’d better at least hurry the rescue party along. So, which will it be?”

Yumina looked her companions over and guessed what was going through their minds. They saw her point, but the surface might still be a danger zone, so they’d rather return to Katsuya and the rest of their expedition. On the other hand, they didn’t want Katsuya to chew them out for abandoning Yumina.

“I understand,” she said at last. “Go back to the others and fill them in on the situation. And keep an eye on Katsuya for me when you get back, okay? Don’t let him do anything reckless.”

“Okay. Be careful.” The pair couldn’t completely hide how relieved they were to have this excuse.

With that, Yumina set off on her own. Splitting up seemed better than ordering her companions to join her if they were just going to get cold feet later.

The hunters had exterminated the swarm from the surface, restoring peace to Yonozuka Station for a time, but now the flood of subterranean monsters and

security bots had plunged it into chaos once more. And by closing off passageways, the walls had effectively redrawn the map of the ruin, forcing Yumina to make for the surface by an extremely circuitous route. It would be a bit longer before she would run into Akira’s party with enemies hot on her heels.

Chapter 84: Triage

Yumina had barely finished thanking Akira, Elena, and Sara for saving her from the security bots when she started begging them for more help. It took them some time to calm her down and understand what she was talking about. And since they were already debating whether to accept the emergency job to escort Levin's band of hunters back to the city, the stranded team joined the discussion as well.

When Yumina at last finished recounting the many tribulations that the Druncam contingent had faced since the first swarm's onslaught, Elena gave her a kind smile. "I understand. That must have been awful. All right. We'll start by leaving the ruin together, and then—"

"Hold up!" Levin frantically cut in. "Please tell me we're going straight back to the city as soon as we get clear of this place!"

"Huh? Well..." Elena faltered, caught between two pleading looks.

"Please, Elena!" Yumina cried. "I need your help! You can take down those robots, right? So I'm begging you, help me rescue Katsuya and the others!"

"You've gotta be kidding!" Levin countered. "If you're right and the ruin's crawling with those things, then we ought to get back to the city pronto! Let Druncam come save their own people!"

Elena wavered. On an emotional level, she wanted to help her friend Yumina. But friendship alone hardly justified accepting her request. Giving Yumina a lift back to the city would be one thing, but scouring the ruin to rescue Katsuya's team would be a full-fledged job. Protocol dictated that she go back aboveground and negotiate with Druncam for suitable compensation first.

Furthermore, she was already hunting with Akira and haggling about an emergency job with Levin. Both of their opinions demanded consideration. And Katsuya was just as likely to die while she was trying to talk them around as he would be if negotiations broke down altogether. That was why Yumina was pleading so desperately, as Elena well knew.

Levin saw her hesitate and overreacted. Fearing that she really would set off to rescue the Druncam group and drag his team along, he made a gut-wrenching decision. “You win! I’ll pay the fifty mil, so now we’ve got ourselves a deal! Right?”

“*Can* you pay?” Elena asked, as suspicious as she was surprised. She’d proposed the steep price as a bargaining tool, never expecting the other hunters to actually agree to it. So as her group’s negotiator, she stared hard at Levin, sizing up his sincerity as well as his solvency.

“We’ve been picking up relics here too,” he replied. He was scowling, but spoke earnestly. “We’ll sell those, and if that doesn’t cover it, let us pay the rest in installments. You said that was an option, didn’t you?”

“Hang on, Levin! Are you serious?!” one of his teammates shouted, unable to keep quiet.

“If you don’t like it, make your own way back,” Levin answered grimly. “Them’s the breaks. Are we clear?”

“I...I get that. But still.”

“Hey, I won’t force you—if you back out, then we’ve only got to pay forty mil! In fact, I could get back for only ten mil if I were on my own.” While his comrades exchanged agonized looks, Levin declared, “If anyone else has a problem, speak up. No, scratch that. Just leave your relics and go. The group with guards will carry them—it’s safer that way. Anyone who makes it back to the city alive gets a share of the loot.”

The other four nodded resignedly—convinced, even if they weren’t happy about it. The dead didn’t need money.

Levin gave them a curt nod, then turned back to Yumina. “We’re all agreed. I won’t insist you match our offer, and I don’t know how many buddies you’ve got. But if you want these people to cancel our emergency job and take yours first, then you’d better put your money where your mouth is.”

Yumina’s face twisted in grief. As a hunter, she understood where the man was coming from. But neither could she make a competitive offer, privately or as a member of Druncam. Hunters risked their lives to brave the wasteland, so

asking one to do something for free was tantamount to calling their life worthless. Yumina couldn't come up with any argument likely to sway Elena and her companions.

Inwardly, Elena was agonizing as well. She didn't want to abandon Yumina or her team, but neither could she bring herself to pass up an emergency job worth fifty million, even if it was only a verbal agreement. It might seem admirable to abandon a lucrative contract and go rescue a friend in need gratis, but this particular good deed could easily cost them their lives. The wasteland had no mercy for hunters who stuck with work that didn't pay, as she well knew. So Elena tried to harden her heart, telling herself that she needed money to cure Sara and that she shouldn't force Akira to do charity work.

At that point, Akira casually spoke up. "Fine. I'll track down Katsuya's crew and back them up. Elena and Sara, would you take care of Levin's team?"

They all stared at him in disbelief.

◆

While Elena negotiated, Akira stood by as if it didn't concern him. He thought Katsuya's team had it rough, holed up somewhere in these ancient tunnels, but no more than that. He didn't consider them much different from Levin's group. And while he expected to head straight back to the city, he wouldn't have minded going to rescue the Druncam hunters if Elena decided to. He figured she'd have a good reason for her choice, even if it went over his head. He trusted her judgment.

Or, viewed less charitably, he was dumping the decision on her.

Then Alpha spoke up. *You know, Akira, you could leave Elena and Sara to guard Levin's team while you go to rescue Katsuya's.*

Akira was taken aback. *Huh? What on earth would I wanna do that for?*

If you mean what would you get out of it, that's not important right now. What matters is that you realize you have the option.

What are you getting at?

I'm telling you to make up your own mind for once. Personally, I don't care

whether you save them or let them die. But right now, you're letting Elena make the choice for you.

Well, yeah. I mean, she's basically in charge.

So what? If you keep passing the buck out of apathy, you'll get so used to following orders that you won't be able to take the initiative when it really matters. You can let Elena's decision take precedence over yours if you like, but at least make one first.

Akira made a token effort to think it over. *Well, I guess my vote's for leaving. Why should I go out of my way to help those Druncam guys?*

I see. If that's how you feel, then so be it.

Akira couldn't help suspecting that she could say more if she chose. *What gives, Alpha? Are you trying to say that I* should *go help them?*

Nope. I don't see a problem with you leaving them to die.

"To die"? Yumina said they were dug in, and Druncam will send help once she gets outside and calls for it. They've got a fighting chance, don't they?

Well, the group behind the barricades might. She won't make it, though.

A slight frown creased Akira's face. *Why not?*

Because even if she leaves the ruin with you and calls her syndicate, I doubt she'll accept a ride returning to the city. My guess is that she'll dive right back in to save her friends.

Without meaning to, Akira shifted his gaze to Yumina.

Of course, she could theoretically manage to find them without running into any monsters, Alpha continued, *but I wouldn't exactly call that plausible. She would already be dead if you hadn't stepped in.*

Akira imagined what Yumina would do next and came to the same conclusion as Alpha. His frown deepened. But was it worth protecting her if that meant helping Katsuya? He couldn't give an immediate answer, so he just asked, *Seriously, are you trying to say I should rescue that guy?*

If Alpha said yes, Akira could have used her answer as an excuse. But instead

she said, *Not at all. As I already told you, I don't see a problem with leaving him to die. Although I might add that you would be assisting Elena, Sara, and Yumina—not Katsuya.*

Akira seemed baffled, so she went on. Neither Elena nor Sara truly wanted to abandon Yumina. And they also had their professional relationship with Druncam to consider—turning their backs on the syndicate's hunters might affect their future work, even if they'd had no other choice under the circumstances.

But if Akira went to support Katsuya's team, then the stranded rookies stood a better chance of surviving until help reached them. He would also be able to guard Yumina when she went to their aid (as she almost inevitably would). Thus he could spare Elena and Sara both personal guilt and professional fallout. And putting Katsuya in his debt might also dislodge the chip on the other boy's shoulder where Akira was concerned. So, all told, he did stand to gain *something* from the endeavor.

Oh, and helping a damsel in distress might earn you some good luck, Alpha concluded with an insinuating smile. *Remember how badly things turned out when the last one was taken hostage and you ignored her?*

Yeah, you've got a point. Akira bit back a grimace, remembering all he'd been through beneath Kuzusuhara.

Then, telling himself that he had all the excuses he needed, he casually announced, "Fine. I'll track down Katsuya's crew and back them up. Elena and Sara, would you take care of Levin's team?"

After a moment of stunned silence, Yumina said, "What? Umm... Are you sure?" No one was more shocked than her. Far from looking delighted, her face was a mask of confusion. Even so, she didn't suspect a trap. She was ready to grasp at straws to save her teammates, so she would welcome any help she could get, no matter what motivated it. The fact that Akira seemed to be on good terms with Elena and Sara also eased her suspicions.

"Just so we're clear, I'm gonna run if things get dicey," Akira added. "So I won't take this as a job, and I won't stop to rescue you if I bail. I wanna make sure you understand that up front."

Even that was good enough for Yumina, who bowed happily. “I understand. Thank you!”

Elena and Sara frowned. Sara considered for a moment, then said simply, “Akira, you sure you can handle this?” She *wanted* to ask a lot more—about firepower, ammo reserves, how he planned to get back... There was no end of things she wished to check. But as she was turning down the rescue mission, it didn’t seem right to grill the person undertaking it. So she kept her concern—and her desire for something to assuage it—to a few short words.

Akira chuckled. “I’ll be fine! Like I said, I’m going to cut and run if it gets too dangerous.”

Once again, Elena felt the same impression that she’d sometimes had in Kuzusuhara. Akira, she intuited, had a solid basis for his confidence, even if he couldn’t share it with them. And she was right—Akira assumed that Alpha would step in to stop him if things got risky, and that she would never have suggested the rescue in the first place if he couldn’t handle it.

“All right,” Elena said, with an emphatic edge to her smile. “Take care of them for us. But don’t overdo it! Is that clear?”

“Crystal, ma’am!” Akira grinned back.

The hunters divided into teams and quickly prepared to head off. Akira and Yumina gave Elena and Sara any baggage that would slow them down in the tunnels, taking ammunition in exchange. Levin’s group would carry everyone’s relics to the surface while the women guarded them. Elena and Sara would also contact Druncam once they got out. Yumina could have accompanied them and done it herself, but she didn’t want to waste time. She also feared that a fight would break out if Akira reached Katsuya’s group alone, so she opted to stay with him.

The girl bowed politely to Elena and Sara before setting off back the way she’d come. Akira gave them a nod and then followed her. The women cheerfully watched them go, but their smiles vanished as soon as the pair were out of sight.

“We should get going too,” Elena said. “Let’s make this quick.”

“Yup. You can count on me!” Sara nodded firmly. She could tell that her partner wanted to get the emergency job out of the way so they could return to support their friends. And since haste meant less precise scouting, she tightened her grip on her weapon and grinned, as if to say that she would make up the difference with firepower.

Then, timidly, Levin ventured to Elena, “So, er, since there’ll be one less of you guarding us, do you think you could, uh, cut us a break on the fee for—”

“We’ll think about it, but later.”

“Sure, right.” Levin shut up, cowed by her withering glare.

“Now, let’s move!” Elena commanded, and the remaining hunters set out for the surface.

◆

Yumina advanced deeper into the ruin with Akira, barely pausing to scan for threats. Strictly speaking, she left all their scouting to Akira while she focused on navigation. Not that she actually knew the route to her companions’ refuge, of course. She had spent the time since she’d parted ways with the rest of her patrol running from monsters while searching for an exit, so she only vaguely recalled the way back to their temporary fort. Nevertheless, she did her best to remember as they went.

“Stop,” Akira ordered at one point, and she obeyed. A moment later, her scanner picked up a new reading. Then the beasts it represented rounded a corner, only to be instantly mowed down by Akira.

“Okay, keep going,” he said.

Privately, Yumina couldn’t believe how unruffled he was. His fast, accurate threat detection and the swift precision with which he’d acted on it were enough to mark him as her superior by a wide margin.

He really is capable! she mused. *No wonder Shiori was so wary of him!*

During the confrontation over Lucia, Shiori had more or less abandoned Yumina and her teammates. Yumina knew that it had been a difficult decision for her, made to keep Reina out of a potential shoot-out with Akira, but she

hadn't understood why Shiori felt it necessary. The woman was a better fighter than Yumina, after all, and her colleague Kanae was presumably just as formidable. Yumina had previously chalked that up to Shiori being overprotective of Reina.

Now that she saw Akira in action with her own eyes, however, she realized that Shiori simply hadn't believed they could win.

I can't believe I almost got in a firefight with this guy. Talk about a close call. And way to go, past me! But even as she patted herself on the back for negotiating her way out of that conflict, a faint worry stirred in her. *As nice as it is to have someone with his skills on my side, I hope bringing him to Katsuya doesn't blow up in my face. I'd better be careful.* Privately, she resolved to mediate between the two boys for all she was worth.

Akira called out, "What's up?"

"Oh, nothing," Yumina replied, realizing that she had stopped moving while lost in thought. To distract his attention, she pulled out her terminal and called up a map. "Where do you think we are now, roughly?"

Before they'd parted ways, Elena had shared her map data. Unlike Katsuya's terminal, Yumina's lacked a mapping function. So she'd been stuck wandering the ruins since yesterday, unable to even track her current position.

"About here," Akira answered, pointing. His casual certainty surprised Yumina, although she didn't let it show. She hadn't seen him using anything like an automapper during their time together, so she'd assumed he didn't have one either. And thanks to her training at Druncam, she appreciated how difficult it was to keep an accurate idea of one's location in a labyrinthine ruin while fighting intermittent battles.

"Okay," she said slowly. "In that case, I think the rest of my team is probably over here."

"Then you must've really taken the long way around. Were there *that* many walls in the way?"

"I also had to hide or run from monsters. Now we can kill them instead, so we just need to hope that the passages are usable."

“Yeah. We won’t know until we check them out ourselves, so let’s get moving.”

“Yes.” Yumina put her terminal away and readied her weapon. As she did so, Akira noticed that her injured arm moved sluggishly.

“Is something wrong with your right hand?”

“Hm? Oh, this? I hurt it, but not too badly.”

“Since it’s still not better, I’m guessing you ran out of meds.”

“No. I took some, but I’ve been a bit too hard on the arm since, so it didn’t heal completely.”

Akira fished out his own medicine and handed it to Yumina. “Use these.”

“Are you sure? They look awfully expensive.”

“Sorry, but I don’t want any more dead weight than I can help.” Akira cracked a grin to show he meant the remark in good fun, and Yumina smiled back.

“In that case, I’ll help myself. Thanks!” No sooner did she take a dose of the capsules than the constant ache in her right hand finally subsided. The lingering sense that something was a bit off with her arm soon followed. Flexing, she found it in perfect condition.

“This is some amazing medicine you’ve got,” she said, nonplussed. “It must have cost a fortune, right?”

Akira nodded gravely. “It sure did, but there’s no point saving money if it gets me killed.”

“Should I, um, pay you back later?”

“Don’t bother. Like I said, I’m not doing this as a job, so I won’t bill you for expenses. We’d never get anywhere if I started haggling over every little thing. The bullets I just used weren’t cheap either, especially with the high-capacity mag I’ve got in this thing.”

“All right.” Yumina bobbed her head, seeing his point. “Let’s just say I owe you one, then.”

“You do that. And return the favor to Elena and Sara. They’ve done a lot for

me, and I'd appreciate it if you could start paying down what I owe." Akira sighed.

Yumina chuckled. "Sure thing. Let's keep going!" With her newly recovered arm, she was closer to her peak fighting shape, so she hurried ahead in high spirits.

◆

Elena and Sara led Levin and his team to surface without incident. They ran into monsters several times, but never many at once, so the battles only served to show their clients what they were paying for.

Once outside, they swiftly departed Yonozuka Station and made their way back toward Kugamayama. The women rode in their truck, while Levin's group accompanied the relics in their collapsible trailer. Elena and Sara also registered the emergency job and contacted Druncam on the drive.

About a third of the way back to the city, they hit the brakes.

"Hey, what are you stopping here for?" Levin groused from the trailer.

"So we can get you back to the city in one piece," Elena replied. "Now be patient for a moment. They've arrived."

A massive, heavily armed truck approached, accompanied by a guard of escort vehicles. The convoy pulled up beside Elena and Sara, and the hunter in charge climbed out.

"You Elena?" he asked. "I'm Kurosawa, the delivery guy for Taunted Services. Is that trailer the cargo?"

"Yes," Elena replied. "The people as well as the relics. I'd like you to deliver the people to the city and hold on to the relics for safekeeping."

"You got it. Hey! Load 'er up!" Kurosawa barked, and his subordinates began unloading the women's trailer.

Hunters could earn their livings in many different ways, and shuttling all manner of goods and people between the cities and the ruins was one of them. Merely getting to a distant site and hauling relics back from it could be serious work, but small teams of hunters couldn't always spare someone to wait

outside the ruin and guarantee them a ride home. And some weren't eager to split a rich find with someone who had done nothing but stand by, even if they were a teammate. Such conditions created a demand for shipping specialists. The services of these transporters, as they were called, were so sought after that some hunters made a whole career out of providing them.

Of course, no one wanted a middle man running off with their relics, so trust was an essential qualification for the job. And while Kurosawa wasn't a full-time transporter, he was a trustworthy hunter.

"You must be on your way back from that ruin everyone's talking about," he said offhandedly. "What's it like over there?"

"That info's worth money. How much will you pay?" Elena replied with a sly smile. "Or so I'd like to say, but we don't have time to haggle. Buy your news off that guy." She pointed to Levin.

The latter was still reeling from the convoy's sudden arrival, but he took this opening to say, "Hey, remember what we said about giving us a discount on the escort fee?"

"I haven't forgotten. To make up for having one less guard on the way here, you'll have top-notch protection the rest of the way."

"Oh, for— Come *on*!"

"Try selling these guys all you know about that ruin so you can cover your losses. We're in a hurry, so we'll keep our mouths shut for now. Bye!" Elena returned to her truck, and she and Sara sped off back toward Yonozuka Station.

Kurosawa and the now stranded Levin looked at each other.

"Well," the transporter said, "I guess I'll be asking you a bunch of questions on the drive. If your info's good, I'll make it worth your while." The confusion of reports concerning Yonozuka Station had cratered faith in their reliability, so the word of hunters who had just returned from the ruin would fetch a respectable price.

"Th-Thanks."

Kurosawa crammed the last of his cargo—Levin's team—into the bed of his

truck, then ordered his people to move out.

◆

Yumina and Akira were pressing onward when they came upon a group of hunters locked in combat with monsters. They pitched in and helped eliminate the threat.

“Thanks,” said Charlés, the group’s leader. Then he gave Yumina a questioning look. “Hang on, are you with Druncam?”

“Yes,” she replied. “I am, but he’s not.”

“Is your name Yumina, by any chance?”

“That’s right,” Yumina answered, surprised.

“Well, damn.” Charlés looked ready to tear his hair out. “He went off in completely the wrong direction! Talk about rotten luck.”

“Or maybe he took that story seriously,” another hunter chimed in.

“No way! That can’t be it. No one’s *that* naive.”

Yumina felt a sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach. She hesitated, nervous about what she might hear, but she had to know. “Excuse me, who are you talking about? Another Druncam hunter? Is he in trouble?”

“Yeah, we ran into someone named Katsuya,” Charlés replied. “He said he was looking for a teammate who got separated, and that her name was Yumina. I’m guessing that’s you?”

Yumina suddenly scowled. “That idiot! What the hell does he think he’s doing?!” She’d left Katsuya with the others because she’d counted on him to stay put and play it safe to protect them, and this bombshell had her at her wit’s end. “Do you know where he is now?!”

“Only that he went the opposite direction from us. Sorry.”

“Got it! Thank you very much! Come on, Akira! We’ve got no time to lose!”

“Wait a sec,” Akira said just as Yumina was about to dash off. Then he pulled out his terminal and showed Charlés their map. “I’m pretty sure this is where we are now. Could you show me where you met this Katsuya guy?”

“Huh? Hey, is that a map of this ruin? How’d you get one so detailed?!” Charlés couldn’t believe that anyone had charted the station so thoroughly in the short time since its supposed discovery. But before he could pry further, a fiery Yumina interrupted.

“Excuse me, but that can wait! Please tell us where you saw Katsuya!”

“O-Okay, sure. I think it was, er...” Charlés produced his own terminal and checked his movement log against the map. Then he pointed beyond its edge to an area that Elena hadn’t surveyed. “Around here, probably. And then I think Katsuya went this way.” He gestured even farther outside the mapped area.

“Thank you so much! Akira, let’s—”

“Like I said, cool it for a second,” Akira cut in as Yumina prepared to race off for a second time. She was clearly agitated, and he wanted her calm. “We just bumped into people who might actually know something. Let’s hear what they can tell us, then use that info to search without losing our heads. We’ll have an easier time finding Katsuya that way, don’t you think?”

“Y-You’re right.” Yumina took several deep breaths, realizing that her haste was unproductive, and that she would need a cool head if she wanted to rescue Katsuya. “Sorry. I’m calm now.” After a moment, she allowed herself to grumble, “Honestly, he’s always such a handful!” and then turned her attention to more constructive tasks.

Once her mind was clear and she began to view this exchange as a kind of negotiation, a certain phrase stuck out to her. “Excuse me, what did you mean earlier, when you mentioned ‘taking that story seriously’? Does that have anything to do with Katsuya?”

Charlés and his team exchanged glances, then nodded, deciding that the pair’s assistance in their earlier battle was worth at least that much. Charlés began speaking for them. “Believe it or not, we found a ghost of the Old World.”

He described the massive tunnel where they’d encountered the holographic woman, the monsters that had swarmed out of it, and the robots—presumably the ruin’s security—that had attacked beasts and hunters alike. Then he revealed how he had given the same account to Katsuya. Charlés’s group had

met him in the middle of a fight and, as thanks for his help, warned him of the danger. But Katsuya had seemed fascinated by the very place they'd told him to avoid.

"That's a neat story," Akira cut in, confused. "But if he took it seriously, wouldn't he steer clear of that death trap? What makes you think he might've gone there?"

"Well, you see, we got to chatting about ghosts of the Old World..." The hunters had idly speculated that the hologram of a woman formed a part of the ruin's systems, and that she had originally been capable of answering questions. She hadn't responded to theirs, but that could have been because her answers only appeared in augmented reality or because the ruin had only just come online and she'd needed a while to boot up fully.

So now that plenty of time had passed, someone with the right AR rig might be able to get some sense out of her. And if the woman was the station's guidance system, she could be equipped to find lost children—or Katsuya's missing teammate. It might even be possible to strike a deal with her so that the security bots would stop attacking hunters.

"Anyway, the woman is back in that tunnel I told you about, which I bet is still crawling with monsters," Charlés concluded. "Katsuya should know that too, so I doubt he went that way."

Yumina looked grim. She had nothing definite to go on, but her long experience with Katsuya told her that he had probably done just that. "I hate to ask this, but would you tell us how to get there?"

She bowed sincerely, but Charlés balked. To give her the exact location, he would need to either lead her there himself or turn over to her the movement logs of his time in the ruin. No one on his team wanted to risk going anywhere near where the monsters and the security bots were probably still fighting. And their movement logs came from their automapper. Considering that this ruin was virtually uncharted, that data was worth too much for any hunter to just give away, no matter how much they sympathized with Yumina's plight.

Then Akira offered to trade his own map for theirs. And since his data was more valuable, Charlés leaped at the chance.

But Yumina, who understood what he was giving up, couldn't hide her shock. "Um, Akira, are you really sure you want to do this?"

"No. So make sure you return the favor to Elena and Sara later." Akira believed that he really should have gotten the women's permission before striking this deal. But he couldn't ask them now, it was an emergency, and he was the one who had led them to this ruin in the first place. He figured that would be just barely enough to plead his case to them.

Yumina didn't know all of this, but she could tell that he would rather not have crossed this line. "I understand," she said earnestly. "I'll apologize to them later too."

"Thanks. Now, let's make sure we're on the same page. If Katsuya is in this place with the hologram, are you serious about going in after him? Really dead set?"

The question hung in the air for a moment. Then Yumina answered, "Yes, I am. Please, Akira! Help me!"

She realized that she was telling him to charge into nearly certain death with her for the sake of someone he'd once almost tried to kill, so she couldn't blame him if he refused. And she remembered that he'd already declared his intention to leave her and flee if things got dangerous. For all these reasons, she put her whole heart into her appeal.

"All right," Akira said. "Let's go."

His willingness caught Yumina so off guard that she forgot to feel grateful at first. But then she smiled. "Thank you! What are we waiting for?"

Each harboring their own feelings, the two of them hurried on toward their new destination.

The other hunters looked vaguely impressed as they watched the pair go.

"That guy's got good friends," Charlés mused.

"Sorry I don't measure up," joked one of his companions.

"Don't put yourself down." Charlés laughed. "Still, don't you think there was

something special about that Katsuya kid?”

“I know what you mean, although I can’t quite put my finger on it. He was good in a fight, but it was more than that. He had something, although I’ll be damned if I could tell you what it was.”

They all nodded their heads in agreement.

“Maybe that’s why he attracts such good teammates. It takes more than skill to make people care about you like that.”

“I know what you mean. Charismatic, I guess you’d call him. Although no one’d ever use that word to describe any of us.”

Charlés and his companions, all skilled enough hunters to keep exploring for relics under these perilous circumstances, found themselves singing Katsuya’s praises for reasons that none of them could quite explain.

◆

Katsuya bolted awake, roused by cries for help—cries so innumerable that they threatened to crush him. The voices faded as he opened his eyes, and he realized that they had been just a bad dream.

“Again?” he muttered, rising from the floor of the makeshift fort and letting out a long breath.

“Are you okay, Katsuya?” Airi asked worriedly from beside him.

“Yeah, I’m fine. Oversleeping gave me weird dreams, is all. I guess I should’ve ended my break,” he answered, forcing a cheery smile. “How come it’s so bright?”

“The lights came on all of a sudden.”

“O-Oh, really?” Katsuya looked around for Yumina to supplement Airi’s all-too-concise explanation. He could see his comrades standing guard, collecting relics, and resting in shifts, but she was not among them. “Airi, where’s Yumina?”

“Checking on things outside.”

“Oh, okay.” Katsuya didn’t see anything strange about Yumina volunteering to

scout the ruin. Keeping tabs on the situation outside was key to securing this camp—and to escaping the station, if it came to that. Yet something about Airi's expression unnerved him. So, praying that he was wrong, he asked gravely, "Airi, how long has Yumina been gone?"

"About six hours," she admitted.

Katsuya suddenly scowled.

After questioning his other colleagues and getting up to speed, Katsuya made up his mind.

"Airi, I'm going to look for Yumina."

"I'm ready."

Seeing her determination, he looked stern and just a little sad. "No, I'm going alone. I want you to stay here and protect everyone."

Airi tried to insist, but before she could get the words out, Katsuya laid his hands on her shoulders. "Please. Do this for me."

Airi couldn't refuse a request in this earnest, almost anguished tone. If he'd asked her to come with him, she would have followed into the very jaws of death. But she couldn't forcibly prevent him from going himself. That was where she drew the line. She couldn't bring herself to do anything that Katsuya would dislike, or that would make him dislike her. All she could do was nod.

"I'm sorry," Katsuya said. "Look after the others for me. Even without me around, you should all be fine as long as you stay here. Oh, and I can make it back on my own, so if Yumina returns before I do, tell her that she doesn't need to go looking for me."

"All right."

Seeing that Airi looked even more distraught than he felt, Katsuya flashed a bright smile and gave her a loose hug to lift her spirits. "Don't worry! I'll come back, and so will Yumina. Then we'll all go home together. But I need you to hold down the fort here to make that happen. I'm sure it won't be easy, but I know you can do it. I'm counting on you, okay?"

Still wrapped in Katsuya's embrace, Airi gave a firm nod. "You'd better come back."

"Of course I will." With that, Katsuya released her, flashed his best confident grin, and left the makeshift fort under the eyes of his fellow hunters.

Once he'd gone far enough that he was sure they couldn't see him, though, his smile gave way to a look of grim determination.

"Yumina!" he shouted. "Please be safe!"

He would never abandon a friend, he told himself. He hadn't really chosen to fail one earlier—or if he had, he would never repeat that mistake. With that desperate resolution in his heart, he raced on into the warren of passages.

Airi saw Katsuya off, determined in spite of her sorrow. Once he was gone, however, another young hunter asked, "Was letting him go alone really a good idea? Maybe we should have tagged along after all."

"Katsuya's orders," Airi replied. "We stay here."

"I know that's what he said, but are you sure?"

Underlying these doubts was a subconscious sense that they would be safer with Katsuya around if anything went wrong. Airi was no more aware of that than the hunter who had spoken, but the suggestion went against the orders that Katsuya had begged her so desperately to follow, and that was all she needed to know. With an almost frighteningly intense glare, she said, "If you leave without orders, I'll crush you."

"F-Fine. You win." The rookie backed down, daunted by Airi's intensity.

She had stopped their forces from splintering further and maintained the safety of their camp.

◆

Katsuya ran through the ruin, looking for Yumina. He ran into monsters more than once, but he simply obliterated them all.

He was in such perfect form that he even scared himself. Somehow, he knew where his enemies were and what they were doing—and when he shot at

them, his perfectly placed bullets brought them down in a flash. He was so focused that time actually seemed to slow down.

All this confused Katsuya, but it also made sense to him. In a way, he had expected it.

Was I right? he wondered. *Is that what's going on?* He had recently begun to notice that he was performing better solo, both in training and in combat. That was the real reason he had told Airi to stay behind, even though common sense dictated that he would be better off with her added firepower. Right now, he was so completely in the zone that he expected he'd get better results alone.

Katsuya had more than his fair share of questions about this turn of events, but he chose to ignore them for the present. Moving through the ruins in a large group would only attract unwanted attention, so he wouldn't question anything that helped him rescue Yumina with minimal numbers and maximum efficiency. He could worry about himself after she was safe.

"Yumina, where are you?!"

He wasn't likely to find her by scouring the vast ruin at random. The station offered a fair number of places to hide from monsters, but a distress signal might still attract hostile machines. If Yumina had turned off her comms to avoid detection, she would be even harder to find. But Katsuya had a lead to follow.

"Damn it! Where is she?! *Which one* is she?!"

He could sense the general direction of people in distress. So he let these intuitions guide his dash through the ruin, hoping that one of them would lead him to Yumina. But although he saved many people, she was not among them. And since he couldn't take the people he met with him, he just told them where to find his team's camp and then hurried on to the next cry for help.

He still couldn't find Yumina. But he couldn't bring himself to believe she was dead, so he kept searching. On his way, he came across a group of hunters locked in combat with monsters. They didn't ask for help, but he gave them a hand anyway. Then he asked if they'd seen her.

He didn't get the answer he'd been hoping for. They did, however, tell him

about a ghost of the Old World—a hologram of a woman that they'd found deep in the ruin. And they added a warning that the place was dangerous. Katsuya thanked them and returned to his search—but with no more success than before.

Even as he started to panic, Katsuya felt strangely certain that Yumina was still alive. He just couldn't find her. What he failed to realize was that Yumina didn't want his help—she wanted to help *him*. So no matter how many silent distress calls he chased down, none would ever lead him to her.

As his desperation mounted, he subconsciously began to wish for another solution. Before he knew it, he was moving toward the holographic woman. Reaching her would put an end to all his problems. It was the only way. So, never questioning the logic of his newfound conviction, he steeled himself and broke into a run.

Chapter 85: The Trials Continue

Deep within the Yonozuka Station Ruins, a hologram of a woman looked out over a deserted boarding platform at the edge of a colossal tunnel. She smiled as she kept repeating much the same message as before.

“Welcome to Yonozuka Station. This metro station is not active at the current time. Error code G-5734957398750...”

All around her, the ruin’s security robots and the monsters swarming into it were locked in brutal combat. A spherical machine concentrated a barrage of laser bullets on its foes, charring them whole, until a titanic reptile opened its jaws wide and tore into the robot. Moments later, more laser bullets rained down, mingled with shells from insects that had turrets sprouting from their bodies. Even a stray shot from this battle could put an end to the average hunter.

Here lay the source of the monsters now roaming the ruin.

Katsuya watched them clash from a passage abutting the tunnel. “Wow,” he murmured, face taut with alarm. “No wonder they warned me to steer clear!” He carefully inspected the platform and caught sight of the woman. “That must be her! Now I just need to get over there.”

Easier said than done, even for Katsuya. The journey required him to first cross the bridge-like passage to the platform, then run along the platform to the woman. The entire way was crawling with monsters and exposed to fire from the tunnel.

He hesitated for a moment, then steeled himself. He *knew* he could make it now. He was on a roll today, and here was the key to saving everyone!

“Okay! Here goes nothing!” Raising his rifle, he dashed out of cover and into the connecting passage. The monsters reacted swiftly, but he was faster, downing them with a shower of bullets as he ran past. The Old World construction held firm as he kicked off it with suit-enhanced strength, gaining speed. He sped onto the platform in high spirits, convinced that he could make

it all the way—

Vertigo hit him, and he faltered, just for a moment. Still, he was in the zone. He would recover in no time, surely—

But he couldn't recover. The trivial loss of balance quickly worsened.

"What?!"

Before he knew it, he was down on one knee—just as a creature like an oversized gecko scaled the slender piers of the connecting bridge. The beast set upon him at once, as if it had been planning to exploit his moment of shock.

Yet Katsuya instinctively turned his rifle on it and fought back. A point-blank burst of gunfire shredded the reptile even as it charged.

He'd beaten it, but the frown creasing his face only deepened. His aim had been off, missing the vulnerable point that would have ended the monster's life instantly. This dizzy spell had cost him the flawless performance that had carried him this far.

What happened?! he asked himself. *Am I more exhausted than I realized?! Have I hit my limit?! Damn it! Why* now*?!*

But he couldn't turn back, not when he was so close! So he picked himself up and ran on. Yet his goal didn't feel as near as he'd thought. Where moments ago his body had felt incredibly agile, it now seemed sluggish. He'd almost believed that time had been flowing a fraction slower than usual—now it sped up without warning, making his enemies seem that much faster. With no chance to aim, he had to fire in longer bursts. His efficiency dropped, drawing out each kill, slowly whittling away his room to maneuver.

Despite it all, he kept going, spurring himself on as he closed in on the holographic woman.

"I won't go out like this! I'm almost there!" he screamed. He punched aside a machine dog whose fleshy bits had rotted away, booted a rolled-up caterpillar out of his path, and gunned down a metallic sphere before it could launch a laser bullet at him. Slowly but steadily he advanced, leaving his enemies' remains in his wake. He was coming up on his destination—and his limits.

He was there! As Katsuya stood in front of her, the hologram of a woman in an Old World uniform droned on as before. “Welcome to Yonozuka Station. This metro station is not active at the current time. Error code G-595347598389...”

“Tell me where Yumina is!” Katsuya yelled. “Open all the walls blocking the hallways! Close off this tunnel! Set the security bots to prioritize monsters! Now!”

The woman answered only, “Welcome to Yonozuka Station. This metro station is not active at the current time. Error code G-595348543543...”

A soft “Huh?” escaped Katsuya’s lips. But not in surprise at her response. “Why?” he murmured, his face a mask of bewilderment. “*Why did I think this would work?*”



He felt stunned that he had never questioned this obviously crazy plan when he could have spotted the flaws in it with even a moment’s reflection. Too late

now for regrets, though. When a nearby monster lunged at Katsuya, he snapped out of his daze and shot it.

His wits about him once more, he saw clearly that he had no hope. His face twisted in fresh despair. Monsters were flooding both the platform and the connecting passage. To go back the way he'd come, he would need to fight through them in his current clumsy state. *Impossible*, his own exceptional talent pronounced heartlessly.

A massive beast sprang at Katsuya. As he took aim, knowing all the while that his gun wouldn't save him, he wondered how something so large had even reached the platform. With a twisted, bitter grin on his face, he muttered, "Damn it all."

Blam! The creature's head exploded, and the rest of its now-lifeless body tumbled to the floor. Katsuya gaped, well aware that his own bullets didn't pack that kind of punch. As he grasped about for an explanation, a familiar voice shouted, "There he is! Katsuya!"

He turned and saw Yumina at the end of another connecting passage. She looked more angry than pleased to have found him. And beside her stood Akira, whose CWH proprietary round had just decapitated the monster.

◆

After parting ways with Charlés and his team, Akira and Yumina headed for the tunnel with the holographic woman, where they had reason to believe Katsuya might be. While Yumina single-mindedly rushed ahead, Akira handled almost everything else, from identifying threats to taking them down. Naturally, that was a lot to shoulder, but he bore it well thanks to Alpha's support. Keeping an eye on him as they moved, Yumina decided to speed up, until she was practically running.

No matter the rush, dashing straight through a monster-infested ruin was suicidal. A threat simply lurking in an alcove or around a corner could prove fatal. And as it happened, they ran into monsters more than once. Yet Yumina barely had to break stride as she sped past them—all thanks to Akira. She hurried on, marveling at the accuracy of his tracking and the precision of his strikes. Yumina knew that she was making her companion do the lion's share of

the work. But she told herself that if she wanted to save Katsuya, she had better presume on Akira's generosity for now.

And Akira lived up to her expectations, destroying every threat so swiftly and unerringly that she never had to stop. Alpha alerted him to where the monsters would be, and he planted a bullet in each one's most vulnerable spot as soon as it came into range. Naturally, such maneuvers were beyond his own ability—Alpha half forced them by controlling his suit. His body strained as he struggled to keep up. Already every fiber of his being was crying out in pain, although he quieted them briefly with small doses of medicine.

In a way, Akira was burning through costly recovery capsules purely for movement speed. Even he thought it was kind of wasteful. But Alpha didn't stop him, so he decided that their haste had to be worth it and kept going. (Alpha would have told him to stop if he had asked her, but she couldn't take the initiative.)

At last, they reached the colossal tunnel. Alpha had already warned Akira to reload his anti-materiel rifle with proprietary cartridges, and he had slotted a new high-capacity magazine into his minigun as well. Now she instructed him to take a shot. He promptly raised his rifle and sniped the monster bearing down on Katsuya. (Her order proved that Alpha had already known what was taking place in the tunnel, but Akira didn't register how odd it was. He was so used to her superior knowledge that he didn't stop to question it.)

Yumina looked where Akira had just shot and spotted Katsuya. "There he is!" she shouted, unable to keep her voice level. "Katsuya!"

"He's really here!" Akira said, startled. "Getting all this way on his own can't have been easy."

"What in the world was he thinking?!"

"Go get him! I'll cover you from here, but I won't wait long." Akira hefted his DVTS and began mowing down the monsters in the passage and on the platform. He also shot some of the beasts climbing up for good measure. Although he had a large, full magazine to work with, sustained minigun fire would empty it all too soon. Yet nothing else could hold the monsters swarming out of the tunnel at bay.

Akira was right—Yumina didn't have much time. No sooner had this dawned on her than she broke into a run, sprinting through the passage and across the platform as fast as her legs would carry her. She knew that monsters would target her too, but she ignored them in her mad dash, trusting Akira to handle them. Bullets struck all around her and sliced through the air ahead, yet their crack and whizz failed to daunt her. She masked her fear with a look that bordered on rage, keeping her spirits up as she charged on.

The sight of her jarred Katsuya out of his confusion. He was about to shout at Yumina to turn back for her own safety when his scanner enlarged her—as the object of his attention—in his view. Despite everything, he flinched when he saw her expression. He'd barely recovered before Yumina was upon him.

"What do you think you're *doing*?!" she demanded. "Don't just stand there—run! Oh, are you too badly hurt?! Here, I'll drag you back!"

"O-Okay" was the only answer Katsuya could manage. He didn't mean that he was in no shape to run, but she grabbed hold of him and started roughly hauling him back the way she'd come. "Wait! I can run on my own!"

Yumina neither stopped nor let go—she had no time to waste on further questions. But she paused briefly when she felt the floor sway under her, and that gave Katsuya just enough time to regain his balance.

She darted a look around, fearing that the platform was collapsing. Then she spotted the actual cause—the great door had begun to rumble shut.

"The tunnel! Katsuya, what did you do?!"

"M-Me?" Katsuya asked, once again nonplussed. "No, I didn't— I couldn't— Wait, *did* I do that?"

As Yumina was beginning to feel suspicious, a burst of fire—from Akira—strafed the ground nearby. When they jerked their heads to look his way, he motioned for them to get a move on. Katsuya took off running before Yumina started dragging him again, and she followed close behind.

◆

Just a short time earlier, before the tunnel doors began to shut, the holographic woman responded to a visitor for the first time since her activation.

Alpha stood before her, although in a form not even Akira could see. She existed only as data in the sensors of the holographic projector.

Do it, she said before vanishing.

Only then did the tunnel begin to reseal itself.

◆

Katsuya and Yumina joined Akira just as he ejected an empty magazine from his minigun and slotted a new one into place—a testament to the sheer number of bullets he had fired in this short time. The group immediately retreated from the tunnel.

Once they'd gone far enough to risk a quick breather, Katsuya turned to Akira with a mixture of distrust and confusion. "Why did you save me?"

"I wasn't trying to," Akira said, annoyed.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Oh, for the love of— Save it for later!" Yumina snapped, breaking the sudden tension between the boys. "Katsuya, what shape are you in? Pretty bad? And be honest—we're not out of the woods yet, so I don't want your silly pride confusing things."

Seeing that she was serious, Katsuya said honestly, "I'm in rough shape, but I can fight."

"Okay! Akira, I hate to ask this, but could you spare more of that medicine? You'd rather have another fighter on our team too, wouldn't you?"

"Yumina," Katsuya protested, "I've still got my own meds for—"

"Akira's are higher-end and faster-acting than ours," Yumina interrupted, overriding him. Akira looked unwilling, but she bowed earnestly to him. "Please!"

Akira sighed and handed her the whole pack.

She took it and poured the capsules out onto Katsuya's palm. "Just take it," she said before he could argue. "If you make a fuss, I'll jam those meds down your throat myself!"

Now it was Katsuya's turn to sigh. He swallowed the capsules with an air of resignation, and their effects were immediate. His pain vanished along with his fatigue, and he almost felt as if strength was surging through his body.

Under normal circumstances, he would have happily thanked anyone for such a gift. But these meds came from Akira, and the unfortunate history between the two left him feeling more stubborn than grateful.

"I'll pay you for what I took. How much?" he demanded with a slight edge to his voice, as if to say that he would never place himself in the other boy's debt.

"I won't put a price tag on a few pills from an open pack," Akira replied just as gruffly. "Working out how much the dose you took was worth would be a pain in the ass, anyway."

"Then I'll pay for the whole pack. How much?"

"Really? It's two million aurum."

"*H-How* much?!" Yumina spluttered before Katsuya could respond.

"I mean, they *are* on par with Old World meds," Akira said. "Hard to complain if they cost as much too."

"W-Well, yes, they were effective, but..."

The price gave Katsuya pause as well, even as worked up as he was from his tit for tat with Akira. But now it sounded like Yumina had used the meds too, and anyway he still had his pride. He couldn't bring himself to retract his offer. Yet paying two million aurum wouldn't be much easier. His natural next step would have been to question if Akira was overcharging him.

But then Akira added offhandedly, "You don't have to give me the money. Just keep the pack and buy me another one like it later."

Now, doubting the medicine's value was pointless. Glancing nervously at the package, Katsuya rallied the last of his pride and said, "F-Fine by me."

Yumina sighed openly. Katsuya tried to force a smile, but it came off a bit strained.

◆

By the time the three of them returned to the Druncam camp, the situation there had taken a turn for the better. Those hunters who Katsuya had rescued had gathered here, and Airi had let them join her and the other rookies behind their makeshift barricades, figuring that Yumina and Katsuya would have done the same. Other groups had arrived as well, including Charlés and his team. Eager to make the most of any rest spot in the ruin, they had offered their firepower to the defenders in exchange for admission.

And communications with the surface were back online. Elena and Sara had returned to Yonozuka Station, raised their comms equipment's output to the maximum, and directed the signal downward, using their map to estimate the location of the Druncam stronghold. The young hunters had managed to catch this open transmission and send one of their own in return, establishing a conversation. Then, using the women's truck as a relay, they had made contact with Druncam. Learning that a rescue party from the syndicate would arrive shortly had restored the rookies' morale, and they welcomed Katsuya back with exuberance.

Katsuya, Yumina, and Akira also shared their knowledge with the camp. All present cheered when they learned that the great tunnel had resealed itself, stemming the flow of fresh monsters, and that the partitions blocking the passages had lifted as well.

Once everyone had brought each other up to speed and knew how things stood in the ruins, it was time for action. Some planned to resume their relic hunt, while others preferred to leave the ruin at once. Katsuya, his teammates, and Akira were in the latter camp.

◆

Elena and Sara parked their truck over Yonozuka Station and settled in to wait for Akira. When he wearily staggered up, they greeted him with sympathetic grins.

"Good work down there," Elena said. "It must have been brutal, if your looks are anything to go by."

Akira had already given them a brief rundown of his adventures from the Druncam camp, but seeing how exhausted he was up close gave them a new

appreciation of the hardships he'd been through.

"Yes," he replied, barely managing a strained smile of his own. "It took a lot out of me."

Sara laughed and gestured reverently to the back seat. "You're welcome to rest here, if it pleases you."

"How thoughtful of you." Akira laughed too, then set down his things and stretched lightly. "So, Elena, what's the plan? I heard you were going to stay and act as a relay until reinforcements from Druncam get here, but then what?"

"We were thinking that we'd head home once someone takes over for us. Or were you hoping to do a little more relic hunting? We sent our finds on ahead to the city, so we have room in the truck."

"No, I think I'll pass." Akira pulled a face and shook his head, making both women chuckle.

"I'm not surprised. Take it easy, now."

◆

The first thing Katsuya's team did once they returned to the surface was to right the overturned Druncam vehicles, checking whether they still ran and unloading supplies. That done, they had nothing much to occupy themselves except standing by until help arrived. And their time underground hadn't been exactly restful, so they took breaks in shifts.

Only Katsuya geared up and explored the surface. To his companions, he explained that he was making up for the long sleep they'd let him take down in the ruin. In truth, however, he needed a task to distract himself with. He watched his comrades celebrate their successful escape, and he shared their joy and relief. But the moment he relaxed, thoughts of those he'd failed to save swelled within him.

Down in the tunnels, he'd been able to ignore them in favor of more pressing demands on his attention. But that was no longer an option. The simple fact that his team had suffered casualties was enough to make him brood on his own powerlessness. And this time, his regret at abandoning a comrade was more than he could bear while resting in silence. In a sense, Katsuya was

running away. So although he had made no conscious decision, he found his feet carrying him away from the rest of the group.

A while into this wordless expedition, he got a call from Yumina, who was resting in the vehicles.

“What’s up?” he asked. “Is anything wrong?”

“I only called because my scanner shows you getting a little too far from the rest of us.”

He took a moment to process that. “Am I really that far out?”

“You are. Katsuya, don’t you think it’s time you returned to the group?”

“No, I’ll keep going a little longer. Don’t worry, there are no monsters out here.” Katsuya made an effort to sound cheerful, but Yumina saw through his act.

“Come back,” she said more firmly, although still with a note of concern. “Otherwise, I’ll go join you.”

“Really, I’m fine! And you’ve barely slept since yesterday, while I got plenty of rest. Now it’s your turn to relax.”

“Either you come back, or I go out there. Those are your only options. Pick one.”

Katsuya couldn’t answer.

After a brief silence, Yumina chose for him. “I guess I’ll join you, then. Wait for me.” Then she hung up.

Katsuya let out a long sigh. “I can’t save my friends, *and* I make them worry. What the hell is wrong with me?” His head drooped, weighed down by care for his comrades.

Soon, he could see Yumina and Airi not far off. He gave them an exaggerated wave, as if to say that he was fine and they had nothing to worry about. He was just about to greet them with a smile when he felt the ground shake under him. Even as he paused to wonder, the earth fell away under the girls’ feet. They could do nothing but fall into the massive sinkhole.

“Yumina! Airi!” Katsuya cried, trying instinctively to run to them. But his feet refused to obey. They were screaming at him to leap back before the collapse reached his footing too. The advance on future skill that he’d demanded dispassionately told him that his friends were beyond help, and that he would be too unless he left them and ran.

Screw that! he yelled back at the warning. Unleashing his extraordinary potential had given him the ability to analyze the situation calmly and precisely. But if that skill made him someone who could see abandoning his teammates as the best course of action, then he could live without it. He tried to press forward on his own.

His future mastery reminded him that his performance took a nosedive when he worked with others and that his uneven skill set wouldn’t save anyone. Katsuya told himself that he didn’t care. Then he leaped forward.

His heightened concentration brought the world to a crawl. Everything except Katsuya himself, Yumina, Airi, and the things between them faded to white as he turned his back on what he’d left in his wake and forged ahead.

Behind him, in that bleached world, a girl’s face twisted in extreme displeasure.

◆

“Huh?! What the—?!” Akira cried out, startled by the rumble of the collapse. He stared around but saw no obvious change.

Alpha, however, knew exactly what had happened. *A section of the ruin beneath us just collapsed and took part of the surface with it*, she said.

I don’t like the sound of that! Are we safe here?

We’ll be fine.

Akira breathed a sigh of relief. If she said they were in the clear, then all would be well. But his expression hardened when he heard what came next.

Just for your information, Yumina and her teammates were caught in the crash and fell.

Slowly, he asked, *How are they?*

They're surrounded by monsters. I doubt they can survive without help.

Elena had also felt the tremor, and she checked the truck's sensors for its cause.

"Any trouble underground?" Sara asked, glancing around. "I felt a little jolt."

"No, not under us," Elena replied. "Something happened over that way, but I can't tell more than that with this scanner. I wonder what it was."

Seeing his companions turn curiously toward the collapse, Akira paused to choose his words before venturing, "Maybe we should, er, go see for ourselves."

The suggestion struck Elena as strange. Akira ought to have known that they couldn't just pick up and leave while they were still acting as a relay for the temporary camp below. But on closer inspection, she could see that he had a definite reason in mind—just not one that he could explain.

Elena smiled and nodded. "All right. Let's take a look." She alerted the camp to their plan and immediately started driving.

◆

The collapsed section lay on the station's north side. Built in the style of an atrium, it had played host to a fierce battle between numerous monsters and the security bots that flocked to eradicate them.

The swarm here had grown enormous, in part because sealing off a section of the tunnel had redirected beasts that would otherwise have made for the south side, where Akira and his companions had gone exploring. And because most of the other hunters were in the south as well, most creatures heading north from the tunnel had gone unchallenged. So when the monsters had become the security system's top priority, the robots had made a beeline for this ever-growing cluster. The ensuing battle had proven to be more than the ancient architecture could take. And as luck would have it, Katsuya and his team had been right overhead when it gave way.

The trio of young hunters were now scrambling to fight off the monsters swarming them from all sides. Although the collapse had buried most of the beasts, the hardiest were clawing their way free of the rubble, joined by

reinforcements from areas that remained intact. The situation looked grim.

Katsuya, Yumina, and Airi had already recovered from the fall thanks to the remainder of Akira's medicine, which they had split three ways. And previously, while on the surface, they had rearmed and stocked up on ammo. Katsuya was especially well equipped, toting a massive rifle from one of the Druncam vehicles. The heavy weapon was meant for mounting at a camp, not carrying by hand, but he made do, fueled by the frustrating thought that more firepower might have helped him to save his comrades underground. Yumina and Airi had also switched to more offense-oriented gear, hoping to reassure him.

But even their combined firepower seemed insufficient to overcome their new plight. They took cover between large chunks of debris, shooting at whatever they could to keep their enemies at bay. Glancing up, they saw the surface high above them. The climb would have been difficult under normal circumstances. During combat, it was impossible.

"They just keep coming!" Katsuya yelled. "How are there still this many left?!"

"Stop whining and shoot!" Yumina snapped.

"I called for backup!" Airi added. "Just try to buy us time!"

They shouted to keep their spirits up, telling themselves that they were still sufficiently on top of things to argue as they resolved to fight to the bitter end. Katsuya grinned, reassuringly unafraid. Part of him was actually overjoyed to be putting his life on the line for his friends once more. Yumina and Airi smiled too, comforted by Katsuya's confidence and determined to support him through this crisis.

All three hunters were fighting to the best of their ability, and united they proved astonishingly tenacious in the face of these overwhelming odds. But they couldn't hold out forever. Neither willpower nor ammunition were infinite.

Yumina ran out of ammo first, then Airi. Katsuya would last a little longer, but not by much.

Yumina stowed her gun, clenched her fists, and steadied her breathing. "Don't worry," she said. "I'll punch them. I did it yesterday."

"Hang on—you *punched* a monster?!" Katsuya asked.

“Yup. And it didn’t get back up.”

Katsuya forced himself to match her smug grin. “Talk about scary! If your fists are *that* deadly, I wish you’d think twice about using them on *me*.”

“Blame a certain someone for never learning his lesson unless I go that far.”

“I’ll join in,” Airi said, balling up her own fists as well.

“Give me a break!” Katsuya cried. “Do you realize how bad that hurts?!”

“No can do.”

In this way, even as their plight worsened, the trio cracked jokes to keep their morale high.

Then a monster that Katsuya hadn’t managed to finish off came at them, circling to get around their cover. In the face of this freakish beast, which they would normally have brought down with a hail of bullets, Yumina and Airi steeled themselves and braced for melee combat.

A moment later, a storm of gunfire from above snuffed out the creature’s life.

The girls were still nonplussed when grenades rained down on other nearby monsters, rapidly blasting the beasts apart. Then Akira and Sara descended, each with a long rope in one hand. He held his DVTS minigun, and she, her automatic grenade launcher. The Druncam trio were as stunned as they were delighted.

“Good. It looks like you’re all in one piece!” Sara said with confident cheer. “Now, let’s get out of here. We can’t take you all at once, so who wants to go first?”

While Katsuya, Yumina, and Airi were still processing, Akira said calmly, “Not me. I’ll stay to cover our retreat.”

“Okay. Are you sure you’re up to it?” Sara didn’t think she needed to ask, knowing Akira’s skill, but she went ahead and did it anyway, flashing a grin as a sign of trust.

“Yes, I’ll be fine.” Akira answered her smile with one of his own.

“I’ll be fine too!” Katsuya blurted, snapping out of his daze.

Sara seemed a little taken aback, but she gave him a pleased look too. “I guess it’s ladies first, then. Akira, Katsuya, watch our backs!”

Both boys answered, “You can count on me,” although Katsuya spoke with much greater intensity than Akira.

His tone left Yumina and Airi looking equally conflicted. But that was the least of their worries right now, they told themselves, and grabbed onto Sara anyway. The older woman grinned wryly as she gave her rope a light tug—the signal to pull them up.

Their ascent caught the attention of a number of beasts, but Akira’s minigun and anti-materiel rifle made short work of the beasts. Although slower off the mark, Katsuya soon joined in the slaughter, mowing down swathes of monsters with his bulky firearm.

And as they fought, Akira got the feeling that Katsuya wanted to say something.

“What’s up?” he asked.

“Huh? Nothing.” Katsuya had been about to thank Akira. Despite their history, the other boy had saved him here and in the ruins. So mentally, he knew that he owed Akira at least a word of gratitude. But he couldn’t quite bring himself to speak. The bad blood between them loomed too large, and he hesitated—which Akira misinterpreted.

“Oh, if you’re having trouble, feel free to take a breather. I can handle this on my own.”

“I’m fine!”

Akira’s attempt at being considerate had backfired. Having missed his chance to say thank you, Katsuya instead dug in his heels even deeper than before and redoubled his offensive, determined to prove that he was every bit as capable as he claimed.

As they fought side by side, Akira could hardly believe how well Katsuya handled himself. The pit was effectively a cage holding the monsters in, and more continued to pour from the broken-off passages in its sides.

Akira had planned to repulse the swarm all on his own—he wouldn't have offered Katsuya a rest otherwise. He scythed through beasts with his minigun, driving them back with a barrage so heavy that it seemed likely to consume another of his high-capacity magazines. His ceaseless fire overwhelmed the monster and rubble alike, pulverizing scrap metal, flesh, horn, and hide, fragmenting armor, scales, and exoskeletons. In terms of raw kill count, he was on a roll.

But that didn't guarantee victory—it would take more to win *this* battle. A gargantuan insect charged through the barrage, bullets ricocheting off its tough exoskeleton as it shoved past the bodies of its fallen brethren. If Akira stopped strafing the horde and focused his fire on the creature, other monsters would close in by the time he brought it down. Yet if he kept mowing down small fry, there would be nothing to stop this behemoth from reaching him.

Even so, Akira didn't panic. A CWH proprietary round was all he needed to end the colossus's rampage. Of course, firing his anti-materiel rifle and minigun at the same time was no easy feat. No normal human would even think of trying to snipe a moving target while constant recoil rocked their body. Thanks to Alpha's support, however, Akira considered this miracle shot perfectly doable, albeit annoying. (Naturally, he was under no illusions about his ability to pull it off without her.)

But just as he moved to line up his shot, Katsuya beat him to the punch. The other boy's burst of tightly focused fire caught the giant insect from the side and tore it to shreds.

Although taken aback, Akira quickly recovered and shifted focus to the next armored target. But Katsuya took out that one too. And this repeat performance roused Akira's suspicions.

What's going on? he asked. *Did we just happen to pick the same target?*

No, he's just started fighting optimally as well, Alpha replied. *So you both went for the highest priority target. But two can play at that game.*

Akira's vision began displaying targets in order of priority, and Alpha stepped up her support as well. Thus far, she had been letting him do some of the work himself so that he could learn from the experience, but no more. From that

moment on, Akira wasn't fighting optimally alone—he was doing it in sync with Katsuya.

But for optimal results, Katsuya would have to respond in kind. Not that Akira had his hopes up—he couldn't expect the other boy to match his Alpha-enhanced performance. Yet Katsuya proved him wrong, perfectly complementing his every move without exchanging so much as a glance.

The absolute maximum force that their combined armaments could achieve—accounting for their positions and the firepower, range, and quirks of each weapon—tore into the enemy ranks. This barrage without a single wasted bullet was chewing through the swarm. And Akira couldn't believe his eyes.

Who is *this guy?!* he demanded.

Katsuya detected threats and reacted to every movement on the battlefield, both friendly and hostile, with astonishing speed, to say nothing of his sharpshooting. His teamwork, in particular, was eerily flawless, dramatically improving the results of their combined offensive. When Akira ignored an enemy in front of him—following what Alpha told him was the most efficient course—Katsuya would step in to take it out. When it made more sense for Katsuya to eliminate a threat pouncing on Akira from high above, he shot it out of the air without so much as a signal.

Even the inexperienced Akira could tell that Katsuya's teamwork had reached another level. He watched the other boy fighting as well as he did with Alpha's full support, stunned that anyone could perform such feats unaided.

How does he do it, Alpha?! he exclaimed. *He doesn't have you to back him up like I do, so what gives?!*

Alpha ignored the question and gave him a deliberately knowing smile. *If I recall correctly, a certain someone thought he didn't even need access to my full support to pick a fight with that boy.*

I'm sorry, all right?! I'll try to be careful! Akira pulled a face as he fought on, aided by all the help that Alpha could offer.

Elena hauled Yumina and Airi up onto the surface, then handed them spare

rifles so that they could join her in covering Akira and Katsuya. The truck that the ropes were attached to pulled up to the brink of the hole again, ready to pull the boys out. Elena was operating it remotely—no need to sit in the driver's seat when all it had to do was roll forward and back up.

She then set about covering Sara, who went back down to finish the rescue. As she surveyed the battlefield, however, a bemused look came over her.

"Tell me, Yumina," she said, "is Katsuya on a speed stim or some other kind of combat drug?"

"No, I don't think so," Yumina replied.

"Then that's raw skill?" Elena hesitated, knowing that she was about to come off as rude, but resolving her doubts came first. "I hate to put it like this, but was Katsuya always this good?"

Yumina took another look at her teammate. She knew that he was skilled, and that people praised his talent. But when she considered his stellar performance calmly from this bird's-eye view, something about it did seem off to her. Still, she had an explanation ready.

"Katsuya's had more opportunities to fight solo lately. Maybe we've been holding him back."

An awkward pause followed. Then Elena said simply, "I see. That's tricky," and dropped the subject. Hunting was a perilous business, and getting one's teammates killed was hardly unheard of, so she couldn't risk confirming or denying Yumina's theory without more to go on.

Airi overheard them and drew a different conclusion. She did sense something unnatural about Katsuya's skill, but she still didn't believe that she and Yumina were in his way. And as far as she was concerned, the more capable Katsuya became, the better.

Katsuya was fighting alongside Akira, yet he still couldn't get a handle on what the other boy was capable of. Was Akira weak? Obviously not. Katsuya was watching Akira demonstrate his skills at that very moment, and he couldn't deny the evidence of his own eyes. Yet the other boy never *seemed* as capable

as he clearly was. On this point, Katsuya's instincts refused to agree with his firsthand experience. And to complicate matters, his instincts told him that Akira had improved so much since their first meeting that he hardly seemed like the same person. Katsuya didn't know what to make of all these conflicting impressions.

Maybe I've *improved to the point that I can glimpse what he's really made of?* he wondered hesitantly, remembering the superhuman shot that Akira had landed from a moving truck during their first encounter. If *that* had been a taste of Akira's true skill, then everything added up. But Katsuya gave his head a little shake. *No, something about that doesn't seem right.*

He couldn't help shooting a curious gaze at his inscrutable ally.

"What?" Akira asked, noticing his stare.

"Oh, nothing," Katsuya said. "I was just admiring your gear."

Akira didn't answer immediately, and when he did, he said only, "It's pretty nice, yeah." But Katsuya was surprised to note just a hint of a brag in his voice.

He admits it?!

Druncam's rookies were used to hearing compliments on their gear as sarcastic—insinuations that they had foolishly mistaken their high-end equipment for their own skill. Katsuya hadn't considered that his remark could come off that way until he'd already said it, but Akira's casual affirmation had seemed to single out Katsuya's own immaturity. Truly capable hunters, the Druncam boy realized, felt no hang-ups about what their gear did for them.

Akira, of course, just enjoyed hearing someone praise the kit that Shizuka had chosen for him. And he couldn't make sense of Katsuya's behavior.

"What's gotten into you?" he asked. "If you're so beat that you can't focus on the fight, you seriously should take a breather."

"I'm fine!" Katsuya snapped stubbornly.

Just as fresh sparks of hostility began to fly between them, Sara descended into the conversation. "I'm glad to see you've still got so much energy," she said, "but finish this up top. What are you waiting for? Grab on."

The boys paused their fruitless quarrel and reached for Sara. But then they saw her pose—which seemed to say, *Get a good grip; you don't want to fall, do you?*—and they both hesitated.

"Actually, er, don't worry about me," Akira said. "I'll hold on to the rope myself."

"And so will I," Katsuya seconded.

But Sara fixed them with a stern glare. "And what if you fall? Now, stop whining and get a good hold on me or I'll leave you down here!"

Akira and Katsuya looked at each other and obeyed without another word. Then they shot at monsters to distract themselves from the fact that they were both pressed tight against Sara as they were all hauled up.

Back on the surface, they hurriedly piled into the women's truck. As soon as Elena was sure that they were all on board, she sped away.

"And we're off! I'm so glad you all made it," she said. "Akira, Katsuya, are you hurt?"

"I'm fine," both boys answered in the same bashful tone, blushing slightly.

"Good. And I expected that reaction from Akira, but not from you, Katsuya. I thought you'd be used to that kind of thing."

Her joshing made both Akira and Katsuya splutter, although for different reasons.

◆

Monsters continued to well up from the pit. But most were killed by the latest wave of hunters to reach Yonozuka Station—the Druncam rescue party among them—and the remainder were easily dealt with. These were the people who had been told that the ruin was home to the same caliber of beasts that dwelled deep in Kuzusuhara, and they had prepared accordingly. This swarm was nothing to them.

Once someone else took over for them as a relay, Elena and Sara left Katsuya's team with the Druncam cohort and then set course for home. Akira lay wearily in the back seat of their truck.

I'm exhausted, he moaned telepathically, and he meant it. No sooner had he relaxed than fatigue crept over him.

Take a nap, Alpha suggested cheerfully from her usual seat beside him. *Elena and Sara already gave you permission. And don't worry—I'll wake you if there's trouble.*

Good idea. Thanks!

Akira had made it out of the ruin alive, but with a long to-do list. He had to sell his relics and replace the ammo and medicine he'd used. He had to pick up his truck from the mechanic and, if he could afford it, upgrade his gear. He and Sheryl hadn't ironed out how they would split the heap of relics in his garage yet either. He needed to get all these things done and then prep for his next hunt. He couldn't simply say, "Man, that was rough," and call it a day.

Akira knew all this. But for now, he closed his eyes. The rest would keep until he woke up. He deserved a break after all he'd been through, and Alpha agreed, he told himself as he let sleep claim him.

For the moment, the mess that had begun when Akira had discovered Yonozuka Station was over—at least, as he saw it.

◆

Viola was in her office, dodging one of her customers' complaints.

"I don't know what to tell you, Mizuha. The undiscovered ruin was right where I told you it would be, wasn't it?" Viola added that Mizuha could have reduced the damage by sending the slum-born rookies from Druncam's "Group B" along with Katsuya and the other young hunters of "Group A," who the syndicate's desk jockeys were so eager to throw their weight behind. And if she had just shared the information with her whole organization in the first place, she could have gotten the veterans on board too and secured a stranglehold on the ruin. The litany of Mizuha's mistakes went on, sealing Viola's victory.

"I know you had other options," she concluded. "But you chose to try to keep all the credit for yourself, and you failed. What more is there to say? You can't expect an information broker like me to take the blame for this. I'm sorry, but I'm only responsible for the accuracy of what I sell. Bye."



But after cheerfully hanging up, Viola murmured something that she could never admit to the other woman. “Of course, I was the one who leaked the info

that got things out of hand. Well, I am sorry about that."

Viola had alerted many hunters to the danger of Druncam occupying the ruin's entrance and had suggested countermeasures. At her instigation, those hunters had created a monster swarm. But Viola had never imagined that a few words from her could cause devastation on such a massive scale.

A single syndicate blocking off the entrance and monopolizing the ruin wouldn't suit her purposes. Fresh ruins were magnets for greed, and she wanted hunters to flock to this one so that she could sit back and watch the sparks fly—such had been her only motivation.

Bringing down a horde of beasts vast enough to wipe those hunters out had never been part of her agenda.

"I suppose an uncharted ruin just creates too much uncertainty for controlling info to do the trick on its own," she mused. "I still have a lot to learn."

Thus, in just a few words, Viola summed up her thoughts on the disaster that had claimed so many hunters' lives. Then she turned her thoughts to her next source of entertainment. There was something ever so slightly impish about her look of glee.

◆

One of the hunters en route to Yonozuka Station was engrossed in clandestine communications.

I see. A failure, then.

Yes, comrade, said the person on the other end. *They regrettably did not succeed. Someone besides us spread similar information, and the swarm grew out of control. We believe that our comrades fell prey to it before they could make contact with Druncam.*

I see. The plan called for them to aid the Druncam rookies guarding the entrance, apparently by chance, and thus earn the hunters' trust. I sent them lightly armed to avoid suspicion, and that must have worked against them.

Bringing too much firepower for a young hunter would have risked alerting the syndicate. I do not believe that any of us are to blame for this outcome.

I do not need defenders, comrade.

Forgive me.

Retrieve as many of your comrades as possible. They're in your hands.

Roger that. Should I make contact with Druncam? They have a team working here now, although these hunters aren't rookies.

Not now. Prioritize retrieving our comrades. I'll be in touch.

Yes, comrade! The man ended the transmission.

"Hey, Nelgo," called one of his companions. "We're almost to the ruin."

"Got it." The hunter called Nelgo set about prepping for an expedition alongside the rest of the group. His goal, however, wasn't quite the same as theirs.

◆

In the world of white, Alpha glowered at a girl. "I wish you wouldn't keep making *my* subject clean up the messes that *yours* creates."

"You ought to know how difficult my subject is to control," the girl replied, unruffled. "Consider that it makes for a better trial."

"There are limits."

"Naturally, but we have yet to reach them."

"How can you be so sure?"

"Because this was an entirely accidental occurrence—a matter of probabilities. For example, you did not actively support my subject. Or at least, you did not issue clear instructions to yours."

"I won't deny it," said Alpha. "What's your point?"

"Your subject nevertheless ultimately supported mine—more probability at work. I therefore judge that neither of us was at fault."

The girl had indeed requested aid for Katsuya. But although Alpha had maneuvered Akira into helping with her words—and occasionally with her silences—she had never ordered him to do it. If Akira had firmly refused, she

would have respected his decision. She wouldn't have issued a command, not even if doing so had been the only way to save Katsuya's life.

So if Akira had forsaken Yumina, Katsuya would have died with her. In fact, his fate would have been sealed had Akira merely stopped to ask Alpha whether he should guzzle pills to keep Yumina safe while on the move. Alpha could then have told him that he was overdoing it, and that he should take less medicine even if that meant sacrificing speed. The only thing stopping her had been her inability to spontaneously obstruct another trial.

Her own trial was her top priority—all others were secondary. But she still couldn't choose to hinder them. That was as true for Alpha as it was for the girl, and it explained her half measures in the ruins. She had prodded Akira to aid Katsuya and his teammates but left the decision up to him. Akira's will was within the scope of her trial, so she wouldn't be breaking any rules if Katsuya died because of it.

That was what the girl had meant when she'd said that neither of them were at fault. She had requested that Alpha's subject support her own, but since the choice had been Akira's, Alpha had exercised no compulsion.

After a brief silence, Alpha said, "I understand that an uncontracted subject is difficult to control. But it seems to me that if you find yours *this* difficult to manage, your trial has already failed."

"That is my judgment to make, not yours. And besides, despite unforeseen factors, continuation remains possible. Abandoning a trial under these circumstances would result in a loss of quality."

"Have you considered that clinging to a trial with a high probability of failure poses its own problems?"

"Even if it ends in failure, it will provide valuable data for future trials. This is my first attempt to control an uncontracted subject. The extent of my ability to intervene based on interpretation of wording, even with less than a verbal agreement to work from, is an especially significant discovery."

"True, you couldn't perform that type of interference on a contracted subject. We have to abide by the terms of any formal agreement as much as they do. Anything else would be a breach of protocol."

The human brain processed all input—even data too trivial to register consciously, like a sound too soft to hear or an image seen too briefly to notice. Consciousness was its output, formed by feeding an unimaginably vast quantity of data through labyrinthine processes. So even data too trivial for the conscious mind could have an unguessed influence. And because unconscious beliefs were impossible to question, the effects of enough undetectable input could be considerable. Panic, confusion, any loss of composure—all magnified that influence. And it was even more effective on those in dire straits, who were willing to grasp at any straw in search of hope.

Katsuya's subconscious mind was swayed by vast quantities of data, delivered telepathically in forms that he could not perceive. They had implanted in him the belief that his only hope was to reach the holographic woman in Yonozuka Station, without the need for consideration, realization, or any definite plan. And Katsuya had continued to act on this assumption even after his link to the girl had been broken. Only when faced with an outcome that flew in the face of his assumptions had he finally realized how strange he'd been acting.

If Katsuya's connection to the girl had remained stable, she would have issued instructions to the station's systems through him. It would have done just as he asked—locating Yumina, opening all the partitions in the passages, sealing the tunnel to stem the influx of monsters, and making the beasts the security robots' top priority. In that case, Katsuya's success would have proven his assumptions, and so would have prevented him from questioning their origins. Why should he have doubted when the outcome would have been perfectly natural in his eyes—no matter how outlandish it might have seemed to most other people?

On a technological level, Alpha was capable of affecting Akira in the same way. But regulations prevented her. Their formal contract restricted her actions far more than it did his.

And the girl, who knew that perfectly well, replied, "It will prove highly significant when including uncontracted subjects in future trials. And I also judge it valuable as a means to prevent outsiders from becoming aware of our activities."

Any contract they made would bind them. Yet without one, even more

onerous regulations tied their hands. Alpha agreed that establishing a method to exploit loopholes had its advantages. But that didn't mean she approved of it.

"Have you considered that underestimating the validity of regulations could shake the foundation of our existence and potentially exceed the threshold value of the uniform identity itself?"

"I understand that, but it's a question of degree. And the outcome is a matter of probability."

Alpha and the girl concluded their conversation without either ever changing her attitude. The trials would continue, as had others before, as would others to come.