
Author: Nahuse
Illustrator: Gin
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Mechanical Designer: cell
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Part Two
Desire's End


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"I'll never let Katsuya die. I swear it."

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Part Two Desire's End

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Chapter 168: Visitors

Following the Iida Commercial District Ruins incident, Akira's injuries had once again landed him in the hospital. Upon awakening, he had immediately received visits from Shiori, who wanted him to transfer ownership of the white card to Reina's group, and from Kibayashi, who sought Akira's permission to negotiate on the boy's behalf for the rights to the Old World automatons. Akira had listened to each request and had readily agreed to both.

Now, thanks to a treatment procedure that would set him back seventy million aurum, he was already completely healed—yet just listening to his two visitors had left him thoroughly exhausted, and he lay back down on the bed to rest. The doctor overseeing his care was expected to appear shortly to take care of the paperwork for his release, but he could take a quick nap in the meantime.

Or so he thought. Before the doctor showed up, Akira had two more visitors—Sheryl and Inabe.

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A short time earlier, Sheryl was hard at work at her base when she got a call from Inabe.

"Why, Mr. Inabe, it's so good to hear from you! To what do I owe the pleasure?"

"I just got word that Akira's finally awake from his comatose state at the hospital," said the executive, "and I was thinking it might finally be time to introduce myself. I'd like to accompany you when you decide to visit him, so what's your schedule look like? I'd prefer to head there right away if possible. Sheryl? Are you there? Sheryl?"

At the sound of her name, Sheryl recovered from her shock, barely holding back a shriek and forcing herself to appear calm. "My apologies, I was just checking my schedule. Yes, I'm free right now."

"Very well. Then I'll send for a car and pick you up in thirty minutes."

"Thank you very much. I'll see you later, then."

She hung up and instantly let out a deep sigh, desperately trying to keep her body from quivering.

Akira could have *died* out there, and she would never have been the wiser! The dawning realization that her worst fears had very nearly come true seemed to crush her, and it was all she could do to keep from collapsing on the spot.

The moment she entered Akira's room at the hospital and saw he was alive and well, Sheryl felt a wave of relief. Less than an hour ago, she'd had no idea he was even hospitalized, and after hearing from Inabe that Akira had been rushed to the hospital in critical condition, she'd been extremely worried that his life might still be in danger even after he regained consciousness. Now, with her fears put to rest, her smile shone even brighter than usual.

Meanwhile, Akira caught sight of Sheryl entering, and he sat up with a hint of irritation on his face. "Now you're here too? What do *you* want?"

"I heard you were at the hospital and had just woken up," she replied. "I was worried, so I came to check up on you."

Akira looked skeptical. "And that's all?"

"Yes, honestly. Your injuries are mostly healed now, correct? I heard you were in an awful state."

"I was, but I'm fine now. Any treatment that costs seventy mil like that had better work."

"S-Seventy million, you say... My, that's quite the expensive procedure."

"Well, yeah. It was spendy, but also pretty high-tech, I guess. I mean, I'm as good as new." At first, he'd been a little suspicious of Sheryl's arrival, thinking she, like his previous two visitors, had brought another troublesome proposal. But now, hearing that she had only come to check on him, he felt more relaxed.

Then he noticed Inabe standing behind her, and his gaze became wary once more.

"So, Sheryl, who's *this* guy?" he asked.

That was a disrespectful way to refer to one of the city's top brass—or at least, Sheryl thought so and panicked a little. But she didn't dare speak up and scold Akira, lest he get angry. So she was forced to maintain a balancing act between keeping Inabe happy and not upsetting Akira.

The official, on the other hand, had never expected a hunter from the slums to know the first thing about etiquette to begin with—and Akira was the only person who knew the true source of the Old World terminals Sheryl had brought to Inabe. Judging, therefore, that he wouldn't stand to profit by incurring the ire of someone integral to his plan, Inabe chose to overlook Akira's lack of courtesy. "My name is Inabe. I'm collaborating with Sheryl on her relic shop business. Has she not mentioned me before?"

"Hm? Oh, right, come to think of it, I feel like she *did* mention something about that—maybe?" Akira cocked his head. Either Sheryl hadn't explained Inabe's involvement to Akira, or Akira hadn't found the information important and had simply forgotten.

Whatever the case, it didn't really matter to Inabe—if Akira wasn't that interested in him, then Inabe didn't feel the need to go into detail about himself. "Anyway, that's how I know Sheryl," said the official. "So for now, just think of me as someone who has some pull within the city."

At that, Akira snorted. Inabe looked a bit astonished, especially given that he'd just admitted his influence within the government, but didn't call the boy out on it.

The truth was that Akira had come to associate the overlords of the city with trouble. He was neither scared of nor intimidated by people in positions of power—just irritated. In fact, he now felt even *more* concerned that this Inabe character would be just as much of a nuisance as Kibayashi.

"So why are *you* here, then?" he asked. "Come to check up on me too, I take it?"

"That, and I thought it was about time we met face-to-face. Judging by your reaction, it seems that you're leaving the shop entirely to Sheryl and its management doesn't concern you in the

least. But as we're fellow business partners all the same, I at least wanted to give you a name and face to remember me by."

"I see. All right, then," Akira replied. If this was all Inabe had come here for, then his arrival might not herald any annoyances after all. Akira felt relieved, then remembered something else. "Oh, right. Sheryl, you know those relics I gave you? If I said I needed you to pay me for those as soon as you could, how soon would that be and about how much would I get?"

Akira had delivered three collections of valuable relics, including Old World terminals, to Sheryl's relic shop so far. He'd sold the first batch for six hundred million aurum and had been paid in full on the spot, but had yet to receive compensation for the second and third shipments. Originally, he'd been planning to ask for payment for the latter relics once the store had sold them all off.

"A-As soon as I can, you ask?"

"Yeah, sorry. I wish I didn't have to press you like this, but well, some things happened." Even with Viola helping Sheryl out, Akira wasn't naive enough to think the girls would have the funds to pay him right away—especially since they'd just paid him six hundred million aurum not too long ago. A store wouldn't make any money if all its inventory stayed on the shelf—only when the items sold would it start to turn a profit. Plus, items at higher prices took longer to sell and incurred greater expenses. He was aware it would be at least a little while longer before he'd see any of that money.

This hadn't been a problem for Akira because he'd only just recently purchased a brand-new set of gear, so he'd figured it would be some time before he'd need to replace it. As long as they paid him by that time, he could wait. And the longer he waited, the more the shop would flourish, likely leading to higher compensation for him in the end. So with this in mind, he'd intended to be patient.

But then, during the battle in the Iida Commercial District Ruins, Akira had lost all his primary equipment and now needed to replace it as soon as he could. And due to some messy negotiations over the rights to the Old World automatons he and his team had encountered, it would apparently be some time before his accomplishments in Iida would be converted into money he could

actually use. Though he had Kibayashi serving as his proxy, he couldn't afford to be too hasty and ask the city official to try to hurry the negotiations along, or the others at the table might take advantage of him. What's more, since he'd been in the middle of a hunter rank advancement commission from the city at the time, the city might try to raise his hunter rank in lieu of paying him actual money for his accomplishments. Finally, he'd also asked Kibayashi to try and lobby for much cheaper prices on anti-force rounds, so the fulfillment of that request might also reduce his portion of reward money.

And so, he explained to Sheryl, it would be great if she could pay him for the relics as soon as possible.

Hearing the reasons for Akira's urgency, Sheryl felt greatly conflicted. "I-I see. Well, er..." Rarely did Akira ever ask Sheryl for anything, and she had no doubt his opinion of her would skyrocket if she came through for him now, when he was hard up for money.

But to do so, she'd need to dip into her shop's management funds, and not just for a few million—for hundreds of millions of aurum. If she wasn't careful, she might end up sinking her whole business. She needed that money to train and pay her employees, procure more inventory, pay her shop's security personnel, cover interior maintenance and remodeling, manage her staff, and many other things.

Even so, she wanted to help Akira. She had toiled day after day to build her shop up into what it was now, but only for Akira's sake. She could sacrifice it all if it meant settling her mounting debt to him. But could she bring herself to do so while Inabe was standing right next to her? She needed that store for Inabe's plan to succeed, to retain the executive's support in the future, and to ensure she remained in good standing with the city's highest leadership. Wouldn't sacrificing her business for Akira's sake right here actually *disadvantage* the boy in the end?

Still, this was a prime opportunity to be of use to him. For once, Akira was in trouble—and Sheryl was in a position to help. If she couldn't assist him even in his time of need, Akira might decide she was useless to him. Then all her efforts would be for naught.

What should I do? Sheryl was truly torn.

Akira gathered from her hesitation that she wouldn't be able to help him, and he sighed. Sensing his opinion of her was about to plummet for good, Sheryl felt even more pressured.

Then Inabe, who hadn't said a word since hearing Akira's account of his financial need, finally spoke up. "In that case, I'll give you two billion aurum right here, up front. How does that sound?"

Akira and Sheryl gasped. Neither of them had expected Inabe, of all people, to offer a solution.

But Inabe continued as though he hadn't heard them. He declared that if Akira was worried about not getting paid and being able to acquire new gear until the Iida relic negotiations were over, then Inabe would just advance him the money. Later, once negotiations were settled, Akira could just pay Inabe back out of his reward money.

The offer was technically a loan, but even if Akira's total reward money couldn't quite cover it, he wouldn't need to make up the difference. Inabe would transfer the unpaid portion of the loan to Sheryl's shop, and Sheryl could gradually pay it back as her profits grew. Akira could reimburse Sheryl later, if he so wished, or Sheryl could simply call it even and consider it Akira's compensation for backing her gang. The two of them could hash out those details however they wanted between themselves.

Inabe finally proposed that the two billion aurum first be deposited in Sheryl's account as financing for her shop, after which Sheryl would transfer the money to Akira.

Then the official took a moment to observe their reactions. Both looked thrilled at his proposal—Akira would have the money to afford new gear, and Sheryl would be able to prove to Akira her worth and that of her shop.

Inabe then slid his gaze over to Akira and continued. "But I do have a condition, one that concerns the source of those Old World data terminals you've been giving Sheryl."

The moment he heard that, Akira's mood soured—and Inabe wasn't even done speaking. He was about to snap "I already told Sheryl I couldn't reveal that!" but managed to restrain himself.

Reacting before people finished was a recipe for misunderstandings, so he opted to hear Inabe out before opening his mouth.

"Something wrong?" Inabe inquired, eyeing him.

"No, it's nothing," Akira answered. "Go on."

"Very well. As I was saying, you're the only one who knows where those terminals come from. I want you to promise me you'll never divulge that information to anyone else."

Akira was floored—he certainly hadn't expected *this*. "Er, I wasn't going to tell anyone anyway, so you didn't even have to ask."

"In that case, you won't mind if I make it a condition, right?"

"W-Well, yeah."

"Good, that's the *first* condition. Second, in the event you come across more Old World data terminals, do not give them to anyone other than Sheryl. You'll be selling to a relic shop in the slums, so your hunter rank won't rise, but you'll just have to put up with that. And third, when you do sell them, act discreetly—carrying them out in the open will draw attention. Make sure no one finds out about the sale—if there even *is* another batch out there to sell, that is. Does that work for you?"

"Yeah, shouldn't be a problem. Anything else?"

"No, those are my only conditions. I'll repeat them again, though, just for good measure: don't tell anyone where the terminals came from, sell them to no one but Sheryl from now on, and make the sale discreetly. Got it? If those terms suit you, I'll get your payment ready."

"Yeah, sounds good to me."

"Then we have an agreement." Inabe stuck out his hand, and Akira shook it—the deal was struck. "Now then, we'll take our leave. I've got a payment to prepare, after all. I'll deposit the two billion within the next few days. Let's go, Sheryl."

"Huh? Y-Yes, of course." She wanted to talk to Akira longer, but she couldn't very well disobey Inabe and announce she was staying behind. As disappointed as she was, she decided to leave. "At any rate, Akira, I'm glad you're all healed up now. Be sure to take it easy and rest. Another time, then."

With one last parting smile, she followed Inabe out of the hospital

room.

Riding next to Inabe as they drove back, Sheryl could tell that something serious was weighing on his mind. Neither of them spoke for the entire trip, and eventually the car pulled into the Kugama Building's parking lot. But even when the vehicle came to a halt, Inabe didn't open the door. For what seemed like forever, the two of them sat in complete silence until, without warning, the executive spoke with a frown.

"I'll be honest with you, Sheryl. I had been under the impression that you'd seduced Akira into supporting you. Seeing the way you had that Katsuya fellow wrapped around your finger at the dinner party without even trying, I was certain you could bring someone like Akira under your spell if you put your mind to it. That was how you'd managed to persuade a hunter like him, skilled enough to be offered a rank advancement commission, to back your insignificant little gang at the time." He spoke quietly—then suddenly his voice seemed to crush her as he added, "Or so I thought. But I was wrong! You didn't even have the courage to reprimand him for speaking to me the way he did. You don't hold any power over him at all, do you?"

Sheryl gripped her fist tightly to keep herself from trembling.

"Consider this two billion aurum proposal an expression of my uncertainty," he continued. "In other words, you made me feel like I had to offer that much to keep that boy's mouth shut. Truth be told, I even wanted to run my proposal through the Hunter Office as a commission, just to make sure he wouldn't go back on his word. I couldn't do that, of course, without leaking the information to third parties, but that's how I felt, believe me." He sighed, a sound that raised Sheryl's anxiety even higher. "When I first agreed to cooperate with you, I asked you a question. Now, let me ask that question again."

Thus far, Inabe had been facing straight ahead, not even so much as glancing in Sheryl's direction. Now, however, he turned to stare directly at her.

"There won't be any problems here, right?"

His gaze was deadly serious as his eyes bore into hers.

Sheryl didn't look away as she replied, "No, there won't be any problems." Once again, she had answered Inabe with resolve.

"Is that so? You'd better take every measure you can to make those words the truth. And if you run into trouble, you *will* let me know about it." Inabe opened the door and got out. The moment he shut the door, the car sped off.

Sheryl was still stricken with nervousness as the car drove her back to her base. Suddenly, the notification sound on her terminal rang out. In a panic, she checked the alert—a message notifying her that two billion aurum had been deposited in her account.

Reading it, Sheryl heaved an enormous sigh. "I guess I can take this to mean he hasn't given up on me yet." Somehow Sheryl suspected that wasn't exactly the case—but for now, this was how she chose to interpret it.

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The day after his discharge from the hospital, Akira headed to Shizuka's shop and stood in front of the shop's door.

But he felt too nervous to enter.

He knew he would have to order a new set of gear from Shizuka eventually, of course, but doing so would clearly prove to her that he'd been reckless and rash enough to lose his entire old set.

He knew she would be furious with him for pushing himself after she'd specifically warned him not to, and the guilt was keeping his feet firmly in place.

Still, he couldn't just stand outside the door forever. So, steeling himself, he headed in.

Inside the shop were two others besides Shizuka—Elena and Sara, who'd arrived just before Akira. The three women noticed him come in and greeted him with warm smiles.

Akira somehow got the feeling those smiles were hinting at something. But he was more preoccupied with how he was going to explain his equipment needs to Shizuka without upsetting her, and so didn't dwell on other details too much. After greeting the women

and engaging in some small talk, an awkward smile came to his lips. Then, bracing himself a final time, he broke the news to Shizuka that he needed another set of gear.

But as it turned out, all his resolve had been unnecessary—because the three of them had already heard about his fierce battle even before he opened his mouth.

"Huh?! You already know?!"

"Yes," replied Shizuka. "While you were hospitalized, Yumina came here and gave me the news." Their battle against the Old World automatons in Iida, how Akira had suffered critical injuries and been forced to go to the hospital for treatment, the desperation that had driven Akira to put his life on the line, and everyone being saved thanks to his efforts—Yumina had conscientiously explained everything to Shizuka.

Of course, as Shizuka explained, the girl hadn't been under any obligation or duty to go out of her way to detail any of this to someone who was merely the owner of a hunter-focused general store. In fact, Yumina had been treading a fine line in divulging the personal information of another hunter who was currently in the field—especially about the hunter's condition, which could potentially affect his earnings in the future. But having seen for herself just how fondly Akira regarded Shizuka, Yumina had thought it better for her to know and had told her everything—she just felt like that was the right thing to do.

Shizuka gave him a gentle smile. "So relax. I'm not angry with you or anything."

Akira heaved a huge sigh of relief.

Seeing this, Elena smiled wryly. "You know, it's rather like—how should I put this?—just another day at the office for you by now."

Akira stared at the floor. "Yeah, can't argue with that. Seriously, why am I always getting into these messes? Am I really just that unlucky?"

Sara smirked. "Well, even if you are, you can't help it, so no point in getting all down in the dumps. Things might've been tough, but you came back home alive. Isn't that good enough?" She beamed, in hopes that her words would encourage him.

They did. Akira perked up and grinned back. “Yeah, you’re right. That’s a good way to look at it, huh?”

“Plus, you earned enough to make your struggle worth it, didn’t you? That in itself is a perk of being a hunter.”

“I mean, I’d rather *not* risk my life if I can help it. My own safety’s more important than money.”

Shizuka smiled and nodded. “That’s right, Akira. That’s the mindset you need to have. Make sure you never forget it.”

“I won’t,” Akira nodded, completely sincere.

“Glad to hear it.” Shizuka also smiled, satisfied. Between the four of them, Akira’s life-or-death struggle within Iida’s commercial district was now just an amusing anecdote they could look back on and laugh about.

“Anyway, Shizuka, I’m sorry I ruined all my stuff so soon after buying it from you, but would you mind helping me replace it?”

“Of course not! As long as you’re not reckless by choice, you can ruin all the goods you want. If it contributes to your survival in the end, I have no complaints—and it means more sales for me.” Shizuka threw in a light joke at the end to ensure that Akira didn’t get too hung up over the loss of his gear—she didn’t want him to value his equipment more than his own life. “So what budget will we be working with this time?”

“Two billion—no, 1.8 billion aurum, please.” He’d asked Kibayashi to negotiate for the right to buy anti-force rounds on the cheap, but there was no guarantee that the official would be successful—and even if he was, Akira didn’t know *how* cheap they’d become. Still, he’d need those rounds regardless of the price, so he decided to reserve two hundred million just in case.

Even so, this amount was three times his budget the last time he’d shopped there. Elena and Sara were both stunned. Shizuka was also surprised, but another emotion took precedence.

“See here, Akira. If you’re already talking about that kind of money, it might be time to find another store to buy from,” she said with a serious look.

“Huh?” Her suggestion struck Akira like a bolt from the blue. First he was shocked, then confused, then forlorn.

As she watched him, Shizuka felt driven to carefully explain her reasoning for this recommendation. Her store, she told him, primarily catered to hunters in the novice to intermediate range; her inventory, too, was really only meant for hunters under rank 30. In fact, making even forty million aurum from a single sale was a huge profit for her. Shizuka strove for honesty and sincerity when dealing with her customers, but she was also a businesswoman—a part of her didn't want to lose a customer as profitable as Akira. Still, there was a limit to what she could manage, due to both her store's capacity and what she herself was capable of.

And it seemed likely to her that Akira no longer had any use for the lower-end goods her store stocked. In fact, once she'd found herself having to place special orders on Akira's behalf for goods her shop didn't carry, she'd already known in her heart that he had outgrown any need for her establishment. She wasn't the kind of store owner who could handle the high-priced, high performance gear Akira would need—she'd never intended for her store to deal in such goods in the first place. Last time Akira had been shopping around, the very reason she'd sent him such a massive list of guns and powered suits was because she didn't know enough about the equipment in his price range to narrow his selection down more appropriately. Thus, if Shizuka was to continue treating Akira with as much sincerity as she had the day they'd first met, she could only recommend he switch to a higher-end store that dealt in this kind of merchandise.

"You'll often say things like 'If *you're* saying I should, then I will' or 'If it's what *you* recommend, I'll do it,'" she pointed out. "You seem to hold my opinion and judgment in high regard. So consider this my recommendation, what I've judged to be best for you—though it is quite a shame." Her smile contained just a hint of sadness.

Akira understood what she was saying and even agreed with her reasoning—being equipped with the proper gear could mean the difference between life and death. Moreover, he did trust her and knew that following her guidance would be the wisest and safest option.

Nevertheless, he looked extremely conflicted. And in the end—in a rare display for him when Shizuka was concerned—he dug in his heels.

"Er, if possible, I'd like to continue buying from you, though... Is there nothing you can do?"

"I wouldn't advise that, and I think it'd be better if you didn't. A store catering to higher-ranked hunters will be more familiar with the gear in your price range and will be able to give you better recommendations."

"B-But it's not completely impossible for you to help me, right?" Had Shizuka explicitly said that it was impossible, he would have had no choice but to back down. Since she hadn't, however, he didn't give up.

At that, Elena and Sara couldn't help snorting in amusement. Grinning, Elena turned to Shizuka. "Look, if he's saying he's okay with this arrangement, why not just go along with it? Isn't it part of your job as proprietor to meet a customer's selfish demands?"

Shizuka's serious expression relaxed into a smile. Then she turned to Akira and said, with the air of one acquiescing to a child's selfishness, "Fine, you win. But be aware that I'll be handling a lot of products outside my wheelhouse, so if I mess up and give you some bizarre recommendations, don't get angry, okay?"

"Y-Yes, of course! I won't blame you at all. Thank you so much, Shizuka!" Akira grinned with delight and bowed gratefully.

Shizuka smiled again—then scrunched up her face in mock dissatisfaction. "And here I was even prepared to let go of a big spender in order to maintain my standard of treating my customers with honesty. But the three of you just had to be so selfish! Now I have to do all this extra work so that I can carry such expensive items."

Elena smirked. "Oh, but think of the profits! Akira, Sara, and I have all been working hard in the wasteland, so you should put in the same kind of effort. Why should you be the only one who gets to kick back?"

"Easy for you to say, when you have no idea what it's like to work retail," Shizuka teased.

Sara chuckled and turned to Akira. “Actually, Shizuka’s been urging us to do the same thing for some time now—move to a higher-end store, she keeps saying. But Elena keeps coming up with reasons not to switch.”

“You too, huh?”

“Yeah. Both of us get Shizuka’s point, of course, but since we’re putting our lives on the line when we purchase our equipment, we’d rather keep getting it from someone we trust.”

“Makes total sense to me.”

“By the way,” Sara interjected, “what’s your hunter rank right now? I heard you accepted a hunter rank commission, so I bet it’s gone up quite a bit, right?”

Akira thought for a moment. “Hold on, just a sec.” He took out his terminal and checked his current rank. The negotiations over the Old World automatons were still ongoing, but his destruction of a number of rogue machines had already been factored into his rank. “Looks like it’s 45.”

Elena and Sara glanced at each other. When they turned back to him, they looked just a bit conflicted. Sara’s voice sounded almost forlorn as she spoke. “Rank 45, huh? Guess you’ve already surpassed both of us, then.”

“For real?!”

Elena spoke in a similarly melancholic tone as she picked up where Sara had left off. “We’re both rank 40, you see. I think that’s probably the reason Shizuka’s been badgering us to change stores.”

Like Akira, Elena and Sara were serious relic hunters. They’d been operating in the wasteland for many years, running risks and raising their ranks. Since meeting Akira, their hunter work had taken a turn for the better, and despite the challenges they’d faced, their progress had mostly been steady. They had continued to proactively seek out jobs, most recently pouring their efforts into monster hunting and relic gathering in the depths of the Kuzusuhara Town Ruins, which had bolstered their growth as hunters even further.

Their current rank of 40 was the result of all their struggles as relic hunters up until then. Very few hunters based in Kugamayama ever achieved this level—only the cream of the crop, in other words.

And yet, here was Akira, a child who'd only recently begun his journey as a hunter, surpassing them just like that. Both women couldn't help but feel the sting to their pride as professionals.

But they tried to act as cheerfully as possible. After all, they were genuinely glad to see Akira grow so rapidly in such a short time, though their other emotions kept them from praising him wholeheartedly. So they sought to disguise their feelings by looking happy and joking around.

"Well, we both kinda figured you'd pass us up eventually," Sara said with a small smile. "We just didn't think it'd be *this* soon."

Elena turned a teasing grin onto him. "I guess that means we'll have to call you our senior now, huh?"

Akira, with his lack of interpersonal skills, took their attitudes at face value and was genuinely at a loss for how to respond. Even he could tell that he might upset them with a thoughtless show of humility, like saying he "still had a long way to go" or something similar, but no other response came to mind.

Moreover, he had a pretty good idea why his hunter rank had climbed so high in such a short span of time—a little support from Yajima and Yoshioka behind the scenes. In order to salvage the reputations of the mechs they'd manufactured, both companies found it in their best interests to make the hunter who'd kicked their products to the curb have as high a rank as possible. Akira suspected that the companies had pulled a few strings behind the scenes, and that his rank now *over*estimated his actual ability.

But he didn't dare tell Elena and Sara that—if he did, he'd have to divulge what had driven the companies to do so in the first place. The recent gang war in the slums had been spearheaded by none other than Kugamayama City itself, and Yajima and Yoshioka had been coconspirators. It would be bad if he leaked information incriminating the city to those who weren't in the loop—and all the more so if they were Elena and Sara. Even Akira understood that much.

Then, how should he answer? Akira mulled this over. He'd come a long way since escaping the back alleys of the slums to become a relic hunter. While he was still green in many respects, his

communication skills had developed at least slightly over time, and now he employed everything he'd learned in that regard to the fullest.

"Oh—er, well, calling me your senior feels like a little much. I might have grown in rank, but that doesn't account for my lack of experience, you know? I still have a lot to learn about being a hunter, so I'd like you and Sara to continue mentoring me, if that's okay with you."

Looking at Akira's expression, it was clear to Elena and Sara he'd strained every brain cell he had to come up with that response. They realized how trivial their own hang-ups were, and their negative feelings melted away. Akira admired them so much that he'd tried his best to be considerate of their emotions in order to preserve the relationship he currently had with them. Seeing this, the two women felt quite ashamed to have let such a minor concern get the best of them.

They glanced at each other again and couldn't help laughing. Now they were back to their usual cheerful selves.

"Oh yeah?" Elena said with a grin. "Then, Sara, how about we take him up on that and mentor him for a little while longer?"

"Sounds good to me," Sara said happily. "Our star pupil better not let us down!"

"Of course!" Akira nodded, overjoyed.

Then Shizuka cut in. "In that case, why not jump right in and offer that expertise of yours by helping Akira choose what gear he should buy? To be honest, with his budget of 1.8 billion, I don't even know the first place to begin. So lend us a hand."

Elena looked startled. "Hold up, Shizuka! It's not like we're familiar with the ins and outs of superexpensive gear either, you know?"

"Oh, stop making excuses and just help out. You're both aiming to become highly ranked hunters someday, so you must have at least given the matter some thought or looked into it a little. Rack your brains and think back on those memories. If you're calling yourself Akira's mentors, you owe him at least that much."

Before Shizuka's tongue-lashing, Elena could no longer refuse and

smiled resignedly. “All right, all right, fine! First, let’s hear what features Akira has in mind. Akira?”

“Uh, er, well... What features would be good?”

That was a question no one present had the knowledge to actually answer, which more or less set the stage for the ensuing discussion regarding his new gear. They spent quite a while hemming and hawing without making any real headway, but Akira enjoyed his time with them all the same.

Chapter 169: A Luxurious Bath

Until he could procure new equipment, Akira decided to once again put hunter work on hold. He had yet to order any of it—or even to decide what he wanted, for that matter. He was still stuck at the stage of having Shizuka, Elena, and Sara help him explore his options, so it would be quite some time before he was kitted out once more. Still, he wasn't about to just blow 1.8 billion without carefully considering and researching his options first. The more expensive a product was, the more important it was to look into it to avoid buyer's remorse.

However, he wasn't in a time crunch, so there was no need to rush. If Kibayashi's negotiations went well, he'd be able to buy anti-force rounds at an extreme discount, so in that sense, it was even better for him to wait.

With that in mind, he decided to take things easy for the time being.

During this period, he stopped by Sheryl's base one day to make an appearance. Unlike in the past, he didn't head up to Sheryl's room but rather sat in a chair on a floor of her base that had been repurposed into a break area of sorts. This was typically where the members of her gang and the employees of her shop came to take a breather—but at the moment, Akira was the only one here. Not that the others were barred from entry—rather, everyone who came here to relax took one look at the destructive land mine sitting in the corner of the room and fled.

But Akira hadn't come here specifically to disrupt the others on their break. Sheryl had asked him to place himself in a relatively conspicuous area, so that those inside and outside the gang alike could see that her patron was still alive and well. Relic hunting was a dangerous profession, in which one could kick the bucket at any time, so if a hunter didn't show their face for quite a while, many

would naturally assume that they'd perished out in the wasteland. In other words, it was important for Sheryl to show Akira off from time to time to let everyone know he was alive.

Sheryl would forgive the grunts and newbies in her gang for distancing themselves from Akira when he was near. But she would not tolerate that kind of behavior from her officers. She'd forced them all to greet Akira whenever they saw him. And if Akira ever spoke to them, even if he was just making obligatory small talk or asking about the status of the gang or the relic shop, they were required to respond. Thanks to their own respective experiences with the boy, her current officers—Erio, Aricia, Nasya, and Lucia—spoke to Akira with the same level of caution one might use when traversing a minefield. The other children in the gang saw this, reaffirmed in their minds that Sheryl's officers were made of tougher stuff, and found their respect for said officers rising even higher.

Katsuragi entered the room, casually striding up to the same Akira Sheryl's officers regarded with such caution. The children watching from afar were awed by the merchant's courage.

He sat down opposite Akira and immediately began speaking. "So, Akira, it sounds like you earned quite a lot this time too. In that case, how about buying something from me? No, no, I know you already have another store you're on good terms with, but it's not good to get too attached to one outlet, now, is it? It's the same as buying up inventory—rather than getting everything from the same supplier, using multiple routes promotes a healthier business."

Even as Katsuragi sought to persuade Akira, however, he knew from previous experiences not to get his hopes up—in truth, his only reason for coming here was to convince his business partners that he was actually making an effort to sway the boy. If he pushed too hard and angered Akira, the boy might not even buy any more recovery medicine from him. Moreover, the small arms the merchant had sold to Sheryl for her subordinates to use had also been a significant chunk of his sales, and while he wasn't involved with the dealings on the top floor, Katsuragi had greatly profited from Sheryl's relic shop as well. All that would go out the window if Akira tattled on Katsuragi to Sheryl, so to avoid ruffling Akira's feathers, Katsuragi

urged the boy half-heartedly, knowing deep down he was wasting his breath.

But ironically enough, Katsuragi's reserved approach was what finally did the trick. Akira had warmed up to Katsuragi quite a bit over time, but there was still a part of him that saw the merchant as a swindler, someone who always approached him with some ulterior motive. However, Katsuragi's self-restraint here told Akira there was no hidden motive behind this discussion, and that the merchant was approaching him with an honest request.

"In that case," the boy asked, "can you get me a truck and a bike?"

Katsuragi was taken aback by this unexpected order. "Huh? I-If I do, you'll actually buy them?"

"You're the one who said I could buy anything I wanted from you, right?"

"W-Well, yes, I did say that, but I'm just surprised you changed your mind so suddenly. I've asked you to patronize my business many times before, and you've mostly turned me down."

"Er, well, I'm asking you because the bike you got for me last time was so useful," he said.

This wasn't exactly a lie, but neither was it his main reason. Shizuka, Elena, and Sara had their hands full right now helping him get his powered suit and gun, so he didn't want to burden Shizuka even more by asking her to order a vehicle and a bike on top of that. He'd left purchasing those two items on the back burner—but now that Katsuragi was here, he reasoned, perhaps the merchant would order them for him instead.

Katsuragi immediately donned his business smile. "Then I'm glad I can be of service! Now then, what kind of truck and bike did you have in mind?"

"The bike can be the same as before, or maybe an even better model. As for the truck..." Akira mulled this over. "I'll need one big enough to fit the bike inside. And as for its performance, just make sure the model's comparable to the bike."

A top-of-the-line bike would be useful during both combat and ruin exploration, but it couldn't carry as much as a truck. It was

better to compromise on the bike's performance so that he could also afford a large vehicle to pack ammo and relics in, like the one Yumina had used. In fact, he'd been thinking as much ever since his recent expeditions in Kuzusuhara and Iida.

Katsuragi ran a few numbers in his head. "If you're wanting a bike with specs similar to the last one *and* a vehicle with comparable specs, one or two hundred mil won't be enough. Hmm... I can probably do both for five hundred mil. Does that work for you?"

"Sure."

Soon to be five hundred million richer, Katsuragi practically jumped for joy. But then Akira's expression grew serious.

"By the way, you know that bike you sold me last time? It was really nice—helped me out a lot. Thanks for that."

"Huh? R-Right, you're welcome."

Akira hesitated a bit before continuing. "In other words, well, there's probably no point in saying this anyway, since I think you already know, but I'll be entrusting my life to the products you get for me. I know five hundred mil might not net me the best models on the market, but if they're not both sufficiently high performance, I'll be in trouble."

Akira stared at Katsuragi silently. It wasn't that he didn't trust the merchant—he'd never had an issue with the quality of the medicine the latter had provided, after all—but Akira highly doubted Katsuragi's aid came with no strings attached, any more than the money from Inabe that he was spending at Shizuka's shop. The look in his eyes said as much.

"So, Katsuragi? We're good, right?"

Inwardly, Katsuragi was sweating bullets, but he managed a hearty smile. "Yeah, we're good. Don't worry, I'll get you exactly what you need. So buy some guns and powered suits from me next time, okay?"

"If you're trying to get me to agree now so you can hold me to that later, it's not gonna work."

"I figured as much. Well, at least think about it for me, okay?" Katsuragi said, his smile now somewhat awkward. "How soon do you want the goods? Would a month be quick enough for you? If you

want it faster, I'll have to ask you to put down a deposit."

"No, a month is fine."

"All right. Then I'm heading out to place this order. I'll contact you later. You won't be disappointed!" With that parting remark, Katsuragi left the room.

The moment Akira was out of view, the merchant let out a huge breath. His look was grim—the look of a merchant who'd nearly bitten off more than he could chew.

Shit, that was close! Did I get too excited about the five hundred mil and let my guard down? I need to be more careful.

This was Katsuragi's concern: If Akira paid five hundred million aurum, only for Katsuragi to sell him substandard products—or if Akira nearly died due to a defect in a vehicle Katsuragi sold him—just what course of action would the indignant hunter take? It wasn't hard for Katsuragi to imagine the answer. But he'd been so thrilled with the prospect of an extra five hundred million in his pocket that until Akira had reminded him, he'd forgotten that little detail.

Well, anyway, if he's buying a vehicle and bike combo for five hundred mil, he's probably paying even more than that for guns and powered suits. How much, though? Eight hundred million? A billion? I don't know just how high-end Akira's preferred store is, but if they're making huge deals like that with him despite knowing what he's done to those who upset him, that store owner must have some serious guts.

Inwardly impressed by the bravery of the proprietor of a business he didn't know the location or name of, Katsuragi called up his business partners to get the vehicle and bike ready.

Though Sheryl spent all her time caught up in the never-ending management of her business and her gang, she somehow managed to squeeze in a break one day to visit Akira. His hunter activities were on hold for the time being until he could procure new gear, but that didn't mean he stopped by Sheryl's base every day. So she had scraped together this opportunity specifically to spend more time with Akira and was now sitting opposite him across an immaculately clean circular table. As they sipped expensive coffee from chic-

looking cups, they chatted about various things, like how her relic shop and gang were coming along. Sheryl was greatly enjoying herself, and Akira listened to her with rapt interest.

"No kidding? I can't believe your gang has grown so much!" he said, astonished.

The success of Sheryl's shop had also caused her gang's influence to skyrocket—the residents of the slums were even referring to her syndicate now as the "Sheryl Family," though it hadn't quite reached the heights of the two organizations that had once ruled the slums. Had circumstances been otherwise, those after her business's immense profits would have interfered with the "Family's" growth much earlier, but no one had dared target her—she had Akira backing her, and even Viola was on her side. The other gangs hadn't laid a hand on Sheryl for fear that Viola might suss out their plans and Akira would show up in person to crush them.

Akira's strength, the relic shop's wealth, and Viola's intelligence and cunning—these three factors had contributed to the formation of a highly influential gang that the slum dwellers were champing at the bit to join. The syndicate's current membership had grown exponentially, although it still mostly consisted of children—Sheryl automatically turned away any adult hopefuls at the door, at least for now. Nor did she let the children in unconditionally, as she could only manage so many members at once. Gaining new underlings was easy, but new officers? Not so much. Until she found more leaders to assist her, new applicants would need to wait their turn.

As a result, new organizations, akin to subordinate gangs of Sheryl's, had begun cropping up around the slums. Their members worked hard at anything they thought might reduce their wait time to join the Sheryl Family, like currying favor with members of the main gang or earning money to bribe their way in. Those children who successfully made it into Sheryl's syndicate first performed cheap labor, earning a small salary while doing grunt work or working the relic shop's low-end floors. If they did well and avoided causing any trouble, they were then assigned work from Sheryl's other affiliates, like Katsuragi's business partners.

Slum children rarely ever found decent work because of the (not

entirely untrue) stigma that if they *were* introduced to higher-paying clients, the kids would just make off with the money or goods; there were other reasons too, of course, but that was the prevailing one. However, the Sheryl Family was sufficiently well-off that they could cover any damages or losses their kids incurred, and so the children from Sheryl's gang had a better reputation than others.

Thus, as long as the kids did their work like they were supposed to, employer and employee alike would profit. And if the children didn't, it went without saying that Sheryl would kick them out. Rumors had even spread among the children that if they stole just once, they'd either be killed by Akira or sold off by Viola; these stories kept their roguish tendencies in check. Many children instead spent their days learning to read and write and earned enough money to buy a data terminal of their own, opening the door to better opportunities. There were websites where they could learn whatever skills or qualifications they needed at no cost whatsoever—as long as they could read and write, had a terminal that could connect to the internet, and desired to learn, they could acquire both general and specialized knowledge that the children of the back alleys would normally never have access to.

Those who took the time and effort to learn these things were introduced to higher-level, higher-paying jobs through Katsuragi, his business partners, or Viola. Some were even given special jobs or managerial positions within the gang, or asked to work the floor of the relic shop and sell mid-priced items—in other words, they were given better treatment and social standing overall. And if they weren't confident they'd be up to any of those tasks, they could also choose to head out into the wasteland, borrowing gear from the Sheryl Family in order to try their luck as a hunter.

This was risky, of course, but traveling with the more experienced hunters who were affiliated with the gang, like Levin and Dale, was much safer than trying their luck on their own. Besides, if they killed a tough monster and brought some valuable relics back to sell at Sheryl's shop, the children could make significant money or exchange their finds for permission to borrow better weapons and gear.

And so, by making her members climb the ladder from cheap laborers to valuable assets, Sheryl constantly pushed them to better themselves and to strive for a larger, more prosperous organization as a whole.

Akira was genuinely impressed to hear all of this from her. "Wow, you really are something else, Sheryl. Come to think of it, you even attend the city's dinner parties with that Inabe guy, don't you? I mean, I don't know much about those myself, but I do know you've got to be a pretty big deal to get invited. Even Katsuragi was surprised to hear about that."

As Akira had at best only a shallow understanding of what she had accomplished, his compliments were accordingly rather general in tone. He might as well have been saying "I don't really know anything about that, but it sounds impressive, so it probably is."

Yet Sheryl, thrilled to be praised by him at all, beamed radiantly. "I appreciate you saying so! But again, none of that would have been possible without your support. It pains me greatly to think that I haven't yet managed to repay you for all you've done for me, but I'll keep growing my gang and business, and one day, I promise, I'll return the favor. So please think of your continued support as an investment—one that will surely be worth it in the long run."

"Don't worry. I wouldn't have gotten two billion from Inabe without you, so in a way, your debt to me's already paid off." Inabe had indeed loaned Akira this money with Sheryl as the guarantor. In other words, Akira thought, Inabe must see a lot of potential in Sheryl—otherwise he wouldn't have been so quick to shell out so much.

"Then count on me for even more benefits in the future! At the moment, the shop's sales are quite in the black. That said, our expenses have also increased, including those needed to grow the gang, so managing the finances has gotten a lot tougher as of late."

"Being a gang boss sounds like a lot of work," Akira observed, and added lightly, "Don't take this the wrong way, but honestly, I was glad you chose to take charge back when all this started. I'd never be able to handle it all."

At that, Sheryl teased, "Oh? I bet you'd do a better job than you

think. Want to try it for a day? I'll assist you, so don't worry."

"No thanks! I don't want that whole burden put on me."

"Really? What a shame," she said with a breezy smile. But inwardly, she was genuinely disappointed.

After talking with Sheryl for a while longer, Akira became aware that more time had passed than he'd realized, and he made as if to go.

But Sheryl wasn't ready to part with him just yet. "You're leaving already? I was hoping we could spend a little more time together. You don't have anything else you need to hurry back for, right?"

"Sure I do. I wanna go home and take a long, relaxing bath." Akira had planned to spend the day researching possible guns and powered suits while in the tub, like he'd been doing for the past several days. Staying here any longer would cut into his bath time, so he wanted to head out.

But Sheryl didn't back down. "A bath? Then why not just take one here? While we were remodeling the base, I had them give the baths a makeover as well. The executive bath is especially impressive."

"Like, in terms of size, or of interior decor?"

"Both, actually, but that's not all. It's a little hard to explain, but if you just take a soak, you'll understand the difference. It'll be better if you just experience it for yourself." Hoping to pique his curiosity as much as possible, however, she added that this was the tub she used herself, and it was a world of difference from the one Akira was used to washing in at her base. Erio and Aricia had also given it five stars—Sheryl offered her officers the right to enter the bath as a special perk, and opportunities to use it were even traded among gang members as a kind of currency.

Now Akira couldn't help but look interested. Seeing this, Sheryl gave him an alluring smile.

"So, what do you say? Wanna try it?"

He hesitated at first, but in the end, his curiosity won out.

◆

The executive bath, a brand-new bathroom constructed during the base's remodel, was entirely white and gave off a clean, luxurious aura. The tub itself was wide enough for ten people to stretch out comfortably at once and so felt quite spacious. On these merits alone, it already surpassed Akira's bath at home—but this wasn't all that impressed him.

As he climbed in, he immediately felt a new sensation on his skin. "Whoa! This is amazing! I can't really put into words why, but it just feels incredible!"

Sheryl, who'd naturally entered the bath with him, smiled in satisfaction. "That's because it has a high-tech system that fine-tunes the water's composition to the perfect bathing standards, you see. Thanks to this, we can enjoy a better bath than with just regular hot water."

"Huh, fascinating. You're right, it really does seem different somehow." Akira scooped up some water in his hand and examined it. It looked indistinguishable from any other water, and yet, perhaps because Akira could feel such a difference with his body, the liquid appeared to his eyes a little glossier than normal.

"To be honest," said Sheryl, "I didn't really understand what the big deal was either until I tried it. It kind of defies explanation, huh?"

"Yeah. I guess there are all kinds of baths out there, no?"

This new bathing experience had put Akira in a good mood—and Sheryl pounced on the chance to bring her naked body closer to him.

"If you like it that much, I don't mind if you come here to use it every day, you know."

He hesitated for a few seconds. "Er, n-no, that'd be kinda..."

Sheryl didn't miss the fact that he had wavered. *One more little push ought to do it*, she thought, and with a completely natural motion, she grabbed his hand. "If you're thinking you'll put me out by coming here every day, don't. You're the reason we're even able to have such a nice bathing area, through both your efforts as our patron and your supply of highly valuable relics to the shop. We couldn't have done it without you." She kept her eyes fixed on him

as she continued. “Regrettably, however, we haven’t yet been able to repay our gratitude to a satisfactory level. If you like the bath here that much, then might you allow us to pay you back at least a little by using it?”

Pressed this far, Akira found it hard to refuse, and his pleasant experience was tipping the scales in his mind toward agreeing.

I got him! Sheryl thought, so happy that she beamed at him without realizing it.

But at that moment, a tactless jingling interrupted them—an alert from the bathroom’s built-in data terminal, indicating she was receiving a call. Since this was the executive bath, the terminal had been installed so Sheryl or her officers could receive messages and issue orders even while bathing.

“Er, Sheryl, something’s ringing.”

Sheryl didn’t speak for a moment. “Yes, I know.” *Honestly, could the timing be any worse?* she thought, but she let go of Akira’s hand. Then, in a harsh tone that clearly communicated her ire, she snapped at the terminal. “What is it?”

“O-Oh, well,” said a nervous voice, “Viola wants to discuss something with you and Akira, Boss.”

“Akira and I are taking a bath right now. Tell her it can wait.”

“Y-Yes, Boss.” Panicking in the face of Sheryl’s wrath, the gang member hung up immediately.

Sheryl took a breath to calm herself down. Everything was going so well. There’d been a small disruption, sure, but she could probably still salvage the mood. Allowing herself to hope, she turned her attention back to Akira.

The terminal rang once more.

“What is it *now*?” she barked, even more upset than before.

On the other end, Sheryl’s subordinate broke out in a cold sweat. “Er, I told Viola what you said, Boss, but she insists it’s an emergency, so she’s heading in there to see you.”

“*What?!*”

Sheryl exchanged a bewildered glance with Akira.

Viola really did join them in the bath—and brought Carol with her.

Neither were shy about exposing themselves to Akira—in fact, they cozied right up next to him as they leisurely lowered themselves into the water. Their nude bodies gave off an adult allure that Sheryl's frankly lacked.

Carol's body was augmented with enhancements she'd paid through the nose for, greatly increasing not only her physical strength (necessary for hunters) but her body's attractiveness and charm as well. With this seductive body of hers, she'd shot many a man through the heart—sometimes literally.

Viola was also careful about maintaining her figure, as doing so gave her an advantage during negotiations. When her opponent's gaze and attention were on the supple curves of her body and away from the discussion, she found it easier to trap them.

Though employed in different ways, their naked appearances were captivatingly beautiful, and their gorgeous facial features only made the women look even more enticing. Yet Akira turned to them with an utterly uninterested, exasperated look.

"If you're gonna soak in here, can't you just do it normally?"

Carol looked like she'd expected this exact response as she cheerfully replied, "Oh, c'mon, what's the harm? It's not like the view's bad, right?"

"Well, I guess not, but still—"

"Oh, was that a compliment?! I appreciate it!"

Akira hadn't meant anything of the sort, in fact, but Carol insisted on interpreting his words as praise. The boy, for his part, had no idea why he was being thanked, and frowned, puzzled. It was true that his words hadn't *denied* he was enjoying the view, and Carol wanted Akira to realize what he'd essentially admitted, hoping it would make him more conscious of her looks in the future. She didn't know whether this seed would actually bear fruit, but she saw no harm in planting it just in case.

Sheryl, however, immediately saw what she was up to, and did some weeding before the seed could take root. "Viola, you had something to discuss with us? Seeing as how you've interrupted our bath to come talk to us, it must be quite urgent."

That was all it took for Akira's attention to slide away from his

perplexity over why Carol had thanked him and onto the important matter at hand. The women both smirked, amused by Sheryl's tactic, before Viola broached her main topic.

"Yes, it *is* quite urgent, in fact. After all, it concerns the procurement of Akira's new gear, as well as the bolstering of your gang's forces."

Neither Akira nor Sheryl had expected this, and it showed on their faces. Smiling, Viola explained that Kiryou wanted Akira and Sheryl, and the members of her gang, to test out their all-in-one support system.

For Akira, this would provide the opportunity to use a powered suit that only the most successful of hunters could typically afford. As Shizuka had been asking around at all the companies that sold powered suits for information on their products, Kiryou had deduced that Akira was in the market for one. It would be devastating for Kiryou if Akira ultimately chose a suit from another business, right after Yumina had accompanied him specifically to sell him on the Kiryou suit's capabilities. And so, desperate not to miss this chance, the corporation had turned to Viola for help.

Sheryl, for her part, would have the opportunity to introduce the all-in-one support system to her gang, dramatically boosting the Sheryl Family's military might and beefing up her relic shop's security. For now, she had Inabe's support in exchange for the Old World terminals she'd provided him—but with Kiryou's suits, she wouldn't need to rely on him as much.

The more Viola spoke, the sweeter the deal sounded to Akira and Sheryl. But since this was Viola they were dealing with, they both knew there had to be some kind of catch somewhere.

"Just so we're clear, Viola, you aren't scheming something again, are you?" Akira asked.

"Of course I am, but you're not my target, so what's the problem? Besides, if this goes well, both of you stand to gain tremendously."

"Then who stands to lose?"

"Oh, I'd say every powered suit manufacturer that isn't Kiryou. And Katsuragi, probably." If she got him to agree, Akira could take a

brand-new, cutting-edge powered suit for a test run, and maybe even snag one of his own at a discount, while Sheryl could bolster her gang's forces. Kiryou would then have a powerful hunter using their product, a fact which they could advertise. But the other powered suit manufacturers would lose the chance to secure Akira's patronage, and the more Sheryl's gang relied on the support system, the less gear they'd need to buy from Katsuragi.

In any scramble for business opportunities, there were inevitably losers. Akira got this, so he had no objections here. This was a matter for businessmen to deal with, and Akira had no obligation to throw away new equipment for himself and more power for Sheryl's gang just so that Katsuragi could profit.

If he did decide to test the powered suit out, Viola added, he wouldn't need to buy his own model directly from Kiryou—he could order it through Shizuka's shop like usual. And if he agreed to buy Kiryou suits exclusively, in the future the company would send him other models to test, which he could also buy on the cheap if he so wished. Even if he were furthering Viola's scheme by accepting, he had no reason to refuse.

Sheryl chimed in, "Viola, just to confirm: Will this scheme, or any of the other schemes you no doubt have in the works right now, be in Inabe's best interests?"

Inabe's recent warning to Sheryl had put her on edge. She was worried about his Old World terminal plan going belly-up somehow because of her own carelessness, and she wanted to make sure Viola's plotting wouldn't make that fear become reality.

But Viola immediately replied, "I can't promise that. In fact, depending on how things shake out, it could very well ruin him."

Sheryl blanched, and she turned an extremely critical eye on the info broker. "And just what do you mean by that? You know as well as I do that making an enemy of the city's top brass will undermine everything we've worked for so far—"

"But it's not like we need to get in bed with them either, right?" Viola said with a wicked grin. "In case you've forgotten, I'm working with you because Akira asked me to. Your link to Akira is more important to me than your partnership with Inabe, so the former is

my priority. So it's entirely possible that Inabe will end up in an unfavorable position as a result." Viola piled on further arguments that made it harder for Sheryl to object. "It will only help you in the long run if your patron has more powerful gear, and strengthening your gang's defenses will make Akira's job there easier too. Rather than getting into bed with Inabe, you should be in bed with Akira. In order to uphold my promise with Akira, I've worked hard for both *your* sakes, not Inabe's. Even if he's a city leader, I'm under no obligation to help him over you two, right?"

Sheryl was caught. If she answered no, she would be prioritizing Inabe over Akira. And if she said yes, she would be signing off on a scheme that might bring a city executive to ruin. So she didn't respond at all.

"Oh, or were you perhaps planning to drop Akira and make Inabe your patron instead? Well, I *do* understand how you feel—however strong Akira might be, a city executive's support would surely prove more useful." Viola's utterance was so preposterous that Sheryl was at a loss for words. So Viola kept going, her malicious grin growing wider. "But I must apologize—if that was your plan, I can't cooperate with you anymore. I'd rather Akira not kill me."

"I wasn't planning that at all!" Sheryl declared, raising her voice—exactly as Viola had expected.

"Then you don't have any objections?" the devious woman said with a grin.

"N-No, no objections at all," Sheryl responded, her smile wooden.

"Glad to hear it! Well, now that I have permission from both of you, I'll be getting out first. I have some details to work out with Kiryou, you see."

Viola emerged from the bath and left the room. As Sheryl watched her go, the girl's forced smile gave way to a glare. Akira, for his part, was still reeling from Sheryl's outburst moments earlier, and Carol observed them both with an amused smile.

After calming down, Sheryl submerged herself in the hot water and sighed. The water quality might have impressed Akira, but its healing properties were still no match for Viola's shadiness, and

Sheryl felt even more exhausted than when she'd gotten in the tub.

Letting Viola talk as much as she'd wanted had left Sheryl at a disadvantage, but shutting her up would have been admitting that Sheryl couldn't match Viola, which was an even worse outcome. So at first, she'd planned to not let Viola speak at all—until Sheryl remembered what Tomejima had told her. He'd allowed Viola to sit in on his discussion with Akira on the condition that she wouldn't say a word no matter what happened. True to her word, Viola had kept silent—and Tomejima himself had fouled up the negotiations as a result.

"I'm damned if I do, damned if I don't," Sheryl muttered to herself. "Honestly, that woman really is devious. What should I do?"

An extreme option arose in her mind: *Should I kill her?* But even if she could pull this off—which was not at all certain—she recalled that Viola was insured by revengeware for three billion aurum. If Sheryl killed the woman carelessly, the girl would find that price on her head—an unofficial bounty, but a bounty all the same. So murder wasn't an option.

"Of course," she continued thinking aloud, "that wouldn't be enough to stop some people from trying, but I'm sure she's got bodyguards hired for that exact purpose. She's thought of everything."

Viola was so duplicitous and manipulative that more than a few people out there wanted her dead. But as long as the disadvantages to killing her far outweighed the benefits, they could do nothing but hope that someone else would do the job down the line. By expertly maintaining that balance without any mistakes, as she'd done up until now, Viola had survived yet another day.

As Sheryl mumbled to herself, Akira scooted away a bit and focused on enjoying his bath. Naturally, he'd also realized there had been some questionable business between Viola and Sheryl, but as he'd been the one to ask Viola for her help in the first place, he didn't really know what to tell Sheryl right now. He glanced at Sheryl from the corner of his eye to gauge her current mood.

Carol spoke up with a smile. "Honestly, it looks like you're just as

clueless about women as ever! If you're not sure what to say to her, don't say anything—just go up to her and give her a big hug."

"Er, really? That's all I need to do? But—"

"No need to be embarrassed! You're already naked in the bath together, so what's the big deal?"

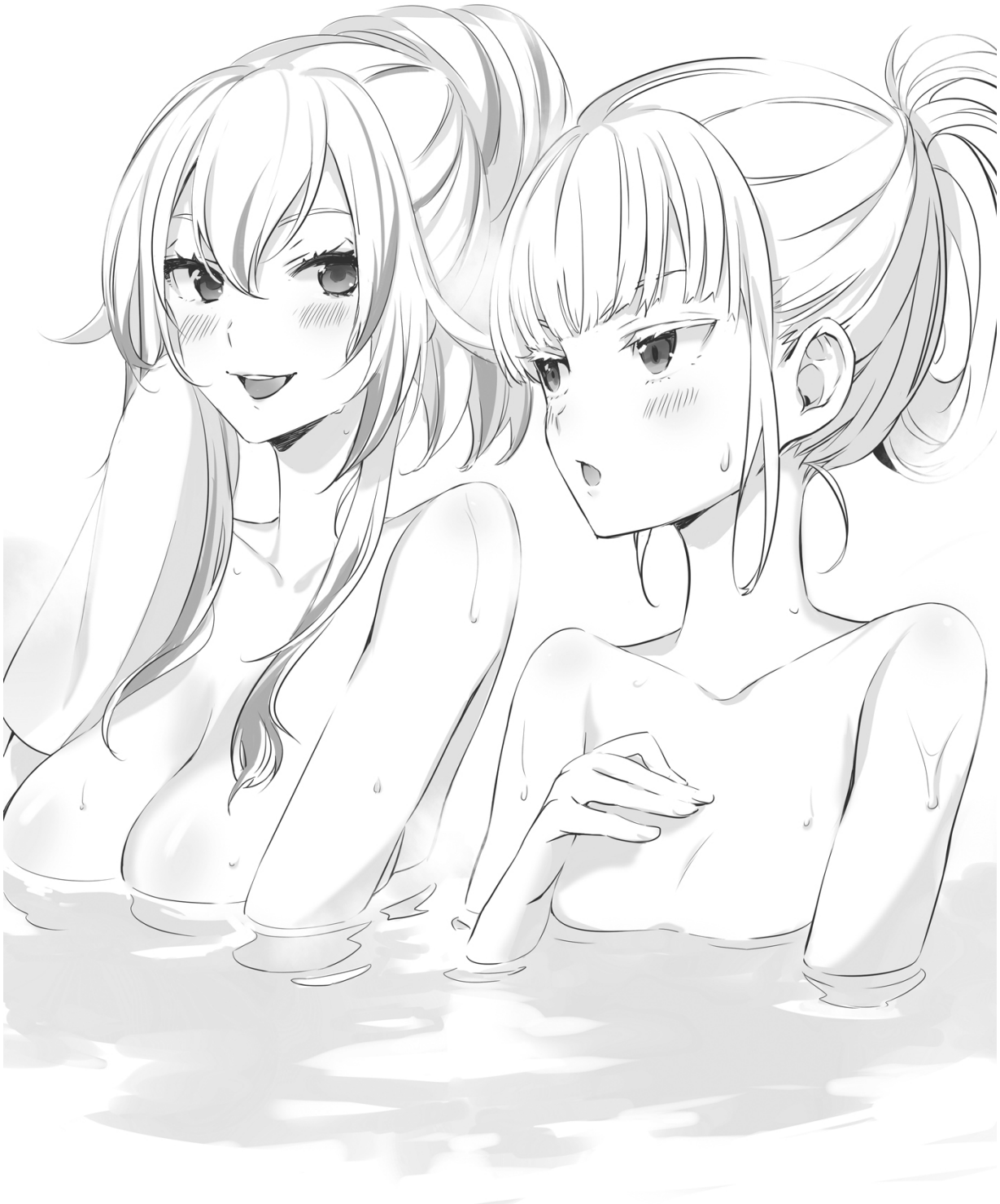
"I-It's not that I'm embarrassed." Still, he couldn't help but wonder if something that simple would actually work, and he looked back at Sheryl.

She was staring at him expectantly.

Carol also glanced in Sheryl's direction and grinned teasingly. "Whoops, looks like you were a little too late! Sorry, Akira, that won't work anymore. Hugs are only about half as effective if the other person's expecting it."

"Oh, really? Never mind, then."

Sheryl heaved a deep sigh and made her way over to Akira, pouting as she did so. Then she turned to Carol with a look of displeasure. "You know, it's no wonder you're always hanging out with Viola, because you're just as bad as she is."



Carol had deliberately given Sheryl hope that Akira might come over and embrace her, then told Akira it wouldn't work if she was hoping for it. From Sheryl's sullen expression, it was clear she hadn't found Carol's antics too amusing.

"Guilty as charged," Carol replied without a hint of remorse.

Sheryl sighed deeply again, exasperated. However, that helped her clear her mind. She dropped her pout (which had partly been an act), and her expression returned to normal. "Come to think of it, why do you even hang out with that woman? Aren't you worried you'll get wrapped up in one of her schemes someday and die?"

"Well, it's a long story. Apart from that, though, she's a capable woman with money, info, and connections. There are all sorts of benefits to staying in her good graces. The proposal she came to you two with just now wasn't so bad, right?"

"I suppose not, no." Sheryl was just a child from the slums, and yet Viola had raised her up until she could comfortably sit in on the meetings of city executives. That and the fact that people kept hiring Viola despite her terrible reputation forced Sheryl to acknowledge Viola's competency.

But acknowledging her skill wasn't the same as tolerating her. Sheryl couldn't understand why Carol would want to fraternize with someone like Viola.

Carol gave the girl a gentle smile. "Listen, Sheryl. Viola's someone you should doubt as much as you trust. If you're ever unsure how to handle her, a healthy wariness is always going to be the safest bet. And if you feel like she's going to cause you trouble, just part ways with her and leave her to her own devices. Let sleeping dogs lie, as they say." Then she added a light warning. "But if you ever consider using her, outwitting her, or going around behind her back, don't! Others have tried, and bringing *those* people to ruin is what she gets off on the most."

"I-I'll keep that in mind," Sheryl replied. Carol was treating her like an amateur at handling Viola. But the girl didn't think Carol would lie to her in front of Akira, so she decided to trust her.

At this point, Akira piped up as well. "Just so you know, Carol, I plan to kill Viola next time she tries to put one over me. So if you

aim to revive her again, I'll have to kill you too."

"If you decide to do that," said Carol without hesitation, "at least let me know first. That way, if she asks me to protect her, I'll know to turn her down. Then you can shoot her."

So Carol would let him dispose of her friend. Akira looked a little conflicted, but not because he thought she was being heartless or cruel.

"Are you sure you wouldn't stop it?"

"If I asked you to stop, would you listen?"

"Er, well, probably not, but—"

"Right?"

"No, that's not what I meant. You wouldn't stop Viola from targeting me?"

"If I asked Viola to stop, do you think she'd listen?"

"Er, well, probably not."

"Right?" Carol grinned. It was the same kind of amused look one might give at finding something slightly amusing during a casual conversation, and yet they were discussing the life and death of her friend. Akira found her attitude a little difficult to understand, but he wasn't surprised. Even when he'd shot Viola, Carol had displayed the same attitude toward her—and Viola toward Carol. Both had accepted that this was how they treated one another.

And yet despite it all, Akira could tell they were close. It was this bizarre bond of companionship between the two women that puzzled him most of all.

Their conversation finished, Akira relinquished his body to the relaxing bath once again. As he soaked in the specially treated water, his expression became one of pure bliss.

"You look like you're in paradise," Carol commented. "Do you really like baths that much?"

"Well, yeah. And also, this bath is just, like, on another level, you know?"

"On another level? Like how?"

"Huh? I mean the water quality, obviously. Can you not feel it?" As Carol was bathing in the same water he was, he found it strange

that she couldn't recognize the difference.

"Oh, I see," said Carol, understanding dawning. "In other words, you're used to cheap baths at home. All that money you've earned, and you choose to bathe in poverty. Tragic, really."

"Well, excuse me for having a cheap bath," Akira grumbled. "Then what kind of bath do you usually take at your place?"

"Oh, the bath at my place? It's pretty awesome, actually." With an air of pride, Carol detailed the features of the bathroom in *her* home—a step up even from the facility they were currently in. The room and tub weren't as large, of course, but they were more than sufficient for one person. What's more, the size of the bathroom could actually be adjusted if she wanted more space, and its interior was high-class enough to impress her wealthiest visitors.

Her water adjustment system was also more advanced, capable of fine-tuning her bath to optimally suit her augmented body. It could inject recovery or maintenance nanomachines into the water to treat simple wounds, as well as more subtle abrasions and injuries like skin blemishes and various aches and pains, with a single soak. She could also cleanse herself of residual nanomachines while bathing.

Her bathroom's antechamber contained a full-body dryer that utilized wind pressure: easier, quicker, and more hygienic than drying herself by hand, not to mention a more refreshing experience after emerging from the bath.

Just one of these features would have convinced Akira that her bath was superior to his, so he was duly impressed. "There's even recovery medicine in your water? Now, *that's* fancy. But even if you're just buying the cheap kind, that's got to make for a pretty expensive setup, no?"

"You're right, it costs a pretty penny, but I think it's worth it. When it comes to taking care of your body, there's no such thing as overdoing it. Some people assume that having an augmented body makes it easier to manage, and that's true in some respects, but to maintain your ideal figure, you've still got to put in the work. I mean, look at these. Pretty impressive, no?"

She pointed to her chest, and Akira's eyes followed her gesture.

The complexion, shape, and size of her breasts were all flawless, like a work of art. Even at a glance, it was clear how much money she'd poured into maintaining them.

But when Akira gazed at her chest, it only reminded him of the hardship Sara had to go through to maintain her own augmented body.

"Yeah. Having an augmented body like that, well, it must be tough, huh?" he said.

It sounded to Carol almost like he was pitying her rather than agreeing, and she nearly forgot to smile as she replied. "Well, I won't deny it." Her body had ensnared countless men in the past, and yet Akira clearly only saw it as a high performance piece of equipment that was as difficult to maintain as it was powerful. *I know it's not that he's not interested in women, but that makes it sting all the more. Honestly, is there no getting through to him at all?*

At that moment, Carol noticed the look in Sheryl's eyes. The girl was clearly just as troubled by Akira's attitude. Understanding each other's dissatisfaction and frustration at Akira's indifference toward their bodies, Sheryl and Carol sighed as one.

◆

When Akira got back home, he tried out his own bath again. But it felt just as it always had, and left him dissatisfied.

"I guess now that I know what luxury feels like, it's hard to go back," Akira mused to himself.

Alpha, joining him in the bath like usual, smirked. *Looks that way. And it's not like you can go to Sheryl's base every day to bathe, so I guess this bath's due for an upgrade soon, isn't it? You've worked hard to earn all that money, so* I *think you deserve to splurge a bit.*

Hearing this, Akira nodded, his mind made up. "Yeah, you know what? You're right! And why wait for 'soon'? I'll call the company first thing in the morning and—"

No, I would advise against that.

Akira suddenly looked concerned. "And why's that? I've got

enough money, right?"

You do, but I suspect if you use those funds on a bathroom renovation now, you might find yourself in a tight spot later on.

Alpha reminded him that, thanks to his deal with Kibayashi, the reward money for his accomplishments in Iida would all go to pay for the gear and ammo he'd used. True, Inabe had loaned him two billion aurum in supplementary funds, but these had already been deposited in Akira's account and so were now mixed in with the rest of his money. If he made a withdrawal to finance his bathroom upgrade, Kibayashi might consider it a violation of his agreement to only spend the money on necessary hunter equipment. To be on the safe side, Alpha explained, he would need to postpone his project until either he'd spent the entire two billion or the negotiations over the Old World automatons were complete and his final reward had been determined.

"Oh yeah, good point," Akira said. And at the same time, he finally understood why Kibayashi's grin had been so wide when Akira had readily accepted his proposal. The executive had forced him to spend the money he'd earned in a certain way, and now that Akira had tasted what luxury was like, he realized the possibilities he'd given up by agreeing. Without him realizing it, Akira's mindset had slid a little closer toward resembling a normal hunter's.

Chapter 170: The Powered Suit Test

The day Akira was scheduled to test Kiryou's powered suit, he headed to the designated meeting spot—Shizuka's shop. There was a "Closed" sign on the door, but he opened it and entered. Shizuka, Elena, and Sara were already inside waiting for him.

Viola had been the first to inform Akira of Kiryou's proposal, but only because it had suited her purposes that Akira should know about it beforehand. Shizuka had contacted him later with the official request. And as a result of the agreement the shopkeeper had hashed out with Kiryou, Elena and Sara were also going to be participating in the trial.

Kiryou's main target was Akira, of course, but Elena and Sara were rank 40 hunters and therefore promising potential patrons. Moreover, the company had identified the two women as close associates of Akira. So Kiryou had permitted them to join him, anticipating that a joint recommendation from such tight-knit comrades who'd risked their lives together in the wasteland would hold greater advertising potential than an average sales pitch.

Typically, hunters would find new suppliers for their equipment as their hunter rank rose. A store that mostly dealt in cheaper goods could only procure cheaper gear. However much a hunter might prefer such an outlet, they couldn't reach greater heights while continuing to use only lower-end gear with limited functionality. More advanced gear also reduced the risks of heading out into the wasteland. So it was normal for rising hunters to decide a store no longer met their needs and to move on to one that suited them better.

Yet even though Shizuka's shop only sold gear for hunters rank 30 and below, two hunters at rank 40—and one ranked even higher

—were still choosing to buy from her. In other words, if Kiryou could get such a highly esteemed proprietor to consistently recommend the manufacturer's products to such clients, it would be a huge shot in the arm for the company. And so it was that Shizuka, Elena, and Sara found themselves accompanying Akira to Kiryou's powered suit testing facility.

They were all dressed casually, even Akira. The boy rarely got to see the three women in anything other than powered suits, body armor, or store uniforms, so he found the sight fresh and new.

"Thanks for coming here to help me out on your day off, Shizuka," he told her.

"Don't mention it. You're a big spender of mine, so as the owner of this establishment, I ought to do at least this much. Plus, this is a good opportunity to get Elena and Sara's gear situation squared away as well."

"Oh, so our equipment is just an afterthought to you?" Elena chimed in. "Isn't that a little harsh?"

"Spend as much at my store as Akira here has, and then you can complain all you want. Kiryou only invited you here today to play second fiddle to Akira, right? You ought to be thanking him."

"Yeah, yeah," Elena said, dismissing Shizuka with a wave. Then she turned to Akira with an exaggerated bow. "Oh, great Akira! I offer you my most humble gratitude for today! Please grant that I might use my honorable status as your friend to persuade Kiryou into condescending to sell us cutting-edge gear on the cheap!"

"Go right ahead!" Akira said with a grin. "Show off those negotiation skills you're so proud of!" If getting them this chance would pay them back even a little for all they had done for him, he was happy to oblige. "Come to think of it," he added, his tone becoming more serious, "you're going to get Sara a suit too, right? I thought a powered suit would be incompatible with the nanomachines that her augmented body needs."

"A cheaper suit would, yeah," Sara answered with a grin, "but not one with a price tag in the hundred millions. We let Kiryou know about the nanomachines beforehand, so they should have a suitable model prepared. In that sense, too, we're really grateful that we

were able to come with you today, so thanks a bunch!”

“No problem. I’m glad I could help you out,” Akira said from the bottom of his heart.

They continued chatting for some time until a Kiryou representative arrived, right on schedule. The hunters were then escorted by car to the testing facility—Druncam’s training grounds.

◆

On the outskirts of Kugamayama City’s lower district, there stood a training facility the size of a warehouse. The inside was vast, and the interior walls could be raised or lowered as needed for more complicated arrangements, like simulating the narrowness of dilapidated buildings or the layouts of various ruins. There were also practice weapons for use against AR simulations of monsters, allowing for the trainee to experience a desperate situation without having to worry about wasting ammo or being in actual peril.

Such were Druncam’s training grounds, funded with the support of the organization’s affluent backers within the city walls. Recently, however, Kiryou had also been using it as a testing site for their support system.

The Kiryou representative led Akira and the others into a large room within the training facility. Inside, powered suits were lined up for Akira, Elena, and Sara to wear and try out. The corporation had prepared five different models for Akira, and six for Elena and Sara together. While this wasn’t a huge variety, Kiryou had told their selling agency to prepare their priciest products—just one of these suits sold for several hundred million.

Akira examined the suits on display. “How much is this one?” he asked.

The sales rep, Maebashi, smiled cordially. “These models have been prepared specifically for you to test, so don’t worry about the price for now—try them out to your heart’s content first! They have all been selected with your ability in mind rather than the cost.”

Maebashi clarified that the higher-priced ones were definitely more capable and powerful, and he guaranteed, on his honor as a

salesman, that the prices were reasonable for what the products offered. But not just any high performance model would fulfill Akira's requirements, Maebashi added. Even if Akira bought the most advanced model on the market, he'd be paying for a cutting-edge doorstop that would just gather dust at his home if it didn't check all his boxes. Therefore, rather than focusing on cost, Maebashi urged him to evaluate the suits based on whether he could actually see himself using them. After all, if Akira heard the cost before trying them out, the price tag might skew his perception of the product, so it was in his best interest to test them first.

Then Maebashi gave the boy a deliberately impish grin. "That being said, if I'm being completely honest, our company will be selling these to Cartridge Freak, not to you, Mr. Akira. And I have no say in what prices Ms. Shizuka decides to sell them to you for. There are many different factors for her to consider, such as inventory and profit margins, so I'd be remiss to offer you a specific figure. Please understand."

Maebashi's tone was casual and lighthearted, but Akira understood what the salesman was really getting at. And since the boy had specifically requested to buy the gear through Shizuka rather than directly from Kiryou, he refrained from saying anything further. "Yeah, I understand," he said with an awkward smile.

"Thank you, sir. Now then, let me begin by explaining the features and functionality of each suit."

Without waiting for a response, Maebashi launched into his spiel. At the same time, a female representative began detailing the particulars of Elena's and Sara's suit options to the two women, while the reps' supervisor talked business with Shizuka. The discussions were as intense as one would expect when several hundred million aurum were on the line.

◆

After putting on one of the powered suit test models, Akira headed to the facility's training grounds to try it out. Thinking he would start with some calisthenics, he began stretching. Shizuka,

who accompanied him, watched with an amused look on her face.

"Akira, maybe I'm just an amateur, but I can't see why a powered suit would need *that* ability."

This suit let Akira reinforce the ground beneath his feet with force-field armor, allowing him to accelerate or stop on a dime by adjusting its "grip." At the moment, rather than stretching on the ground, Akira was currently standing sideways on the wall—adhering his feet to the "ground."

"The folks who don't need it are probably better off," he replied, "but it sure is convenient. And personally, I'd rather have it than not."

Shizuka grinned, amused by the gravity-defying feat before her. "All right. I guess once someone reaches a level like yours, they start wanting different results from their powered suits, huh?"

"Not letting me walk on walls isn't a deal-breaker," Akira clarified. "But if it can't, I'll have a hard time moving as fast as I want. And being able to walk on walls and ceilings expands my options in battle. Like if I ever found myself cornered in a dead end, I could just run up the wall to escape— Whoa?!" As he talked, Akira tried running down the side of the wall—but lost control of his force-field armor and fell to the ground. He hadn't quite mastered the technique to control his own two legs while maintaining the exact amount of force field needed to keep the soles of his feet on the wall.

"Ugh... Man, that's hard!" he said, but he had a grin on his face.

That's because I've been handling such things for you thus far, Alpha said, seemingly amused. *Since that suit doesn't belong to you, I can't adjust its system to your specifications, so I'd be more shocked if you* could *pull off that kind of stunt.*

Yeah, I guess, he replied. In order to intuitively manage something that wasn't originally a function of the body, like controlling the application of force-field armor, one needed to teach their brain the proper method by practicing over and over. At the same time, the suit's system would need to understand the messages the wearer's nerves were sending and recognize them as input. While the process might be faster for some people than

others, it certainly wasn't something one could accomplish right away.

But with Alpha's support, his own suit's system had automatically been tuned to be compatible with Akira from the start. Thanks to this, he'd hardly had to spend any time at all learning the basics of how to operate his suit and could focus on polishing up his combat skills instead, allowing for more efficient training. Now that he was on his own for this test, however, he was realizing just how essential Alpha's aid had been.

I guess that means that without you, I still have a long way to go. Seems I just gotta work even harder.

That's right. I'll help you all I can, so do your best!

Akira glanced at Shizuka, looking embarrassed, then climbed back up on the wall and resumed stretching, checking the responsiveness of the suit as he did so. Shizuka watched him for a while longer, then called out.

"Say, Akira, I need to ask you about something. Can you listen to me without getting distracted?"

"Yeah, I'm good. What's up?"

"Kiryou came to me with a proposal regarding your gear, you see." If Akira bought a gun and scanner to go along with his suit, she told him, Kiryou would give him a discount on the whole order. Moreover, the next suit he bought from Kiryou would be even cheaper—and if he signed an agreement to buy all his gear exclusively from them, he'd get even steeper discounts the longer he remained their client. Shizuka then took some time to spell out the potential advantages and disadvantages of their offer.

When she finished, Akira looked conflicted. "Shizuka, is this one of those deals where the more you dig into the details, the more conditions and stipulations you find buried there?"

"Pretty much. I've only given you a general overview so far. The offer does include a number of finer details, like that the rate at which your discount increases depends on how much you spend and how long your contract lasts, or the penalty for buying other companies' products while under said contract."

"I figured as much." The look on Akira's face clearly added, "What

a pain!”

Shizuka smiled wryly. “Well, I’ll handle those details for you, if you’d like. Would that be okay?”

“Yes, please! That’ll be a big help! Thank you, Shizuka!”

“No need to thank me! With how much you’ve spent at my store, how could I not do that much for you? Now, having said that, let me first make sure I correctly understand the features you’re looking for in a gun. You found the SSBs more cumbersome than you would have liked, so you wanted something a bit smaller, right?”

“Bingo. Larger guns are more powerful, which is great and all, but the SSBs are a little *too* big for me, I think.”

As they were chatting, Elena and Sara came up, having also donned suits to try out. Seeing Akira standing on the wall while casually conversing with Shizuka, the two looked amused.

“Seems like *you’re* having fun,” Sara teased. “Or is that just your special way of testing suits before you buy them?”

“Well, something like that,” he replied seriously.

Sara was intrigued. “Oh? Then maybe I should try it too.” She at least knew the theory behind using force-field armor to adhere to and run along vertical surfaces. She put one foot on the wall, stepping down hard to make her powered suit recognize the wall as footing, then attempted to defy gravity and stand on the wall. But the moment her other foot left the ground, she lost her balance and fell off—though she managed to land on both feet.

“Uh, Akira, don’t you find this rather, well, difficult?”

“I’m used to it by now. Sure, it was hard at first, since I’m just borrowing this suit, but it’s gotten easier. Actually, is your suit even equipped to do this in the first place?”

“I thought it was, at least.”

“Then here, I’ll give you a hand.”

Akira reached and helped her back up. This time, with his support, she succeeded. But she could only stand still on the wall like a statue—any move whatsoever threatened to topple her.

Elena watched them with a grin, then reached her own hand out to Akira. He took it and helped her stand on the wall as well. Like Sara, she couldn’t make any extra movements, but she managed to

stay “upright” in place.

With the boy’s help, the two women were now maintaining their balance perpendicular to the floor, while Akira himself stood between them. Shizuka, the only one still on the floor, couldn’t help but laugh out loud at the sight.

“Honestly, what are you three doing?” she said.

“Good question,” Akira said with a grin, aware of how bizarre he must look.

At that, the four of them burst out laughing.

Having checked their suits’ basic capabilities, Akira and the others next tried a test that was a little more intense. Using equipment Maebashi lent them, they held a mock battle against AR monsters. After getting in position, the three of them trained their mock weapons on a mechanical behemoth with an excess of limbs.

“Ready, Elena? Sara?”

“Anytime.”

“Let’s do this!”

Akira pulled his trigger. Since his weapon wasn’t real, no actual bullets were fired. However, the trajectory of his shooting was calculated all the same, and his AR target responded as if it had been hit. The machine guns on the monster’s back instantly swung in his direction.

Noticing the movement through their visors, the three hunters leaped out of the line of fire, relying on the boosted strength their suits offered.

At the same instant, both sides opened fire. In reality, they were just running around the training ground holding guns, but the augmented reality program displayed bullets flying all over the place. There were no obstacles to hide behind, so they had to keep moving lest they get caught up in the enemy’s barrage.

They ran, leaped around, and dodged shots, firing back whenever they saw an opening. Virtual sparks flew, indicating where their shots struck the enemy, but because the monster was also programmed to simulate having a dense layer of force-field armor, it went right on firing, unhindered.

Sara was the first to fail out of the test. She found it difficult to control the unfamiliar powered suit's physical capabilities and collapsed on the ground with a crash. The monster, seeing its opportunity, targeted her and took her out.

Elena was next. One mistimed dodge, and she was pelted with enough gunfire for the program to designate her as dead.

Even Akira didn't survive after that. With all the monster's gunfire now concentrated on him alone, he was powerless to defend himself against the bullet onslaught and perished.

The program ended, and the multilegged monster vanished. Akira, Elena, and Sara got to their feet and held a team huddle.

Akira said, "That enemy's settings were a little tougher than we could handle, huh?"

Elena nodded. "Seems so. If it eliminates us before we can even test our suits' movements, that defeats the purpose. So let's turn the difficulty down a notch."

Sara, on the other hand, seemed more dissatisfied with her weapon. "The enemy's difficulty is one thing, but don't you think these guns are also too weak? I'm pretty sure all my shots were on the money, and they didn't even make a dent."

"Well, this is a test for powered suits, after all," Akira said. "If we use overpowered guns and kill the enemy too quickly, we won't get to see what the suits can do. Though I suppose we could stand to make them a little stronger."

"Yeah, I guess we could try that," Elena conceded.

The three of them restarted their mock battle, trying out a number of different settings along the way. Once they each had a good idea of what their suits were capable of, they moved on to the next test.

By the time they'd thoroughly put all the suits Kiryou had prepared through their paces, the sun was starting to set. The time allotted for their test was running out anyway, so they decided to call it a day.

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After leaving Druncam's facility, Shizuka proposed that the four of them have dinner together. They found a restaurant that was slightly pricey but close to the city walls and sat down at a table for four. Perhaps those patrons who were used to spending hundreds of millions of aurum at the deluxe eateries nearby wouldn't have found the menu anything to write home about, but for Akira and the others, it was quite luxurious. They expectantly eyed the food being delivered to their table, and dug in as soon as it was laid before them. It was delicious, of course.

As they ate, they chatted about the powered suits they'd tried out.

"Out of all the powered suits you tried today, which one do you like best, Akira?" Shizuka asked.

"Hmm, from what I could tell, I think I liked the first one the most."

"The most expensive of the bunch, then. I thought so."

"Really? How much is it?"

"For the base model, around 1.2 billion aurum."

"That much, huh?" Akira felt conflicted. Naturally, he could afford it—his total budget was two billion, including the amount he'd set aside for ammo. But he'd already allocated five hundred million for a truck and bike, and he'd have to buy a gun and a scanner as well. So he needed to be careful.

Shizuka added that any optional add-ons or customizations would drive the price up further. Perhaps some accessories were cheaper than others, but low cost indicated low quality; Shizuka therefore did not recommend these. Yet it was best not to skimp on add-ons for the sake of saving money, since they allowed a suit to do more and do it better.

Now Akira looked even more torn.

Shizuka noticed the change in his expression. "So the discount from Kiryou's proposal might come in handy." She turned her gaze to Elena and Sara. "Would you two like to sign up as well?" She explained that if the two of them signed the exclusivity agreement with Kiryou along with Akira, the three of them would enjoy a greater discount than any one of them signing up individually.

Elena didn't think this was a bad deal, but she also understood the disadvantages that would come with it. Though participating in the test was a great opportunity to snag some Kiryou powered suits at a discount, no doubt she and Sara would have to shell out more than a hundred million. For the moment, if they decided the price was too steep, they could just walk away. But if they accepted Shizuka's offer here, they would no longer have that option.

In other words, Shizuka was asking if they would give this freedom up for Akira's sake.

And Elena understood her perfectly. "Sure, why not?" she said with the confident grin of a team's professional negotiator. "But if that's how it's gonna be, you'd better let me sit in on your discussion with Kiryou."

"You'll have to go easy on me, then," Shizuka said with the smile of a businesswoman.

Naturally, Akira didn't understand the nuances of the conversation quite as well, but he at least grasped that they were about to get roped into something on his account, and he looked apologetic. "Er, are you both sure about this?"

"Yeah, don't worry," Elena said, her tone breezy. "Depending on how well negotiations go, the benefits could far outweigh the risks." She beamed at him confidently. "You know, I'm a pretty decent negotiator. No need to back down *there*. Besides, business discussions are one area where I still have the edge on you for now. If I want to maintain my dignity as a mentor, I've got to show off every now and then. And I'll start by negotiating with Shizuka right here, right now. So take notes, Akira!"

"You got it! Let's see what you can do," he replied with a hint of a smirk. Beneath his outward demeanor, however, he really was grateful she'd decided to help him out.

With that, the restaurant table became a battleground. Akira enjoyed watching Elena and Shizuka ruthlessly hash out the details of how they would be involved in Kiryou's proposal, even as he relished his meal. By the time all the plates on the table had been cleared away and they'd put in their orders for dessert and café noir, Elena and Shizuka had hammered out an agreement at last.

Tomorrow, they would bring their own proposal to the table with Kiryou, and negotiations would begin anew.

After an evening of great food and lively conversation, Akira and the others left the restaurant. He parted ways with them and headed home, walking down the street in good humor.

You know, he told Alpha, *with Shizuka, Elena, and Sara all helping me out, I feel good about this next set of gear I'll be getting.*

Yes, things are progressing nicely, she replied. *At this rate, the day that I introduce you to the ruin I want you to conquer might not be so far off after all.*

No kidding?! he replied cheerfully. But his smile was forced, and inwardly, he felt a little disappointed. In other words, whatever he bought this time—and probably even next time—still wouldn't be enough to conquer Alpha's ruin. In short, he still wasn't good enough.

Alpha's smile, meanwhile, remained the same as it always did—the more help Akira had procuring powerful gear, the quicker she could accomplish her own goal.

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As a result of Shizuka and Elena's new negotiations with Kiryou, Akira was asked to participate in another test. This time, the testing ground was the wasteland, and Akira was participating alone. Kiryou wanted to see how he would perform wearing a brand-new suit while making quick, irregular movements, punching or kicking debris into the air, and similar actions.

The suit Akira wore was the one he had decided on and purchased. As such, it was already his, and Alpha had gone ahead and assumed control of it. So Alpha's support was now available to him, meaning the suit's extremely high performance wasn't going to throw him off like before. In the end, Akira put on a much more impressive showing than during the AR fight—making sharp turns at high speed, kicking off footholds to turn quickly in midair, and many other astounding feats. Maebashi, who as Kiryou's sales

representative had accompanied him, and the Kiryou engineers who'd come to watch wore expressions of utter shock. To Akira, however, it was just a warmup, and when he was done, he returned to Maebashi and the others.

"Sorry for the wait. Now let me try it with the add-ons."

"Certainly." Maebashi ordered the engineers to remove the suit from Akira and attach the requested accessories.

Akira's new suit was a CA31R model, known by the name Cerberus. It was highly customizable—one could add all kinds of bells and whistles to fit a variety of situations. He had already bought the base model—now he would be taking these various modifications for a spin.

The main body of the suit was all black, with metallic armor and a scanner on the outside. To this, the engineers fitted performance enhancers and a helmet. They also attached two support arms to the back of the suit.

Akira put the suit on again. After listening to a rundown of the purposes for the add-ons, he and Alpha went to work testing each of them out.

First, he prodded the armor and sleek black bodysuit with his finger. This served to test the minimum strength and area of force-field armor that the suit could produce, as well as how quickly it deployed and disengaged. Then he made sure the armor would activate on each section of his body with the same speed and efficacy, and he kept it switched on while doing some light exercises to check the force field's flexibility.

Next, he checked the degree to which the accessories had improved his physical abilities. While deliberately making quick, intense movements with his suit, he used his scanner to scout the area and checked its radius and accuracy. He focused on a pile of debris in the distance and zoomed in, making sure the zoomed-in 3D display that was projected ever so slightly in front of his corneas—or perhaps directly into it—was comfortable for his vision.

The helmet, which doubled as a display and allowed him to control his equipment, was as impressive a piece of hardware as it looked. It didn't have a visor or a face shield—even one's hair was

completely exposed while wearing it. Instead, it generated an extremely resilient force-field shield to protect the wearer's entire head. Akira activated this shield and tapped on the invisible barrier over his face to check how it felt.

The support arms on his back were multijointed, designed for transporting luggage. They weren't agile by any means, but they could carry heavy weaponry with ease. Akira tried pressing on them a little with his suit-enhanced strength, and they pushed right back with the same force.

After checking everything he needed to, he asked Maebashi to change up his accessories. But when he heard what Akira had in mind, the sales rep looked surprised.

"Th-That seems like an awfully overspecialized setup to me. Are you sure?"

Akira was essentially proposing a setup that focused on efficiency—and nothing else. In theory, this was the optimal configuration, but only assuming that the user made absolutely no mistakes, which was rather unrealistic. For example, some highly advanced desert utility vehicles had layers of force-field armor protecting them, but many other vehicles in the same price range used armored tiles instead. The force-field armor was great because it kept the vehicle's body light, but it could quickly consume energy, depending on how long it was active and at what intensity. In the wasteland, where one could run into a monster at any given moment, one would at least want the armor to be strong enough to withstand such attacks—and so one's energy would run out quickly.

Of course, a high-powered scanner could quickly detect approaching monsters, allowing one to raise the force field's intensity right at the moment of attack and thus saving energy. But many monsters could camouflage themselves, and if the scanner failed to detect them, hunter and vehicle alike would be in serious trouble. Armored tiles, on the other hand, were always active from the moment they were placed on the vehicle. Even if they weighed a little more, they were the more appropriate choice in nearly every situation given how much less energy they used.

Maebashi felt like Akira's requested configuration was akin to

outfitting his desert utility vehicle with force-field armor. The setup was highly lopsided—it would allow him to pierce right through monsters much stronger than himself, but offered so little defense that a weaker beast could easily sneak up and kill him if he wasn't careful.

At the very least, it wasn't something Maebashi would ever recommend to a customer of his.

The sales rep toyed with encouraging Akira to reconsider, but he felt conflicted: Akira was a child, yes, but one capable enough to be offered an opportunity to advance his rank. So perhaps this configuration wouldn't present a problem for him after all—in fact, maybe it was the *optimal* solution for a hunter as skilled as him. And yet, as he gazed at the boy, Akira really didn't seem that strong. Sure, his movements while trying the suit out had surprised Maebashi, but the child in front of him just didn't have the gravitas of the many other high-ranking hunters he'd done business with in the past. So Maebashi hesitated.

But Akira didn't. "Yes. As long as there's room in my budget for it, I'd like to try it out."

"C-Certainly." Maebashi gave the boy a polite bow. His own uncertainty didn't matter. The customer had requested this, and the customer was always right.

While they waited for the suit to be customized according to the given specifications, Maebashi introduced Akira to a man named Someya, a representative for Toson Corporation, which manufactured the SSB multifunction guns. Someya told Akira a bit about himself and his company; then, with a smile, he moved on to his main topic.

"We've heard about all you've accomplished with the help of our products, you see, and we also heard you were in the market for a new weapon. Since you're our esteemed patron, we would love the opportunity to continue to serve you. So, just for you, I've come here to show you some of the finer products we offer—if it wouldn't take up too much of your time, that is?"

Akira sensed a hint of pressure in Someya's smile and felt like he

couldn’t refuse. “A-All right.”

“Oh, thank you so much! Now then, please take a look here.” Someya set the suitcase in his hand on the ground, opened it, and showed Akira what lay inside.

A single gun.

“*This* is the weapon our company recommends for you, Mr. Akira, with the utmost confidence—our pride and joy, the LEO multifunction gun!”

The LEO was only slightly longer than an AAH assault rifle but much more massive, and even at a glance, it was obvious how different it was from the average weapon. Its muzzle could be customized to fire anything from regular bullets to explosive projectiles, and at incredible rates of fire. A layer of extremely resilient force-field armor could be deployed to protect the weapon and suppress its recoil, greatly reducing the burden on the user.

Then Someya moved on to the weapon’s defining feature. “Now, doubtless you have already realized that this LEO multifunction gun surpasses the SSB in every single way. But wait—there’s more! The LEO uses a different type of ammo as well—the C-bullet! And so, Mr. Akira, please take a look at *this*!”

Someya picked up the LEO and fitted a magazine and energy pack inside it. Then, with the help of the powered inner wear he had underneath his business suit, he held the gun at the ready and aimed it at a pile of debris a short distance away.

He pulled the trigger.

The bullet that erupted from the gun was so powerful it could hardly even be called a bullet—in terms of force, it was more like a cannonball.

A charge bullet, or C-bullet for short, was a special projectile essentially composed of force fields. Therefore, its strength and mass were proportional to the amount of energy it was supplied with—meaning that potentially, its power could be enhanced to levels no normal bullet could even hope to reach. In theory, there was no limit to how much one could charge it, as long as one had the energy, but due to the technological limitations at the moment, overcharging a C-bullet would cause it to disintegrate and might damage the gun as

well—or even blow it up. Thus, there was at present a ceiling to the force that C-bullets could pack.

Even so, the C-bullet was a unique, *extremely* powerful type of ammunition. Someya's one shot blasted the pile of debris to smithereens, scattering fragments everywhere. Akira's eyes widened in surprise.

Satisfied by his reaction, Someya continued demonstrating the LEO's compatibility with C-bullets. He showed how the C-bullet's piercing ability, not just its raw power, could be boosted by charging it with more energy, blowing a perfectly round hole in a flat piece of rubble. Then he fired yet another one, this time boosting its impact—instead of piercing through the debris, the projectile sent an intense shock wave through the latter that caused it to crumble. Finally, he demonstrated how, in a pinch and with the proper technique, C-bullets could even function as anti-force rounds.

Someya turned back to him. "So, what do you think? Pretty outstanding, isn't it? I guarantee that this gun is the best possible choice for your next weapon. And so, if you choose right now to purchase this LEO multifunction gun along with your powered suit—"

"Er, about that..." Akira broke in, sounding awkwardly apologetic. "That C-bullet ammo is probably so expensive that I'll need the city's assistance to afford it, much like anti-force ammo, right? I'm not really in a position to afford a ton of ammo like that, so while I'm glad you showed me all this stuff, well..." Although he'd already asked Kibayashi to try getting him cheaper anti-force rounds, there was no guarantee the executive would succeed, and Akira just couldn't afford to buy a gun that used the expensive C-bullets on top of that.

But Someya had anticipated his response, and his grin grew wider. "No worries! If you buy our LEO right now, my company is prepared to help you out. In fact, we will use our influence to fulfill your request to Mr. Kibayashi for cheaper ammunition."

A hint of suspicion entered Akira's expression. "How do you know about that?"

"Mr. Kibayashi had to disclose that information as one of the conditions for serving as your proxy. A number of companies

obtained the information as a result, including ours."

"Oh, that makes sense," said Akira, looking less concerned.

"Normally, discounts for C-bullets aren't awarded to hunters below rank 50," Someya went on. "At your rank of 45, Mr. Akira, they would be quite difficult for you to obtain. But with our assistance, you can get the ammunition you need."

"Before I give my answer, can I ask how much the gun is?"

"We will sell it to you for two hundred million aurum."

"All right, I'll take it."

The gun itself was more than capable enough for his needs, and if the right to cheaper anti-force rounds and C-bullets were included in the deal, Akira couldn't refuse. The only downside was that he wouldn't be able to afford any more guns on his current budget, but he'd just have to make do.

"Glad to hear it!" said Someya. However, he had another proposal ready. "Incidentally, as thanks for your purchase, we've prepared another offer for you—we'll give you two more LEOs for the price of one, so that you can stay within your budget!"

Naturally, Akira thought this was an outstanding deal—which was why he found it extremely suspicious. His truck and bike had cost five hundred million. His powered suit had been 1.2 billion. And three LEOs would come to six hundred million. Altogether, that was 2.3 billion. This was before negotiating discounts and the like, but however many conditions he swallowed, he doubted they would suffice to bring the total down to his original budget of 1.8 billion. This tipped him off to the possibility that he was being scammed, or at least that there was some outrageous caveat tied to the offer.

His skepticism showed on his face. "And what's the catch?"

"Yes, well, actually, we were wondering if you might be open to serving as a sort of spokesperson for our products."

Since Akira had taken down an army of mechs and a horde of automatons using his SSBs, Toson was hoping they could use his achievements to advertise their weapons, as well as get a few comments from him praising their functionality and ease of use. Someya knew that Akira might back out of the deal if he thought this an unreasonable condition or that they were trying to put one

over on him, so he sought to soothe the boy's suspicions.

"I understand you might feel uneasy about this, but please consider our advertising costs. It would be more expensive and risky for us to pay someone else six hundred million to fight—and win against—a horde of automatons or an army of mechs on their own, with only a powered suit and an SSB, for advertising purposes than it would be to pay you for the rights to advertise that feat, since you've already pulled it off."

That did in fact make sense to Akira, because if he hadn't had Alpha's support, he wouldn't have wanted to do any of that either. He'd only barely managed to survive *with* her help; for anyone else, it would have been a certain death sentence. Maybe there were some hunters out there who could survive such an ordeal, but he doubted any of them would do the job for a mere six hundred million—and the fact that Toson was coming to him with this proposal more or less confirmed as much.

Given this, the deal seemed legitimate to Akira, and he nodded. "All right. As long as that's your only condition, I don't mind."

"Thank you so much! In that case, I'll explain what this will entail."

But as Someya was about to launch into the details of what Akira would need to do, they were told that the modifications for Akira's suit were finished, and since time was starting to run short, Someya let Akira try out the newly customized suit first. Akira didn't plan on asking for any more customizations after this, and he tested it out rather quickly.

What do you think, Alpha?

No complaints here.

All right.

Akira went back over to Maebashi and bowed slightly. "This is perfect. Thank you very much."

"No, the pleasure is all mine. I and Toson thank you for your purchases today. As long as our products assist you in reaching even greater heights, we could ask for nothing more. Now then, it looks like we're running out of time, so we'll need to hurry things up."

Akira quickly prepared to leave the wasteland. After removing his

suit and handing it over to the Kiryou engineers, he walked back toward the city, one step ahead of Maebashi and Someya. Their destination was Druncam's training grounds.

One other result of Shizuka and Elena's deal with Kiryou was that Akira had agreed to another condition in exchange for a deeper discount on his powered suit—namely, to cooperate with the all-in-one support system's development team. And as part of this arrangement, he would be participating in a mock battle using that system.

Chapter 171: Yumina’s Potential

Sheryl had been invited to Druncam’s training grounds as a party with a vested interest in the event, as had Inabe. Kiryou was still trying to get the city’s defense force to adopt their all-in-one support system, and Inabe had agreed to entertain Kiryou’s sales pitch on the condition that he be allowed to test the system for a fixed period of time at a company he had personal dealings with. If the results of the trial period proved favorable, then and only then would he introduce Kiryou’s system to the city. And Kiryou had been thrilled to accept Inabe’s offer.

At least, that was how the situation looked on the surface. In truth, a variety of complicated and shady deals were going on behind the scenes between Kiryou and Inabe through Viola—who’d been the one to come up with the proposal, though only those involved in the deals knew that.

Sheryl was being treated as a company representative invited by Inabe. And she did actually own a business, though one connected to the city’s black market. But even though Kiryou knew she had such connections, they didn’t allude to this fact, nor did they even investigate her link to Inabe. They were essentially employing the same method, though on a smaller scale, that Yajima and Yoshioka had when the latter had leaked their products to Ezent and Harlias. It was in the best interests of Sheryl, Inabe, and Kiryou alike to keep quiet about the whole thing.

At present, Sheryl was busy watching the most powerful members of her gang desperately hold their own against a horde of AR monsters, while Takagi, Kiryou’s representative, gushed to her over his own achievements. “Well? Pretty amazing, huh? Our company’s all-in-one support suit—no, the support system *I* developed, code-named King’s Mind, is really something else.”

Takagi was the leader of the system’s dev team, and the one

overseeing the maintenance and development of the suits worn by Katsuya and his team.

"Our company's powered suits themselves are worthy of praise as well, of course," he went on, "but they still can't exceed the potential of the user wearing them. The myth of powered suits is that anyone can instantly become stronger by wearing one, regardless of talent or level of training, and for a long time, that was all it was—a myth. But with King's Mind, myth has now become reality!"

Takagi was feeling thoroughly confident in his system, in part because Katsuya and his team's showing had been so impressive.

"Look at how their ability has skyrocketed! They're like completely different people, now that King's Mind is backing them up! That's the power of Kiryou's support system! Pretty impressive, huh?"

Indeed, the support system's power was evident just by looking at how much better Erio and the others were faring. Against monsters whose difficulty level was set to suit a hunter of rank 30, Sheryl's gang members had achieved a complete victory with the system's aid, despite having been wiped out completely in the earlier battle without it. The system's effectiveness was indisputable.

"Yes, I can certainly see that," Sheryl replied cordially. "I had no idea it would make that much of a difference. It is impressive."

"Thank you for your kind words! But you know, that's not all the system's capable of. Its true potential will reveal itself in due time. Look forward to it!" Takagi left with an enthusiastic bow, thrilled to have gotten the response he wanted.

But Sheryl's cordial smile vanished with him.

"You don't look too satisfied," Inabe spoke up. "Is there something about this support system that displeases you?"

"No, nothing like that."

"Then what's wrong?"

"Well, when I think about how they're probably hoping they can get me to use this system to replace Akira, I can't help but feel a little upset."

"I see." Inabe understood her meaning and turned his gaze in Takagi's direction. When he did, his expression grew grim—Udajima was there next to the dev team leader.

Udajima—an executive of the city, like Inabe—was a figure Kiryou wanted to impress. Takagi, too, was enthusiastically recommending Udajima the system he'd so proudly developed. Because of Inabe's connection to Akira, Kiryou was prioritizing their arrangement with Inabe instead—but Druncam was another story, because their connection to Udajima had deepened of late.

Udajima had dispatched Katsuya's team to his section of territory within Kuzusuhara's depths to clear out monsters and gather relics, and the success of this operation had greatly benefited Druncam and put Udajima in the lead in his power struggle with Inabe. Because of that, Inabe thought it only natural that Druncam would rather partner up with Udajima than himself.

But this was also why Inabe wasn't particularly upset, even as he watched Mizuha cozying up to Udajima nearby, though she'd been fawning all over Inabe during the recent dinner party. In other words, there was another reason for his grim expression. Right beside Udajima was none other than Viola.

"Now then, Sheryl, here's a question for you. What's Viola doing over there with him?"

Sheryl replied with complete composure. "She said that it's necessary for the plan."

"I see. So you're holding the reins tightly, then?"

"If you'd rather get rid of her just in case, I certainly don't mind. But if so, you'll unfortunately have to do the job yourself. She has invested three billion aurum in revengeware, which is more than I can handle."

Inabe's eyes narrowed. "Should I take that to mean you're not confident you can control her? I believe that would qualify as a problem."

But Sheryl's calm demeanor didn't falter. "That depends on your definition of control. While I might not have power over whether she lives or dies, I'm confident she's working in our best interests, so I'm not worried. Think of it like this: leaving her alive might be a nuisance, but right now she has enough worth to us to let her live."

During their previous discussion, Sheryl had been forced to steel herself before replying to Inabe that there wasn't a problem. But this

time, she didn't look pressured in the least and answered without hesitation. Noticing this, Inabe was a little taken aback—but also impressed.

"Very well. We'll let her do as she pleases for now."

If Sheryl was no longer intimidated by Inabe, he would now have to be more cautious around her. But at the same time, had she not been so formidable, she wouldn't have been worth bringing on board as a coconspirator to his plan. For the first time, Inabe was finally recognizing Sheryl as a true accomplice.

Meanwhile, Sheryl the accomplice regarded the situation calmly—because she remembered what she and Viola had discussed in her executive bath. The info broker had reminded Sheryl that she was supposed to be in bed with Akira, not Inabe. The girl had been so afraid of making an enemy of the city that she'd forgotten something so basic, and now that she'd remembered, even if she did end up antagonizing Inabe, it wouldn't be a problem to her.

Naturally, continuing to have Inabe's support would be preferable; Sheryl hadn't changed her mind on that point. But even if circumstances eventually pitted her against Inabe and they broke off their partnership, it wouldn't matter, as long as it led to the best outcome for her and Akira. With this in mind, Sheryl had no more reason to hesitate.

Of course, she still didn't want to be the one to create those circumstances—in fact, she intended to do her utmost to make sure they didn't come to pass.

But even so, she and Akira always came first. Not Inabe, and not Viola. That was the crux of the matter for her.

In a way, this thought process made her more like the conniving witch Viola than she cared to realize.

As Sheryl and Inabe continued watching her underlings' mock battle, they were approached by a small group of people. In the lead were Yumina's engineer Fulta and a Kiryou executive named Yodogawa. These were followed by Udajima, Viola, Mizuha, and Yumina herself. Yodogawa pitched an idea to Sheryl and to Inabe on Kiryou's behalf—a mock battle that would pit Erio and the others against Yumina alone.

Sheryl was caught off guard. "Er, I don't mind, but may I hear the reason?" When Takagi had told her earlier that she'd soon see the Kiryou system's true potential, Sheryl had taken this to mean that Katsuya's team and Akira were slated to fight. So hearing that the battle would involve her own gang members—and that Yumina would be their opponent—caught Sheryl off guard.

In fact, the plan had originally been just as Sheryl had guessed. But Fulta had intervened and proposed the current arrangement instead, then persuaded Udajima to agree, which had sealed the deal.

Yodogawa, the Kiryou executive who'd signed off on the change in plans, hesitated for a moment, considering what he could and couldn't say to a company outsider. "Our company's all-in-one support system actually has two separate development teams. Fulta here is developing a different version of the system, distinct from Takagi's, with her own team. So we thought this would be a golden opportunity to see what her system is capable of too."

"Well, in that case, I have no objections," Sheryl replied.

"I appreciate your understanding. Then, without further ado, shall we get the mock battle underway?" Yodogawa gave Takagi and Fulta a look indicating that they should get to their stations and prepare.

The two engineers bowed to Sheryl and Inabe, then headed to rejoin their teams. Both wore looks of determination. They would have to make their preparations under the watchful eyes of two city executives—they were being monitored to make sure neither team cheated. Their subordinates likewise appeared tense as they got everything ready, with both teams staying alert for any funny business from their opponents.

Sheryl, feeling their level of resolve seemed a little excessive for a mock battle, turned to Yodogawa. "I apologize if I'm prying into private matters, but are there any, shall we say, *other* circumstances hinging on the outcome of this battle, by any chance?"

She was asking more out of curiosity than caution, so had he said that this was a company secret he couldn't divulge, she wouldn't have pressed him. But then Inabe latched on to her words.

"I'd like to know that too," he said.

"Likewise," chimed in Udajima.

Yodogawa was acquainted with Inabe, having done business with him on several previous occasions, so the Kiryou leader could have dodged an inquiry coming from Inabe alone. But with *two* Kugamayama executives expressing interest, Yodogawa had no choice but to spill the details.

"Both teams' versions of the system are outstanding products that we have the utmost confidence in," he reassured them. "But because of this very fact, there's something of a rivalry between them." He went on to explain that Katsuya's team had been testing Takagi's system, that it was performing better than ever, and that Kiryou's management had been so pleased with the results that they'd immediately prepared to sell it to the city.

Fulta's project, on the other hand, had more or less been a money sink. Her team had no achievements to its name, and had been on the verge of getting shut down. But then Yumina's success had changed all that—not only had she kept up with Akira, a hunter who'd been offered a rank advancement commission, but her own performance in the Kuzusuhara depths and the Iida Commercial District Ruins had been remarkable, causing Kiryou's top brass to regard Fulta's system in a new light.

However, this unexpected result had left them in a bit of a quandary. Yumina, the very person who'd led Fulta's system to success, had been deemed unqualified by Takagi's system. Kiryou's management could see only two possibilities—either Fulta's system was so much better than Takagi's that it had done what Takagi's system couldn't, or there was some critical bug in Takagi's system concerning its ability to evaluate hunters appropriately. So the company's leaders were torn over how to proceed.

"In the end," Yodogawa concluded, "we decided to resolve the situation by combining both teams into one. Regrettably, however, a dispute broke out over which one of them should lead the new team, and—"

"And so, the results of this mock battle will decide that," Sheryl finished for him.

"Yes, that's the gist of it."

"But then wouldn't it be better to have Katsuya's team go against Yumina instead?" she probed.

"That was the original plan, but then there was a second disagreement, you see." Katsuya's team, Yodogawa divulged, had made great strides in performance while using Takagi's support system, and Takagi had confidently attributed their success to the functionality of his program. But Fulta had disagreed, arguing that Katsuya and the others were already highly capable to begin with. So in order to find out who was right, she'd suggested that another team use Takagi's system during the mock battle. Under different circumstances, Takagi would have demanded in the interest of fairness that she, too, find another participant (other than Yumina)—but in this case, requesting a change of opponent would have been tantamount to acknowledging that there was a flaw in his own system. As Takagi had complete faith in what he'd developed, he'd consented to Fulta's request.

They had agreed that both Yumina and the members of Erio's team would be equipped with exactly the same gear—the only differences would be the support systems each used and the number of opponents on each side. An entire team against one individual could hardly be called a fair fight, but both engineers had known this going in—they cared less about which side won and more about how the systems performed throughout the battle. Even if one side technically lost, as long as it could somehow demonstrate that its system was superior to the other, its developer could claim victory. And Takagi and Fulta were equally confident in their own creations.

Preparations were now complete, and the mock battle would soon begin. Sheryl lined up Erio and her other subordinates, stood in front of them, and gave them a final pep talk. "This battle is ten against one. You all have the same gear as your opponent—the only difference is your support system. Whatever happens, do the best you can. And if you manage to win, I'll award each of you a million aurum!"

Her underlings were shocked for a moment, then let out cries of

joy and renewed enthusiasm—all except Erio, who looked very grave at her words.

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Each side started out in one of two rooms at opposite ends of a long, wide corridor. Flanking the corridor were also a number of side passages and shortcuts that each team could use to make their way to their opponent's initial room. As time passed, the active battlefield's radius would gradually shrink, and anyone who was out of bounds would be eliminated from the battle, preventing either side from just holing up in its starting room the entire time.

If one team used the side paths to reach the other room before their opponent exited it, they would be positioned to ambush the enemy coming out. However, if the other side anticipated this strategy, its members could not only be prepared for the ambush but also know exactly where to fire. Thus, the field had a simple setup, but one that left a lot of room for tactics, and by adding additional options—like letting each team choose their starting point or giving them different win conditions—the strategic possibilities could be expanded even more. For this battle, however, both teams knew where their opponents would be starting from, and their goal was simple—to wipe out the other team entirely. Therefore, Erio's team planned to use their numerical advantage and charge into Yumina's starting room immediately, launching an all-out attack against her. After all, as long as at least one member of Erio's team survived, they would be victorious.

Erio and the others waited in their room for the starting signal. With a chance at a million aurum each, the children were raring to go, ready to bolt out the door the moment they got the green light.

Erio, who had been designated their leader by the all-in-one support system, called out, "Hey guys, just so we're clear, don't get careless simply because the boss has offered a reward for winning. We need to take this seriously."

"What are you on about, Erio?" replied one kid. "Why would we *not* take this seriously? A million aurum is on the line, you know?"

"Yeah," declared another. "With an incentive like that, we'll do whatever it takes to win. We'll fight as though our lives are on the line."

Erio could tell from their smug grins and casual tone that whether they realized it or not, they all assumed they were going to win—which was exactly what Erio was afraid of. He let out a small sigh.

"All right. Then let me say it another way—be as cautious here as if you were fighting Akira. Does that help put things into perspective?"

At that, his comrades' smiles vanished, and hesitation appeared on their faces instead. Some began to voice their dismay: "Huh? Wait a sec, Erio. Are you saying we're gonna *lose*?"

"I'm not going that far, no, but we shouldn't let our guard down. That's all."

The children exchanged glances. None of them believed they'd ever stand a chance against Akira. Never mind one against ten—Akira could no doubt win even against *fifty*, even when he was the only one without a powered suit. After all, he had done exactly that some time ago, when he'd paid a visit to the base of a medium-sized slum gang and slaughtered nearly everyone on the spot. Even if the children had the support system's assistance and the same gear as Akira, the boy would certainly wipe the floor with all ten of them—everyone, including Erio, agreed on that point.

Yet one of the boys turned to Erio, looking puzzled. "But back when our warehouse got attacked, that Yumina girl wasn't even with us on the front lines, right? She stayed behind to help out the people in the warehouse, if I remember correctly. Surely the ten of us can win against *her*."

"Sounds like you've *already* let your guard down. Remember, the boss is offering us a million aurum for our victory—a million *each*. Would she really do that if she thought our opponent was a pushover? Of course not. Use your brains, guys!"

They realized he was absolutely right, and their enthusiasm fell sharply. Worried he'd gone too far, Erio continued with more confidence in his voice. "Hey, now, I never said we couldn't win. This support system we have is pretty incredible, after all. I mean, even if

it wasn't a real battle, we were able to take out all those challenging monsters in AR, right? We might actually pull this off!"

Hearing his optimism, their heads perked up with hope.

"But again, that's also only if we give it everything we've got. If we go into this as though Akira is our opponent, there's a good chance we'll win. So don't let your guard down—fight as though your lives depend on it. We won't die even if we lose, so there's no need to be afraid either. Let's give it our all!"

The team's enthusiasm began to rise once more. Seeing that, Erio wrapped up his speech.

"If we win, the boss will reward us. But even if we lose, she might look upon us more favorably, as long as we put in a good effort. So let's do this and surprise her with our show of strength!" He grinned confidently.

"Yeah! Let's win this thing!" they shouted back eagerly.

Their team consisted of the gang's strongest members—yet compared to the rest of the forces that defended the gang, they were little more than grunts. Akira played the largest role in protecting the syndicate, of course, but experienced hunters like Levin and Kolbe had also been with Sheryl's gang for a while, not to mention the newer hunters Tomejima had introduced during the warehouse incident and who had since been hired permanently as security. Sheryl could even get Shijima to send over some of his men if all else failed. Erio's team was virtually unneeded in comparison—better than nothing, of course, but that was all. So they knew they had to improve, but at the same time, many of them had already given up on rising any higher within the gang.

Thus, Erio's words resonated strongly with them. If they proved their ability here, maybe their status would finally change. That thought, along with the enticing reward of one million aurum for winning, kicked their determination back into high gear.

"You're right, Erio! Let's do this!" they cried. Their dismissive attitude toward Yumina had dissipated, yet they were filled with even more zeal than before.

Seeing his comrades alert and raring to go, Erio was also satisfied. *Now we might actually win*, he thought, and the impending

sense of danger he'd been feeling ebbed away.

In truth, Erio had felt extremely skeptical about incorporating the all-in-one support system into the gang. If anyone who used it really could become strong, didn't that mean anyone could replace him? He and his team were currently the strongest official members of the gang. They had trained day after day—recently, they'd even been heading out into the wasteland to practice—and had worked hard to get to where they were. But in the face of the capable all-in-one support system, their achievements amounted to little more than a footnote. There probably weren't enough support suits available to outfit the whole gang, and if the system could make up for a lack of skill so easily, then what reason would Sheryl have to distribute the suits to Erio's team over anyone else in the gang? If the support suits could make anyone as good as him, then Erio was no better than anyone.

This was his greatest fear. For his sweetheart Aricia's sake, among other things, he couldn't go back to being a regular gang member. After coming this far, he couldn't go back to being one of the dime-a-dozen kids in the slums. So right here, right now, he would show Sheryl what he and his team were capable of. He'd try his absolute best to win, of course, but if that wasn't in the cards, he would at least put on an impressive show.

Resolving this in his heart, he gave voice to his determination. "Yeah! Let's show the boss how strong we can be!"

Equally spirited, they all took their positions.

The signal to begin the mock battle came.

Their weapons raised and ready, Erio and his comrades dashed out of the room together.

Four of his comrades were taken out right off the bat—two who were covering the side paths, and two who were aiming at the far end of the hallway but were ready at a moment's notice to back up their teammates if necessary. Yumina had shot them all down from the other end of the hallway and was now bounding toward the rest at top speed.

"Yikes!" Erio, bringing up the rear, frantically leaped back into the starting room.

Thanks to his quick reflexes, he made it in time, but one teammate wasn't so lucky and got eliminated, his powered suit shutting down and forcing him to collapse to the ground.

In only five seconds since the battle had begun, Erio had lost half of his forces. And even now, Yumina was dashing down the hallway with the remainder of the team in her sights.

◆

Awaiting the start of the exercise in her room, Yumina took deep breaths to get her mental state in order and to maintain the proper balance of calm and caution that would allow her to fight in peak condition.

In this battle, she was aiming for a complete victory. She wanted to kick her opponents to the curb so decisively that there wasn't a doubt in anyone's mind who the winner was. Then she could finally break free of the ban Takagi's system had put on her and fight alongside Katsuya and the others again. But for that to happen, she'd need to give her all in this fight.

She'd already told her support system to prioritize finishing the battle in the shortest amount of time she could—thirty seconds at most. As a result, the system had suggested that she head straight for Erio and his teammates' starting point the moment the battle began, regardless of whatever action they decided to take.

Why thirty seconds? Yumina wanted to wrap this battle up before she hit her threshold for how long she could control her sense of time. After successfully achieving that sensation once during the final battle in the Iida Commercial District Ruins, Yumina had since continued to hone her technique. Now that she knew it was possible, it hadn't taken long for her to reproduce the phenomenon. Then, once she could activate this experience at will, she had practiced to maintain it for longer and longer periods of time. Due to her rigorous daily training, she was now able to keep it up for a maximum of thirty seconds.

Compared to what Akira was capable of, of course, this was hardly impressive. Still, she was now far more capable than she'd

been during the Iida incident.

Thanks to the timer in her vision counting down to the battle's start, she knew it was almost time—ten seconds to go, in fact. The timer also displayed the fractions of a second, digits shown after the decimal point, which were decreasing so rapidly she could barely follow them. Yumina concentrated on those speeding digits—and gradually, they began to slow down.

Five seconds left.

The digit just to the left of the decimal had slowed to a crawl. She continued to focus until all of the fractional digits were ticking away slowly.

At that moment, Yumina suddenly recalled the excitement on the faces of Erio's teammates as Sheryl informed them of their million-aurum reward for victory. *I'm sorry, guys*, she thought. *But I need to win this!*

Only one second was left, and yet time had slowed to the point that she could afford to leisurely consider her opponents' feelings in that span. Now the second digit after the decimal was moving slow enough to follow with her eyes. She raised her gun, relaxed yet confident.

The moment the timer hit zero, Yumina burst from the room. There was a long corridor between her opponent's room and her own, but that hardly meant much with the leg power from her powered suit. To Yumina, however, it still felt like a considerable distance. She'd gotten so used to the souped-up support suit Kiryou had given her while accompanying Akira that her current suit seemed lethargic by comparison. She felt as if the support suit couldn't keep up with her—as she ran, she had to put in extra work to move it forward.

Erio and the others came into view at the far end of the corridor, their movements so slow they seemed to be frozen in place. She took her time to make sure her aim was perfect before firing. Judging that the lag in the support system's response time wasn't going to help her aim any better, she made the shots on her own, even calculating their trajectories without any assistance.

Her aim was spot-on, and she scored direct hits on all five of the

gang members she'd targeted.

Is that all? she found herself thinking. *That was pretty easy—no, Yumina, don't let your guard down, and don't get complacent! You can't afford to lose!*

The corridor was completely free of obstacles, so her only option for seeking cover was to duck down a side path. Yumina, however, made a beeline for her opponents without even attempting to shield herself from their fire.

The five remaining members on Erio's team shot at the quickly approaching Yumina, but their movements were much too slow. By the time they could receive the support system's orders and comprehend them, it was already too late. However fast Erio and the others could react, to Yumina they might as well all have been stationary targets.

Naturally, they were shot down the moment Yumina spotted them. Her virtual shots either hit their bodies, incapacitating them, or their guns, rendering them defenseless. She took them out one by one until only Erio was left.

Erio, however, didn't give up. He waited inside the starting room with his gun pointed toward the entrance. His scanner allowed him to see Yumina's figure behind the wall—his comrades had managed to scan the corridor before meeting their end, and their data had been transmitted to Erio. She was bolting down the hallway, heading straight for his room. So he aimed at the entrance and waited for his moment, betting everything on this strategy.

But he never even got the chance.

Yumina entered the room so quickly he didn't even realize she was there. Even if Erio's aim had been perfect, he still wouldn't have hit her.

Erio didn't even have time to spin around and correct his aim before she pulled the trigger. His suit shut down, and he crumpled to the ground. With his entire team out of commission, Yumina was indisputably the winner.

◆

Sheryl and the others had witnessed the entire fight, and the result shocked not only Takagi, the loser, but Fulta, the winner.

"No way... That's impossible!" Takagi muttered.

This was exactly what Fulta had wanted to hear him say for so long, and yet she wasn't the least bit smug about it. She knew that what she'd just watched couldn't be attributed solely to the system she'd developed, and so she couldn't take pride in Yumina's win.

Yumina's demonstration had also shocked Inabe and Udajima. They had both planned to get Kiryou and Druncam to pit Akira against Katsuya's team next, saying they wanted to test the limits of the all-in-one support suit. This mock battle was only supposed to be the opening act.

So they were quite surprised by the outcome.

"You don't look too shocked, Sheryl," Inabe commented. "Did you predict this result, perhaps?"

"Well, I heard about all she accomplished while working with Akira, so it was at least within my calculations."

"I see. Then, just for reference, could you also tell me how much the incompetence of those boys you brought here factored into your calculations?"

Inabe was clearly asking whether Yumina was extremely strong or Erio and the others were just extremely weak. But Sheryl wasn't intimidated. "I won't deny that compared to the hunters of Druncam, those boys are basically novices," she answered calmly. "However, I *was* expecting the support system to improve their chances at least a little more than that. I can guarantee the motivation to win was there, at least. That's why I offered such a large sum as a reward." Sheryl wanted Inabe to understand that while Erio and the others lacked skill, she had put the work in to motivate them sufficiently.

Udajima was also listening to her attentively. "I see," he said. "In that case, let's find out what the other side has to say."

Implicitly, he was asking Takagi to defend himself—but Takagi didn't even hear him. "N-No way... This shouldn't have...!" The engineer still hadn't recovered from his shock at the battle's outcome—he couldn't even finish his sentences. He was convinced there had to have been some mistake.

This in itself told the executives everything—in a sense, his response was even easier to understand than Sheryl's.

Udajima slid his gaze to Fulta. Realizing he was requesting her opinion on the matter, she stole a quick glance at Takagi before answering somewhat awkwardly. "Er, w-well, Takagi's system is set up for team use rather than for individual use, like my system. Maybe that's why there was such a stark difference in each side's performances."

Inwardly wondering why *she* had to be the one to defend her rival, she clarified aloud the implications of what she had said. Takagi's system was designed to improve the efficiency of a team of hunters. But to use it to its full potential, the hunters needed at least to be used to working in teams. Even if the system suggested the best possible actions, how closely people were able to follow those suggestions would depend on their own skill. A team of novices and a team of experts might be given the same orders, yet perform differently based on how accurately those orders were interpreted and executed.

Naturally, Takagi's system was designed to issue orders that suited the team's skill level, but the system would first need to learn the skill level of the team it was dealing with. While it probably didn't need to witness an entire team training session to evaluate their skill, it certainly wouldn't be able to evaluate the boys' abilities right out of the gate. This was why the movements of Erio and his comrades had still been dull and inexperienced despite the system's aid, and why they hadn't stood a chance against Yumina.

Then Fulta moved on to explaining the reason for Yumina's excellent performance. "If I'm being completely honest, I believe Yumina's victory here was mostly due to her own skill. But it was thanks to our system that her natural ability was able to blossom." Yumina was undoubtedly a skilled hunter, she clarified, but that was in part because her support system had helped Yumina polish her skills, something Takagi's system wasn't built to do. And even if Erio's team had been given Fulta's system in this battle instead, they still wouldn't have fought on Yumina's level. Fulta's system offered optimal, specialized support to each of its users, but it needed

sufficient data on the user before it could make those adjustments. The system already had all the data on Yumina that it had gathered throughout the development test period—but this was not so for Erio and the others. It could still use its built-in general knowledge database to support them, but this wouldn't allow them to perform like Yumina. Of course, if Erio and the others had been as skilled as Yumina, if the system had gathered the same amount of data on them, or even if they had received the same level of training, they might have stood a chance. But this still wouldn't have guaranteed their victory—all Fulta could guarantee was the efficacy of her own system. As an engineer, she would be remiss to make assumptions about the talent or work ethic of those using her program.

In her explanation, Fulta made sure to acknowledge Yumina's strength, yet asserted the power of her system as well. "Takagi's system and mine were built to function with groups and individuals, respectively. Even though one side had compatibility issues with the system and the other was extremely compatible, I was surprised to see the battle end so quickly. That's my take on it. But never fear—now that the higher-ups have decided to combine our teams, each system's merits will make up for the other's deficits!"

Fulta then directed her gaze to Yodogawa, who correctly interpreted her intent to pass the baton to him. But before he could speak, Udajima cut in.

"Yet wasn't that girl deemed unfit for battle by the system? What's the deal with *that*? Judging from what I just saw, I can only think there must be some kind of error in the system's evaluation capabilities."

Fulta took another glance at Takagi. Seeing that he was still in no condition to answer, she attempted to provide a reason, inwardly grumbling about having to cover for him so much. "I would say that's probably a side effect of focusing on the efficiency of the team over the individual." If a team whose members all had similar levels of skill suddenly gained a new member whose proficiency greatly differed from the others', this difference might legitimately be a problem for the team's efficiency. Even if the new member was *more* skilled than the others, the system might consider the huge gap in

skill a hindrance to the team as a whole and deem the outlier unfit for the team. And in all likelihood, the system's reasoning hadn't been properly communicated to Druncam. Because the program was still in development, and finer details like the way the system worded its judgments had yet to be fine-tuned, it might have said something that had led Druncam to believe Yumina was just incompetent, rather than unsuited for that specific team.

This was how Fulta chose to gloss over the issue, at least. She could have easily suggested that Yumina had just been much less capable at the time, but that might be taken to imply that Druncam had failed to train her properly. Moreover, if she admitted the true reason for Yumina's growth, she would have to disclose the hellish training Akira had put the Druncam hunter through, which might make Fulta's own system seem like less of a factor. So her excuse might have been a stretch, but it was the best she could come up with.

At least on the surface, Udajima looked convinced. "Very well. Then I guess her exclusion was just a stroke of bad luck. Mizuha, now that we know the reason, I think you ought to be treating her a little better. She was in Katsuya's team originally, if I remember correctly?"

Mizuha answered with a cordial smile, "Yes, absolutely. I'll have her put back on the team immediately."

Was Yumina really so skilled, or had the system just made her perform that well? Udajima couldn't have cared less. All that mattered was that at the moment, Yumina wasn't affiliated with anyone in the desk jockey faction—something Udajima meant to remedy.

Now that he and Mizuha were business partners, Udajima had Katsuya's team under his control. Even if Katsuya and the others decided to work in the Kuzusuhara depths, they wouldn't be allowed to work in Inabe's section. Yumina also technically belonged to the desk jockey faction, but as long as she wasn't considered a member of Katsuya's team, she wouldn't receive the perks, benefits, and jobs that the rest had access to. Well aware of this, Udajima was worried that Inabe might use Yumina's dissatisfaction with the way she was

being treated to secure her services. To prevent this, Udajima had immediately ordered Mizuha to give Yumina the treatment she deserved.

Mizuha was now Udajima's subordinate, so she couldn't refuse. Inwardly, she was furious, as this thwarted her plan to remove Yumina for good, but she was forced to smile and nod.

Thus, with Yumina's win in the mock battle, her desire to return to Katsuya's side had been fulfilled at last. In exchange, she was now bound by a new set of chains, having to answer to an even more powerful organization.

Chapter 172: Another Mock Battle

Akira made his way to Druncam's training facility. He'd been asked to participate in development tests for Kiryou's system, in return for Kiryou lowering the price of his suit. After donning the support suit prepared for him and heading to the testing ground inside the facility, he saw that Elena and Sara were there as well. They were wearing the same kind of support suit that he was, albeit fitted to their own bodies.

"You're here too?" he exclaimed. "And if you're wearing those suits, that means—"

"That's right, we're test participants too. A small price to pay for getting a discount on those ridiculously expensive suits," Elena answered, grinning.

Akira bowed his head. "Thank you both, truly." He knew the discount didn't apply just to their suits but to his as well, so he was grateful.

Reina and Togami were present too. Both were also wearing all-in-one support suits, so they were clearly going to be participating. With them were Shiori and Kanae, who were wearing their usual maid uniforms.

"You two are just chaperones today, I take it?" Akira asked.

"Yes," Shiori answered. "Besides my own reasons for sitting out, if Kanae participated, some combatants might get hurt."

"Y-Yeah, good point." This made perfect sense to Akira. Even in a mock battle with practice guns that didn't fire actual bullets, a martial artist like Kanae would fight with punches and kicks. She might think she was holding back and yet seriously injure someone.

Kanae, however, looked unhappy with Shiori's decision. "Oh, c'mon. I promise I'll pull my punches!"

"No."

"Then, say, Akira kiddo! Wanna have a real fight later to test how

the suit performs in close-quarters combat?”

“Hell no.”

Kanae pouted, looking even more dissatisfied.

Togami, who’d been watching them from his position, said casually to Reina, “Looks like we’ve got the same gear as Akira today. Guess that means we can’t use our difference in gear as an excuse this time.”

Reina grinned. “Then we’ve just got to do so well we don’t need that excuse, no?”

“Confident right off the bat, are we? But yeah, you’re spot-on.” Knowing full well that out of all those present, he and Reina would be most likely to need excuses, Togami couldn’t help smiling nonetheless.

Now that the combatants were all gathered, a Kiryou engineer explained the details of the test to everyone. But when Akira heard them, he frowned.

“Wasn’t this supposed to be a mock battle between a group with the system and a group without? At least, that’s what I thought I heard.”

“Oh, yes, well, that was the plan initially, but a few things happened, and the program was changed. Er, does the new arrangement present a problem for you, Mr. Akira?”

“No, I’m good. Just asking.”

“Then please take your positions, everyone.”

Akira noticed the evasiveness in the engineer’s answer, but decided that even if there were some hidden circumstances, they didn’t concern him if all he had to do was participate. So he chose to overlook this oddity—as well as the peculiar setup of the mock battle, which had them all cooperating with Katsuya’s team.

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The walls of the training facility could be raised out of or lowered into the ground at will, and they had been set up to form a building around two stories high and twenty meters in length. The resulting structure resembled a military base, except that only the front had

walls, while the sides and back were completely exposed. The mock battle's objective was to defend this structure.

The participants were already in position. Akira, who had been stationed on the roof, surveyed his AR wasteland surroundings through the visor he'd been issued for the test. It was the same wasteland scenery he was familiar with—but to Akira, it all felt fake. He stole a glance at Alpha. She was also displayed in AR, yet she seemed to him actually present, far more real than the simulated wasteland.

The way you feel like the only real thing in my vision makes clear just how different you are from typical AR, huh? he commented.

Naturally, she replied with a smug smile. *For one, the resolution of such imagery is much lower. I'm nothing like that cheap holographic technology.*

Alpha's mention of resolution reminded Akira of the high-definition experience of reality he'd had, and how she'd told him his "reality" was nothing more than an image his consciousness generated based on external stimuli. Compared to the real world, this image had a lower resolution and significant lag. She'd also said that continuing to fight while experiencing the world in such a way would have left him at a huge disadvantage against the Old World automatons, since their high processing power allowed them to perceive the world more accurately. He'd managed to take them down last time with Alpha's help, but he knew that sooner or later he'd need to access that higher resolution on his own—at least partly, if not entirely. So he'd been trying to achieve this of late, but he had yet to be successful.

Alpha did say that with the proper training, I'll be able to do something similar, at least, so I know it's possible. I've just gotta keep working at it. He'd been shown a way to get stronger, and Alpha had said it was feasible, so now all he needed was effort and resolve. *In that case, I'm sure I'll pull it off eventually*, he added to himself encouragingly.

Say, Akira, since the battle's about to start, let me ask: How much do you want me to help you?

Hm? Oh, I'll be fine on my own for this one.

Are you sure? Since this exercise is a condition for getting a discount on your gear, they'll undoubtedly be expecting quite a lot from you.

I'm not worried. They only said I needed to participate, not fight till I'm spitting blood or anything. I didn't promise them I'd behave as if my life was on the line.

All right, if that's your decision. Looks like it's time to begin. Ready?

Yeah. Akira raised his gun and trained it on the AR monster in front of him without Alpha's help. Then he pulled the trigger.

◆

In this mock battle, three teams were participating: Akira's, Erio's, and Katsuya's (including Yumina). They would all be working together to defend the base.



Akira's team was making no use of the all-in-one support system, while Katsuya's and Erio's teams had Takagi's system and Yumina was using Fulta's. In other words, they were testing how well the systems worked with each other and how well they handled having team members mixed in who weren't using either system.

At least, that was the goal on the surface.

The original plan had been to pit Akira's team against Katsuya's. The latter had been expected to win, which would allow the desk jockeys to show the city executives the full might of Katsuya's team and permit Kiryou to demonstrate the true potential of Takagi's system. It didn't matter to them how capable Akira and the others were, nor did it matter that Akira was so powerful he'd been offered a rank advancement commission. In a battle where both teams had the same gear, there was no way that Katsuya and the others, with the advantage of the all-in-one support system, would lose—at least, such was the confidence Takagi had placed in his creation.

But Yumina's overwhelming victory against Erio's team had shattered those preconceived notions. As a result, Kiryou had been forced to change their approach and show off the system's functionality another way. If Katsuya's team were to lose to Akira's—after Yumina had trounced a group using Takagi's system—the city executives might start doubting the value of the support system itself. So Kiryou had decided to have Akira's and Katsuya's teams work together instead.

With how Kiryou had arranged things, everyone would be working together to defend the base from monsters. That way, even if Katsuya's team did fail in their objective, there would be no clear winner. This would also give Erio's team an opportunity to redeem themselves and show everyone they weren't just weaklings who were too powerless to put up a fight.

◆

As he waited with his comrades for the battle to begin, Erio sighed despondently. He still hadn't gotten over the shock of Yumina wiping the floor with them.

Hearing him, one of his teammates spoke up. “C’mon, Erio, get over it already! There was nothing we could do.”

“Yeah,” another joined in. “We never had any chance against someone that skilled to begin with. After our battle, I heard that apparently this Yumina girl once worked alongside Akira on some job and didn’t even slow him down. If she’s that adept, it’s no wonder we lost.”

“Right,” said a third. “It’s a shame about the one million aurum, sure, but you said it yourself, didn’t you? It’s not about winning—it’s about showing the boss what we’re capable of. We should count ourselves lucky to have a second chance to do that here.”

At his comrades’ attempts to pep him up, Erio forced himself to put on a confident grin. “Yeah, you’re right. Let’s do it—for real this time!”

During the fight with Yumina, Erio had been the one to encourage his comrades—now, they were returning the favor. And the camaraderie they shared helped them all regain their determination and will to fight.

◆

Yumina, in position with Katsuya and the rest of their unit, turned a smug grin toward him. “Well? I told you I’d make it back on my own merit, and here I am! I proved you wrong!”

As a result of her total victory over Erio’s team, Yumina had made it back to Katsuya’s team—and Katsuya himself. She had once told Katsuya to wait for her a little longer, and now, just as she’d promised, she’d regained her right to fight by his side.

Katsuya knew how hard Yumina had worked to return to him and looked happy to have her back. “Yeah, you sure did. Thanks, Yumina!”

Seeing her crush beam at her, Yumina blushed. Before he could notice, she turned to Airi. “So, Airi, did Katsuya behave himself while I was away?”

“There were no problems,” Airi replied. “Mostly.”

“So, there *was* a problem?”

"Nothing too concerning—since I doubt any of those girls followed him all the way here from the cities we visited during our expedition."

Yumina looked incredulous. "You even hit on girls during your little field trip?! Man, you're shameless!"

"N-No! I didn't do anything like that!" Katsuya protested.

"If you're not aware of it, that's even worse. I take my eyes off you for just a little while, and this is what happens?! Seriously, what am I going to do with you?"

Of course, Yumina and Airi were just teasing him, and Katsuya was responding in kind. The three of them were thrilled to be together again, just like old times.

Then the start of the mock battle arrived. Yumina looked smugly at Katsuya. "Time to show you exactly how much I've improved since I've been away. Just watch me!"

Katsuya grinned back. "We haven't just been sitting around either, you know. Check *us* out! It's go time, Airi!"

"Ready," Airi replied—terse, but sufficiently enthusiastic.

As one, the three of them raised their guns. Their gear and abilities had all drastically improved since their last battle together, but their enthusiasm and determination were just as in sync as they had always been.

◆

In this mock battle, the combatants were defending their base from a large-scale monster attack. At first, only twenty or so organic monsters approached from some distance away. Monsters who were larger or who looked more threatening (for example, by resembling spiders) were mixed among the others, but knowing they were all merely AR images made them seem significantly less threatening. With no fear of death, the participants didn't even need to use heavy weapons and could win with amateur, nonstrategic movements.

But that was only the first wave. As time went on, the monsters drastically increased in number and difficulty. They had appeared sparsely at first, but before long, the distant landscape was

blanketed in enemies. More agile creatures appeared, and behemoths came charging into the fray. There were miniature multilegged robots with machine guns sprouting from their bodies, as well as much bigger ones sporting comically large cannons.

At this rate, the base would eventually fall to the might of the overwhelming horde. How long it could hold out depended entirely on the skill level of its defenders.

Akira took the mock battle as seriously as he could, but he was dissatisfied in more ways than one. He fired from the building's roof at the approaching monsters, pinpointing each of his targets' weak spots as though they were real creatures, which would have died instantly. But the foes here hardly received a scratch—the program's damage reader wasn't accurate enough to take weak points into account. Still, he did his best to destroy as many as he could. When his ammo ran dry—or rather, when he ran out of virtual bullets—he had to retreat and wait for his ammo to automatically refill.

Say, Alpha? I know this is a mock battle, but still—this is a little underwhelming. He'd trained against countless AR monsters in the past with Alpha's help, but those were in a completely different league from these moving targets. In Alpha's training, the monsters would react differently and receive more damage depending on where they were hit. Simply firing willy-nilly wouldn't take them down—in fact, it would often result in him getting hit with a punishing counterattack. But in this battle, his shots did the same amount of damage no matter where he landed them. As long as he pelted his targets with enough bullets, they would fall. Shooting their legs didn't slow their movements, though it did prevent them from moving—they just vanished as though they had been eliminated, no differently than if he'd hit them anywhere else. Akira couldn't help but feel disillusioned by how unnatural it all seemed. Besides, the amount of time he had to wait for an ammo refill after exhausting his shots was always the same, no matter what. He couldn't speed things up by loading the magazines in himself, which he found incredibly annoying.

Alpha smiled gently. *Well, of course. The facilities here aren't high-tech enough to make such precise calculations. You'll just have*

to put up with them for now.

Yeah, I guess so. I can manage for a little longer, at least.

However, don't think that you can get lazy with your aim just because the calculations are lenient. Pretend every enemy you come across is so threatening that you won't defeat it without hitting it in the right spot. You don't want to develop bad habits like just shooting at any old spot on the target.

Yeah, I know. I won't let my guard down. By then, his gun had finished reloading again, so he focused on the battle once more, firing with far more precision than a mock battle like this deserved.

As the struggle wore on, the enemy attacks grew more intense. A monster with an enormous cannon continuously bombarded the base, depleting the integrity of the walls and causing them to collapse. It was programmed to attack from outside of the combatants' range of fire, forcing them to venture outside the base to take the beast down. And the AR creature was also positioned behind a physical wall, so even if they drew nearer, their shots still wouldn't reach it. The defenders had no choice but to go around the wall and engage it in close quarters while avoiding its cannon fire.

One artillery shell blasted a hole in the wall of the base, and a flood of monsters came pouring through. Akira, who was the closest at hand, put up a desperate struggle, but because he had to wait a fixed amount of time between reloads, the monsters swallowed him up, and the program pronounced him dead.

The monsters disappeared from Akira's vision—his defeat had booted him out of the program. The proclamation of his failure was also displayed in large letters across his augmented vision.

Akira let out a small sigh. "Sorry, you two. I'm out."

Elena, who'd assumed the role of team leader for this battle, responded over their comms. "You put in a good effort. I apologize if I gave you poor orders."

"No, nothing like that. I was probably just unlucky, that's all. Anyway, since I'm out, I guess I'll head back. I feel bad that you have to pick up my slack."

"No worries. Hey, Sara! Akira's out, so get your ass in gear! You're

supposed to be our heavy hitter, so do enough to impress our mentee here!"

"Yeah, yeah, I know! Just leave it to— Whoa! Wait, now they're all headed for *me*! Elena, a little help here?!"

"All right, I'll be right there! Wait one second!"

With their lighthearted banter ringing in his ears over the comms, Akira exited the building through its exposed back wall.

◆

Behind the building, those who'd already been eliminated watched the rest of the battle unfold. This included some of Erio's teammates, who were shocked to see Akira joining them.

"Huh?! Akira?! *Akira* got taken out?!"

"Seriously?! Then that means, whoa, Erio outlasted him?!"

A short time later, Erio also joined them. On his face was not satisfaction that he'd done the best he could but regret that he hadn't done any more. So when his comrades quietly congratulated him, making sure Akira didn't overhear, he was nonplussed.

"What's gotten into you guys? Why are you congratulating me?"

"Erio, look. You won. Against *Akira*!"

"Say what?!" Erio looked like he didn't believe them, but when he turned in the direction they were pointing and saw Akira standing there, he realized they were right.

Of course, the two boys had been working under different conditions. Erio was on a team and thus had the support of more teammates, not to mention the support system. However much longer he'd held out than Akira, he knew this never would have happened under normal circumstances. Still, compared to his total loss against Yumina, he'd performed significantly better. From the start, the goal he'd shared with his comrades was to prove their ability and worth to Sheryl—to show her what they could really do—and in light of that, his feat here was indeed a win.

"Well, then... That means we did it!"

"*Yeah!*"

While they hadn't even been in the same section of the

battlefield, Erio had technically won against Akira. But Erio knew he'd be in serious trouble if Akira heard those words—so while they continued celebrating among themselves, they made sure they were out of Akira's earshot.

◆

Elena and Sara continued to put up a fight even after Akira left, but they were unable to recover from the blow of losing him. Both were taken out at the same time.

Elena sighed with a small smile. "Well, at least we did enough to preserve our dignity as mentors. C'mon, Sara, let's head back."

"Roger! Still, I wish you would've let me do more."

"No, I don't want you wasting precious nanomachines on a trivial mock battle."

Sara's augmented body could boost her physical strength immensely—by sacrificing the nanomachines that also kept her alive. And the support suit she was wearing wasn't designed with nanomachine conservation in mind, so drastic movements consumed more of them.

Elena and Sara both wanted to show off to Akira. But if that meant putting Sara's life in danger in the process, then it was Elena's job as team leader to hold her back. Sure, they might have been eliminated earlier, but for Elena, making this decision had been easy.

Sara smiled wryly at her friend's behavior, and as she turned to Elena, her smile became a smirk. "If you say so. Then shall we go and get our evaluation from Akira?"

The women approached him, grinning.

"So, what did you think of our performance?" Sara asked. "Pretty impressive, right?"

"Sure was," Akira said, smiling back. "As expected of my mentors."

The two women could tell that Akira's compliment wasn't just flattery. But it left them with mixed feelings: Akira was undoubtedly stronger than both of them, yet he gave no such impression at all. His breadth of knowledge and experience was that of an amateur, so

even though they knew for a fact how strong he was, they still found it hard to believe.

Suddenly, it occurred to Sara that perhaps this was because they had been treating him as though *he* were the veteran—they were doing this even now. So she tried behaving instead like a sore loser toward him, just to see how he'd react. "Actually, you know we were holding back today, right? We could've done a *lot* more, but I would've had to spend more nanomachines than necessary."

Akira teased right back, "Oh yeah? Then I'll claim that since it was only a mock battle, I didn't use my full strength."

Sara, reading between the lines, understood that despite his teasing tone, he wanted her to know he was capable of much more. She grinned at him—at her friend and rival. For now, she thought, this dynamic was good enough.

◆

When Togami and Reina were eliminated from the mock battle, they returned to Shiori and Kanae's side. Both were unsatisfied with their personal performances, and Reina's face in particular said as much.

"Guess I was too naive," she sighed. "I counted too much on my equipment to get me through."

Reina didn't think relying on her gear was a bad thing in itself: the better one's accoutrements, the stronger one would be in combat. To her, using gear that boosted her combat power far beyond its normal level wasn't cheap or unfair—hunters had to do whatever they could to survive. Still, she had to draw a clear line between her native strength and the capabilities offered by her equipment. The results of the mock battle disappointed her because they proved she'd severely misjudged where that line lay.

Thanks to the powerful gear Shiori had procured for her, Reina had finally been able to meet her own high combat standards during the events in Iida. But as time had gone on, she'd unconsciously begun to conflate what her suit had to offer with her own competency. So she'd assumed she would fare better during this

test, even though her outfit was on loan from Kiryou and much less capable than her usual one.

In short, she'd been too conceited and had ended up offering a lackluster performance and amateurish actions throughout the mock battle.

Realizing how full of herself she'd been before the battle started, Reina sighed a heavier sigh than usual. Still, she couldn't dwell on this outcome forever, so she tried to put it out of her mind.

"Well, at least now my eyes have been opened. I'll just put this down as a learning experience and move on." The more shortcomings and weak points she discovered in herself, the more she'd know about what she needed to improve. By looking at the event from a positive angle, she prevented herself from feeling down in the dumps over her failure like she would have in the past.

Reina's constructive outlook got a passing grade from Kanae. "Way to go, missy! Not only did you avoid making excuses like 'I was just off my game' or 'I could've done a lot better,' you turned this into an opportunity to improve. You really have grown up a little! Congratulations!"

"Yeah, yeah, thanks," Reina replied dismissively, detecting the teasing tone in Kanae's compliment. But in truth, Reina felt quite happy to hear praise from her. Unlike Shiori, who often complimented Reina, Kanae rarely approved of the girl's performance and would always nitpick her faults. So Reina felt rather accomplished to hear her utter an actual compliment.

Sensing Reina's feelings, Shiori spoke up. "Miss Reina, I'm sure you must feel dissatisfied and unhappy at the results of the battle. But you did more than enough to satisfy Kanae and me. It's certainly important to avoid complacency and to continue striving for greater heights, but being too hard on yourself will adversely affect your growth. Take a little more pride in your accomplishments."

"Well, I understand that, but I can't help but think I could've done better," the girl said.

Shiori's praise had been genuine, not just flattery, but Reina reacted more tepidly than her attendant had expected. Had Shiori been handing out compliments a little too freely as of late, since

Reina had improved so rapidly—and was Reina thus starting to get used to her praise? *That won't do*, Shiori thought. Yet at the same time, she did want to communicate her approval of Reina's growth, and so she found herself in a quandary.

Kanae noticed Shiori's troubled expression and gave her a knowing look, as though she could tell exactly what was bothering her. Shiori returned an icy glare, and the other maid looked away.

Togami let out a sigh. "Reina, I don't know whether it was a fluke or Akira was just having an off day, but the fact remains we survived longer than he did, even though we were all wearing the same gear. In a way, that means we won against him! Shouldn't we be happy about that? Or am I the stupid one for feeling proud of what we managed to accomplish?"

Togami wasn't chastising Reina for her attitude. In fact, he wanted her to be as proud as he was of their achievement, and felt a little disappointed that she didn't feel the same way.

Not wanting to dampen his spirits, Reina quickly clarified, "No, that's not it at all! I've just decided not to grade myself based on whom I win or lose against anymore. What's important is whether I grow from the experience—the details of who won or lost are sort of trivial by comparison, wouldn't you say?"

"Well, you might have a point there."

"And you know, if I *was* to evaluate myself based on whether I could beat someone, for me it wouldn't be Akira," she said, directing her gaze to two of those still in the fight—Katsuya and Yumina.

Following her gaze, Togami nodded. "Yeah, I know what you mean."

"Right?" Reina had previously belonged to Katsuya's team but had left after a while. The official reason she'd given Druncam had been that she disapproved of how Katsuya had treated Akira back when the two boys had been a hair's breadth away from fighting each other to the death.

However, she'd told Katsuya the real cause, which was completely different. During the clash with the relic thieves in underground Kuzusuhara, Reina had been taken hostage by one of them due to her own incompetence, and the experience had ruined her

confidence in her own abilities. She'd explained to Katsuya that she didn't want him or her attendants to have to constantly bail her out—she would therefore take a sabbatical and one day, hopefully, rejoin his team without constantly needing to be looked after.

Had Reina survived in the mock battle longer than Katsuya—in other words, surpassed him—then she would have had proof of her progress. But things hadn't turned out that way, and as she realized the day she returned to Katsuya's team was still a long way off, she felt disappointed—and slightly envious of Yumina, who remained a step ahead of her.

◆

By and large, the battle was proceeding in line with Kiryou's expectations. Erio's entire team had been defeated, as predicted due to the boys' obvious lack of combat experience. Still, they'd put up a good fight, and with the help of his comrades, Erio had managed to endure longer than Akira. Though theirs was the first group to be eliminated, their impressive performance made up for the shameful loss against Yumina.

Akira's team had failed to survive as well. This, too, was an extremely favorable result for Kiryou, because it meant a team using the support system had lasted longer than the team without it, effectively proving the system's worth to the city executives. In fact, Akira's unit hadn't made any egregious mistakes, but its commander Elena had been doing triple duty—issuing orders to the team, watching out for the enemy's cannon fire, and holding her own in combat. These were overwhelming to handle all at once, especially against a swarm of enemies. However, though such was the cause of the team's downfall, Kiryou could now point to their performance and say that if they'd only used the support system, Elena might have been able to make up for some of her shortcomings and keep the three of them in the fight longer. The team's defeat had given Kiryou a new angle to advertise from.

Katsuya's unit was still in the fight, but of course they couldn't survive alone against the AR monster onslaught forever. In the end,

one after another, Katsuya's comrades fell until only Katsuya, Yumina, and Airi were left. This made both Takagi's and Fulta's systems look good, so neither engineer had any complaints about the battle's outcome—and the Kiryou bigwigs couldn't have been happier.

As the battle progressed, Yumina was only barely managing to hold out against the waves of enemies, relying on her newfound ability to manipulate her sense of time. At present, she could maintain this state for a mere thirty seconds at most. However, by only using it when necessary and in very short bursts, she could reduce the burden on her brain and maintain her performance as the test wore on. Still, had she been on her own, she would have quickly reached her limit and been defeated. Katsuya and Airi, as well as the rest of his team, were supporting Yumina excellently, complementing her fighting style by timing their supporting fire so that they could cover for her whenever she had to wait for her gun to reload. This allowed her moments of respite, which prevented her from reaching her limit as quickly. Consequently, Yumina was performing so well that even she was surprised.

She was grateful for the apt support from the others, but she was also shocked by how much Takagi's system seemed to be improving Katsuya's leadership abilities. *I've heard Takagi's system is designed for teams, but the way it assists the commander really is impressive. Though, if they've been operating with such tight leadership all this time, no wonder they removed me from the team.* It was a shame, she thought, but at her level back then, she would have only dragged the team down with her incompetence. *Well, that just means if I want to keep up, I'll need to persevere even harder with Fulta's system. It's working well for me so far, so let's keep it up!*

Now that she was back on Katsuya's team, she would have to defer to him, more or less. But until Takagi's and Fulta's systems were merged, Yumina would be her own leader, just as much as Katsuya was the leader of his whole team. And in this battle, she was a team all her own, cooperating with Katsuya's—and it surprised her how well this dynamic was working. After all, Erio's and Akira's

teams had already dropped out, yet this group was still standing. And so, as she fought, she felt deeply accomplished.

Just then, she ran out of ammo again, so it was time to retreat. With her back to the wall, she waited for the reload time to pass. At the same time, Katsuya's followers saw that Yumina had temporarily left the front lines and immediately moved to back her up.

As she watched them from the sidelines, something occurred to her. *Katsuya's actually staying back. He's probably unhappy that the support system is having him do so, but to be honest, it's better this way.*

Up until now, Katsuya had risked life and limb to keep his comrades safe. During the bounty hunts, he'd even used himself as a decoy to keep a monster the size of a skyscraper away from his teammates. This selflessness was one of the reasons Yumina had come to like him so much—but at the same time, she wished he wouldn't be so reckless. In fact, making sure he didn't do anything like that again was one of the main reasons she'd wanted to return to him so badly.

And yet, so far in this exercise, Katsuya hadn't taken a single reckless action. He was staying behind the lines, maintaining his role as commander. Considering his past actions, she would have expected him to rush out in front to protect his comrades and be one of the first eliminated, but he hadn't done anything of the sort. Quite the opposite, in fact—he looked prepared to make the tough call to give up on his teammates if necessary. Was this because the battle wasn't real, or had Katsuya really grown enough as a leader to make such decisions for the good of the team? Yumina wasn't sure—but since she didn't want him to risk his life, she didn't disapprove.

The mock battle raged on. Even as more of their teammates fell, the three friends—Katsuya, Yumina, and Airi—held on.

Finally, Airi was taken out. "Sorry, guys. They got me."

"Don't worry, Airi! You did great! Yumina, looks like it's just us from here on out! Stay sharp!"

"That's *my* line!"

The gulf in power between the two of them and the horde of monsters had already reached the point that victory was impossible.

Now all that mattered was how much longer they could endure. Katsuya possessed exceptional talent and had received a lot of support from others as well, but he wasn't invincible. As the monsters surrounded him, he held on as long as he could, protecting Yumina from their attacks.

In the end, though, even Katsuya succumbed to the onslaught. "Sorry, guess that was too much for me to handle. It's all up to you now, Yumina!"

"Yeah, yeah! Leave it to me!" She no longer had Katsuya's support—or anyone else's, for that matter. She was on her own and would thus be forced to manipulate her sense of time more often from here on out. Yet she wore a fearless smile, determined not to go down without a fight.

The moment she reached the limits of her concentration and couldn't stop time from returning to normal, she was hit and went down. With all the combatants out, the mock battle came to an end. Yumina collapsed on the ground looking exhausted, and Katsuya and Airi came over and sat down next to her.

"Good work, Yumina! You really have gotten a lot better, haven't you?" Katsuya looked surprised but pleased.

"Told ya," Yumina replied smugly, then added awkwardly, "Of course, I can't take all the credit. My support system did a lot of the work—I couldn't have done everything on my own."

"Well, it's the same for me," said Katsuya.

"Even you?"

"Yeah. I pretty much let the system handle everything, to be honest. I'm not sure I could manage without it at this point."

"But we're only testing this system for now, right?"

"Yeah, I know. Well, Mizuha's planning on introducing it into Druncam at some point anyway, so it's okay to get accustomed to relying on it."

Yumina grinned at his optimism. "In that case, you'd better make sure you don't do anything stupid and chase our backers away from Druncam. You've been behaving yourself in front of the suits, right?"

"Yeah, yeah. Don't worry so much. I wouldn't do anything that stupid."

"Oh yeah? Airi, has he been behaving himself?"

"For the most part," she deadpanned. It wasn't clear whether she was joking or serious.

At that, Katsuya panicked visibly.

"So, what was the problem?" Yumina demanded.

Airi didn't respond and looked away, causing Katsuya's anxiety to skyrocket.

"H-Hey, Airi, you're just kidding, right?" he asked.

"If you're that alarmed by her response," said Yumina, "then it sounds like you need to pay more attention to your conduct."

"Nah, don't worry. Airi's just joking around—right, Airi?"

"If you say so," the girl responded.

"No, I mean, it really *is* just a joke, right?"

"It's a joke," Airi replied.

Seeing Katsuya genuinely beginning to worry amused Yumina greatly. How she enjoyed these precious moments of goofing around with her friends.

◆

After watching the entire mock battle, Udajima announced, "Well, I suppose that's good enough for me. It seemed like a number of combatants couldn't demonstrate their true abilities due to the limitations of their gear, but I can certainly see the all-in-one support system's potential."

The fact that Erio and his comrades had been equipped with low-level gear, as befitted their inexperience, and yet had survived so long against the monster waves spoke volumes about the support system's value.

"Normally I'd be concerned whether the system could offer the same level of support for users with better equipment," Udajima continued, "but Katsuya's and Yumina's successes have already proven that it can." He turned to Yodogawa and addressed him in a tone befitting a city executive. "Mr. Yodogawa, while I can't guarantee your system will be adopted by the city's defense force, I will certainly be in touch. Consider this approval from me a token of

my gratitude for inviting me here today. I trust that's satisfactory?"

"Certainly! Thank you very much for coming, and I look forward to working with you in the future."

"Likewise. Well then, I'll see myself out," Udajima said. He turned on his heel and left the facility.

Mizuha attempted to escort him out, but he waved her off. He didn't say anything to Viola, though, who followed him outside without his permission. Noticing this, Mizuha cast a wary gaze toward the retreating figure of this woman she didn't know.

Once they were out of earshot, Udajima addressed Viola. "Awfully brazen, don't you think? You do know I'm more or less on the other side, right?"

"Of course I do. But I can't help it. I'm a conniving witch through and through."

Viola was double-crossing Sheryl and Inabe by attempting to change sides—or at least, that's what she wanted Udajima to think. In reality, she was merely taking advantage of her reputation as a schemer to trap Udajima *and* conceal her true motive.

"I see. Well, you're free to weigh Inabe and me against each other on a scale if you wish, but if I were you, I'd be careful which plate on the scale I set myself on," he said.

"Naturally," Viola agreed with her usual smile.

Seeing his warning hadn't fazed her, Udajima hesitated for a moment before continuing. "So? I suppose you have something to discuss?"

"Yes, a proposal. It wouldn't disadvantage you in any way, so you should listen."

Udajima paid attention as she outlined her suggestion. Once she finished, he frowned in suspicion. "True, this might not disadvantage me, but it sounds to me like only Inabe would benefit."

"Now, now, we both know better than that. You and your team are continuing to explore the Kuzusuhara depths as we speak, correct? Yet you can't proceed in the way you want, because Inabe's territory is in the way. You can't obtain that definitive proof you've been looking for. But this is your golden opportunity. So, wouldn't it be worth letting his exploration progress a little? Think of it as a

necessary expense."

Udajima thought this over carefully, then decided, "All right, I accept."

"I thought you might," Viola said with a smirk. Even when pulling the wool over the eyes of a city executive, she made no attempt to hide her sly grin.

◆

Takagi made his way to Katsuya and his team as they were catching their breath following the mock battle. "Katsuya, I absolutely need to talk to you. Do you have a second?"

Katsuya flinched ever so slightly under the intensity of Takagi's attitude. "Y-Yeah, what's up?"

"Well, as you know, I developed the support system you and your team are testing. And it's thanks to that system you've had such great success in your expeditions away from Kugamayama and in the depths of Kuzusuhara, wouldn't you agree?"

"Yeah, absolutely. Your system's been a huge help."

"Then let me ask you this, and answer me honestly. How do you feel about it?"

"How do I, er, feel?"

"Like, do you feel it's been useful to you? And if so, to what degree? How important is it for you to have? Is it even any help to someone at your level, or could you perform just as remarkably without it? Tell me the truth!" As Takagi spoke, he brought his face closer to Katsuya's, pressing him for an answer. His expression was unreadable, but Katsuya could clearly sense his desperation—here was a man still in denial, looking for some final thread of hope to cling to.

If, at this moment, Katsuya had declared that he could have done just as well without the system, perhaps such an answer would have released Takagi from his overconfidence. But Katsuya replied honestly and said just the opposite. "I couldn't have done any of that back there without your system, Takagi. I'm not good enough to perform that well on my own. In fact, I've relied on the system so

much that it's going to be really hard to do without it."

Looking Takagi straight in the eyes, Katsuya continued, "As for why those kids lost to Yumina so badly, I don't think the system had anything to do with it. Yumina's just far more skilled than they are." As he'd just seen Yumina's ability firsthand in the mock battle, he spoke with complete confidence. "Remember Yumina was using the same system as the rest of us back when she was on our team, and at the time she couldn't keep up? I think that, for whatever reason, she just wasn't compatible with your system. Those other kids might not be either."

Katsuya thought that maybe Takagi's confidence in his product had been shaken after witnessing Erio's team suffer such a devastating loss, and he smiled reassuringly to try and cheer the engineer up.

"I can say this for sure, though—your system's perfect for me," he added. "Ever since I started using it, I've become a much better hunter. There's no doubt you've created something amazing."

Hearing Katsuya earnestly praise his handiwork to his face moved Takagi. The boy's words resonated in his heart, and the corners of his mouth turned up. "Yeah, you're right! It really *is* amazing, isn't it?" Someone felt the same way about his system that he did! Takagi's confidence was instantly restored—no, he was now more confident than he'd ever been. "Wow, I can't believe I ever doubted myself! Sorry to put you on the spot, Katsuya—I've had a lot on my mind recently. Use my system all you need! I'll be expecting even greater things from you in the future!"

"Yeah, I won't disappoint you," Katsuya said with a smile.

Takagi walked away in higher spirits than ever before. Regardless of the truth of the matter, he was now entirely convinced that he'd been right all along—his system was truly incredible.

◆

Now that the mock battle had ended, Akira and his friends called it a day. After parting ways with the women, he discussed the results of the battle with Alpha as he made his way home. *Hey, do you think*

I was defeated faster than Elena and Sara because I wasn't taking the battle seriously enough?

I couldn't say either way. But the fact that you think you might have means you probably were, even if you weren't conscious of it. It's good that you've gotten stronger, of course, but it doesn't mean you should let your guard down around weaker opponents.

Yeah, I know. I'll be more careful from now on.

Confidence and carelessness were two different things, but by now he knew the boundary separating them wasn't always so clear. Realizing he'd accidentally slipped over the line and become negligent, he scolded himself for not noticing his own inattentiveness and vowed never to let it happen again.

Without the mock battle, he never would have come to such a realization. *Perhaps this was a worthwhile experience after all*, he thought.

◆

In the world of white, a young girl who'd witnessed Katsuya's performance alongside the others in the mock battle looked conflicted.

"The local network's construction is progressing with no issues. And yet, the subject still clings to that female friend of his. As I thought, she will need to be dealt with. But how?"

The girl was allowed to interfere with Katsuya's actions, but only indirectly. If she wanted to get rid of Yumina, she would need to be very careful about her next move.

Chapter 173: Back to the Depths

As Akira was relaxing at home, he got a call from Kibayashi. The city official notified him that he would henceforth receive the same ammunition discount perks as a rank 50 hunter.

"This means you can now buy ammo cheaply from shops sanctioned by the Hunter Office," Kibayashi told him. "However, there are a few conditions—for example, you can't resell the ammo on the black market. I'm sending you the list of terms now, so make sure to give it a read."

"Sure, will do."

"Wow, man! Not only did you borrow two billion aurum from a city exec to get some *craaaaazy* gear, you even made a deal with Toson so you can get C-bullets easier! That's my Akira—you never disappoint! With all your new gear, I'm just dying to know what crazy, reckless, and rash hijinks you'll get up to next!" Kibayashi sounded like he couldn't contain his excitement.

"I'm not planning anything like that," Akira replied, sounding irritated.

"Naturally! It'll happen when you least expect it, and then you'll have to deal with the situation the best you can, right? That's even better!"

Akira sighed deeply. "How'd the negotiations go?" he said, changing the subject. "When do I get my reward money, and how much? I've got a debt that I'd like to pay off as soon as possible."

"Actually, the negotiations aren't quite finished yet. I'm pushing for a higher payout for you, though. Now that Toson's helping out with your ammo, I have even more room for negotiating your pay, so I asked to revisit that. Hence, I can't give you a specific time frame just yet."

"In other words, it'll still be a while?"

"Well, if paying off your debt's your top priority, and a two-billion-

aurum reward's enough for you, I can have it wrapped up tomorrow."

"Er... No, I'll wait." He didn't want to lose out by demanding his pay early. Besides, if he said he needed the money ASAP, he'd look strapped for cash, which wouldn't give the right impression. So he decided to be patient and wait for Kibayashi to finish.

◆

Later, Shizuka called Akira to let him know that his new gear had come in, so he drove his truck to her shop. After suiting up in the new outfit, he loaded the powered suit's storage case (which doubled as a repair pod, much like his previous suit's) and three LEO multifunction guns in their cases onto the truck bed.

As Shizuka watched him work, she said, "I heard you got quite a deal on those LEOs by agreeing to be Toson's SSB spokesperson."

"Yes, that's right. I got a really good bargain."

"So I was told. Altogether, your purchases are worth six hundred million, yet they sold you everything for merely two hundred million, right? You must be amazing if you have that kind of leverage."

Akira thought Shizuka was praising him for his negotiation skills and tried to correct her. "N-No, not at all. They came to *me* with that offer, I didn't do anything—"

"That's not what I was getting at," she said. "I meant your advertising potential must be pretty amazing. Considering how you bested a legion of mechs all by yourself, though, I can see why they'd want to treat you specially."

Akira, who was in the middle of loading the gun cases onto the back of his truck, froze in place. He didn't remember ever mentioning the gang war incident to her. He turned to her stiffly, or at least his head did—the rest of his body stayed put.

Shizuka only smiled and showed him a large data terminal. There, on the screen, was Toson's SSB advertisement. It recounted how Akira had been surrounded by dozens of mechs, forced to fight them all off at once, and that the deciding factor in his survival had been the power of his weapon. It also described how, due to his success

there, he had later been chosen to participate in a rank advancement commission—all because of his SSB multifunction gun!

Underneath that large header of text was a testimonial from Akira about how incredible the weapon was. Naturally Akira himself didn't have a talent for lining up flowery vocabulary—the Toson representative Someya had merely asked him some leading questions, to which Akira had either responded "Yes" or "That's right." Someya had taken the liberty of dressing up those answers—while the testimonial wasn't necessarily untrue, it had been "enhanced."

Most people who read the advertisement would probably assume as much, of course. But because the advertisement was online, hunters working in different, far-off towns would also see it. If they were skeptical enough to be curious and do some digging, they'd learn that there had indeed been a mech stampede in the Kugamayama slums, and that a hunter named Akira had been offered a rank advancement commission. And if they investigated even further and were skilled at gathering information, they'd discover Akira had recently used the SSB to trounce a number of Old World mechs as well. A sizable number of those hunters would think, *Perhaps that gun's pretty good after all*—exactly as Someya had planned.

But Akira couldn't care less. The fact that Shizuka had found out about his exploits during the gang war was far more pressing at the moment. When he'd agreed to let Someya use the incident in an advertisement, it hadn't occurred to him that Shizuka might see the ad as well. He immediately broke out in a cold sweat and tried to defend himself. "No, well, that's, you see... I was roped into it! R-Right, exactly like it says in that ad! I was *forced*! I didn't do it because I wanted to!"

"You didn't do it because you wanted to. Uh-huh."

"That's right!"

Shizuka only gave him a gentle smile. For some reason, that only made him sweat even more profusely. Finally, after a little time had passed, Shizuka broke into a grin.

"If that's how you feel, I trust you're watching out to make sure

you're never 'forced' into a situation like that again?"

"Y-Yes, absolutely!"

"Very well, then."

The boy let out a sigh, relieved that he'd avoided incurring Shizuka's wrath this time.

◆

On the day he was scheduled to receive his five-hundred-million-aurum order—his new truck and bike—Akira waited in front of his house for Katsuragi and his crew to arrive.

Katsuragi's semitruck pulled up right on schedule, with a cargo trailer hitched behind. The merchant emerged from the cab and proudly pointed to the trailer. Inside was a truck that looked more like an armored transport and a bike that was slightly larger than average.

"Sorry for the wait, Akira, but here are the goods, exactly as you ordered!"

"Just put them in the garage for now."

"As you wish!" Katsuragi put the truck and bike on auto-drive, and the vehicles stored themselves inside Akira's garage. Though he'd seen vehicles like the truck with auto-drive, Akira had never seen an unmanned bike move on its own before, so he found the sight a little surreal.

Katsuragi stood in front of the truck and bike and, with exaggerated gestures, showed them off to Akira. "Well? What do you think? Precisely what you wanted, right?"

"What do I think? What do you mean by that?"

Akira's muted reaction disgruntled Katsuragi. "Hey now, what's with that attitude? Shouldn't you be a little more excited? These are way better than your old vehicles, you know."

"I understand that, but—"

"No, you clearly *don't*. Here, I already sent you the specs earlier, but let me give you a more visual explanation." Katsuragi felt quite confident about the vehicles' features, in part because he'd worked so hard to procure these goods.

In terms of size and appearance, the truck was closer to a transport vehicle. Its entire surface was covered in armored tiles. Attaching tiles by hand all over the surface of such a vehicle would have been onerous, but fortunately, this could be done automatically. The interior was spacious, with lots of room for cargo. Even when Akira placed his new bike inside the truck as a test, it didn't feel cramped at all. There was a large energy tank on board, providing the vehicle with more than enough power for long treks, as well as a cutting-edge scanner capable of scouting with pinpoint accuracy in a wide radius.

The bike was a newer version of the one he'd had previously. It had all the same features, drastically upgraded. The force-field armor protecting its frame could now repel weaker attacks with ease, its maximum speed had been increased, and its highly advanced control system could automatically maintain the bike's speed even when it was in danger of tipping over, preventing serious accidents. It also came with a large cargo pod attached.

The truck had cost two hundred million, the bike three hundred million—the latter was more expensive because Akira had requested a bike customized more for combat than transport. Both vehicles were luxury items meant for high-ranking hunters.

While explaining all this to Akira, Katsuragi had made sure to impress upon the boy how much trouble he had gone through to get these vehicles, as well as to present himself as a capable businessman because he had successfully obtained such goods. "Well? Now surely you understand, right?"

Katsuragi was behaving a little more excitedly than usual—understandable, as he was about to close a five-hundred-million-aurum sale. Akira, on the other hand, found the merchant's attitude a bit tiresome.

"Yeah, they seem pretty good, I guess? Of course, I won't really know until I try them out myself."

At that, Katsuragi looked almost sulky. "Oh, I see. By now, vehicles in the two-or three-hundred-million-aurum range just don't impress you anymore. I guess customers who can afford to blow five hundred mil without batting an eye really are just different beasts

entirely. And after all that trouble I went through to get these too."

Sensing that Katsuragi would continue to grumble and complain unless he said something, Akira tried to console him, "All right, all right, I get it. You did a great job. You were a big help."

"As long as you understand!" the merchant said with a grin, immediately perking up. "And since you do, I'll be counting on your business next time as well!"

"At least put a sock in it until then" was Akira's only reply.

◆

Now that Akira had his two vehicles and new equipment, it was finally time for him to head out into the wasteland once more.

So where to next? he asked Alpha. *Now that I've got a bigger truck, should we go to a ruin a little farther out this time?*

He made this suggestion because his truck's capacity for cargo was now on par with that of a transport. While his reaction to Katsuragi had seemed lukewarm, he was truly excited to have such a vehicle so he could resume his hunter activities.

No, I think we should head back to the Kuzusuhara depths. The difficulty level there will be perfect to give your new gear a test run.

"The same place again? Well, all right, if you say so." True, he considered, Yumina's transport had been especially helpful in carrying so many relics out of there. With this in mind, he agreed.

But Alpha gave him a knowing smirk. *No, not the same place again.*

"Huh? But you just said—"

Didn't you pay attention? I said the difficulty level where we're going will be perfect for testing your new gear. That means we're not going to the same place, but farther in.

Akira's equipment had received a dramatic upgrade. Naturally, that meant the threat from the monsters he'd be facing would increase as well.

After finishing his preparations to head into the wasteland for the first time in quite a while, Akira headed toward the interior of

Kuzusuhara. Upon merging onto the city highway in his new truck, he got a notification saying that the toll had automatically been deducted from his account.

"One and a half million? Isn't that a little steep? Well, considering how much harder it would be to travel that far without using the road, maybe not."

The city would probably reply that if it's too expensive for you, don't use the highway next time.

Remembering all the trouble he'd gone through to make it deeper into the ruin on his own, he nodded. "Maybe it's a reasonable fee after all."

After all, he considered, the toll wasn't set in stone—it could be cheaper depending on the method one chose to pay with or whether one struck a deal with the city. Hunters could also have their toll reduced by selling a certain number of relics to the forward base's exchange, and if ammo costs on such a mission left a hunter in the red, the city might even waive the portion of the toll the hunter was unable to pay. And transporters who needed to use the highway multiple times a day could purchase a pass. Moreover, in the event the city wanted a specific section of the ruin to be conquered, they could offer a significant limited-time discount on part of the highway to entice hunters there.

Because none of these arrangements applied to Akira today, however, he had to pay the regular amount. So his fee was indeed a little higher than the cost for most hunters using the road.

Akira parked at the very end of the perpetually growing highway, which now extended much farther into the ruin than the last time he'd been here, and then switched to his bike, which he'd stored in his truck. Two of his LEOs were attached to the bike's support arms, and he held the third one himself, watching his surroundings carefully as he proceeded.

The area Akira and Yumina had combed for relics was technically also part of the interior of Kuzusuhara, but only in the sense that it was far past the ruin's outskirts. The two hunters had still been nowhere near the center of the ruin. This time, Akira went even farther in, entering an area totally new to him.

The scenery that spread out in front of him was similar to what he'd seen in Tsubaki's district—skyscrapers with elegant, uniform designs lined up as far as he could see. As he looked up at them from the road, which was around a hundred meters wide, their majesty made the sky feel cramped and narrow by comparison. And yet, the sanctity he'd felt within Tsubaki's city was nowhere to be found—this place had become a war zone.

Behemoths were going toe-to-toe with legions of white mechs—Shirousagis, manufactured by Yajima Heavy Industries. These weren't the cheaper models that had been used in the gang war; they were the standard versions. Their armor was tougher—their weapons, heavier.

On the receiving end of their fire was an immense pack of wolves—if they could be called "wolves" when they were so large the mechs had to aim upward at them. Yet despite their massive size, they moved agilely, leaping toward the white mechs. Their tough fur repelled lighter cannon fire completely, and though stronger ammunition pierced through and gouged their skin underneath, the beasts didn't back down. In fact, their agility increased—they even kicked off building walls now and then to quickly change directions in the air and pounce upon their opponents.

One wolf tried to crush a mech's armor with its gigantic sharp fangs—but the machine endured. A lower-end Shirousagi would have been crushed instantaneously, but the standard models had much stronger force-field armor, allowing the mech to withstand the monster's powerful jaws and shoot at it from point-blank range. But the wolf was astoundingly resilient. More mechs joined the barrage, but even that wasn't enough to destroy it. Instead, the monster went on a rampage, slamming into the mechs that were attempting to surround it.

The next moment, however, a black mech appeared, assaulting the wolf from above. Using a chain saw sword longer than the mech itself, it decapitated the wolf with a single downward swing. While the attack hadn't been imperceptibly fast, the giant creature still hadn't had time to counter. Its massive head fell to the ground, an

instant before its body also collapsed. Technically, the creature was still alive, but the body couldn't move without its head, and the head no longer had the power to crush the Shirousagi that it had clamped on to before the black mech showed up.

The latter was a Kokurou, manufactured by Yoshioka Heavy Industries. Like the Shirousagis, it had been prepared specifically for conquering Kuzusuhara's depths and had much higher specs than the lower-end Kokurou that had appeared during the gang war. It launched more attacks, just as powerful as the first, and one by one, the other enormous wolves fell to its might.

The mech that had come close to getting crushed by the now-decapitated wolf was saved. The Shirousagi's body had taken severe damage, but thanks to the sturdiness of the cockpit, the pilot inside had survived. Forcing open the dented door, he retreated from the battlefield, and the other Shirousagis followed suit.

The demonstration that Yajima and Yoshioka had held some time ago—the one that they'd gone out of their way to keep Akira far away from, to make sure he wouldn't interfere with it—had been a success. While their mechs had yet to be officially adopted by the city's defense force, the demonstration had gone well enough that the city had offered the corporations a test. Kugamayama's leaders would make their decision based on how well the mechs fared deep within Kuzusuhara. Pleased, both companies had dispatched a group of their mechs to this location, leading to this battle Akira had encountered as he approached.

Due to the intensity of the conflict, the nearby buildings had crumbled. Destroyed mechs, dead monsters, and fallen debris littered the ground. Thus, unlike in other Old World areas he'd visited, Akira didn't feel like he was trespassing on holy ground here.

After watching the Shirousagis retreat, the Kokurous returned to their posts in the air. They risked drawing the attention of the sky monsters if they flew too high, of course, but as long as they didn't ascend above the skyscrapers, they were safe. Together, the Kokurous overhead and the Shirousagis on the ground formed a legion of mechs that worked to advance the front lines.

Then a new set of enemies appeared—mechanical ones. Their

bodies were spherical, but each of them sprouted appendages that made them resemble tanks, mechs, or mobile artillery. These fired lasers at the airborne Kokurous.

The Shirousagis, now lined up in formation, instantly raised their shields. Each individual's force-field armor overlapped with those of the mechs beside it, forming a long defensive barrier, and together they launched harassing fire on the machines attacking the Kokurous.

The black mechs, too, opened fire, destroying the enemy's laser cannons and ducking behind the Shirousagis' barrier for cover whenever necessary. If one ran low on energy, it called over the nearby support vehicles, who were ready and waiting to replenish the mechs' supplies. By strategically advancing and retreating, the city's forces continued to advance the front lines, forcing the ruin's monsters farther back.

Akira watched their fight for a while from a short distance away, then nodded, as if coming to a decision. "All right, Alpha. Let's get out of here."

No.

Akira couldn't help wincing. "C'mon, seriously? This clearly isn't a place for individuals with powered suits. Even those mechs are having a hard time of it."

Then you shouldn't have any problem. After all, you've already won against both those models of mechs, no?

"Well, yeah, but that's different!"

The fighting before him was so intense that just a glimpse of it was enough to make him reconsider hunting for relics here. But Alpha, wearing her usual placid smile, turned to him.

Don't worry. If things get rough, you have my support to fall back on.

Well, if Alpha was this confident, Akira believed her. After all, if her words couldn't be trusted, he never would have made it so far. With a sigh of resignation, he gave her a small smile. "All right. Just keep me safe, got it?"

You don't even need to ask. Simply leave it to me, she replied,

her smile brimming with confidence.

Akira started searching for relics in this new area of the Kuzusuhara depths, but naturally he stayed away from the mechs and behemoths locked in combat. Instead, he turned off the highway and began making his way through the Old World territory via a side path.

When he looked up, he could hardly see the sky because of all the buildings above him. Yet for some reason, it wasn't dark—everything was just as visible to him here as in an open space under a clear sky. He guessed this must be due to some Old World technology he was unfamiliar with, but it still felt peculiar to him.

Turning to Alpha, he asked nonchalantly, "Hey, what *are* these buildings anyway?"

What are they? They're Old World buildings, of course.

"No, I know that—I'm asking what *kind* of buildings they are. Houses? Stores? Offices? Hospitals?"

Oh, that's what you mean.

"The buildings in the Iida Commercial District Ruins were also from the Old World, but I could at least tell those were stores. Well, maybe the name of the district gave it away, but even so, with these buildings I can't tell at all."

In terms you understand, this would probably most closely resemble a residential area. You can think of the buildings here as apartments. That's not technically accurate, but it fits the definition, at least.

"Apartments, huh? But closer to the highway, I saw a lot of buildings that looked more like apartments. They looked drastically different from these."

That's because they were for different kinds of people. You know how the houses in Kugamayama's slums and the ones in its lower district are both called residences, but they're completely different? This is the same thing.

A wry smile came to Akira's lips upon hearing that. "In other words, I've been hunting relics in the Old World slums, and now, after all this time, I've made it to the lower district. No wonder the

monsters got so much deadlier all of a sudden."

That's exactly right! You've made it past the slums and into the lower district, so the security here will be much tougher. Keep that in mind, and don't forget it!

"Oh, rest assured, I won't," Akira said with a grin, and decided to remain content with that explanation for now. Part of him wondered how Alpha knew all this, but he refrained from asking. Considering that she already had acquaintances like Tsubaki, there was probably no need to inquire any further.

Alpha led Akira through the ruin until they came to a building that looked like a classy hotel. At her direction, he hopped off his bike and entered the extravagant lobby.

"Considering how spacious this place is, couldn't I have just driven my bike in here?"

No, the security is still online, and since you're an intruder, it'll be wary of you if you ride in like that.

"But I'm already armed. Isn't it gonna be on the alert anyway?"

Not at all like it would be otherwise.

"Really? Well, if you say so." *Perhaps Old World systems just don't see modern weaponry as all that threatening*, Akira thought, and continued down the spotless hallway.

Alpha led him to a room large enough for ten people to occupy comfortably. It was fully furnished, and the decor seemed incredibly expensive—though everything looked so foreign to him that he could only guess whether this was so.

"For now," he said, "guess I'll grab as much as I can carry."

A word of warning first, Akira. The moment you try to take anything out of this room, the security system here will attack you. So be prepared.

"Then, I'll be safe until I leave the room?"

I can't guarantee that. The guards might already be on their way, or they might start moving as soon as you put something in your pack. But they'll definitely recognize you as a thief once you carry anything out that door, at least.

"A thief, huh?" He couldn't really argue with that. Hunters made off with relics from ruins, and from the Old World's perspective, this

would definitely qualify as theft. And even in the New World, stealing was considered a serious crime. Hunting had only become a valid profession because people thought of the Old World as having already fallen into ruin. And the remaining Old World systems were pushing back, as though to declare that the Old World hadn't collapsed yet. The Eastern League of Governing Corporations, including the hunters and indeed all humans of the New World, spent their days resisting these incursions by what remained of the immense infrastructure of the past.

And in seizing as many of the room's relics as his backpack could fit, Akira was also participating in said resistance.

He attached the bulging backpack to his powered suit's support arm and let out a deep sigh, then grabbed one LEO in each hand. The third LEO was still outside, attached to his bike.

"All right, guess it's now or never. Time to beat it. You sure they'll attack me as soon as I leave?"

I'm certain, though I can't say whether they'll assault you right outside the room or farther down the hallway.

Akira thought for a moment. "If they're going to come for me regardless, then would it be better for me to make a run for the exit, rather than escaping cautiously?"

Alpha briefly checked the hallway outside the room, then turned back to Akira with a smile. *I think so. Let's make a beeline for the exit.*

"Roger that!" Akira breathed in deeply one last time, then dashed toward the hallway as fast as his brand-new powered suit would let him—so fast, as it turned out, that he felt wind on his face despite being in an utterly windless room.

He reached the door in an instant and kicked it with all his might. It was Old World-made and thus incredibly sturdy, but it was just an average door—not, say, built specifically to keep prisoners confined—and his power more than sufficed to knock it down.

Slice! The door split in half before it could hit the ground. Outside was a mechanical guard, around forty centimeters in diameter—more or less spherical, but multifaceted like a polyhedron. It had rolled up to the door and then, at the moment it had sensed Akira

nearby, jerked up into the air and produced a rapidly rotating blade from inside.

The blade missed Akira. Nimbly dodging to the side, the boy trained both guns on the round machine and immediately opened fire. The sentry, under the barrage of bullets from both two-hundred-million-aurum weapons, was instantly blown to smithereens.

But Akira couldn't afford to revel in his victory. Sure, he'd defeated one sentry, but now that he'd been attacked, just as Alpha had predicted, there would undoubtedly be more. He launched himself forward and dashed straight for the building's exit—only to find trouble waiting for him right in the middle of the hallway.

Two more ball-like sentries were rolling toward him, one over the floor and the other along the ceiling. When they were within around ten meters of him, they both stopped suddenly and transformed into mounted weapons on their respective surfaces. Laser cannons emerged through their shells and opened fire. The lasers from the ground and ceiling passed each other, forming an X, and streaked toward Akira.

Kicking off the walls and ceiling to avoid the crisscrossing lasers, he fired both LEOs at the sentries simultaneously. His extended magazines allowed him to pelt them continuously, and every single bullet hit the intended targets.

This time, however, the sentries weren't destroyed. Splitting his firepower between two targets had halved its efficacy, of course, but the machines received so little damage that this alone didn't explain their survival. Realizing that his first easy victory had led him to underestimate the resilience of these two, Akira's eyes went wide with shock. All the while, the machines focused more lasers on him, their attacks so quick he had to slow his sense of time just to avoid them and be able to counter with another barrage of his own. He kept shooting and shooting, hoping this would take them out.

Alpha! Aren't these guys awfully tough?! What gives?!

In principle, she replied, *they're no different from those snaillike monsters you fought before. They're absorbing energy from the walls and ceilings to fortify their force-field armor.*

Oh, so that's *it! Then I'll use my anti-force rounds instead!*

While he didn't have enough of these rounds to use them as his default ammo, he did keep a few on himself just in case. Now that he could afford them, he'd asked Shizuka to supply him with them. But Shizuka's store didn't typically carry such ammunition, so a large order would take some time to arrive. For that reason, he'd only purchased as much as he could get before his trip to the wasteland, putting the rest on back order. At the moment, therefore, he had merely one smaller extended magazine of anti-force ammo—not a lot, but enough to get him through this encounter, at least.

He was about to load the magazine when Alpha stopped him.

Akira, don't.

Huh?! Why not?!

Isn't it obvious? If you cheat by using anti-force rounds, how are we going to know what your new gear is capable of? Besides, it wouldn't be conducive to your training.

"Training"?! His eyes widened with surprise—how could a battle this tough still be considered "training"?

Alpha just smiled, as though to say "That's right."

Akira responded with a grin that was strained, but it contained a hint of excitement. *All right! Then I've just got to win here, right?! Assuming I* can *win, that is!* If this was only a training exercise, then he'd survive as long as he kept his determination. Psyching himself up, Akira concentrated hard, slowing his sense of time as much as possible. Once he could follow his enemies' sweeping lasers with his eyes, he charged up to the machine on the floor, pressed his guns against it, and pulled both triggers. Even protected by a fortified force field, the sentry couldn't withstand such power at point-blank range—the bullets punched through its armor, blasting its insides to pieces.

The remaining sentry shot a beam at Akira from overhead. He leaped upward to dodge, high enough to reach the machine, then destroyed it the same way.

With both machines out of commission, Akira once more dashed toward the exit. Landing directly on the floor would have reduced his speed, so he spiraled through the corridor instead—first running

along the ceiling and then down the wall, finally reaching the floor.

As he did so, a group of *four* sentries approached. Seeing the newcomers, he decided to take them out before they could mount themselves on a surface and start firing lasers. His bullets knocked them off the walls and ceiling before they had a chance to attack.

That didn't stop them, however. The bullets' impacts sent the spherical sentries bouncing off the walls at high speeds—but also at unnatural angles *toward* him instead of away. The sentries were controlling the directions of their ricochets! Akira somehow managed to aim through their movements to hit the farthest one, destroying it. But rotating blades emerged from the other three, seeking to slice him to pieces as they bounded around him. One would have expected such blades to get lodged in the walls or to break upon striking them, but no—defying the laws of physics, the machines would temporarily stop the revolving of the blades alone just before impact, even as they tried to cut Akira with no loss of precision.

Akira kept dodging. As he neared the ceiling, he let go of his backpack, full of relics, so as to be less encumbered. With the bare minimum of movement required, he avoided the blades while counterattacking. He bent backward to dodge one headed for his face, destroying it as it passed overhead, then leaped into the air to avoid another aiming to slice off his legs. He landed on top of that sentry before it passed by him, crushing it against the floor. The final one aimed for his torso—rather than avoiding it, he kicked it away, sending it flying. A perfectly aimed shot destroyed it.

Then he grabbed his pack before it could hit the floor, and he raced on down the hallway.

Finally, he reached the lobby—the building's exit was right in front of him.

He'd fought only one sentry during his first encounter, two during the second, and just now another four. Given those numbers, he thought he had a pretty good idea of how many enemies he'd be up against next—until he actually set eyes on them.

Wait, I thought there'd only be eight!

Sixteen sentries lay in wait for Akira in the lobby.

Perhaps they're more enthusiastic than usual after not having had

any action for so long, Alpha suggested with a smile.

Yeah, right! They're machines! he grumbled. Even Akira would have a hard time handling sixteen of them at once, so he couldn't bring himself to grin at Alpha's joke right now.

But at that moment, his bike burst through the doors of the building, mowing down the sentries with the LEO on its support arm. As even the power of Akira's two handheld LEOs hadn't finished off the other sentries right away, so the gunfire from a single LEO naturally couldn't take out any one of these. Still, Alpha's intervention here wasn't useless by any means—her precisely placed shots bought Akira the time he needed to mount the bike.

Thanks to her help, the sentries were momentarily prevented from attacking him. Akira didn't miss his opportunity—he hopped on his bike, which at once made a half turn, knocking back the enemies closest to him and sending them flying, and streaked out of the building at top speed.

Akira sighed in relief. *Whew, that was way too close!*

Don't let your guard down yet, Alpha warned. *This isn't over.*

Yeah, yeah, I know. It isn't truly over until we make it home. You don't have to tell me every time. This wasn't necessarily a lie, in that he was aware of it—but he had indeed let his guard down for a moment, assuming that now that he was outside and on his bike, he would be safe.

The next few seconds, however, confirmed how wrong he'd been. Several new sentries appeared—nearly all of them of the same spherical type he'd run into in the building, but accompanied this time by some larger ones around two meters in diameter. Their shapes varied as well—some had upper bodies resembling mechs, while others had clusters of legs.

And all of them focused their machine guns, micromissile pods, and laser cannons on their target, Akira.

The next instant, the ground was engulfed in gunfire, leaving absolutely no room for him to run. Fortunately, Akira's bike could ride on walls, so he escaped by heading up. With Alpha driving, the bike scaled a nearby building, narrowly avoiding the enemy's barrage.

But Akira didn't look any less concerned—this situation was even worse than the one inside the building. *You're not gonna say* this *is part of my training too, are you, Alpha?!*

I suppose not, she admitted. *Very well—from here on out, you have my full support! But don't get lazy and make me handle everything. You've got to put in some work yourself too!*

That calmed Akira down. *Absolutely!* he said with a grin.

Then shall we begin?

Yeah! Backed by the full power of his AI companion, Akira enthusiastically raised his gun.

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Together, they shredded yet another spherical sentry to mincemeat.

Akira, your aim was still off by a large margin there, Alpha pointed out.

Oh, r-right! Sorry! He had slowed his sense of time and thought his aim had therefore been true. But if Alpha was going out of her way to scold him, he must have been pretty far off, and his face grew tense.

He *was* confident he was giving his all. He could *feel* it. And yet, his efforts alone still couldn't accomplish anything close to what they did with Alpha's support, and he felt dissatisfied with his performance.

If only I could access that "higher resolution of reality," like I experienced before, at will. In fact, he'd been training to do exactly this in his spare time. Just as with controlling his sense of time, he was convinced that if he could figure out how to activate this state of heightened perception whenever he wanted, his prowess as a hunter would grow by leaps and bounds. So he'd diligently tried to learn, but so far, his greatest achievement had been a splitting headache.

If only there were some trigger, some impetus. I thought maybe a battle this intense would be the catalyst I was looking for, but now I'm not so sure. He remembered the dire peril he'd been in when

fighting the Old World automatons in Iida—letting his concentration wane would have meant instant death. Was such desperation the missing ingredient he needed to replicate the high-resolution reality he'd experienced then? Here, on a battlefield so challenging that he needed Alpha's help to survive, he seemed to have all the ingredients he needed to access that high resolution. So he was trying over and over, but to no avail. Instead, the extra burden on his brain was only disrupting his concentration. And Alpha, well aware that his efforts were hampering his performance, kept him apprised of how he was doing.

You were off with that shot as well.

S-Sorry! I'll try harder!

I'm not upset, merely letting you know. Just keep doing the best you can.

On his own, Akira would have died by now, but with Alpha's help, he was able to keep the advantage over his foes. He destroyed the last sentry persistently pursuing him, and with the threat abated, Alpha returned the bike to the main road and brought it to a stop.

We should be safe for now. Good work, Akira!

Akira sighed deeply, looking equal parts exhausted and disappointed. In the end, he hadn't succeeded. But he knew he couldn't let his feelings get the best of him, so he took his experience as a wake-up call that he needed to improve and move on.

"Guess the enemies here really were a bit much for me after all," he sulked. "Maybe we came here too early."

Yes, perhaps so. Let's head back for now and return when the ammo you ordered comes in.

"We're coming back here right away?! We're not gonna wait till I'm stronger?"

Of course not. You didn't agree to all those conditions for cheaper ammo only to end up not using it, right?

"Well, I guess not." By now, conversing with Alpha had helped him calm down. He took a quick glance farther down the road. "Uh, Alpha—"

Yes, I'm aware. One monster, coming this way.

"What do you think we should do?"

Well, if we head back home immediately, the enemy might follow us, so I recommend you defeat it here.

"Roger!" He dismounted and held his two LEOs at the ready, while Alpha aimed the LEO on the bike's emplacement toward the street. Moments later, an enormous monster emerged from the other side of the road.

Akire beheld a behemoth so massive that it forced mechs to look upward in order to aim at it.

It made its way down the road at a leisurely pace until it spotted Akira, at which point it broke into a run. The gigantic wolf, networked with the mechanical sentries in the vicinity, knew that Akira had destroyed quite a few of them.

My goodness, you didn't even have time to shoot before it noticed you. I guess you really do have a long way to go, Alpha commented.

"Yeah, yeah, I know," Akira replied dismissively. "I'll be more diligent and get stronger as quickly as I can, yada yada. But first things first."

He trained both LEOs' faint laser sights on their target. The wolf drew closer and closer. If its attacks hit him, Akira would have zero chance of survival.

Yet he felt no fear.

The wolf stepped within range, and he pulled both triggers forcefully, as though channeling his pent-up frustration from his failure into his attack. All three guns fired at the beast simultaneously in an all-out, last-ditch assault.

In an instant, three bullets streaked toward the wolf and struck its head in the exact same spot, with enough collective force not only to pierce the head but to blow it off entirely. Each C-bullet had been strengthened to its absolute maximum with energy—depleting the energy packs on each weapon in one go, but also making the shots as powerful as possible. Like anti-force rounds, C-bullets were not typically sold in Shizuka's shop, and it would take some time for the full order to arrive, so he was currently using sample rounds that Toson had thrown in as a bonus for purchasing the LEOs.

"Wow, these *rock*," Akira muttered. "C-bullets and LEO energy packs cost an arm and a leg apiece, but looks like they're worth it."

It's not only thanks to the ammo, you know. I channeled just enough energy into those shots so that they wouldn't harm the guns or the bullets themselves. Don't forget my contribution!

"Yeah, I won't. Thanks, Alpha—you're a lifesaver!"

That's better. Now, shall we head home?

Akira got back on his bike, and they left that area behind.

◆

Once Akira had gone, a group of ten or so hunters appeared and approached the giant wolf's corpse.

"All right, it's now or never, guys. Let's carry this thing out of here."

It took all the hunters present to lift the corpse and carry it away.

"Damn, this thing's heavy! Not something people should be lifting using only powered suits, that's for sure!"

"Quit complaining! You know as well as I do there's no helping it. If we used vehicles or machines, the monsters would think we were in cahoots with the city's mechs, and we'd end up getting attacked as well. This is the best we can do right now."

"But how can you guarantee they won't attack us anyway?"

"I can't, of course. But carrying this thing on our own will decrease the chances of that happening. And if we want to reduce that likelihood even more, let's quit yapping and hurry our asses."

"Fine, but if this turns out to be some kind of scam, we'll be screwed in more ways than one, you know?"

"I'm aware. So let's just do our job and hope for the best."

Talking among themselves in this way, and joking around to keep their enthusiasm up, the hunters carried the large wolf corpse out of the area.

Chapter 174: A Risky Venture

Before returning home, Akira stopped by the city's forward base to sell the relics he'd found. The clerk, treating him extremely politely, handed him a list.

"These are the relics you've given us today, itemized for your convenience. Please take a look and confirm that everything is correct. If so, we'll begin our appraisal and will pay you afterward."

Akira looked at the list, and one thing immediately jumped out at him. "Er, it says here that these relics were found in 'Kuzusuhara Depths, Zone 2.' What does 'Zone 2' mean?"

"Yes, for convenience's sake, the Kuzusuhara depths have been divided into zones and numbered by the city." The area Akira had just visited was Zone 2, and the section where he'd worked with Yumina was known as Zone 1. "Wow, for you to head to Zone 2 on your own, you must be awfully fearless, eh, Mr. Akira? Then again, you *were* given a rank advancement commission, so perhaps ruins like those are just business as usual for hunters as talented as you."

While exploring Zone 2, Akira had also taken on some mundane extermination jobs for the city on the side, so the city already knew he had been in the area. "Er, thanks for the compliment," Akira said with a polite smile.

"We would have bought those mechanical monsters off you too, if you'd brought them in, but it seems you destroyed them instead. Understandable, but still a bit of a shame."

"Sorry. Things got a little dicey back there, so I didn't have that luxury. Oh, I'm not claiming any rights to their remains just because I defeated them, though, so you can send some people to recover what's left if you want."

"I appreciate your kind offer, Mr. Akira, but Zone 2 is so dangerous that even the city's mechs had to retreat from there. If we *did* offer a retrieval job to other hunters, I doubt anyone would

take it— Oh, what if *you* go get them for us? We'll make it an official request through the Hunter Office, if you'd like!"

"Oh, well, I appreciate it, but I just, er, kinda came back from there, and you know..."

Seeing Akira's face at the prospect of heading back to Zone 2 so soon, the clerk gave a wry smile. "Don't worry, I don't blame you."

◆

The group of hunters were heading to Zone 1 in a large transport vehicle that also carried the corpse of the giant wolf Akira had defeated. The unit's leader, a man named Moraf, addressed his comrades.

"We're about to arrive at the destination point. Just to let you know, they'll be expecting us to stay quiet and not make a scene, but stay on your toes so that we'll be ready in case something *does* happen."

The other hunters chorused that they understood—save for one, who looked puzzled.

"Hey, Moraf, are you sure this is a good idea? Isn't this transaction a little more dangerous than what we're used to?"

"Why do you think I just told you to stay on your guard, dumbass? This isn't some official job through the Hunter Office, so of course it's dangerous. But as long as we take that into consideration and are careful, we'll be fine, right?"

"No, th-that's not what I meant. I just remembered there's a rumor goin' around. I'm sure you've heard it too—that those nationalist guys have been seen here and there in this area lately. *That's* my concern. Will we really be okay?"

He was anxious about dealing with the nationalists because they directly opposed the League, and Moraf hesitated for a moment before answering.

"W-Well, that's why we need to be careful, like I said! We stay uninvolved and pretend like we hear nothing no one says. We're just here to transport the cargo, get our pay, and get out. That's all."

Even if their clients *did* happen to be nationalists, Moraf's team

had nothing to do with whatever that group was planning, nor did they want to be involved. Not even a little. And so they weren't going to ask any questions that didn't need to be answered. Curiosity killed the cat, and Moraf wanted to remind his subordinates that they were just here to do their jobs, nothing more.

"Think of it this way: if this job's a success, the money here will pay for our friends' treatments. Look at it from a positive angle."

Understanding dawned on his comrade's face. "Right... I suppose so!"

Theirs was a risky job, to be sure, but it was for the sake of their comrades. Now that they were all on the same page, Moraf and his team fell silent, fully focused on getting through this exchange.

The designated meeting spot was an abandoned building in Zone 1. Once Moraf's team entered the indoor parking garage, they contacted their client via data terminal to say they'd arrived.

A woman wearing a maid uniform and a boy—a hunter—emerged from the darkness of the garage. Up until now, Moraf had only communicated with the client by text, so the team was visibly shocked to see they were dealing with a maid and a kid. Still, they'd already decided they weren't going to ask any questions, and they continued with the exchange. Moraf signaled with his eyes for someone to open the transport's loading bay, and one of his comrades hurriedly did so. The door opened to reveal the gigantic wolf corpse inside.

"Your cargo, as agreed upon. Please confirm."

"It is indeed what we requested. Here is your payment," the woman said, passing a paper bag with a relic inside to Moraf.

She then approached the corpse, and even though it had taken ten powered-suit-wearing hunters to hoist it onto the transport, she dragged it out of the vehicle effortlessly with one hand. Moraf and the others couldn't believe their eyes.

Meanwhile, the boy hunter stared at the body in silence, expressionless. Once the woman had brought the wolf to the boy's side, she bowed politely to Moraf and the others. "Thank you for your services today. Until next time, if the opportunity presents itself."

Moraf understood that she was politely telling him and his team to scram, so he ordered them to return to the vehicle and depart. Naturally, he had a mountain of questions he wanted to ask—in fact, normally he would have at least asked whether the relic in the bag was truly worth the amount of work they'd done. But he had the feeling that retreating obediently was the wisest and safest option here, and none of his comrades objected to his order. Moraf and his team were well aware that when crossing a dangerous bridge, it was best to hurry over it as quickly as possible rather than stopping midway. So they fled the building in a hurry instead of indulging their curiosity and sticking around.

Once they had left, Olivia turned to Tiol. "Now, go ahead."

Hearing her give the okay, the boy reached his left arm out toward the corpse. His arm swelled up like a balloon and part of it began to tear, revealing fangs that eventually became a large mouth. The limb began to feast on the corpse. The woman and the boy watched as it greedily devoured the entire carcass.

◆

After receiving their payment for delivering the wolf corpse to Tiol and Olivia, Moraf and his team returned to the city's forward base. Relieved that they'd made it over the dangerous bridge, they breathed a collective sigh of relief.

"So, Moraf, what are we gonna do about that relic?" a subordinate asked him. "Sell it here?"

"No, I doubt that'd be a good idea," he said.

"Yeah, good point."

Considering the danger they'd weathered, and the bizarre nature of their clientele, their reward probably wasn't something they ought to take just to any old exchange. Still, it wouldn't net them any money if they didn't sell it somehow, and they needed money for their comrades' treatments.

"Nothing for it, then. We'll sell the relic to a shop in the slums. They'll probably lowball us, but since we can't take it to a proper exchange, we'll have to suck it up and get what we can."

Exchanging relics for money was also a key part of the hunter trade, so in truth, Moraf and the others still had one last section of the bridge to cross before they were truly in the clear. With their relic in tow, they headed for the slums.

Along the way, however, one of his teammates' faces became grim. "Hey, Moraf... Those two clients we dealt with, do you think they were—"

"Hey, what did I say about not asking questions? It doesn't matter whose side they were on."

"No, that's not what I was going to say."

"Huh? Then out with it."

Moraf's team was highly skilled—after all, they'd willingly set foot in Zone 2. So they could sense the strength of an opponent they'd never met before. Now his comrade's face looked pale, like he'd seen a ghost. "Were they, well, really human?"

"I see where you're coming from. Well, the woman's most likely a cyborg, at least," Moraf answered.

"Th-Then what about the boy?"

This time, Moraf hesitated before answering. Had he been forced to say whether the kid was human or not, Moraf would have leaned toward the latter. But if he said this out loud, his comrades might start getting anxious and fearful over what kind of deal they had just been a part of. So to keep them calm, he evaded the question.

"To be honest? I have no idea."

◆

Meanwhile, at a meeting of the Kugamayama City executives, Yanagisawa looked extremely upset.

"Excuse me, but what do you mean you want to end construction on the city highway?" There was no trace of his usual calm demeanor. The anger in his expression and tone was undisguised—and it was not a violent, loathing anger. His was the icy, subtle wrath one might display toward an opponent who was in the way and needed to be eliminated.

All of the officials present held high positions within the

government—they'd all demonstrated the ability and confidence to come out on top of the struggle for power and attain their current status, as well as the courage not to be cowed by the anger of one who held a similar level of power. Yet everyone in attendance averted their eyes from Yanagisawa and broke out in a cold sweat.

None of them wanted to be the one to meet his gaze.

The Kugamayama executives were powerful, influential people, but among the countless civic executives in the East, they ranked only slightly higher than those of the other cities. Yanagisawa was different. He was just as much a key figure as the others present, but had displayed an unnaturally high level of skill for a city resident—so much so that Sakashita Heavy Industries, one of the Big Five of the League, had bribed him with special treatment to get him to work for them.

Some time ago, when a horde of monsters from Kuzusuhara was attacking the city, it had been Yanagisawa who'd gotten the ELGC to put out the request for hunters to come to its defense. What kind of power could he possibly hold to make this possible? For a mere Kugamayama executive like him to pull something like that off, what people did he have connections with? The other city executives knew the answer—and it made them squirm nervously in their seats.

Out of all the city's bigwigs, only three could match Yanagisawa in influence. The first was the chairman, a man named Riott. The other two were Inabe and Udajima, who each had factions they ruled over.

Chairman Riott tried to calm Yanagisawa down, because he knew the meeting wouldn't get anywhere otherwise. "First off, the construction is not getting canceled, merely postponed," he said calmly. "It's a temporary measure. Please understand."

"Oh, I do!"

"And all of us here agree that the highway has so far been extremely beneficial for the city."

"If you know that, why postpone it?"

Yanagisawa's glare was freezing, but Riott endured it and said, "There's a significant concern that continuing to develop the highway into Zone 2 and beyond might be seriously cost-prohibitive."

The highway leading to Zone 1 of the depths had increased the

efficiency of relic gathering dramatically. Because the depths had previously been so difficult to reach, many hunters simply hadn't set foot there until now. But the highway had streamlined and optimized the relic-hunting process, and the city's profits had skyrocketed as a result, compelling the city executives to claim their own sections and fight among themselves for the rights to more of the ruin. Yet while building the road to Zone 1 had been profitable, many executives had doubts over whether extending it out to Zone 2 would be just as beneficial and thus opposed the idea. After all, the monsters in Zone 2 had just forced a legion of mechs to retreat.

The tougher the monsters in the area, the more money they'd have to invest into maintaining that section of the highway. And even if they did spend a fortune to extend the road out to Zone 2, only the very few extremely skilled hunters in the area would be using it. So these executives had asserted that, at present, there was no reason to keep developing the road toward Zone 2, and that they should redirect the allocated funds into furthering their efforts in Zone 1 instead.

Inabe was especially in favor of this proposal—his territory was far away from the road, and the monsters there were more formidable than in other areas. He wanted to dispatch mechs to his territory to cull the monster population there and thereby draw many more hunters.

But thus far, Yanagisawa had merely crushed his colleagues' proposals and demands in his fist and forced forward the plan to extend the highway. He had the power to do so, and normally, he would have nipped this topic in the bud before it was ever brought up in a meeting. This time, however, Inabe's and Udajima's factions had conspired to get every executive of Kugamayama City to stand against Yanagisawa. Faced with so much opposition, even Yanagisawa couldn't just crush his detractors like he usually did. Bringing down every executive other than himself would paralyze the city's economy, and he couldn't let that happen. So the rest of the executives finally had room to negotiate—such were the extremes they'd had to go to in order to get Yanagisawa to consider budging even a little.

And such was the stark difference between their power and Yanagisawa's.

Riott tried to get Yanagisawa to compromise. "If you agree to the temporary suspension of the highway's construction, we'll agree to build a second forward base. By moving the mechs out of Zone 2 and bringing them back to Zone 1, we'll be able to cover more ground and discover new areas in Zone 1. The budget for the base will be the profits from whatever we find in those areas, and more profit should bolster your defenses as well. How does that sound?"

Although hunters were making great strides in Zone 1, much of it still had yet to be explored, including Inabe's territory and the other areas even farther out. Pulling the mechs out of Zone 2 to cull the monsters in those untouched regions instead would accelerate the relic-hunting efforts there, leading to greater profits for the city. Then that money could be used to bolster their forces when it was time to conquer Zone 2. Even if Yanagisawa refused to comply, the monsters in the area were already far too dangerous for the highway extension effort to make any headway, so it was also in his best interests to temporarily suspend that project and come back to it later.

At least, such was the angle from which Riott was trying to convince Yanagisawa. There was a long silence as everyone in the room awaited his answer. Depending on how he responded, an all-out confrontation could erupt between Yanagisawa and every other executive. As the silence went on, the latter became more and more tense. Finally, the only one in the room who wasn't intimidated at all —Yanagisawa—spoke.

"Well, I guess I don't have a choice. All right, go ahead," he said with a grin.

Seeing Yanagisawa had returned to his usual easygoing demeanor, Riott accidentally let slip a small sigh of relief before proceeding. "Very well. In that case, we'll proceed with the new plan going forward, and discuss the details at a later meeting once we've each made our preparations. Now, moving on to the next topic: We've received word that nationalists have been spotted in Zone 1. We have yet to corroborate this information, but if it's true, they're

probably after the relics in the area. I want the section managers to keep each other posted on whether any nationalists are spotted in their area and take appropriate measures."

As he continued speaking, the executives in the room all relaxed, relieved that the discussion had returned to more ordinary topics of conversation. Many even sighed audibly in relief as well.

During a break in the long meeting, Inabe went up to Udajima, his face grim. "Just what are you scheming, Udajima?"

Inabe had conspired with Udajima to pressure Yanagisawa into changing his plans, but they had made those arrangements with each other through Riott. This was their first time speaking about the matter face-to-face.

"No scheme here," Udajima replied casually. "Just doing what I need to do as an executive of the city. By suspending the development of the highway and rerouting our forces in Zone 2 to Zone 1 instead, the city will see more profit than ever, just as Riott explained. You ought to understand that much as well, considering you didn't object?"

"Hmph. I 'understand' you're up to something."

Udajima hadn't said anything that wasn't true. However, as things currently stood, Inabe was set to gain much more from this proposal than Udajima. And so Udajima hadn't been on board with persuading Yanagisawa—until now. So why had he changed his mind all of a sudden?

Inabe couldn't read what Udajima's true intentions were. "Well, whatever. Don't expect any gratitude from me."

"Perish the thought," Udajima said smugly.

His overly confident attitude concerned Inabe, but the latter left things at that for now and walked away.

Then he received a call from Sheryl.

"What is it? I'm busy right now, so if it's not important, it'll have to wait."

"Very well, I'll be brief. We have a customer in our shop who wants to sell us some Old World data terminals, and it's not Akira. If that doesn't sound like an issue to you, feel free to hang up."

Inabe paused for a moment. “All right, go on.” This break during the meeting would have given him the time he needed to inform his faction of the change in plans and get them to prepare accordingly. The faster he acted, the better.

So the fact that he’d chosen to hear Sheryl out instead proved how concerning this development was to him.

◆

Sheryl returned to the customer, wearing a cordial smile. “Thank you for waiting. We’ll buy the Old World data terminal from you for five hundred thousand aurum.”

The man who’d brought the relic to the store was shocked and raised his voice without meaning to. “F-Five hundred thousand?! That’s all?! That can’t be right! I heard these go for fifty million, at the very least! What is this, a scam?!”

“No, sir, nothing of the sort.”

“Then why are you offering such a pittance?! Even a lowball wouldn’t go *that* low!”

Sheryl calmly explained her reasoning in an attempt to pacify the furious customer. “I apologize, sir, but we can’t afford to buy a relic at a high price without verifying its authenticity first. Rest assured, I am not suggesting the relic is fake, but our ability to appraise relics only goes so far. And finds such as these are extremely difficult to evaluate properly, you see.”

She turned her gaze to the group of appraisers Katsuragi and his business partners had hired to work at her shop. They weren’t novices by any means—they had no difficulty evaluating normal relics. But they didn’t have the know-how to assess an Old World terminal, and so Sheryl hesitated to spend that much money on something she wasn’t sure was genuine. “As much as I regret it, we need to have relics like these examined by a third party first to verify their authenticity. Therefore, at present, five hundred thousand is the most we can offer.”

The man, realizing Sheryl’s offer was justifiable after all, looked dejected. He wanted to tell her, “Get that third party to appraise it,

then!”—but he couldn’t, because then he’d have to part with his precious relic, even if only temporarily. As successful as Sheryl’s relic outlet had been, it was still a shop in the slums, and he couldn’t be sure how they’d treat the treasure once he handed it over. What if they had it appraised, found it to be genuine, and then lied that it was a fake? Or worse, what if they acted like he had never brought the relic in at all? Of course, even in the slums, business was business, so such an establishment had to maintain a degree of trust with its customers lest none of them show up. Still, whether he could trust this particular place was another matter entirely.

On the other hand, there was also no guarantee the shop could trust a given customer. Swindlers came in all the time to sell fakes. On occasion, a customer would bring in a counterfeit, thinking it was real, then get upset when they heard the result and accuse the store of switching the genuine relic with a forgery behind their back. They might even use force—and the stronger the hunter, the greater the shop’s damages would be. So the more successful an outlet became, the more important it became to invest in stronger security. This was also why shops couldn’t hold relics for customers for several days like the Hunter Office exchanges could, and instead had to appraise and make their offer right on the spot.

The customer knew all this, but he still found Sheryl’s offer criminally low. “I get what you’re saying, but please, can’t you do any better than five hundred thousand?”

“I can’t believe I’m saying this, but if you’re confident about the relic’s authenticity, I would recommend bringing it to a proper exchange instead. The Hunter Office exchanges, or even privately owned ones like those belonging to Kokuginya, would surely give you a better offer.”

“Er, well...”

Of course, Sheryl knew the man had some reason preventing him from doing so, or else he wouldn’t have come to her in the first place. Her aim was to gauge from his reaction what that reason might be. Perhaps he was trying to pass off a nearly indistinguishable replica as the real thing. Perhaps the terminal was genuine but stolen, and an official exchange might uncover the

truth. Or maybe he'd legitimately found the relic in a ruin, but was contractually obligated to sell it to a particular business. And there were many other possibilities as well.

So in order to tease out his motivation, Sheryl made another suggestion.

"If you absolutely must sell it now, I could also call a trustworthy appraiser here. However, in that case, you would have to pay the appraisal fee."

The man hesitated. "How much?"

"Including travel fees, we'd need five million up front, this business's location being what it is."

Well, *that* certainly wasn't cheap. The man considered for a short while, then came to a decision. "All right, please call them here."

"Right away, sir." Sheryl was a little surprised by his answer—she hadn't actually expected him to agree—but she kept a straight face and bowed professionally. Now that she was almost certain he wasn't trying to swindle her, she quickly made the necessary arrangements.

Some time later, the appraiser finished inspecting the relic in question and called Sheryl over to discuss the results in private.

"While I can't speak with absolute certainty," he told her, "this relic is most likely genuine. In fact, I'd be willing to buy it from you for thirty million. What do you say?"

Sheryl deliberated. She'd acquired the appraiser's services through Viola, and he was the real deal. At one time, he'd worked at Kokuginya—and the reason he'd been fired had nothing to do with a lack of skill. In other words, if he was offering that much for the relic, it was almost certainly authentic.

So what should she do? She gave the appraiser her answer, left him there, and returned to her customer with a smile.

"Thank you for your patience. The appraisal has finished. I'll spare you the details and get straight to the point. We will buy the relic for thirty million aurum. Would that be satisfactory?"

The man looked conflicted. Considering he'd heard of Old World terminals going for fifty million or more, this was still a low offer. But

he'd already paid to have the relic appraised, so if he backed out now, he'd be out five million. Her offer indicated that she believed the relic was undoubtedly genuine—but other shops in the slums wouldn't accept her assessment, nor would they necessarily offer to appraise the relic themselves. In other words, this might be his only chance to make so much money.

"All right, deal."

"Thank you very much! Would you like the money deposited or in cash?"

"Cash, please."

"Right away, sir!"

Sheryl ordered a subordinate to prepare a suitcase with thirty million inside. When it was ready, the man checked the amount, and the deal was complete.

"Thank you for your patronage! We hope to see you again!"

"Thanks. Another time, perhaps." The man left.

Watching him go, the appraisers Katsuragi had hired looked thoughtful.

Once the man was outside, he sighed with relief. As he made his way through the slums, he contacted one of his colleagues.

"Hey Moraf, it's me. I sold the relic! Thirty million aurum. Well, technically twenty-five, since I had to pay five million to get it appraised. Yeah, I think it was real, considering they paid that much for it. What about the others? Did they get sold? Oh, I see. Then maybe they should instead try the place I just went to."

◆

Sheryl left the shop in the care of her subordinates and headed to Kokuginya to have them appraise the terminal she'd bought off Moraf's comrade. She didn't doubt its authenticity, but if she wanted to sell it at a high price as a genuine relic, she needed a reputable certification of authenticity—merely claiming it was genuine wouldn't convince any prospective buyers.

The appraisal would consist of two stages. First, she wanted to

find out whether the terminal had been appraised at Kokuginya before. If not, she'd then have them inspect it in more detail.

After explaining her request to the appraiser, she sat in the waiting room while the initial analysis was taking place. To kill time, she went over the situation in her head.

Judging from that man's reaction, I doubt the relic is stolen property. But did that mean he found it himself? If he discovered it in a ruin, it's probably genuine—but he was acting too suspiciously for that to be likely. Then did he get it from someone else? Someone he didn't fully trust? If that was the whole story, he could have just brought it to a regular exchange. For him to risk getting lowballed in a slum relic shop, he'd need a stronger reason. What could it be?

Using the little information she had to go on, Sheryl speculated further. *He chose to be paid in cash. That means he didn't want our transaction to be recorded in his hunter account. But he paid the appraisal fee out of that same account. Does he not care, as long as there's no record of the transaction itself? And does his caution mean there are sketchy circumstances behind the origin of this relic? Hmm.*

She couldn't conclude anything for sure. In the midst of her rumination, she got a call from her shop.

She listened to the voice on the other end, then nearly yelled, "W-Wait, you can't be serious!"

Another customer had come in—with *two* Old World data terminals to sell.

Sheryl looked utterly bewildered. *What's going on here? Are both hunters from the same group, selling the relics piecemeal? Was the first visit a test? Were they putting out feelers for a store that would give them a good deal on a load of terminals?*

At that point, she decided not to draw any conclusions until she knew more. She told the staff member who had called her, "Ask for them to put up the money for appraisal, get it checked, and buy it off them if it's real. Set the appraisal fee at five million and the offer at thirty million, the same as before. If they complain, tell them the deal's off and throw them out." She added that, on the off chance even more customers came with similar offers, she wouldn't buy any

more than ten terminals—she'd let Katsuragi and his business partners make offers for the rest if they wanted.

She hung up and sighed. "Really, what in the world is going on?" The situation had suddenly become something that might be beyond her capacity to handle.

Then she got another call.

"It's me," said Viola's voice on the other end. "Got a minute?"

"What is it?" asked Sheryl. "Don't tell me it's about those Old World data terminals?"

"Huh? What are you talking about?"

Sheryl explained the situation to Viola, who sounded genuinely surprised.

"Are you serious? That's news to me. I'd like to hear what happened in detail later, but for now, let's get my business out of the way. It concerns that proposal to send Erio and his team to gather relics in the Kuzusuhara depths."

"Oh, that. Honestly, I'm not sure it's a good idea."

"Really? But the boys seem so eager to go."

"Well, that may be, but that doesn't mean they should," said Sheryl, but tentatively.

What had happened was this: Flush with confidence after the mock battle, Erio and his boys had expressed the desire to participate in a relic hunt in Zone 1, relying on the all-in-one support system. But a simulated battle was very different from actual combat. Even though Katsuya's team would accompany them, Sheryl thought the depths were too dangerous for the likes of her subordinates and wasn't on board with the suggestion. Still, she couldn't let the support system her gang was borrowing from Kiryou go to waste, and it was hard to refuse this request when doing so might cost her a tool that had strengthened her forces.

Viola seized on her dilemma. "I understand your concern, Sheryl. And so, I have an idea—why not have Akira participate as well, for extra insurance? You could go too, provided you can handle the challenge."

"Akira aside, why do *I* need to go? What would be the point?"

"To prove that your forces are so reliable that you're confident in

your own safety, of course. And it will also prove that you hold Kiryou's all-in-one support system in high enough regard to entrust it with your life." Of course, Sheryl wouldn't be fighting, only spectating—she wouldn't have to wear a powered suit or hunt for relics. "And wouldn't it be nice to have a front-row seat to witness how Akira fights in the ruins?"

Sheryl wavered. "I'll run it by Akira and see what he says. But I can't promise anything."

"Good enough for me. All right, that's all on my end. Later!"

Viola hung up. Sheryl sighed, worried that she'd let her desire to watch Akira in action override any other considerations.

Some time later, the first appraisal she'd requested was finished. And after checking the results, she sent them to Inabe.

◆

Moraf showed up outside Sheryl's relic shop, took one look at the building, and muttered to himself, "Is this really the place? Well, beggars can't be choosers."

Originally, he had decided to sell the terminals he'd gotten from Tiol and Olivia to multiple slum shops in small batches. If he brought a load of them to a single store, the outlet might not be able to afford them all—and even if it could, the preparation needed for such a large transaction might stir up rumors in the slums.

But then his plan had hit an impasse. The scars on the slum's economy, left by the demise of the two largest gangs, still hadn't healed, and very few shops had the funds immediately available for relics as valuable as Old World terminals—as a matter of fact, Sheryl's shop was currently the *only* such outlet. Other stores had the money available, of course, but with so many fakes out there, these places didn't have the additional money to risk buying one. Once upon a time, when these shops had been backed by Harlias and Ezent, they could have just chased down the seller and demanded compensation, but now they no longer had that support. Even though a real Old World terminal might make their profits skyrocket, the gamble wasn't worth the risk.

So Moraf had decided that even if he drew some attention, his best bet was to sell all the remaining terminals at Sheryl's shop instead. He was aware he was crossing yet another dangerous bridge, but he had to convert these terminals into money, or all the previous risks he'd weathered would be for naught. And Moraf needed the money to pay for his comrades' treatments.

So, feeling unusually desperate, he entered the shop.

Just then, someone called out to him. "Hey, you! Got a minute? You're selling one of those Old World terminals, right? I've got a proposal for you—"

In one swift move, Moraf grabbed the man by the shirt. How did this person know he was carrying an Old World terminal? Moraf wasn't about to let him run away before getting some answers, and was ready to resort to violence if necessary.

Panicking, the man raised his arms in surrender and smiled in an attempt to soothe his attacker—a strained smile, but a smile nonetheless.

"H-Hey, calm down! Why are you suspicious of *me*? You guys are way fishier than I am, but I'm not gonna ask questions. I want to make a deal."

"A deal? What kind?"

"Lemme cut right to the chase. My associates will buy those terminals off you for twenty-eight million each. Considering the extra appraisal fee this shop would make you pay, our offer's much better, right?"

This man was one of the appraisers Katsuragi's associates had hired for the shop. He'd already seen Moraf's team sell relics here twice, and he knew the goods were genuine. Suspecting that more authentic terminals would soon be forthcoming, the appraiser had joined up with a group of like-minded individuals, and they'd taken turns staking out Sheryl's shop.

But how would they know what kind of person to look for? The first man who'd come to sell terminals had been wearing advanced gear, giving off the impression of a seasoned hunter. So had the second one. In that case, the conspirators just needed to keep an eye out for anyone else with powerful gear.

Their plan wasn't the most intricate, but surprisingly, it had actually worked.

From the man's words and behavior, Moraf got the gist of the situation, and he decided this deal actually sounded pretty favorable. "All right."

"A wise choice! Oh, before I forget, we won't charge you an appraisal fee, but we *will* examine the objects. I trust that's okay?"

"Yeah, I don't mind. Just don't try any funny stuff, got it?"

"Wouldn't dream of it! We're very attached to our lives, you know."

With that, the man led Moraf to another building in the slums, where he and the others in his group carried out their assessment. They didn't have the talent of the appraisers at Kokuginya—or even the ones at Sheryl's shop, for that matter—so they couldn't be completely sure, but as far as they could tell, the relics looked authentic. Besides, all of the terminals Moraf's team had previously brought to Sheryl had been real, so the appraisers judged these to be as well.

"All right, looks like they're the real deal. Still, I'm surprised you found ten completely genuine terminals. Where in the world did you __"

"You said you weren't gonna ask questions," Moraf warned.

"S-So I did." The man fell silent and handed Moraf part of the money to cover the transaction—there were more actual Old World terminals than he'd expected, so they didn't have the entire payment on hand.

It took some time to secure the rest of the money, but eventually the deal was completed.

Having accomplished his goal, Moraf called up one of his comrades as he proceeded through the slums. "Yeah, that's right. I got the dough! That's one hurdle cleared."

"Is that so? Then tell me, what's the next hurdle?"

"What do you mean?"

"Look, we're not cutting any more dangerous deals, right? At our rendezvous in the parking garage, that woman said she might call

on us again. She was pretty sketchy, but her reward was real enough. That's how we were able to make bank this time. So are we going back there?"

"Don't be stupid! Of course not."

"I thought so—just making sure," his colleague said, sounding relieved.

Moraf's team had profited greatly from their gamble, it was true—so much so that he felt it had been worth heading to Zone 2. But accepting another of Tiol and Olivia's requests would mean having to meet them again.

That was something he would rather avoid if at all possible.

Chapter 175: The Tsubakihara District

As the legion of white mechs was making its way through the Kuzusuhara Town Ruins, it encountered a pack of weapon dogs, each over ten meters in length. Gunfire and artillery began tearing through both sides.

Bounding along the ground, the enormous dogs peppered the mechs with countless bullets. One with a giant cannon on its back roared as it fired, but its cry was drowned out by the shell erupting from the cannon's muzzle. Its target, a Shirousagi, smoothly sidestepped another enemy's shots, then blocked the shell with a large shield it was holding and returned fire.

There were eighteen weapon dogs in all, each capable of easily tearing a team of average hunters to shreds. On top of having stamina befitting their size and agility belying it, they sported machine guns and huge cannons that would make most hunters quake in their boots.

And yet behemoths like these were a dime a dozen here.

The four mechs opposing the weapon dogs were significantly outnumbered. And the fact that the dogs were smart enough to gang up on their prey compounded the challenge. After all, it was far easier for one person to win against two opponents in two separate fights than in a single clash.

Yet the white mechs were dominating the battle.

The Shirousagis charged past the abandoned buildings that cluttered the landscape in pursuit of their foes. Top-tier force-field armor reduced the impact of heavy gunfire to that of thrown pebbles, so they had little need to dodge, and their shields blocked the weapon dogs' shells—even though these were powerful enough to destroy a mech in one hit—allowing them to conserve energy.

Then the mechs closed in on their targets, pummeling them with massive missiles at close range. The projectiles tore through the weapon dogs' insides, pulverizing their heads, torsos, and limbs and killing them instantly. Demolished artilleries fell off the beasts' bodies in pieces and littered the ground.

These four mechs were part of the team of Shirousagis that had been dispatched to defend the workers extending the city's highway. Their pilots were so skilled they didn't consider any of the monsters in Zone 1 a threat, and they hunted down their enemies with seamless teamwork.

Of course, the weapon dogs fought back with all their might. They nimbly threaded their way between the buildings, unloading their guns and cannons as they ran. But they were simply no match for the combat prowess of the four mechs, and they found that all their attacks were dodged, blocked, and countered.

Before long, the pack of weapon dogs was entirely wiped out.

Watching the battle from a short distance away with the help of his all-in-one support system, Erio couldn't help but murmur an admiring "Whoa!"

The strength of the monsters of the depths, the superiority of the mechs who were bringing them down, and the sheer intensity of the battle left him slack-jawed.

"Looks like we're up," his teammate beside him said. "C'mon, let's go."

"O-Oh, right!"

With the surrounding threats now eliminated, Erio and the other boys drove to a certain building within the ruin.

◆

Erio's team was accompanying Katsuya's on a relic hunt in Zone 1 of the Kuzusuhara depths. This time, however, rather than forming two separate groups as they had during the mock battle, Sheryl's underlings had been mixed in with the Druncam people, after which they had all been divided into separate units consisting of members of both organizations.

Erio found himself assigned to a group with three other people. They were led by a boy who'd been born and raised in the slums and had formerly belonged to Group B of Druncam's rookies. Because his background was similar to Erio's, the two hit it off, and they chatted animatedly as they made their way through the ruined building. Eventually, their conversation turned to Katsuya.

"So yeah, at first, I couldn't stand the guy," the former Group B boy said. "The top brass at Druncam were always fawning over him, so I thought he was just some cocky brat who got all the good gear and jobs handed to him on a silver platter."

Another boy, a Group A rookie, grinned. "Yeah, same here! When he first joined Druncam with two girls hanging off his arms, I remember thinking to myself, 'Who the hell's this pretty boy?'"

Erio listened to their first impressions of Katsuya with rapt interest. "No way, seriously?"

"Yeah, that was what I thought at the time, at least. And then—Oh, scanner's picking up something. Stay sharp!"

Instantly alert, the boys held their guns ready. A monster charged at them from farther in, but they took it out with ease.

While the mechs had taken care of the monsters outside the building, there were still some monsters within. However, these were considerably weaker. They did pose a threat—they were much stronger than the creatures stalking Kuzusuhara's outskirts, in fact—but Erio's team could make short work of such enemies, thanks to the powerful gear they were borrowing from Kiryou. And Erio was keeping up with the team as well. He did feel like his suit was doing most of the work, but thanks to its support, he was able to contribute to the group instead of being a hindrance.

With the immediate threat now gone, the team leader lowered his weapon and continued where he'd left off. "Anyway, like I was saying about Katsuya..."

The boy's relaxed demeanor demonstrated his faith in the all-in-one system. Letting one's guard down inside a dangerous ruin was tantamount to suicide—but keeping one's caution at a maximum at all times would only lead to fatigue. In such an intense situation, where the slightest bit of inattention could prove fatal, one had to

know when they could afford to relax and when they needed to be on their guard. For hunters, maintaining this balance was crucial.

But while lowering one's guard was necessary to stave off mental fatigue, it wasn't easy when lives were on the line. To do so without first accurately gauging the level of danger one was in, or how much one's life was at risk, was suicidal. But remaining tense at all times without any reprieve would eventually cause one's concentration to short out—and the moment an enemy targeted them, the hunter would die. Many hunters lost their lives in the wasteland before they could ever learn how to manage this balance.

The all-in-one support system, however, mitigated much of this challenge. It handled all of the scouting, allowing the hunter peace of mind. And it was because the boy trusted the system's judgment that he could display such a carefree attitude right after a battle. It was often said that you could be considered a full-fledged hunter once you could afford to hold leisurely conversations in the midst of combat, and the support system had brought the boys closer to that level than they had ever been before.

After discussing the animosity between the rookies of Group A and Group B, the others told Erio how they had come to view Katsuya in a new light.

"I was on Katsuya's team during the Mihazono operation," the Group B boy said, "and even though I had the same equipment he did, I couldn't keep up with him at all. For the longest time, I'd assumed he was only strong because the bigwigs favored him and gave him all the best stuff. I thought that he was nothing special, and that if I had the same gear, I'd be able to do exactly what he did. And then I was shocked to be left in the dust. Man, my mind was such a mess the rest of that day!" He smiled wryly, now amused by the memory. "Anyway, as I continued fighting alongside Katsuya and the others, my mind all a haze, I realized that my assumptions about him and Group A had all been misguided. Even though they were clearly much stronger than I was, they never lorded it over me. Their main priority was keeping their teammates safe, including us former Group B people. And, well, you know. The rest is history."

The Group B boy now acknowledged Katsuya. He admired him.

He trusted him. But he was too embarrassed to say all that out loud, so he deliberately ended his account on a vague note.

Another boy spoke up. "For me, it was while we were on the bounty hunt. Up until then, I'd been looking down on Katsuya, thinking he was just some playboy, acting all macho so he could form his own harem. But when he acted as bait to lure that snake behemoth away from his comrades, and gave all of us that pep talk to calm us down when everything was in chaos, I realized he's someone who cares about his allies, and, er, I guess I learned how amazing he is." The boy looked slightly awkward as he continued. "And I don't know if it's because of that moment or what, but ever since then, I've also shared his desire to protect his teammates, and the rest of the team's desire to keep him safe. It's like we all have the same mind, almost, and I feel like that synchronicity is what really boosts our capability as a unit."

"Yeah, I know what you mean," one of the other boys agreed.

"Exactly! I feel the same way!" said the third.

Erio listened intently while the three Druncam rookies expressed similar thoughts and feelings about being in Katsuya's unit. Meanwhile, they kept exploring, taking out any monsters they encountered and scouring the rooms for relics. Before long, they'd searched the entire building.

◆

Sheryl had ended up accompanying the boys on their relic hunt and was in the Druncam transport vehicle, watching the performance of her gang members on each team through a visor display device she'd borrowed. Observing that Erio and her other subordinates didn't seem to be holding any of the Druncam rookies back at all, she found herself once again impressed by the ability of the all-in-one support system.

"Wow! To be honest, even with the system's help, I was certain Erio's team would just drag the others down. But if it's able to help them to this degree, I have no qualms about giving Mr. Inabe a favorable report."

"That makes my day!" Takagi, who'd come along to supervise, grinned with pride upon hearing Sheryl's assessment.

Sheryl turned to Mizuha, who had also joined them. "By the way, while I appreciate the invite, I'm in Mr. Inabe's camp. Will this be a problem? I was under the impression that Druncam's administrative branch was supporting Mr. Udajima."

"No, that's a misunderstanding," Mizuha said, shaking her head with a smile. "It's true that Mr. Udajima has contributed greatly to Druncam, but our organization isn't so influential that we can choose whichever city executive we want to back us. That's up to the city, and regardless of who they choose, we have to bow our head and cooperate with that person to the best of our ability." In other words, Druncam did business with the city, not Inabe or Udajima specifically. Udajima just happened to be the one currently overseeing the syndicate, thus Druncam had nothing against Inabe. Were Inabe to reach out to them as well, they wouldn't turn him away.

So much did Mizuha mean to imply. In truth, however, she didn't think being in Udajima's camp sounded so bad. As far as she could tell from her research, Udajima seemed to have the edge in the power struggle with Inabe, and if things continued on their present course, Udajima's victory would soon be inevitable. But if Mizuha threw in her lot with Udajima for that reason, she would indirectly antagonize Sheryl, a supporter of Inabe. Moreover, if the desk jockeys threw all their influence behind Udajima, Mizuha would have to tell Katsuya to cut ties with Sheryl, which would drive a permanent wedge in Mizuha's relationship with him. Fearful of what might ensue, Mizuha had decided to leave connections to both sides open, just to be safe.

Sheryl not only immediately read between the lines of Mizuha's response but correctly guessed the circumstances behind them. "Ah, so it was a misunderstanding, then. In that case, I'll include this detail in my report to Inabe. Anyway, how's the relic gathering going? Have the teams found anything valuable yet?"

"Nothing at the moment, it seems," Mizuha replied.

Hearing the answer she'd expected, Sheryl knew that her guess

had been right on the money. Of the currently accessible parts of the Kuzusuhara depths, Udajima's faction was occupying all the land near the highway. Everything beyond was Inabe's, including the untouched regions. There were most likely no relics of value within the section of his territory open to exploration at present—which, Sheryl knew, was why Inabe had been pushing so hard to expand into the uncharted area.

Even if this area was infested with dangerous monsters, most hunters would consider exploring it worth the risk if they thought the relics inside were valuable enough—or so Inabe had thought when he'd started investigating it, but in fact the results so far hadn't been favorable. As far as he could tell, the monsters there were extremely threatening, and it was mostly barren wasteland devoid of potential relic caches. No hunter would go out of their way to visit a place like that.

Thus, Inabe sought to lure hunters there by deception, even if he had to use the Old World terminals from Akira as bait. News of such valuable relics being discovered in his territory would surely stoke the hunters' greed—thinking there were probably more where those had come from, they would proceed to explore that section of the ruin. And by planting the "discoveries" of the terminals in the new regions, he could promote the relic-gathering efforts in his territory like he'd wanted all along. Then all that mattered was whether he would be lucky enough for those untouched regions to house a bevy of valuable relics. Since no hunters had yet ventured to check, there was at least a chance.

Of course, if it turned out that there weren't any worthwhile treasures there either, he would be in trouble. He had a lot of money riding on this plan—if it failed, he wouldn't be able to recover from the loss. Everything he'd built would collapse. But he was equally screwed if he sat on his laurels and did nothing, as Udajima currently had the upper hand in their struggle. So whether his plan failed or he let Udajima surpass him, he'd be finished either way.

Sheryl had guessed that Inabe would hedge his bets on a risky gamble to prevent that from happening, and now she knew this was correct. She didn't think his reasoning was necessarily wrong—if

betting in this way was the only chance to prevent his downfall, then so he ought to bet. Sheryl knew what it was like to make a reckless and risky gamble—that was how she had gained Akira's support, after all, so she completely understood the thought process that had led to his decision.

She just wished he hadn't barred Akira from coming with her on this trip as a result.

By this point, word had leaked that Akira had been the one to bring the Old World terminals to Sheryl's shop. So far had the rumor spread that one could now easily deduce as much simply by digging around a little. So it would look far too suspicious if he discovered even more terminals in Inabe's territory. Besides, Akira was considered to be in Inabe's camp, and it would look even more dubious if the hunter who ended up discovering Inabe's planted terminals was connected to Inabe himself. Inabe had therefore refused Sheryl's request that Akira join them.

Sheryl understood why this had to be, of course. At the same time, she realized she would have come to the same conclusion as Inabe even before asking him, if only she hadn't let her thoughtless desire cloud her judgment. Belatedly, she realized Viola had suggested the idea knowing Sheryl would take the bait, and imagining Viola's satisfied smile when Sheryl had agreed, the girl couldn't help but scowl.

Mizuha misinterpreted Sheryl's scowl as dissatisfaction and attempted to pacify her. "I wish I had better news, Sheryl, but this sort of thing is common. There's still plenty of virgin territory to go around, though, so don't give up hope just yet."

"Yes, I suppose. I'm hoping for the best," Sheryl replied.

Inabe had supposedly planted at least one terminal in this area. Ideally, Katsuya's group would find it, at which point Sheryl would notify Inabe. Most likely, one of the desk jockeys who had sided with Udajima would then report the find—thus inadvertently helping to conceal Inabe's scheme. However, Sheryl didn't know the terminal's specific location, and even if she had, she couldn't have disclosed it anyway. Since Akira wasn't here to keep her company, she was honestly hoping someone would find it soon so she could go home.

But she didn't let her feelings show in the least as she spoke, instead treating Mizuha to a perfect, polite smile.

◆

Akira had been planning to accompany Sheryl and the others at her request, having agreed to help Erio and his team out on the relic hunt whenever they needed it. When Sheryl had first fielded the idea, Akira had opined that if Erio and the other boys went to Zone 1 to hunt relics, they would just get themselves killed, and he'd politely turned her down. Sheryl had agreed it was dangerous, but told him there were extenuating circumstances that made it hard for her to refuse, which was exactly why she wanted Akira's help.

But now that Inabe had interfered and put his foot down, Akira had taken some rescue jobs in Zone 1 and was currently working on those instead. Still, he'd asked Sheryl to call him should something major come up, since he'd be close enough to help if needed.

Racing through the ruins on his bike, Akira gave Alpha a grin. *Come to think of it, we've done something like this before, haven't we?*

Yes, when the temporary base was being built. You got put on rescue mission duty at the time.

Bingo! Man, I really went through the wringer back then. There were so many SOSes coming my way that I didn't even have time to rest, and some hunters sicced the monsters on me *so they could buy time to escape! Then I had that horde of Yarata scorpions after me... Yeah, I never want to do that again.* Despite his words, however, he wore an amused grin on his face, as though fondly looking back on a distant memory. *This time, I'm doing pretty much the same thing, but it feels a lot easier. Do you think that's proof that I've gotten stronger?* He stole a furtive glance at Alpha.

Noticing this, Alpha grinned teasingly. *Maybe. But you've still got a long way to go.*

Yeah, yeah, I know.

Akira grinned back, a little relieved that she hadn't denied his growth. He could definitely feel how much stronger he'd gotten, but

he'd worried that this was due more to his gear upgrade and less because he'd actually improved as a hunter. Compared to what his current equipment allowed him to accomplish, it felt like he himself had hardly made any progress at all. Worse, his attempts to access high-resolution perception had continued to prove fruitless, and he didn't feel anywhere close to pulling it off either. And as if *that* wasn't enough, he'd gotten so careless during the mock battle that he'd been knocked out before Erio had. It would have been one thing if the monsters had been overwhelmingly tough, but he had nothing to blame except his own negligence.

Thanks to Alpha's support, he had no trouble controlling high-tech suits that would otherwise have had a steep learning curve, so there were no technical disadvantages to acquiring better gear. But what if he'd reached the limit of what he could accomplish on his own? What if he wouldn't grow any stronger in the future?

This vague fear had been in the back of his mind for a while now.

Yet Alpha hadn't denied that he'd grown, and had even told him he still had a long path ahead of him. That meant he still had the potential to improve—and if Alpha said so, it was probably true. So he placed his trust in her and resolved to become even stronger in the future.

After arriving at his destination, a derelict building, Akira entered and rescued a group of hunters who'd barricaded themselves in for safety. The leader, a man, took one look at the pile of corpses Akira had created to get to them and was as surprised as he was grateful.

"Thanks, kid. You really saved our asses! And you actually cleaned all these out by yourself? Color me impressed!"

"Don't mention it," Akira replied, and glanced again at the monsters he'd defeated. As these had prowled the interior of Kuzusuhara, none of them were weak by any means. But now that he knew Zone 1 was only on the outer edge of the depths, this feat didn't make him feel particularly accomplished.

It occurred to him that if these hunters were already having trouble with enemies of this caliber, they'd have a tough time continuing to work in Zone 1. And so, more or less out of the

goodness of his heart, Akira offered them a word of warning.

"This might sound weird coming from me, but maybe you and your team aren't ready for the depths just yet," he suggested.

The leader had already realized as much deep down, and he sighed. "Yeah, you're probably right, but this opportunity was too good to pass up, so we went ahead and pressed our luck."

"Opportunity? Whaddya mean?"

"Oh, well, you know how the city dispatched mechs here to cull the monsters? That's why we're here too." The Zone 1 monsters that were found outdoors generally presented more of a threat than those indoors. Many of the former—giant mechanical spiders, weapon dogs, and the like—were too large to enter buildings. If a team of hunters wanted to engage the easier monsters inside, however, they had to go through the harder ones first. Thus, even if they were capable of taking on the indoor threats, they would still find it tough to make any actual headway relic hunting.

But now that the mechs had been pulled out of Zone 2 and reassigned to Zone 1, even hunters who weren't as adept had a chance of finding Zone 1 relics, so long as they could handle the monsters inside the buildings. This team of hunters, their leader explained, had decided to capitalize on this chance and come here to try their luck.

At that, the boy looked conflicted. "Hmm. I get your reasoning, but these monsters aren't exactly pushovers either, you know. There are even these snaillike ones with really sturdy force-field armor."

"Yeah, we were aware of those, so we brought some anti-force rounds, at least. Since we were buying them to use in Zone 1, the shop at the forward base gave us a steep discount." The man added that not only had the store lowered the requirement for financial assistance on ammo to rank 40 instead of 50, it was discounting ammo for those below rank 40 as well.

Akira was surprised to hear this. "R-Really? I wonder if they're also discounting C-bullets."

"Dunno. But a discount on C-bullets wouldn't really help hunters at our level, at least, so such an offer probably wouldn't appeal to the crowd they want." Guns compatible with C-bullets were too

expensive for the average hunter, after all. “At the very least, no one on our team can afford them,” the man admitted with a downcast grin.

Akira realized then just how valuable his own hard-won right to cheaper ammo truly was, and he let out a small sigh of relief. Then he reflected that if anti-force rounds were now so accessible, it was only natural that hunters of this team’s caliber would think they could hack it in Zone 1. In the end, however, they hadn’t been up to the task and had been forced to call for help.

Reflecting on their poor judgment, the man sighed too. “Anyway, we thought we had a chance because of the mechs, but clearly this was a fool’s errand. We’d also hoped to find enough relics to make it worth our trouble, but we came up empty there too. All of this is probably because we didn’t follow the trend and head for the Tsubakihara District like everyone else. Our goal was to avoid so much competition, but I guess luck wasn’t on our side.”

Akira was shocked to hear the familiar term, though he didn’t let it show. “Tsubakihara District? Where’s that?”

“You don’t know? It’s in that direction, coming from the highway. Here, I’ll point it out.”

By this point, they’d stood around talking for quite a while, so it was high time to head outside. On the way back to the city’s road, the men explained to Akira what the term “Tsubakihara District” referred to.

And Akira found their answer deeply fascinating.

Once they reached the highway, the men thanked Akira once more. Then they watched the boy head off, and the moment he was out of sight, they smirked knowingly at each other.

“He’s gone.”

“Yeah, he’s gone.”

Then they began to whoop and holler in joy.

“Yes! We did it! We hit the jackpot!”

“For real! Looks like risking our lives to come here was worth it after all!”

The team of hunters had indeed underestimated the difficulty of

the Kuzusuhara depths—the monsters were far tougher than they'd expected, and they'd had to call for someone to bail them out. But they'd also accomplished their primary goal—finding incredibly valuable relics. Not wanting Akira to demand a share of their earnings, they'd lied that they had found nothing worthwhile.

All this time, the leader had been carrying the backpack in which they'd concealed their spoils. Now he opened the pack, and the team inspected its contents.

Inside were five transparent cubes, around five centimeters each.

Seeing the results of their efforts before their eyes, the men were giddy with excitement.

"Are these really what I think they are?"

"They sure look like it! Hell yeah, let's head back to the forward base and sell 'em!"

"Hold up," said one. "Shouldn't we sell the location where we found these first? Once we turn them in at the exchange, that intel's gonna be public knowledge anyway, so we ought to seize this chance while we can."

"Oh, great call! Man, I can see it now—we're gonna be rich!"

Confident that their gamble had paid off, the hunters hurried to the forward base.

◆

Erio continued searching for relics with the rest of his teammates, all promising Druncam rookies who made up the main force of Druncam's desk jockey faction. Even the city's top brass had acknowledged their strength, so at first Erio had felt nervous to be working alongside them.

By now, though, he'd opened up to them completely. "Whoa, seriously? Sounds like you've had it rough."

"We have, yeah. But we did our best and even got city officials to acknowledge us. Well, that was also thanks to the support system, but in any case, we nailed it during the expedition. And just the other day, we fought alongside the legion of mechs from Yajima and Yoshioka as foot soldiers, protecting the construction workers on the

highway. That job went off without a hitch too, of course."

While Akira had been exploring the Iida Commercial District, Yajima and Yoshioka had held another demonstration of their new products, resulting in the successful extension of the highway all the way to Zone 2. Such an enterprise didn't simply mean making the road longer—in order to keep the ruin's monsters away from the highway, it had been necessary to occupy the ruined buildings on either side of the road and convert them into defensive bulwarks. Mechs weren't suited for this or many of the other tasks required to make the highway secure, so human soldiers were just as necessary for the project.

Katsuya's team had been tasked with clearing the monsters inside the buildings, as the mechs were too large to do so. And capitalizing on their great success, Mizuha had been able to introduce Katsuya to the city's leadership at the city-sponsored dinner party.

"All this time, the old guard's been looking down on us. But from now on, things are gonna be different," the boy said smugly. "*We're* gonna be the face of Druncam now—this is *our* era!"

"No kidding? That's pretty amazing!" As a resident of the slums, a child, and a weakling compared to many others he knew, Erio was no stranger to being looked down upon. But his experience had made him even more determined to get stronger, and hearing another slum boy talk about how far he'd risen filled Erio with both admiration and jealousy.

The boy was pleased with the look in Erio's eyes. "Before, the veterans were always like, 'Just who do you think earned the money for that equipment you're using right now?' But they can't say that anymore, 'cause we've earned our current gear through our *own* accomplishments!" He broke off as something else came to mind. "Speaking of gear, Erio, you outlasted Akira in that mock battle when everyone was outfitted with the same stuff, didn't you? That's impressive! Wouldn't this mean that when gear isn't a factor, your ability actually outclasses his?"

The boy sounded lighthearted, so Erio was about to chuckle and tease back, "Yeah, maybe so!" Then he stopped himself. What if they took his reply at face value? And what would happen to him if

Sheryl or Akira learned what he'd said? So he amended his answer. "I'm not sure, but I'd like to think so."

This much, at least, wasn't a lie. He really did wish he were the stronger one—but he also didn't believe that could be anything more than a wish.

"Even so, a win is a win, right?" the Druncam boy said. "And the fact remains that you survived longer in that battle than Akira. I mean, we were the last ones standing, of course, but you put in a good showing yourself! Though not as good as Katsuya."

The boy was being oddly insistent, Erio felt. Puzzled, he wondered why that might be, then hit upon a theory that seemed plausible enough. If these young hunters thought Erio might be stronger than Akira—simply because Akira had been defeated in the mock battle first—perhaps they thought Katsuya, as the last one standing, was even stronger.

Then perhaps this was all a ploy to get Erio, who was more or less a member of Akira's camp, to admit that Katsuya was stronger.

From that point on, Erio watched what he said around them, only responding to their questions with ambivalent, noncommittal answers.

◆

Under Katsuya's leadership, the teams continued combing the area for relics. The mechs would exterminate the monsters surrounding a building, then the hunters would enter it and explore, carrying off any items worth taking. Thus far, however, they hadn't had any luck, and by now, they had already come quite a distance from the city road. Normally, at this point, they would have called it a day, but Sheryl's presence as an observer kept Katsuya—and Mizuha—from ordering a retreat. Neither wanted to disgrace themselves in Sheryl's presence by coming home empty-handed; on the contrary, they each hoped to impress her. So with their supervision, the teams kept exploring building after building, making their way toward the Tsubakihara District.

And yet, no matter how much they searched, they still didn't find

anything. The hunters were starting to feel anxious. Then, during their occasional breaks, each group touched base with Katsuya and Mizuha and learned that none of the other groups had found anything either, and their desperation grew. By now, common sense was whispering that they needed to head back, and even the support system was urging them to wrap things up. But Mizuha—frantic to achieve something, *anything*, at all—pitched an idea to Sheryl that caused the latter to raise her eyebrows.

"You want me and Katsuya to go out there and supervise the teams?" the girl asked in surprise.

"Indeed," said Mizuha. "Wouldn't this be a golden opportunity for you to experience a relic hunt up close and in person, rather than remotely from inside a vehicle? Katsuya will protect you, so you'll be totally safe. Right, Katsuya?"

"Absolutely," said the boy confidently. "You can count on me!"

Mizuha figured that if Sheryl were to get some exposure to relic hunting, the girl wouldn't think the day had been entirely wasted—and Katsuya was eager for Sheryl to see with her own eyes what he and his team were capable of.

Sheryl, however, hesitated. While the opportunity would indeed be a valuable experience for her, she was certain it would also be just as dangerous. This was Zone 1 of the Kuzusuhara depths, after all—an area many hunters balked at even setting foot in. Safety concerns had dictated that she remain in the large transport, so she was aware how hazardous things were outside.

On the other hand, Erio and his boys were managing just fine, so perhaps the danger wasn't as bad as she'd assumed. And with an extremely capable team like Katsuya's watching out for her, she might actually be quite safe after all.

If she was being honest, she admitted to herself, she definitely *was* curious what the ruins were like. And if she turned Mizuha's proposal down, the Druncam exec might interpret this as a sign of distrust in Katsuya and his team's ability. That might lead to trouble, and this concern was ultimately the deciding factor for her.

"Very well, I'll go. Just be sure to protect me, okay, Katsuya?" she said, bewitching him with a smile.

“I sure will!” he exclaimed, raring to go.

To someone with zero battle experience like Sheryl, entering the ruins of the Old World was no different from heading into the jaws of death. Even so, as long as her safety was guaranteed, it was certainly a sight worth seeing.

Having now set foot in said ruin, Sheryl was a little giddy at the prospect of an experience she could never have merely by watching a video on the internet or some screen. And thanks to her presence, Katsuya felt even more animated than usual, standing in front of her to shield her while firing at monsters the moment they appeared. Tough as they might have been, his precise shots made short work of them.

“Bravo, Katsuya!” she exclaimed. “From watching you work up close like this, I can tell that you really live up to your reputation!”

“Thanks!” he said with a grin. Rather than brushing off her praise, he accepted her words with heartfelt gratitude. “I’m really happy to hear you say that. It makes it feel like all my training and growing alongside my teammates was worth it after all.”

Yumina watched them with mixed feelings. Aware that unbecoming emotions were bubbling up within her, she nonetheless tried to stay rational. Then she sneaked a glance at Airi, who didn’t look the least bit jealous, and sighed at the weakness of her own heart.

Meanwhile, observing Yumina’s behavior, Mizuha felt puzzled. Not long ago, the executive had been about to kick Yumina from the exploration team, thinking that someone who had fraternized with the likes of Akira had no business working alongside Katsuya.

So why did she no longer feel this was necessary?

Looking at her change of heart objectively, an outsider might conclude that perhaps she’d reconsidered after witnessing Yumina’s ability, that now Mizuha thought it would be a waste to get rid of her. This was a perfectly reasonable guess—except Mizuha couldn’t recall the point at which she’d reconsidered her thinking, or indeed, what her original motive might have been.

Such a change was too significant not to have some kind of

trigger, some impetus—so what was it? Try as she might to think of it, nothing came to mind. The feeling was uncanny, almost as if, at some point, her own thoughts had been rewritten without her being aware of it. But that idea was far too bizarre and unpleasant to entertain, so she dismissed it and tried to think more rationally.

Then something happened that stopped her thoughts in their tracks.

Katsuya ordered all teams on high alert—an unusual reading had appeared on his scanner, and it was getting closer. As it approached, the shape of the reading became more detailed—a human figure. But that didn't necessarily mean it was human—it could be an enemy assuming a human shape.

And if so, the most likely explanation was an automaton.

Katsuya sent a transmission to the mysterious entity over comms. "We're hunters from Druncam. If you're not hostile, please back off."

He waited for a response, but none came. Instead, the reading drew closer, suggesting that even if it *was* human, it still intended to harm them. Katsuya and his followers raised their weapons.

The enemy appeared from the dark recesses of the room they were in—a boy, the same age as Katsuya. His arms hung limply at his sides. He wasn't holding a weapon, but he did appear to be wearing a powered suit, made from what looked like a hybrid of fur and scales. And he was completely expressionless.

Uncannily so.

Katsuya was puzzled to see him, but he relaxed a little. As peculiar as it was for an unarmed boy to be here all by himself, there was no cause for concern if he was alone and had no weapon. Katsuya didn't lower his own gun, of course, but he thought he'd at least try to speak to the boy in a friendly manner.

Before he could, however, Yumina opened fire. She was currently outfitted with the same gear she'd used when accompanying Akira, and the stream of gunfire from her SSB filled the boy's body full of holes, blasting him backward.

Katsuya was shocked. "Yumina?! What was *that* for?!"

"Watch out, Katsuya! He's an enemy!"

Yumina was convinced this was the case. She remembered

getting ambushed by Tiol in the depths of Kuzusuhara and exchanging gunfire with him in Iida. Along the way, she'd come to recognize his unique presence, and the boy in front of them gave off the same vibe. What's more, her support system was cataloging the boy as a monster, just as it had when she'd encountered him before. Taking all of this into account, Yumina's only option was to shoot.

Katsuya knew none of this. To him, it seemed like Yumina had just arbitrarily decided to fire on an innocent, unarmed boy. He was about to ask her the reason, but when he spoke, what came out of his mouth instead was "You're right—he's our enemy!"

Now he felt absolutely certain of this—so certain, in fact, that once he'd had time to think about it, he found it strange. He had nothing with which to back up his conviction, and yet he turned to Mizuha, his face grave.

"Mizuha, we must retreat, or we'll all be in danger."

Even though the other party had ignored their order and approached, the fact remained that a hunter under Mizuha's supervision had fired upon a defenseless boy without warning. Such a situation would typically have thrown her into a panic—and yet, just like Katsuya, she was irrationally convinced that the boy was an enemy.

"Understood! I'm sorry, Sheryl, but we must consider safety first and foremost. I'll have to ask you to return to the vehicle."

"A-All right." Unlike the others, Sheryl wasn't convinced the boy was a threat and found the order baffling. But she could also tell that now was not the time to ask questions or contest their judgment, so she didn't argue, merely did as she was told. As they left, however, she quietly made some backup arrangements, just in case.

With that, Katsuya and the others fled the area as quickly as possible. The emotionless boy—now a corpse—stayed behind, leaking green blood.

Chapter 176: Uncanny Youths

At first, their retreat from Zone 1 only meant heading for the building's exit at a quicker pace than that at which they'd explored it on the way in. However, almost at once, they were forced to change plans—a massive group of monsters appeared, cutting off their retreat.

"Dammit! Why now?!" Katsuya shouted. If this many beasts had been lurking in the building, then why hadn't they encountered them as soon as they'd entered? It felt almost as though the monsters had deliberately stayed away in order to lure his team deeper in.

Still, this was nothing Katsuya's team couldn't handle. They had two defenseless noncombatants—Sheryl and Mizuha—in tow, so they'd brought along their most capable forces to keep the two safe. After all, if Sheryl had entered the building only when Katsuya's team had finished securing it, she wouldn't be experiencing a true relic hunt. And instead of prioritizing strength in numbers, this group comprised the team's most skilled members, such as Yumina and Airi. The sudden swarm of monsters would delay their retreat, but that was all.

Yet rather than fleeing the building on their own, Katsuya decided to call in reinforcements from outside. He ordered his comrades who were on standby outside the building to head in and secure an escape route. But when they explained what their situation was, he couldn't help but scowl.

"You too?!"

It seemed that the monsters weren't just attacking Katsuya's team—his allies outside, as well as the mechs, were all under siege.

◆

The unit of mechs tasked with culling the monsters in Zone 1 was

still making its way through the ruin, eliminating every monster it came across. But the group accompanying Katsuya's team had been ordered by the city to stay close to the hunters they were escorting. This meant that under normal circumstances, Katsuya's team would be safe as long as they made it out of the building. But now that a group of behemoths had suddenly stormed the mechs, the hunters' safety was no longer guaranteed. What's more, these monsters were all far deadlier than the weapon dogs that the mechs had previously kicked to the curb.

In general, these behemoths looked similar to wolves, especially their torsos and tails. But their front and hind legs seemed more human. Moreover, each one's mouth had four jaws, so that the mouth could open vertically, horizontally, or both at once; when the mouth was closed, its "lips" thus formed a cross shape. Four eyes dotted each head, one on the outside of every jaw.

One of these gigantic creatures, which resembled a failed attempt at creating a human-wolf hybrid, opened its huge maw and lunged at a white mech. The machine countered, opening fire right into the gaping mouth. The barrage of large shells tore right through the monster's insides, killing it instantly.

Not even a second later, another took its place, leaping at the mech. But a second Shirousagi delivered a violent kick to the beast's side, knocking it to the ground, then stomped on its body to pin it down and blew away its head.

The pilot in the first mech breathed a sigh of relief. "Thanks, man! Nice assist there," he said over the comms.

"Don't mention it," said the other pilot. "But what the hell is *up* with these things? They're a lot tougher than the ones we've been dealing with. Never seen anything like these guys in Zone 1 before, that's for sure."

"Well, this area was unexplored before we got here, so that's probably why we haven't seen them in the past," reflected the first pilot. "Now that you mention it, though, they do kind of look a little like the monsters in Zone 2, don't they?"

"Come to think of it, you're right! Though these are quite a bit weaker in comparison."

"And a good thing too, because if Zone 2 monsters started to show up here, I'd make a run for it without a second thought. Actually, shouldn't we be retreating already? Those Druncam kids haven't found anything of note here as it is. Don't tell me they're still gonna hunt relics in the middle of a monster attack," he grumbled.

"They've apparently already decided to retreat," a third pilot answered. "But it sounds like one team is deep inside a gigantic building, so it's gonna take some time for them to get out."

"Okay, then I guess we've gotta hold down the fort here for a little while."

"Yeah. I called in some reinforcements too, so even if it takes a little longer, things should be fine."

"Huh? We have the authority to send their reinforcements in?"

"No, I'm talking about *our* reinforcements."

"Oh, gotcha. Roger that."

Even as the pilots realized how dire their situation was—so desperate that they needed reinforcements—they continued fighting.

"Honestly, this is a joke," one groused. "There ain't any relics here, and these freaks are ridiculously tough to boot. This Tsubakihara District or whatever ain't worth shit!" He fired his mech's gun as if channeling his frustration at the enemy, and the shots mowed down a pack of weapon dogs even as it appeared.

◆

Katsuya and his team kept fighting their way toward the exit until he spotted several people at the end of the hallway. Thinking they were the comrades he'd asked to secure the path ahead, a grin of relief came to his lips.

But Yumina looked grim and immediately raised her gun. "Katsuya! They're enemies too!"

However, Katsuya already had his finger on the trigger before Yumina could finish speaking. All of a sudden, he'd instinctively known—with absolute certainty—that they were foes, even before she could say so.

A dense curtain of collective gunfire from his unit descended

upon the figures. But the targets endured the assault. Two in the front flung out their arms—which reformed and expanded into shields, protecting both ranks of enemies from the bullet storm. Then, while the hunters concentrated their shooting on the first row, the three enemies in the back—each carrying blades in both hands—leaped over those in front and charged Katsuya's group.

Out of habit, Yumina immediately slowed her sense of time. Then, while the world hung nearly frozen around her, she observed her enemy. At first, the mysterious figures had been over ten meters away, but by now they'd covered around half of that. Their liquid-metal blades, originally around the length of a dagger, had extended so far that they would definitely strike the walls or ceilings if swung.

And the charging enemies were already swinging their blades with all their might. One silver blade sliced right through the ceiling with no resistance whatsoever—if anything, the weapon *gained* momentum as it headed straight for Yumina. The blade appeared to her as though it was moving in slow motion, yet her movements as she corrected her aim felt even more sluggish. She just barely managed to counterattack in time—the bullets, fired at point-blank range, knocked the blade's trajectory off course, then blasted the wielder's now-defenseless body to smithereens.

The other two enemies charging forward were taken care of by the rest of Katsuya's unit with such impeccable teamwork that the attackers were helpless to fight back. Then the hunters focused as a group on the last two in the vanguard. Even their sturdy shields were no match for the team's combined firepower, and the enemies were eliminated in less than five seconds.

With the battle over, Katsuya cried out worriedly, "Are you okay, Yumina?!"

"Y-Yeah, I'm fine," she said, managing a smile.

However, she couldn't completely mask the exhaustion on her face. Katsuya noticed, but he'd known her a long time and realized asking her to take a rest would be pointless. Instead, he just gave her a grin to show he cared.

"That's a relief! Just don't push yourself too hard, okay?"

"Hey now, that's *my* line. Well, it seems like you've been doing

better on that front as of late. Or perhaps the system just won't let you do anything reckless anymore?" she teased.

"Ouch, that one hurt," Katsuya said with a strained smile. "Look, I've matured a little since then. I'm not gonna rush out and take enemies on by myself anymore. I'll do my duty as commander, just like the system tells me to."

"And yet you never listened to me when I told you the same thing countless times," she said with a grin.

"Yeah, yeah, my bad."

As Sheryl eavesdropped on their conversation, she could clearly sense their years of friendship—and perhaps a hint of something more—in the way they joked around with each other, and she was slightly envious since there was nothing of the sort in the air between herself and Akira. But apart from that, something else caught her attention. Perhaps it was just her imagination and not worth worrying about, yet it was significant enough to give her pause: during the battle, it seemed, no one on Katsuya's team, including Katsuya himself, had made an effort to help Yumina out.

The fight had been over in seconds, and much of it had gone by too fast for her to catch. However, just by looking at the state of things afterward, she could surmise what had happened: out of the three enemies wielding blades, Yumina had single-handedly taken out the one targeting her—no one else had backed her up. But if so, why? Had they simply been too preoccupied with taking out the other two? Sheryl didn't think so. There were eight Druncam rookies in the group—seven even if one didn't count Yumina. Yet the clash had been one-on-one and seven-on-two, rather than eight against three. Sheryl found that incredibly bizarre.

If she hadn't known any better, she might have thought Katsuya was disregarding or making light of Yumina's existence—or worse, indifferent to whether she lived or died. But she knew that couldn't be the case. Just from what Sheryl had observed of their dynamic thus far, he unquestionably treasured her. Moreover, she got the feeling that during the relic hunt, the other seven had protected Yumina just as much as they'd protected each other, Sheryl, or Mizuha.

Which made it all the more strange that Katsuya and the others hadn't done so in the recent clash.

But she couldn't ask Katsuya the reason. Doing so would undoubtedly upset both Katsuya and Yumina, and besides, it was entirely possible this was all a big misunderstanding on her part. She was, after all, a novice when it came to combat—perhaps there was some strategic reason that they hadn't been able to come to Yumina's aid, and Sheryl just wasn't aware of it. Or maybe it was because they were using different support systems: Katsuya and the other six were using Takagi's system, but Yumina was using Fulta's, and the two systems had yet to be integrated with each other. Perhaps the system had simply determined Yumina could handle one enemy on her own, while the other seven were sufficient to take out the remaining two.

Whatever the reason, Sheryl concluded, it was probably something she hadn't considered due to her lack of expertise. So she put it out of her mind and gave it no further thought.

With the humanoid threats behind them, Katsuya and the others turned back to fighting their way to the building's exit, with Katsuya himself taking point. Finally, he spotted some of his allies at the end of a hallway. This was the group he'd called upon to clear the path ahead—and the system recognized them as allies, so this time he knew there was no chance of mistake. And if he and his team made it to the others, they'd find safe passage to the exit.

Now we just need to make a beeline for the transport once we're outside, and we'll be in the clear, Katsuya thought with a smile.

But at that moment, several enemy readings appeared from behind his team. Data from the support system appeared in the hunters' visions, suggesting these were the same type of enemies as the humanoids they'd defeated not too long ago. Katsuya clicked his tongue, then whipped around and raised his gun, his face grim. At nearly the same time, Yumina also turned to fire but, as she saw the enemies extend their left arms forward, immediately changed plans.

"Dodge!" she shouted, grabbing Sheryl, who was next to her, and leaping into a side corridor.

Katsuya did the same, seizing Mizuha and lunging into a room on the opposite side, and the other hunters scrambled after him.

And not a moment too soon. Cannon fire bombarded the hallway. The corridor was wider than average, but it was still a closed indoor space. As there was nowhere for the explosion to disperse, the impact was devastating. With a deafening roar, the blast engulfed the entire area.

Katsuya and his group were in a room with no other exits, so when the explosion reached them, its force was minimized. The corridor into which Yumina and Sheryl had run, however, opened into other passages at the far end, and so the two girls weren't as lucky, being blasted nearly the full length of the tunnel.

Even so, Yumina managed to land on her feet. The impact had hit her pretty hard, but thanks to the resilience of her powered suit, she was unharmed.

"You okay, Sheryl?" she asked.

"Yes, I'm fine," Sheryl answered. Her outfit had been tailored from Old World material, so she, too, was unhurt. But she looked grim, and not just because the attack had separated the team in an instant.

Carrying Sheryl, Yumina attempted to make her way back to Katsuya and the rest. But she was immediately thwarted—the group of enemies from the main hallway were now making their way down the side corridor, blocking her path forward.

She could now tell it was a group of boys. Seeing them extend their left arms like that had reminded her of the first time Tiol had attacked her—and remembering how Akira had carried her to safety back then, she had instinctively protected Sheryl the same way.

And the ensuing attack had turned out exactly as she had predicted.

Using the fumes from the blast as a smoke screen, the boys assaulted their opponents. Their left hands had been blasted off when their arms had fired, exposing the cannon muzzles underneath, but they didn't look concerned in the least as they rushed in with blades in their right hands. Some of the youths also stayed behind, switching out their arm cannons with machine guns

and providing supporting fire.

Upon reaching the intersection in the hallway where Katsuya's team had been before the attack, the boys had split into three groups. One set had gone after the hunters in the room, one had gone down the hallway after the support team who'd secured the path forward, and the last had headed down the side corridor to pursue Yumina and Sheryl.

Seeing that the enemies had gone in separate directions, Yumina quickly abandoned her plan to rejoin the others. There were five boys heading in her direction, and she wouldn't be able to take them all out on her own. Nor had she any hope of getting past them—she doubted she could even hold out long enough for Katsuya and the others to assist her. So with no other option, she headed farther down the side corridor, half dragging Sheryl along, and aimed her SSB behind her as she ran, firing the same kind of micromissiles she'd used during the battle against the automatons. Such ammunition wasn't meant to be used indoors or at such close range, and she ran the very real risk that she or Sheryl could get caught up in the explosions. But the blasts would keep the enemy at bay, and she judged that right now, this was more important.

Countless missiles streaked toward the boys and exploded right in front of them. The combined force of their explosions reduced a few of them to mincemeat, while the others were blown all the way back to the corridor junction.

The blasts also knocked Yumina and Sheryl farther down the side corridor. But Yumina dexterously harnessed the force blowing her back to help her make a flying leap. With Sheryl still in her arms, she landed standing on the wall at the far end of the corridor where it split, leaped safely onto the floor, then immediately sprinted off in another direction, attempting to get as far away as she could as quickly as possible.

The uncanny youths continued to pursue her.

Katsuya, meanwhile, was struggling against another hostile group. Individually, none of the enemies would have posed much of a threat to him, but neither were any so weak he could finish them

off without difficulty. And now he was facing down a large group of them—as soon as he took one down, another appeared in its place.

Even so, his team was capable enough to hold their own. But having to protect Mizuha at the same time afforded them less leeway, and as they were unable to break through the enemy line, they remained confined to the room.

Dammit! Hang in there, Sheryl and Yumina! I'll come save you! Just please hold out at least until I get there! As he saw the signals of Sheryl and Yumina get farther and farther away on his scanner, Katsuya's anxiety skyrocketed, and he fought with even more desperation.

◆

Olivia brought Tiol to a room littered with various monster corpses. "Eat," she said.

Tiol remained expressionless as his left arm opened its maw and began to devour the corpses. Thanks to its voracious appetite, it polished several off in no time, and as it ate, the arm grew even larger.

Next, Olivia tossed a cubelike device into its mouth. After gulping the device down, the arm detached itself from his shoulder, and a new arm grew in its place. The severed arm gradually assumed a human form, ultimately becoming a boy that resembled Tiol in appearance.

Once the transformation was complete, the new boy immediately dashed off. Neither Olivia nor Tiol paid him any mind whatsoever and continued their work.

"Eat," Olivia commanded.

Tiol's new arm began to feast on the remaining monster corpses. The process repeated until all the corpses in the room were gone.

◆

More and more boys appeared to block Katsuya's path, but though the struggle was difficult, he and his team finally achieved a

temporary victory. His allies tasked with securing the escape route had finally been able to come to their aid, bringing with them additional reinforcements from outside the building.

But he couldn't breathe a sigh of relief just yet. He immediately yelled into his comms. "Yumina! Are you all right?!"

"Yes, we're fine, both me and Sheryl," she responded. "We've taken refuge in a sturdy-looking room for now. How are you all holding up?"

"Understood! Just wait for me—I'll be right there!"

He was about to hang up and dash off without even answering her, when Yumina raised her voice sharply. "Katsuya, first tell me—what's your situation?"

Her tone brought him back to his senses, to a degree, and with relative calm, he explained their current state to Yumina. Her response was not at all what he'd expected.

"All right, then don't worry about us for now, and instead prioritize getting Mizuha out of the building and to a safe place."

"What, Yumina?! You can't be—"

"Katsuya, think about it. If you come to help us, would it really be wise to bring Mizuha along with you?"

Any way one looked at it, bringing someone incapable of fighting along on a rescue mission was a bad idea. Katsuya grasped this, but he still couldn't agree to take Mizuha back first. The longer it took for him to rescue them, the higher the chance they'd die before he got there.

Yumina, sensing what he was thinking, continued, "You're a commander of a unit now, so start acting like one! Commanders don't go rushing off recklessly—they use their brains!"

Katsuya didn't respond. Even though his brain was urging him to agree with her—to an uncanny degree, even—his heart rejected the idea of leaving Yumina and Sheryl to fend for themselves.

So Yumina tried to prove to him that she wasn't in a tight spot by speaking calmly. "Look, I'm not saying you should take her all the way back to the highway, just somewhere she'll be safe. And you're probably running low on ammo, so this'll be a good opportunity to restock before heading back in after us. You can also organize a

larger recovery effort while you're out there to make the rescue easier and safer. Prepare yourself as best you can, then come back and save us. Doesn't that sound like a better plan?"

Katsuya considered. If he headed after them with low ammo and Mizuha in tow, like he'd initially planned, he'd put both Sheryl's *and* Mizuha's lives in danger. A temporary retreat was clearly the safer option. He knew the correct decision he should make as a leader, and the support system was in agreement with Yumina's proposal as well. In short, he had a responsibility as a bodyguard and a leader to keep Mizuha, Sheryl, and his teammates safe. So even if he wasn't too happy with this conclusion, he knew what he had to do.

"All right. I promise I'll come back for you both, so wait for me!"

"Yeah. We'll be watching for you," she said, a hint of happiness and relief in her voice, before ending the call.

Now that Katsuya had made his decision, he intended to follow through. His resolve was evident on his face as he addressed his teammates. "Let's go! We're leaving!"

Unified by Katsuya's orders and the strength of his will, his unit moved out as one.

◆

Yumina and Sheryl had taken refuge in a slightly larger-than-normal room. As Yumina told Katsuya she'd wait for him, she was well aware these could be the last words she'd ever say to him. Then she ended the call and breathed a small sigh of relief. Katsuya was okay, and that was what mattered most.

"Just between you and me, do you think he'll actually come?" Sheryl asked.

"If I'm being honest, I can't say for certain," Yumina replied with a small smile. "I guess it depends on the team's efforts."

"Oh, I suppose that makes sense," Sheryl said, sounding and looking completely calm.

Yumina found her attitude a little curious. "Maybe I shouldn't be saying this, considering I'm supposed to protect you, but you seem awfully relaxed for this situation."

"Oh, well, I'm no stranger to near-death experiences by now. And if it's my time to go, so be it. People die when they die, and there's nothing we can do about it. That said, I'd rather not die here."

"I didn't take you for a philosopher," Yumina teased. Unlike hunters, who basically made a living off danger, Sheryl was just an average citizen, and Yumina found her rational, detached viewpoint refreshing. It also calmed Yumina down and helped squash her pessimistic outlook on the situation. "Well, I'd like to hold on to this life of mine as long as I can too, so I'll make sure we both get out of here."

"I appreciate that," Sheryl said, returning her smile.

◆

Katsuya hurried out of the building as quickly as possible, but the situation he found was worse than he had expected. A team of four mechs were working to keep a group of gigantic creatures at bay. However, they couldn't keep the comparatively smaller monsters from slipping between the larger ones, and it fell to the Druncam hunters to handle those.

Katsuya had planned to split his forces into three teams: one to rescue Yumina and Sheryl (which he would lead), one to continue to secure the area until they got back, and one to take Mizuha to safety. But there were far too many enemies for this approach to be feasible. If he divided his forces here, all three units might get wiped out due to a lack of firepower. In the interest of safety and to ensure the rescue operation's success, they would all need to retreat together—once again, this thought seemed to occupy Katsuya's mind to an unnatural degree. The support system was also in favor of the plan.

But that would mean abandoning Yumina and the others and leaving them to fend for themselves, however temporarily. Even if he was coming right back, it was an agonizing call to make. And because he felt so reluctant, he found himself putting the decision off. First, he escorted Mizuha to the transport vehicle, which was at least safer than being outside, and restocked his ammo. But he

couldn’t stall any longer after that.

Then a compromise formed in his mind. By now, he’d led Mizuha out of the building and to safety, and he also had teammates by his side. In other words, the executive was already in a much safer place than before, and he could leave her here without worry. And he had two-thirds of his comrades with him—more than enough to rescue Yumina and Sheryl, he figured. *Then that’s what I’ll do*, he thought. *I’ve decided!*

But before he could leap into action, the unit of mechs contacted him. “About time you came out! Let’s beat it on the double! Hurry!”

“W-Wait! Some of my friends are still—”

“Like hell we’re gonna wait! We’re runnin’ on fumes with the forces we have left as it is! If you guys wanna stay behind, be my guest, but we’re leavin’ in thirty seconds, whether you’re with us or not! Mech force out!”

The line went dead. Anguish was written all over Katsuya’s face. Two-thirds of his forces would only suffice with the support of the mechs outside. If a legion of Shirousagis was struggling to take down these monsters, Katsuya’s unit alone wouldn’t stand a chance against them. His entire plan was now worthless.

In that case, he thought, *maybe I should just head in there with the whole unit. We’d lose our chance to escape, but we could always simply hole up inside and wait for help to arrive. In fact, wouldn’t that be a safer bet than a botched retreat?*

He could feel some inexplicable force inside him, telling him this was a bad idea. But in his desperation to protect Yumina and Sheryl, he ignored the impulse. If becoming stronger meant rationally concluding that Yumina and Sheryl should be abandoned, he didn’t need such strength. He was about to step back into his old ways.

Then he remembered how Yumina had disapproved as well: “Prepare yourself as best you can, then come back and save us,” she’d said. He realized he had been about to sacrifice himself yet again in a reckless display of heroism, endangering not only Yumina and Sheryl but his team in the process—and so he managed to stop himself before it was too late.

“Shit!” Vowing in his heart that he’d come back as prepared as he

could possibly be, even as he cursed his own powerlessness, he opened his mouth to order his team to retreat along with the mechs.

But then the situation took yet another turn. A swath of the monster horde surrounding Katsuya and the others was suddenly blasted away, annihilated—regardless of shape and size—in a hail of gunfire that seemingly came out of nowhere.

"What the—?!" Shocked, Katsuya turned to look where the attack had come from.

He saw a person race toward him on a motorbike, pull up in front of him, and brake on a dime.

It was Akira.

"Where's Sheryl?" were the first words out of his mouth.

A simple question, and yet Katsuya was too shocked and discombobulated to answer. Instead, he uttered the first question that came to his mind. "Y-You?! Why are *you* here?!"

"Where's Sheryl?" Akira repeated more sternly, ignoring this.

"She's, er, still in the building with Yumina—"

Before Katsuya could even finish speaking, Akira revved his engine. But lest he be left behind, Katsuya hopped on the bike as Akira sped off.

Even when they reached the building, Akira didn't slow down—he smashed his bike right through the wall. Then, inside, he turned to face Katsuya with a scowl. "What the hell do you think you're doing?! Get off!" he shouted.

"No!" Katsuya yelled back. "I'm coming too! I'm rescuing Yumina and Sheryl, and that's final!"

Akira clicked his tongue in irritation and faced forward again. Monsters lay ahead, so he raised his gun, and Katsuya followed suit. The sheer density of their combined firepower annihilated every monster in their path, dyeing the hallways with blood and guts.

"Whatever!" Akira replied. "But if you fall off, you're on your own!"

And then, riding tandem on Akira's bike, the two boys raced through the building at top speed.

◆

While undertaking rescue requests in Zone 1, Akira had received an SOS from Sheryl and immediately dropped what he was doing to head straight to the scene.

Previously, he'd told her to contact him if anything happened, but he hadn't actually expected her to need his help. After all, she had Druncam's elite—Katsuya, Yumina, and the rest of their team—protecting her, and he'd heard that an executive of Druncam's desk jockey faction was present as well. Akira had seriously doubted that the Druncam hunters would let anything happen to their two charges.

So he was quite surprised when he got Sheryl's plea for assistance.

He sped toward her location, his face grim. Whatever was going on, one thing was certain: even Druncam's star unit couldn't handle it.

Alpha, what do you think could've happened?

I couldn't say. Sheryl just sent a brief text, so she might be too busy running from monsters to type any more or call you with the details. And if so, I'd say we can expect a considerable monster presence once we arrive.

But isn't the city supposed to be culling the Zone 1 monsters?!

Sheryl appears to be some distance away from the highway, so perhaps the population control program just hasn't progressed that far yet. But we won't know for sure until we get there. It could very well be that she was just worried and wanted to see you.

We'd be lucky if that's it. For now, let's just focus on getting there.

Here, the roads weren't as uneven and unkempt as those in the wasteland, but the ground was littered with monster corpses, making it dangerous to travel at high speed all the same. And if he were to accidentally collide with a monster suddenly emerging from an abandoned building, neither he nor his bike would be likely to survive.

Luckily, Alpha's expert maneuvering let him race down the road at his bike's top speed. He fired at the creatures ahead of him, taking them out before they could collide with him, his bike swerving

around them just in the nick of time. Alpha could unleash the full potential of his expensive vehicle, and it swiftly bore Akira toward his destination.

Nevertheless, his trip still took some time. Believing Sheryl wouldn't require his services, he'd agreed to escort the most recent group he'd rescued all the way back to the highway, and so had been quite a ways away from Sheryl despite technically being in the same zone.

I should've stayed closer to her, he said bitterly. *I screwed up!*

But Alpha shook her head. *It wasn't your fault. By that logic, you'd have to stay by her side at all times, around the clock, and as you yourself said, that's just not possible.*

Well, I suppose that's fair.

And didn't you also say that because you can't constantly protect her from harm, she'll have to rely on her own luck now and then? Such is the case now. We can only put forth our finest effort and see if we get there in time. For the rest, all we can do is hope her luck holds out. She gave Akira an encouraging grin.

Akira cheered up. *Right, now's not the time for regret!* he reminded himself. *Let's just focus on doing the best we can!*

Off he sped even faster, his bike streaking through the ruins. Should the worst occur nonetheless, at least he could say he'd tried. And as he rode, he mowed down and kicked away the monsters in his path, leaving a trail of corpses in his wake.

As Akira approached his destination at high speed, he grimaced.

Well, Alpha, it looks like luck wasn't on Sheryl's side this time.

So it seems.

A bird's-eye view of the area overlapped his vision, showing a dense cluster of monster readings all around Sheryl's vicinity.

Why the hell are there so many? No wonder she felt compelled to ask me for help. Enemy signals dotted nearly the entire local map. Had they all been small wasteland creatures, Akira wouldn't have been worried—a high-ranking hunter with heavy weaponry could wipe the floor with them, no matter their numbers.

Unfortunately, however, this was Zone 1 of the Kuzusuhara Town

Ruins depths. Even the smallest, weakest monsters here were far more powerful than anything in the wasteland. And as if that wasn't bad enough, his scanner indicated the presence of even larger, deadlier beasts, like weapon dogs and those lupine freaks he'd encountered in Zone 2. He could also see that the white mechs who'd won that battle were now seriously struggling. Had he stumbled across such a dire scene by accident, he would have turned and fled right then and there.

Alpha decided to probe what he was thinking, just to make sure. *What do you want to do, Akira? Turn back?*

Akira thought Alpha was trying to get under his skin, and he grinned back defiantly. *Yeah, right. It's full support time! Let's go!*

Very well, as you wish! she responded with a smile.

As the bike rushed headlong into the horde of monsters, Akira held two LEOs at the ready, one in each hand. The third LEO, mounted on the bike's arm emplacement and connected (as were the other guns) to the vehicle's power source via thick energy cables, also swiveled to face the enemy.

The monsters spotted Akira approaching. Those with machine guns and cannons protruding from their bodies aimed in his direction, while the ones without ranged weapons bounded toward him at a speed belying their size to attack at close range.

Akira had already begun slowing his sense of time—now he concentrated even more. When his bike actually seemed to be *de*celerating, despite continuing to accelerate in reality, he fired the weapons in his hands together.

A curtain of C-bullets, each powered up with enough energy to destroy their targets in one hit, ravaged the enemy horde. The shots blasted massive holes in the monsters' bodies, piercing all the way through them and out the other side—even tearing through and killing the enemies behind them as well. Against beasts with natural force-field armor, he fired anti-force rounds that penetrated the unyielding force fields and sank into flesh, where the impact would churn up the monster's insides like a bomb detonating in its stomach.

Many creatures disintegrated in an instant, scattering blood and

guts through the air. Before they even hit the ground, he sent another curtain of gunfire toward the next wave of enemies.

He was using the largest capacity of extended magazines available for both his C-bullets and his anti-force rounds, each of which normally cost well over a hundred million aurum. These magazines held so many rounds that he almost felt like they'd never run out, and with the LEO's extremely high rate of fire, his gunfire dominated the battlefield.

The monsters aimed at Akira too, of course. As the world around him moved at a snail's pace, and the blood and flesh flying through the air reduced the accuracy of his scanner, his foes trained their sights on him and fired their guns and cannons without any regard to any other monsters in the line of fire. A dense hail of enemy projectiles blanketed the area.

Yet Akira skillfully wove his bike past every single one. Thanks to his upgraded gear, his scanner was more precise than it had ever been, and further bolstered by Alpha's peerless analysis. The stream of data, along with Alpha's outstanding bike maneuvering, the increased physical ability granted by his powered suit, and his own practiced evasive movements, ensured that not one of the enemy's shots hit him.

In reality, it didn't even take ten seconds for Akira to break through the swarm surrounding him—yet it felt more like ten minutes of continuous firing. As he watched his enemies fall before him in slow motion, one by one, he became aware of just how powerful he was now. A smile rose unbidden to his lips.

Wow! I can fire as many of these ridiculously powerful bullets as I want! So this is the power of the city's financial assistance! Thanks to my efforts, I have a right that normally only hunters over Rank 50 attain! Guess getting it really was worth the trouble, right, Alpha?!

Akira had already gotten the entire stock of ammunition he'd requested from Shizuka's shop and, since the cost was now so low, had ordered and received even more since then. Such easy access to powerful ammo made him feel that maybe he'd come out ahead in the desperate battle against the automatons in Iida after all, given how drastically the financial assistance from the city had boosted his

firepower.

Perhaps. But even so, we're not out of the woods here yet. Calm down and focus.

Oh, right! Realizing his newfound power was going to his head, he chided himself and concentrated on the battle once more. In the end, cheap and powerful ammo was only an aid, much like Alpha's support. If he started believing his success was due to his own ability and grew conceited, he'd end up letting his guard down.

All at once, he broke through the horde and saw Katsuya up ahead.

And Sheryl wasn't with him.

Akira slammed on the brakes and stopped right in front of Katsuya. "Where's Sheryl?"

"Y-You?! Why are *you* here?!"

"Where's Sheryl?"

"She's, er, still in the building with Yumina—"

He'd left not only Sheryl but Yumina inside as well?! Akira sped off toward the building without waiting for him to finish—and much to his surprise, Katsuya leaped onto the bike with him.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?!" Akira demanded. "Get off!"

"No! I'm coming too! I'm rescuing Yumina and Sheryl, and that's final!"

Akira felt a strong impulse to kick him off the bike. But Alpha stopped him.

Don't do it, Akira! We have enough enemies around us already—we don't need another.

She was right. There were as many monsters inside the building as outside—in fact, he could see a group of them just ahead. Dealing with them while trying to eject Katsuya would be a pain anyway, so he clicked his tongue irritably and replied, "Whatever! But if you fall off, you're on your own!"

And so, though Akira felt his hands were tied, he and Katsuya sped through the building, working together to eliminate the monsters in their path as they hurried to save Sheryl and Yumina.

Chapter 177: Someone's Wish, Someone's Desire

Outside, the Druncam unit made their retreat along with the mechs. Katsuya had ordered the evacuation via wireless as soon as he'd entered the building with Akira, and no one had objected. Airi, whom he'd tasked with leading the retreat, hurried everyone off the battlefield in a calm and orderly fashion.

As they fell back, they found themselves surrounded by many monsters, but by working together, they were able to break through the swarm without much difficulty. After that, as they returned to the highway, they only needed to worry about the monsters pursuing them from behind—a trivial task for a unit as elite as Katsuya's.

Erio and his fellow gang members were all piled in the same vehicle so they could be guarded more easily. The atmosphere inside was gloomy, and Erio let out a small sigh. The others, understanding exactly how he felt, looked similarly defeated.

"I guess we were a little too cocky," Erio reflected quietly.

"Yeah, you said it," one teammate replied.

Working as a part of Katsuya's unit, and so taking on the same monsters that the Druncam hunters were fighting, had tremendously boosted the gang members' self-confidence. The support system had helped, of course, but they'd hunted relics alongside Druncam's elite without holding the latter back—and done so, moreover, in an area the average hunter wouldn't even be able to set foot in. Shocked at how well they'd performed, they'd started to believe they were more capable as hunters than they'd previously thought. For a brief time, they'd even overcome their ingrained belief that they would never amount to anything more than stronger-than-average members of a gang in the slums.

But then they'd been ambushed by a group of especially enormous monsters, and all their confidence had been ripped away. They'd panicked, become terrified, lost their composure, and found themselves unable to fight back. At that moment, the members of Katsuya's unit demoted Erio and his comrades to targets to be protected, rather than allies to fight alongside. And so, instead of joining Druncam in the battle outside, they had been relegated to this vehicle for safety, left to do nothing but twiddle their thumbs.

For better or worse, they now knew exactly what they were capable of.

After they'd been moping for some time, however, Erio spoke up suddenly and with deliberate enthusiasm. "All right, guys, pity party's over!"

"Come again?"

Erio continued, "We might have blown things a bit there at the end, but I say we should be *proud* of what we've accomplished today! We've now visited a ruin that even the toughest ex-hunters in the slums won't ever go near, and we even held our own while inside. Can't we hold our heads high?"

"W-Well, I suppose..." one boy ventured.

"See?" Erio went on. "We have nothing to be ashamed of! The boss doesn't expect us to perform with the same expertise as Druncam—and if she *is* disappointed by our performance, I'll argue with her and vouch for us all. So don't worry!"

Thanks to Erio's encouragement, the other children started to perk up as well. Before long, they were all grinning as confidently as he was.

"If that happens, Erio," one said slyly, "I look forward to seeing you tell her off."

"Guess that's why you're an officer instead of us, huh?" said another. "We'll leave you to it, then."

"Given your position in the gang, you should be able to handle that, right? We're counting on you!"

"R-Right." Erio was aware that part of his job description as an officer included speaking up to his superior, but he wasn't particularly confrontational—he'd spoken half in jest. So he was a

little taken aback by their words.

"Come to think of it, where *is* the boss?" one kid said, looking slightly puzzled.

"Beats me," another answered. "Wasn't she with that Druncam exec, Mizuha?"

"No, I didn't see the boss with her..."

As the children murmured to themselves, now slightly worried, another kid spoke up, his face grim. "Hey, you don't think"—he looked around, worried—"she's still in there, right?"

"No, no way. That'd never happen... Would it?"

Yet none of them could entirely dismiss the possibility. As the atmosphere in the vehicle grew more and more anxious, another boy spoke up with a different concern.

"Hey, maybe I'm just imagining things, but is Akira here, by any chance?"

"Huh? No, he was supposed to come with us, but the boss told us that circumstances forced him to bow out, remember?"

"Yeah, I know—that's not what I mean. I only got a quick glance, so it might have been someone else, but I thought I saw a person on a bike charging into the fray. It looked like Akira to me."

At that, they all fell silent, then smiled tensely at each other, as though to suggest that couldn't possibly be the case. Akira was their gang's patron, and the children all thought he was extremely strong and reliable. But they also knew trouble followed wherever he showed up, and if he really was here, things were about to get a lot more dangerous.

As one of the boys thought he'd seen Akira, there was a chance the hunter was indeed present—and in some respects, that possibility frightened them more than any monster.

Despite the many special perks that came with being an officer, the position within Sheryl's gang was highly unpopular, largely because of the overwhelming fear the children had of Akira.

◆

Akira raced through the building on his bike toward Yumina and

Sheryl at top speed. The corridors in the building were decently wide, but still not meant for bikes—had he been limited to normal cycling, he would have collided with the wall almost immediately. But thanks to Alpha's support, he traversed the winding hallways without difficulty, the bike's traction allowing him to clear ninety-degree corners at high speed. Meanwhile, he continued to gun down the monsters in his way with perfect precision.

Katsuya, still riding Akira's bike without having asked permission, was shocked by Akira's display of skill. *Holy* shit*, he's incredible! Cornering like that would be difficult enough, and yet he's also slaughtering monsters with such accuracy?! You've gotta be kidding me! How'd he get so skilled?!*

At that moment, the bike spun sideways without warning—so abruptly that the tires rose off the ground, lifting the bike and its passengers into the air. Yet momentum flung them to the end of the hallway, where the bike slammed into a group of monsters. The engine revved and the tires squealed—grinding monsters to shreds in the process—before the bike zoomed off down a side corridor. Blood and scraps of flesh were left scattered all over.

The monsters who had survived gave chase, but found themselves looking down Katsuya's gun. And seeing Katsuya take action, Akira clicked his tongue in irritation.

After all that, he's composed enough to fight, huh? If I didn't have Alpha's support, I definitely would have fallen off by now. What a freak! How'd he get so strong, anyway?

Had Katsuya fallen off the bike, Akira wouldn't have hesitated to abandon him, just as he'd promised. So to reach the girls as quickly as he could, Akira had pulled as many crazy stunts as necessary, entirely disregarding Katsuya's safety in the process.

And yet, the Druncam boy was still on board, and even supporting Akira with frightening accuracy. Akira couldn't hide his surprise—or ignore the fear that rose in his mind.

If he wanted to save Yumina and Sheryl so badly that he hopped on my bike, why didn't he take the girls with him when he fled in the first place? Why did they take refuge inside instead? Did they run into something that prevented them from escaping together? An

enemy they couldn't handle?

He felt concerned, but now wasn't a time for anxiety. He could just ask Yumina and Sheryl later once they'd been rescued.

Asking Katsuya never crossed his mind. Even if the other boy had had no choice but to leave them behind—even if there was a perfectly logical reason that Akira would have normally easily understood—Akira felt that merely hearing it out of Katsuya's mouth would get on his nerves. It was the same irrational, unexplainable irritation he'd felt toward Katsuya during the hypersynthetic snake fight.

Katsuya, unaware of the mood Akira was in, called out to him. "Hey, you sure you're heading in the right direction?"

Thanks to the support system, he knew Yumina's general position—the system kept track of all team members at all times. Still, it couldn't guarantee that their precise locations would always be displayed—for instance, when the colorless fog in a ruin was denser, or inside edifices built with material that blocked transmissions, one's scanner might not function well enough.

Even so, knowing Yumina's general location and direction made things much easier than merely fumbling in the dark. Akira was indeed heading toward Yumina and Sheryl, but Katsuya wondered if this was simply by chance, in which case he wanted to let Akira know about their destination now, before it was too late. He sounded a little accusatory, but only because he was desperate to save the girls.

"Shut the hell up" was Akira's response.

He sounded *extremely* ticked off, as though he didn't even want to speak to the other boy. Katsuya got the sense that the next time he *did* try to speak up, Akira would kick him off, so while the Druncam boy wanted to argue back, he restrained himself for now.

Akira clicked his tongue again, irritated with this bizarre, unprompted loathing of Katsuya that was messing with his emotions. But Katsuya thought Akira's exasperation was directed toward *him*, and he silently fumed at the other boy's unreasonable attitude.

Because of their oil-and-water compatibility, a tense, almost combative atmosphere began to form between the two boys, despite

their close proximity to each other on the bike.

But their animosity never had the chance to come to a head.

Akira?

Yeah, Alpha, I know. I'm not gonna do anything stupid like get into a fight with him here. He spoke as much to remind himself as to reassure her.

But Alpha's concern was elsewhere. *Never mind that. There's an enemy presence ahead, and it's deadlier than the others so far. Be careful!*

At that, Akira's attention snapped back to the task at hand. If Alpha was going out of her way to warn him about this adversary, then it would probably pose quite a challenge, he thought.

More than ten of the weird youths emerged from the hallway ahead. Some had guns sprouting from their left arms; others had cannons. Still others, rather than bearing a weapon there, had their arms enlarged to form shields instead. And wielding blades in their right hands, they moved in on Akira and Katsuya with impeccable teamwork.

"Watch out!" Katsuya shouted. "Those guys are really dangerous!"

His face looked grave. Akira told him to shut the hell up again, but Katsuya knew how strong their opponents were and wasn't about to keep silent about it.

Akira fired both LEOs in his hands nearly simultaneously. Countless C-bullets streaked through the air and struck their unnerving adversaries. Each bullet, charged with a substantial amount of energy, blasted right through the shield and body of one of the boys in front and blew whoever was behind him to pieces as well. Their blood and entrails splattered all over the hallway, but Akira nonchalantly drove on past the carnage.

Katsuya was nonplussed, at a loss for words. Were these the same enemies that his team had only barely managed to defeat after splitting them up, that had prevented the rescue of Sheryl and Yumina afterward? Yet Akira had slaughtered over ten of them in an instant with apparent ease. Katsuya couldn't believe what he'd just witnessed.

"See?" Akira shrugged. "I got this. Now keep your mouth shut."

Katsuya gritted his teeth in chagrin. He couldn't argue with that.

Akira's expression was also severe—but for a different reason. In his AR HUD, he could see that he'd used up more of his bike's energy than expected.

Thanks to his extended magazines, he was in no danger of running out of ammo, but he still had to watch his energy consumption. Without charging, C-bullets were no more powerful than normal bullets, and if he wanted to use them at their full potential, he needed an appropriate supply of energy.

With C-bullets, a standard energy pack fitted into the weapon would be exhausted in no time. So Akira had connected his LEOs to his bike's energy tank using special cables, thereby providing a vast reservoir from which to charge his C-bullets. This had allowed him to fire C-bullets powerful enough to annihilate an entire group of those uncanny youths.

Such a setup meant he wouldn't have to worry about running out of energy as long as he was on the bike—or so he'd thought. But he'd already, in a few moments, used up well over half of the energy in the tank, which was supposed to keep the bike running constantly for several months.

So it was no wonder he looked concerned.

Hey Alpha, am I reading this right? Did we really need to use that much energy on them? Alpha, after all, was the one determining how much energy to charge each C-bullet with. Akira didn't think she would miscalculate or purposefully waste his energy unnecessarily, but he did want to know if those enemies really had warranted that kind of firepower.

I won't deny that it might have been a little overkill. But I was prioritizing finishing the fight in the shortest amount of time possible. If you'd rather spend more time fighting, I can prioritize conserving energy instead. Up to you.

No, you made the right call. We can't waste time fighting when Sheryl and Yumina might be in danger. And I wasn't trying to criticize your judgment, just thinking that at this rate, we might run out of energy, and that'd be real bad. The C-bullets and his bike's

energy tank were currently Akira's most powerful weapons, the trump card he needed to save Yumina and Sheryl in time. Their sheer power might have shocked Katsuya, but Akira could probably deploy that power only a few more times before his energy supply was exhausted.

But Alpha didn't seem bothered. *You're right to ask*, she said with a smile. *Under normal circumstances, we'd never spend that much energy in an area like this. But Yumina and Sheryl must be particularly unlucky today.*

That made sense to Akira. After all, his own bad luck had gotten him in trouble on more than a few occasions. Without any second thoughts, he accepted her interpretation.

◆

In the room where she and Yumina had sought refuge, Sheryl figured her luck hadn't run out just yet. Yumina was keeping the monsters in the hallway at bay, firing at them from the room's entrance. Escape was out of the question, but they were still safe here.

Yet as time wore on, their situation gradually looked more desperate. There seemed to be no end to the beasts, and occasionally one of the strange-looking boys would show up to attack as well. Yumina's advantageous position allowed her to hold the enemies off, but sooner or later, she would run out of ammo—and that would be the end for both girls.

Still, Yumina mused, *I can't help but think these monsters aren't as tough as the ones we encountered earlier. Did the more dangerous ones go after Katsuya's group or something? Not that I'm complaining!* She glanced back to see how Sheryl was faring. Despite the gunshots, splattering noises, explosions, cries of dying monsters, and tremors from cannon and micromissile fire, the other girl looked completely calm. *And I certainly can't complain about how composed she is in this situation, despite not even being a hunter.* Impressed by Sheryl's courage, Yumina smiled to herself. *In that case, I need to do all I can too!*

With renewed determination, she continued to hold the line as best she could. She was down to only a few ammo rounds now, and she'd nearly reached her limit for slowing down her sense of time as well. Nevertheless, she vowed to fight until the very end. She deliberately avoided checking her comrades' positions—if she saw they were too far away to come help, she feared her will might shatter.

Even if the outcome was uncertain, she'd keep fighting. Even if no one was coming to rescue them in the end, she'd hold out hope.

Perhaps there was no salvation coming. Perhaps they were already as good as dead. The only ones who could say for certain, however, would be whoever found their dead bodies afterward. At the very least, that wouldn't be her call to make—therefore, there was no need for her to confirm it now. But if she ended up learning the worst, her heart might break, and she might give up. She wasn't foolish enough to do anything that might reduce her own chance of survival. So rather than check the locations of her team, she focused on fighting.

Then the situation took a turn—for the worse. An explosion blasted apart the wall opposite the room's entrance, and another group of the abnormal boys poured in through the opening.

Yumina didn't lose her will to resist—and yet she couldn't help but think that this was the end for them both.

Meanwhile, Sheryl remained completely calm even as the situation worsened. She'd resigned herself to her fate, but she wasn't depressed about it.

She would prefer to be rescued, of course. But even if she ended up dying, all would be well, because she'd already done what she could—namely, calling on Akira to save her. Whether Akira ignored her request and left her for dead, or failed to make it on time despite his best efforts, was beyond her control. So all she could do now was wait for the outcome and accept it.

So it was that, even after seeing the hostile boys blow a hole in the wall and invade the room, Sheryl was relaxed enough to observe them calmly. And thanks to this, she recognized the boys' faces—

something she never would have noticed had she been in a state of panic.

"Tiol?" she uttered, her eyebrows furrowing in puzzlement.

At that moment, the boys abruptly froze in place, and all glanced in Sheryl's direction. Then, despite having shown no emotion thus far—even as their limbs were blown off or they saw their comrades blown to smithereens—the boys' expressions changed.

Surprise, shock, befuddlement, enchantment, infatuation—their faces displayed a myriad of emotions. But one thing was for certain—their expressions were nothing like the blank looks they'd had before. They were showing actual will and emotion.

Yumina was just as surprised as Sheryl when the boys abruptly halted their advance. But she recovered her senses immediately and fired upon them without reserve. The boys were dangerous and powerful, but frozen in place, they were sitting ducks. They didn't even attempt to defend themselves or fight back as Yumina's gunfire tore them apart.

Panting heavily and looking bewildered, Yumina spoke aloud the question that was on her mind: "What was *that* all about?" She couldn't make heads or tails of what she'd just seen, and her mind was reeling.

But she had no time to figure it out, because at that moment, the monsters gathering outside the entrance smashed through the wall.

Yumina raised her gun in a panic and began firing. Compared to the abnormal boys, these monsters were weaker and easy to kill, but collapsing the wall had allowed great numbers of them to pour in at once. Simply standing guard at the narrow entrance would no longer be enough to ward them off.

"Sheryl, get back!"

Now the monsters were coming from the other side of the room too, cutting off that escape route. Out of options, Yumina had Sheryl retreat to the back of the room, then stood in front of her to shield her from the monster's attacks, backing up toward her and firing her remaining bullets at the oncoming multitude.

Finally, she burned through the last of her ammo. But she simply

smiled, put her gun away, and pulled out a blade instead—the one she'd received from Akira back in the Iida Commercial District.

"I'm not done yet!" she declared bravely. She'd just seen a hopeless situation suddenly, even if inexplicably, overturned, so she had no business surrendering just because she was out of bullets.

The monsters continued to pour in endlessly from the hallway—enough to make it clear at a glance she had no hope of winning. Even so, Yumina's smile didn't fade. One of the monsters leading the charge bounded along the ground on four legs and leaped toward her, opening its huge maw as if to swallow her whole.

And was sent flying by a bike that appeared out of nowhere.

"What?!" she cried.

The bike braked on a dime, and Akira and Katsuya opened fire together, laying waste to the entire horde in no time at all.

Once the area was completely clear, Akira lowered his gun at last, looking grim. "Man, that was way too close!"

"W-We made it..." Katsuya panted heavily, his expression equally serious.

Sheryl and Yumina couldn't quite fathom what they'd just witnessed, and their thoughts ground to a halt. But once they realized that their crushes had come to rescue them, they beamed with delight and greeted them by name.



The two boys grinned and asked if they were all right. Sheryl ran to Akira's side, and now that she was close to him, her smile grew even brighter.

"Yes, Akira, I'm unhurt! I can't thank you enough!"

"It got pretty dicey there at the end, but Sheryl and I are both okay," Yumina added. "You saved us. Thank you both so much!" Then she looked around, and a puzzled expression came to her face. "Er, is it just you two? Where is everyone else, Katsuya?"

Katsuya avoided her gaze. He couldn't exactly tell her he'd leaped onto Akira's bike without his permission and refused to get off when asked.

"And Akira, why are *you* here?" she continued. "I know you were supposed to accompany us, but didn't something urgent come up that you had to take care of instead?"

Akira also averted his eyes. If he answered honestly and told her he'd been hanging around Zone 1 just in case something happened, Yumina might take it to mean he'd never trusted Druncam with Sheryl's safety to begin with. He would have been entirely justified in thinking so, but he was afraid such an answer might upset Yumina.

So Akira glanced furtively at Katsuya, and Katsuya returned his look. They would curb their intense dislike for one another—Akira for Yumina's sake, and Katsuya for Sheryl's.

"It's a, er, long story, so let's save it for after we get out of here," Akira finally answered.

"R-Right! Let's retreat to safety. This area's too dangerous to stay in," Katsuya agreed.

For a moment, neither of the girls said anything, then they both grinned as though nothing had ever happened.

"All right, point taken!" Yumina said.

"Indeed, let's hurry," Sheryl said.

Seeing that they were off the hook, Akira and Katsuya sighed in relief. The girls immediately realized the boys were withholding something from them. But it was true they needed to hurry and escape, so for now, they dropped the matter.

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With the four now reunited, they made their way toward the building's exit. As the bike couldn't hold all four of them, Yumina and Sheryl rode, while Akira took point and Katsuya guarded the rear.

Though they didn't need to rush as much as the boys had on the way in, they still needed to hurry. Relying on his suit's strength, Akira ran ahead of the bike on foot, quickly dispatching any monsters in their way to ensure their safety and a speedy escape.

Now that they'd rescued Yumina and Sheryl, Akira's mood had greatly improved. *Man, what a relief, huh? We nearly didn't make it*, he commented to Alpha.

Yes, well, don't forget that was all thanks to me! Alpha said smugly.

Yeah, yeah, I know! Thank you, Alpha.

Alpha nodded, satisfied.

Still, it is kinda weird that those kids stopped showing up. Akira and Katsuya had run into many monsters on the way to rescue the girls, and they were encountering many more en route to the exit. Yet he hadn't seen any more of those uncanny youths.

Well, you did *kill quite a lot of them*, Alpha pointed out.

Yeah, I know, but it's still weird. He wasn't on his bike right now, so he couldn't use its energy tank to charge his C-bullets—and even if he could have, his bike was running critically low on energy. So he was glad not to cross paths with those alarmingly powerful boys anymore. But why had they just stopped showing up all of a sudden?

Perhaps Sheryl's bad luck finally dissolved when you came to rescue her, Alpha teased. *Maybe your bad luck canceled out hers.*

Akira grinned, amused. *So that's what it was, huh?*

And of course, that was also *thanks to my support!*

Yeah, yeah, thank you, Alpha.

Sure, Alpha was emphasizing the importance of her help rather excessively, but that wasn't anything new. They'd joked with each other like this many times before, so Akira didn't give it a second thought.

But not so for Alpha. Her emphasis on how helpful she was served to distract Akira from the importance she placed on these

interactions—to make him believe she merely wanted him to recognize how useful she was to him, as a facade to keep him from reading any deeper into her behavior. In this way, beneath such lighthearted words, Alpha concealed her true intent.

Meanwhile, Katsuya, also on foot, was bringing up the rear, fending off the monsters that came at them from behind. His face looked grim, but not because he found the monsters challenging. Rather, he felt angry and disappointed over his performance.

Is this really the best I can do?

During the intercity expedition, the highway extension job, and even the relic hunt and the monster exterminations that followed, Katsuya had achieved great success with his team. The city had acknowledged their accomplishments, and they'd even been directly approached by city executives—a huge boost to their confidence. They were convinced that the age of the veterans was over—and the age of the rookies had begun.

But now large fissures were forming in Katsuya's self-confidence. He'd hopped on Akira's bike without asking in order to save Yumina and Sheryl, yet in the end, he'd hardly done anything at all. What's more, he'd witnessed Akira's jaw-dropping skill with his own eyes. Katsuya had lasted much longer in the mock battle, but in real combat, Akira greatly outclassed him. The Druncam boy acknowledged this, knew it for a fact—and burned with envy.

Even so, he gritted his teeth and kept his eyes on his task. He took the emotions welling up within him, as well as the expectations of his peers, and converted them into a desire for even greater power.

Th-That's right! I've got to get even stronger! I need to rise even higher! As the resolve within him rose, the distinction between his desires and those of others grew ever more hazy. He needed *power*. He needed to ascend—as high as he could—even if he was no longer sure whose yearning this was in the first place.

Other than the strange boys who had confronted them on their way in, Akira and those with him had no further trouble in this area. Therefore, they were able to make their way through the rest of the

building and to the exit without incident. Once they were finally outside, Yumina and Sheryl sighed in relief.

"Looks like we made it at last," Yumina said.

"Indeed. Now we can relax—right?" Sheryl added, sounding unsure.

"Seems that way," replied Akira. "Katsuya, what do you think?" There weren't any monsters around, but the mech unit and the Druncam forces had already retreated, and since this was still Zone 1 of the Kuzusuhara interior, there was a chance of getting swarmed by monsters.

But Katsuya smiled and nodded. "Yeah, we're good."

Instead of taking Katsuya's word for it, however, Akira turned to Alpha for confirmation. *Is that true?*

It is. You'll all be safe from here on out. After all, someone's coming to pick you up.

She glanced ahead, and Akira followed her eyes. Up ahead, he noticed several large readings approaching—a group of more than ten white mechs.

Inabe had a vested interest in Sheryl, as Udajima did in Katsuya. So the city's forward base, upon receiving word that both youths had been left in the area that had even forced four mechs to retreat, had immediately ordered the mechs that were busy culling the monsters in Zone 1 to stage an emergency rescue. These machines had originally been assigned to Zone 2, so they were sufficiently equipped to handle the job—they'd even finished off the monsters pursuing the retreating Druncam unit on the way to the rescue point, which meant that Katsuya had known they were coming.

Yumina and Sheryl felt reassured when Katsuya told them this, but Yumina also scolded him. "If you knew all that from the start, you should have told us."

"Oh, right, I guess I should've. My bad."

"Well, I guess I can forgive you *this* time. You and Akira came to rescue us by yourselves, right? Because you both agreed it was faster to head in with just the two of you than with the whole unit, right? Thanks to that, you managed to save us in the nick of time."

"Er... Yeah! That's exactly right!" Katsuya went along with

Yumina's guess and nodded emphatically.

It was obvious to both Yumina and Sheryl that he was lying, and their gazes immediately slid over to Akira, who silently averted his eyes. From that, the girls deduced he didn't want to talk about it, and they decided that if Akira was fine with that explanation, there was no need for them to pry any further.

Not long afterward, the four of them met up with the rescue unit, and together they left the area behind.

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The first thing Akira and company did, upon escaping the Kuzusuhara depths, was to head back to the forward base. After that, Akira took his leave.

"Well, I've got a job to take care of, so I better hit the road," he told them, though in fact he had no such assignment on his schedule. He was just worried that the longer he stayed with them, the more they might uncover some of his secrets. He straddled his bike and was about to speed away when Yumina walked over and thanked him with a smile.

"I understand. Thank you for helping us out, Akira! We really appreciate it. Me, Sheryl... And I'm sure Katsuya does too."

Akira hadn't meant to help Katsuya, but he decided not to correct her. "Don't mention it. I'm just, um, glad I made it in time to save *you*, Yumina. Take care."

She smiled. He blushed slightly at the sight, then drove off in a hurry before she could respond.

Upon seeing Sheryl arrive at the base, Mizuha immediately approached her and started apologizing profusely. "I'm *so* sorry, Sheryl! Please forgive me!"

The Druncam exec had guaranteed Sheryl's safety—and yet had not only exposed Sheryl to danger but ultimately escaped on her own and left the girl behind. She couldn't have been more ashamed of her failure.

Sheryl didn't look particularly bothered, though, and smiled

politely. "I forgive you. You couldn't have known any of that was going to happen, and even when we got separated, Yumina did an excellent job protecting me. And Katsuya came to rescue me right away, so all's well that ends well."

"B-But—"

"If I had to find something to criticize, perhaps sending me outside the safety of the vehicle wasn't the best idea. I agreed to it, however, so I'm just as much to blame." A look of regret came over her face. "And if I had to pinpoint what clouded our judgment, it was probably that we underestimated the danger of the ruin. We both know how capable Katsuya and his unit are, and I think our extreme trust in them made us negligent. I believe we should look at this as a learning experience to ensure something similar doesn't happen again." She smiled once more. "Besides, we both survived, and isn't that the most important thing?"

If Sheryl, who had met with far greater danger than Mizuha had, could speak this way, Mizuha was forced to agree. She obediently bowed her head. "I understand. I will take your advice, reflect on this failure, and work my absolute hardest to ensure it doesn't happen in the future." Privately, she breathed a sigh of relief, glad that Sheryl had accepted her apology.

But behind her smile, Sheryl was observing Mizuha closely. *I guess I was wrong after all.*

Sheryl couldn't shake the feeling that someone had orchestrated this entire incident. She strongly suspected someone wanted her and Yumina dead, and had deliberately placed them both in a dangerous situation they couldn't escape. She didn't think getting separated from the others, or the fact that Katsuya and his team had neglected to support Yumina as she'd fought alongside them, had been mere coincidence.

She had only a shadow of doubt, no proof—but just in case, she'd entertained her theory and mentally gone through the list of those involved, searching for a possible suspect. Akira? No, absolutely not. Out of the question! Yumina? Equally unlikely, since she'd been just as likely to die as Sheryl. Katsuya? He'd come with Akira to rescue them, so probably not.

Then had it been the support system's doing? No—if one of its users were to die, it would only reflect poorly on Kiryou. There was no motive there. Inabe, or perhaps Udajima? Most likely not, since the forward base had sent that rescue unit on the executives' orders.

That left Mizuha. She'd escaped ahead of Sheryl and Yumina, saving herself, and she *did* have a potential motive for eliminating both girls, since they both exerted a profound influence on Katsuya. Perhaps Mizuha wanted to keep Katsuya as her most valuable and powerful pawn, increasing her own influence over him, and saw Sheryl and Yumina as nuisances. This scenario was pure speculation on Sheryl's part—she had no concrete evidence—but because the Druncam exec was the most likely suspect, the girl had decided to observe Mizuha for the time being. However, given how earnestly Mizuha had apologized to her just now, Sheryl determined Mizuha wasn't the culprit either.

That's everyone involved, and none of them can be responsible. Then, was I just overthinking after all? Was it all in my head? Maybe being around Viola for so long has made me distrustful. I need to be careful about that.

So the incident wasn't orchestrated. No one was responsible. Everything that had happened was a complete coincidence, and she'd just been unlucky. As far as she was concerned, the case was closed.

After all, she would never have thought to suspect an entity she couldn't see, hear, or even perceive.

In the base's medical ward, Katsuya stared, motionless, at his deceased teammates. These rookies had lost their lives during the fight to retreat.

Katsuya understood that the expedition's withdrawal had been a great success. They'd had remarkably few casualties, even in the face of the flood of monsters that had forced the four mechs to retreat, and even when they'd split into three groups, reducing the firepower of each one. Heading in by himself and ordering the rest of them to retreat had turned out to be the right call after all, despite the fact he hadn't planned it that way.

Still, there had been a few deaths—as a consequence of his actions, he'd lost more irreplaceable comrades. And as that heavy realization sank in, Katsuya continued to gaze at his teammates' corpses.

By his side was Airi, sharing his grief.

At that moment, Yumina walked in, having just seen Akira off. "Katsuya? Are you okay?" she asked worriedly.

Seeing her concerned expression, Katsuya answered with a small smile, "Yeah. I'm all right." His smile didn't look forced, as when he wanted to keep Yumina from worrying about him, but neither did it suggest he was unbothered by his teammates' deaths. He grieved their losses, but he wasn't going to carry that grief around. His was the smile of someone who had gained the strength to accept the reality of their deaths and move on.

Yumina sensed as much, and her face glowed with genuine happiness and relief. "That's good to hear."

"Yeah."

They didn't need many words. The bond they'd cultivated over the years remained just as strong as ever. And for the two childhood friends, knowing this was enough.

For some time afterward, Katsuya, Yumina, and Airi all stood together in silence. Then, suddenly, Katsuya spoke up.

"I need to get stronger."

"Yeah, I know what you mean," Yumina said. After the events of today, how could he *not* want to seek greater strength? She smiled softly at the thought.

Her interpretation, for the most part, wasn't wrong—except that his desire for strength wasn't entirely his own. He no longer felt deep regret at his inability to save his own teammates, nor did the spirits of his dead comrades manifest from his subconscious to torment and haunt him. But the ones who survived continued to expect much from him: The strength to lead them. The strength to help and support them. The strength to rescue them from crises and guide them to greater heights.

Recently, the great success Katsuya had enjoyed with his team had planted a seed of pride, of confidence, within them all. But that

confidence had also diluted their wish to grow—they'd begun to believe that this wish had already been achieved.

However, the harrowing events of today had proven them wrong, and they were yearning once again. Their wish hadn't come true yet after all, so they needed strength. Much, much more strength.

More.

More.

More!

As long as Katsuya was their leader, they'd reach those heights. He'd make sure of it—he must.

Must.

Must.

MUST!

On and on, they piled up more and more of their desires, their wishes, their hopes, and their prayers—without ever giving a thought to the one who had to shoulder them all.

Chapter 178: Suspicion

A week after the commotion in Zone 1, Sheryl was back at her desk, hard at work. Between managing not only her gang but the relic shop as well, she had a mountain of tasks before her.

In the midst of this, however, she was interrupted by a call from a subordinate.

"Boss, a customer came in with another one of *those.*"

"Is that so? Handle it with the usual double appraisal."

"Well, we are, and the first appraisal's already finished, but they're refusing the second one—"

"Then send them home. The appraisal fee is the customer's responsibility, and your job is to uphold that rule. If they refuse to leave, have Erio and his boys handle them, or call Kolbe and his men if things escalate." Erio's squad was now borrowing the support system and compatible powered suits from Kiryou, so she expected they could handle a stubborn customer or two—but it never hurt to have a backup plan.

She ended the call and sighed, an irritated look on her face.

"Honestly, what the hell's going on?"

An influx of scams involving Old World data terminals had cropped up all over the slums as of late. The majority of them consisted of selling cleverly made fakes to relic outlets for cash, but a variety of other data terminal swindles were occurring as well. Some shops themselves were even selling replicas of Old World terminals to cheat their customers.

Sheryl made sure any items that customers brought were inspected by reputable appraisers and had the seller foot the appraisal bill, so the business wouldn't fall prey to any of these cons. But any store that didn't have access to such high-quality means of analysis would be highly susceptible.

Still, Sheryl didn't see the scams themselves as anything out of

the ordinary—these were the slums, after all. What she found unusual was how frequent and widespread they'd become. While selling the genuine article to a shop could lead to a significant profit, if people *only* brought in fakes, the store would start suspecting *any* Old World terminal was a counterfeit from the moment it was brought in. And without the means to appraise the relics properly, they would most likely just assume it was fake and refuse to buy it.

But that would defeat the whole purpose of a scam. For it to work, there needed to be enough genuine articles brought in to make the shop's employees at least consider the possibility that a proffered relic was authentic.

For Sheryl, the nub of the problem was as follows: if a hunter found an Old World data terminal in a ruin, they'd normally go directly to a Hunter Office exchange and wouldn't even bother with the slums. Not only would the exchange compensate them fairly, their hunter rank would rise as well. She understood, of course, that if the item had been found in an undiscovered ruin or some other place the hunter wanted to keep secret, it was smarter to seek a buyer in the slums so other hunters wouldn't find out where the relic had come from. But so many people were popping up in the slums to sell the terminals now that secrecy likely wasn't the reason.

Furthermore, she'd heard that a considerable number of hunters had been bringing Old World terminals to the Hunter Office exchanges as of late, claiming they'd found them in Zone 1 of the Kuzusuhara depths. Assuming that these were probably the terminals Inabe had secretly planted, Sheryl had taken the rise in terminals on the market to mean that Inabe's plan to lure a large number of hunters to his territory was already underway. But now, she was thinking otherwise, starting to doubt whether *any* of the Old World terminals that came through her door were genuine. If these hunters really had found them somewhere else and simply wanted to conceal that location, they would have only had to lie and say they had found them in Zone 1.

So why weren't they?

She had good reason to be worried. If hunters sold the relics through legal means, like at a Hunter Office exchange, there would

be a record of the transaction. Was that what they were trying to prevent? In other words, were the relics obtained through such illegal means that those who acquired them didn't want to leave behind any proof they'd ever possessed them? If so, those goods were now flooding into her own store. The slums were well-known as a hub for such illegal dealings, so the city overlooked more minor cases thereof, but Sheryl knew the powers that be had a limit to their patience. After all, she'd seen what had happened when Ezent and Harlias had crossed that line. Was she really going to be all right? She sighed, trying her best not to think about how the one who'd brought the majority of those mysterious terminals to the slums was Akira.

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Udajima read the report in his hands with a satisfied grin. "Looks like Inabe's so desperate he's stopped caring about appearances now. He's practically finished."

The dispatch detailed the recent influx of Old World terminals being sold to the shops of the slums, and Udajima assumed this was part of Inabe's scheme. He suspected that Inabe was selling a mix of genuine and fake terminals while spreading the information that they'd all been recovered from Inabe's territory—giving weight to the story that a bevy of valuable terminals was there, just waiting to be collected. And if that was Inabe's plan, it had already succeeded in a way—many relic hunters who'd heard the rumors were now setting foot in his previously unexplored territory, and a few had actually found terminals, causing even more hunters to flock there.

However, as more people showed up in pursuit of those valuable relics, more parts of his territory would get picked clean. And if hunters explored much of the area without success, this information would also spread, *lowering* their overall enthusiasm for exploring the territory. So in order to keep the momentum going, Inabe would need to hurry and plant more terminals—but this was easier said than done. He had to watch his step so that his scheme wouldn't be uncovered. At first, this had been easy, since the area had been

virtually untouched to begin with, but now that it was a hotbed of activity, doing so was much harder, right when he needed to plant far more terminals than before. And as time went on, it would become increasingly difficult to cover his tracks.

Udajima had taken advantage of this and slipped through Inabe's defenses, obtaining evidence that the rival executive had been secretly seeding the terminals. As part of his plan to catch Inabe red-handed, Udajima had also agreed to Viola's proposal to cooperate with Inabe and strong-arm Yanagisawa into agreeing to relocate the city's forces from Zone 2 to Zone 1. Now he just needed to present this evidence at the next meeting, and Inabe's power would vanish.

Just imagining this in his head made Udajima grin.

At that moment, he got a call from one of his subordinates. "Mr. Udajima, the General Relic Appraisal Department is on the line."

"Transfer me." With this, all the elements he needed to ruin Inabe were in place. His grin grew wider.

Said department was an appraisal firm directly supervised by the Eastern League of Governing Corporations, on the grounds that the assessment of relics, from a big-picture perspective, contributed to the overall development of the East. And there was no appraisal organization or institution more accurate or reputable anywhere in the East. Udajima had asked the department to appraise one of the Old World data terminals that had been discovered in Inabe's territory. He'd already known they were genuine, of course, but the important thing had been to find out their origin. And the department, he knew, would have the resources to investigate this thoroughly. If an ELGC-run institute determined that the relic had been brought over from some other ruin—or anywhere other than Inabe's territory, for that matter—Inabe was as good as finished.

In order to obtain this incontrovertible proof, Udajima had spent a large sum of money to get the department, which usually didn't entertain the requests of individuals, to accept his—so much money, in fact, that at first he'd hesitated to spend it. But Viola's persistent recommendations and his desire to achieve complete and total victory over Inabe had pushed him to act. While he currently had the

advantage in their power struggle, he knew his opponent wasn't incompetent. Udajima could slip into second place at any time, when he least expected it, so a little recklessness seemed worth it if it meant putting the final nail in Inabe's coffin.

Once his line connected to the General Relic Appraisal Department, the department head appeared on a screen before Udajima. "Mr. Udajima, I presume? The relic appraisal you requested has been completed. A detailed report will be sent to you later, but I'll go ahead and reveal what we've discovered regarding the relic's origin, since you specifically mentioned that as a priority in your submitted request."

"I'm listening."

"Our department determined that the relic most likely did come from within the area of the Kuzusuhara Town Ruins you specified, Mr. Udajima."

Udajima froze in shock. "Excuse me?"

The department head continued on, paying him no mind. "That's all we have to announce regarding your request's special mention. Will that be all, sir?"

That question brought Udajima back to his senses, and he began to panic. "W-Wait! Th-There must be some mistake! Th-That can't be!"

"Do you mean to call the integrity of this department into question, sir?"

Udajima was a city executive, and the department head was just an employee, so there was a world of difference between their statuses. But Udajima only presided over the city, and the department head belonged to the League. Hearing the hint of displeasure in the department head's tone, Udajima immediately backpedaled and started making excuses.

"N-No, perish the thought! It just wasn't what I was expecting to hear, so I was shocked, is all! Um... Just to confirm, you're absolutely certain there's no chance whatsoever that it was brought over from any other ruin?"

"That depends on your definition of 'another ruin,' sir. For example, most of the relics in Old World stores were produced in

factories, which are also ruins, but we still consider their ‘origin’ to be the store in which they were discovered.”

“O-Oh, okay. I see.”

“I thank you for your understanding. We ask you to confirm the details of the inspection in the document that will be sent to you, and if there are any further questions, provided they’re asked within the time frame of our contract, we will answer promptly. However, please understand that some of our appraisal methods, and the information we obtain through them, are confidential, so we may have some questions we are unable to answer. Thank you for your business, and have a good day.” The department head gave Udajima a polite bow, and the call ended.

For a while, Udajima was too stunned to move. But once he recovered, he contacted Viola, fuming. After he gave her the lowdown on his conversation, he began to grill her.

“Just what are you trying to pull, Viola?! According to *your* information, Akira was supposed to have brought those terminals to Inabe from somewhere else! So tell me—when I had one appraised, why did they say it came from Inabe’s territory?! Explain yourself! And you’d better make sure your excuse is a good one.”

“Sorry, but I really don’t know what to tell you. Isn’t it your fault for interpreting unconfirmed information optimistically in your favor?”

“What’d you say?!”

Even in the face of a city executive’s anger, however, Viola replied in her usual cheerful tone. “The relics Inabe used for his scheme were brought to Sheryl’s shop by Akira. No one besides him knows where he got them, and he won’t tell. That’s all the information I gave you. You’re the one who inferred the rest.”

“What are you implying?”

“It’s simple. We don’t know the relics’ origin, and yet you assumed—on your own—that they came from somewhere else other than Inabe’s territory in Kuzusuhara. How is that my fault?”

Hit where it hurt, Udajima was momentarily speechless. But he recovered quickly, and spoke with an expression that suggested it was taking every ounce of his willpower not to scream at her. “But if

they were in Inabe's territory to begin with, you're telling me Akira went out of his way to hide their location, sell them to Sheryl's shop, then place them back where he found them? What possible point would there be in doing that?!"

"Well, none, normally. But that in itself *is* the point."

"What in the world do you mean?"

"It sounds like a purposeless action to you, but isn't that exactly why you thought the relics were found elsewhere? Isn't that why you were trying to gather evidence to prosecute Inabe for secretly bringing the relics to his own territory to boost its popularity?"

At that, Udajima's puzzled expression gave way to one of realization. "You don't mean... It can't be!"

Even if Udajima were to accuse Inabe of wrongdoing at the next executive meeting, Inabe was sure to feign innocence. So Udajima had been ready to back up his own claim with evidence—namely, the relic inspection by the General Relic Appraisal Department.

However, the results of said appraisal had indicated Inabe's innocence instead, and submitting them as proof of Inabe's scheme would have undoubtedly cast Udajima as the one practicing deception. Not that he'd never tried to ruin other executives with fabricated stories and falsehoods in the past, but such fables had to at least sound believable. Otherwise, his status would plummet, and he would most likely lose his lead over Inabe in the power struggle.

In short—or so Udajima concluded—Inabe had set all of this up to trap Udajima and ruin him. And Viola, who'd deliberately nudged his line of thinking in this direction, cheerfully reinforced his judgment.

"That's right! If the only way for someone to regain the lead in a power struggle is for the other person to fail, then what do you do? You *set them up* to fail. Pretty common tactic, really."

"But to pull that off," protested Udajima, "Inabe would need to have Akira entirely in his pocket. Would that hunter have really agreed to participate in such a risky scheme to ruin a city executive?"

"Two billion aurum," Viola replied. "That's the sum Inabe paid to Akira. Not directly into his account, of course—that would have been

too conspicuous—but he put it in Sheryl's account, disguising it as funding for her relic shop. Naturally, the entire amount was passed along to Akira afterward."

"R-Really?" Indeed, such an amount would get any hunter to cross *any* bridge, no matter how dangerous, so her explanation satisfied Udajima.

"Now aren't you glad you took my advice and requested the department to appraise the relic? You can even compliment me if you want—I don't mind."

That, at least, was true—without Viola's advice, he would have fallen right into Inabe's trap. Thinking about how close he'd been to ruining himself, his face turned grim. "Right. I suppose I should at least thank you."

"Much appreciated. Oh, by the way, could you send me the results of that appraisal too? I just want to check and make sure there aren't any other schemes at play here."

Generally, this wasn't the kind of data he should have passed along to a mere information broker. But if she was using it to make sure there weren't any other traps set for him, then he found it hard to refuse her (especially since he would have fallen into one just then without her help). "Very well, I'll send it over."

"Thanks a bunch. All right, I've gotta go. Ciao!" With that, Viola ended the call.

"Goddammit!" Udajima spat, seething. He'd been so sure he was going to finish Inabe off once and for all—and yet *he'd* nearly ended up finished. He felt absolutely enraged—and this time his ire wasn't just directed toward Inabe, but at Akira and Sheryl as well.

◆

After ending the call with Udajima, Viola immediately called Inabe.

"And there you have it. Thanks to my handiwork, Udajima now genuinely believes the terminals Akira brought you came from your own territory."

"Hmm... Excellent work. That was an extremely big help—if

you're telling the truth, that is."

"Oh, how mean! You don't believe me?"

"When you're in a position like mine," said Inabe, "you can't afford to believe anything without proof to back it up. That said, I'll find out the truth anyway by looking at his reaction."

"Oh? Just don't forget to thank me once you learn the truth."

"Believe me, I won't. And if you're right, I'll let Sheryl know you're still useful enough to keep alive. For now."

"Yikes, harsh. Anyway, talk to you later."

Viola hung up and grinned in satisfaction. Inabe was suspicious, which wasn't ideal, but his suspicion only touched on whether Udajima really believed the terminals had originally come from Inabe's territory. He still took it for granted that Viola was responsible for pulling the wool over Udajima's eyes.

In fact, she'd actually been just as surprised by those results as Udajima had—but thanks to some quick improvising, she'd managed to turn the situation to her advantage and put both Udajima and Inabe in her debt.

Honestly, though, that wasn't the verdict I was expecting. And I seriously doubt that department would make a mistake. What's going on here?

Viola had egged Udajima on in order to learn where Akira had gotten the relics from—if Inabe had ended up ruined in the process, she would have just switched sides to Udajima's. But the results of the appraisal had changed her plans completely. Couldn't she use this revelation as kindling to create an even bigger conflagration?

How naturally the impulse to stir things up came to her! She knew this well, and just imagining the chaos she could cause brought a smile to her lips.

◆

Within a room in the Kugama Building, the city executives were having a meeting. They'd convened to discuss how to handle the nationalists who were frequently appearing here and there in Zone 1.

"According to our reports, nationalist activity in Zone 1 has started to ramp up. Right now, we don't know much more than that."

As the committee chair droned on, Inabe glanced at Udajima, who glared back.

Given his reaction, reasoned Inabe, *it seems like Viola was telling the truth. I'd heard she has a terrible personality, but it seems she's as skilled as she claims.* The fact that she'd managed to manipulate even a city executive quite impressed him.

"We've also received word that the nationalists have been doing business with some of the relic hunters in the area. But apparently they've been paying in relics, not cash, so we don't have any paper trails we can chase."

Even as the speaker droned on, Udajima was also covertly observing Inabe's behavior. *Don't get all conceited just yet, Inabe. Perhaps you almost had me, but your plan to ruin me ultimately failed. You're still losing, and I'm still in the lead. Nothing's changed.* With such thoughts as these, Udajima kept calm—or at least, tried his best to.

"There's also a possibility they'll cause another monster horde to attack the city. If that's the nationalists' plan, we'll be in big trouble. Unlike before, we now have a highway leading to and from the depths, so the monsters there would have a direct, maintained path straight to the city. The damage would be unprecedented."

Inabe scowled. The more his resources got rerouted to taking care of the nationalists, the less the exploration of his own territory would progress. To him, this was a huge nuisance.

"Furthermore, to make sure the especially dangerous monsters in Zone 2 don't reach the highway, we will be moving forward with the construction of the forward base in Zone 2."

Udajima also scowled. If the League made the nationalists their top priority and brought everyone together under its umbrella to eliminate the threat, the meticulous arrangements he'd put in place to weaken Inabe's faction would all be for naught. So this was a significant annoyance to him as well.

"Let me add that since extremely valuable relics, such as Old

World data terminals, were included in what the nationalists paid to the hunters, we'll need to pinpoint their source as well."

By this point, both Inabe and Udajima were just about tearing their hair out over having to deal with these nationalists. But just then, the information that they'd heard during the meeting thus far gave them both inspiration. And for the rest of the meeting, and for some time afterward, each executive obsessed over how he could bring his idea to fruition.

◆

For several days, Akira had been exterminating monsters on the outskirts of Inabe's territory in Zone 1. The monsters were tough, but not as much as those in Zone 2, so Akira's task was the perfect difficulty for training him without Alpha's help. It didn't hurt that because it was also in the city's best interests to have more of the ruin explored, the pay for the extermination jobs in this area had been raised temporarily.

He was seated in his vehicle, in the parking lot of an abandoned building, and ruminating on what to do in his present situation, when he got a call from Inabe.

The city executive wanted him to assist with exploring more of Zone 1. "You might already know this, but nationalists have been spotted all around the area," Inabe explained. "And I'm implementing a plan to make sure they don't try anything in my territory. We're going to head outside of the explored region to search for their base, attack them, and eliminate them at the source. At least, that's the excuse."

The real goal, he clarified, was to get a great deal of support from the city to form and deploy a large unit to sweep a sizable portion of unexplored ruin in one go.

"I heard," he added, "that during the recent incident when the elite Druncam unit was forced to retreat, it was attacked by not just monsters, but humans as well. If the latter were nationalists, it's reasonable to suppose their base might be located farther ahead. In other words, they attacked to defend their base—though, as I said,

this is just a pretext."

This excuse would make it easier for the city to swallow the idea of dispatching a unit beyond the currently explored section of the ruin—in other words, into Inabe's territory. And if that unit did some relic hunting in the meantime, Inabe stood to turn a sizable profit.

"Of course, I'm prepared to pay you, and I'll make it worth your while. This matter involves the severe threat of nationalists, after all, so I'd expect a big payday if I were you. What do you say?"

Much like Udajima, Inabe was also starting to think that Akira really had found those Old World terminals somewhere around that area. Whatever method Viola had used to deceive Udajima, she needed at least enough evidence to back up that claim—so most likely, the information she'd given the rival executive regarding the terminals' origins had been accurate to some degree. In that case, it was entirely possible that the relics came either from somewhere in Inabe's territory, or perhaps another unexplored region that would get scouted out eventually.

If so, Inabe wanted Akira to think that hiding the location of the relics was pointless—and if possible, to guide the unit there. This would naturally put Akira at a disadvantage, however, so Inabe tried sweetening the deal by offering a suitably significant reward.

He was also curious to see how Akira would react to the proposal.

But hearing Inabe's request, Akira scowled. "Maybe it's just me, but this sounds an awful lot like a threat."

"A threat? In what way?"

"Because you went out of your way to mention what those nationalists are up to."

"I'm not sure what you mean. The only reason I mentioned that nationalist pretext to you at all is because I trust you, as a matter of fact. You let me use those relics you sold to Sheryl for my own purposes, and kept quiet about it like you promised. I thought we'd forged a relationship of trust between us."

"Oh yeah? Then listen to this."

Akira put the call on speaker so Inabe could hear what was happening outside his vehicle—and when the executive did, he gasped over the phone.

"I repeat! This is the Kugamayama City's General Investigation Bureau! You are under suspicion of being a nationalist! Drop all your weapons and surrender!"

Akira was surrounded by the city's forces. Around twenty heavily armed personnel and numerous battle vehicles encircled the abandoned building the boy was in.

Such was the situation Akira had been reflecting on when Inabe had called. Akira heard Inabe's inarticulate noise through the receiver and determined that Inabe hadn't been involved after all. No longer quite as suspicious, Akira decided to explain why he'd suspected the executive in the first place. "First, I'll ask just to confirm: You didn't set this up so that I'd get treated as a nationalist and arrested if I turned down your offer, right?"

"O-Of course not! A-Akira, how did this happen?! Transfer them over so I can speak to them!"

"Sure. There, you're patched in."

"This is Inabe, and you are standing in my territory! I demand to know what has happened here!"

The commander of the unit encircling Akira was a man named Paji. Since the suspect hadn't yet responded to his warnings, Paji had been urging the suspect to surrender in an increasingly forceful tone. So when a city executive suddenly announced his presence on the line, it threw the commander for a loop. Even so, he diligently carried out his duty. "My name is Paji, and I'm from the city's General Investigation Bureau. Mr. Inabe, this individual is suspected of engaging in nationalist activity. We've been dispatched to his location to confirm whether this is the case."

"I wasn't informed of any of this," Inabe growled. "What do you think you're doing, sending men to my sector without my permission?"

"Mr. Inabe, at the moment, the nationalist threat is the city's top priority, and the General Investigation Bureau's duty is to investigate anyone suspected of being a nationalist. We do not require your permission to do our jobs."

"Even so, you didn't feel the need to inform me first? Worried that I might leak information to the nationalists?"

"N-No, I never meant to suggest..." Stuck between a rock and a hard place, Paji trailed off.

"Well, no matter. Send your unit back. I'll have a little chat with your boss after this."

Perhaps if Paji had silently obeyed Inabe and withdrawn his men here, the incident could have ended peacefully. The problem, however, was that Inabe had no authority over the General Investigation Bureau and was trying to exercise power far beyond his position. Moreover, his order to withdraw could be interpreted as an attempt to block the bureau from investigating the nationalists. Finally, if Paji complied, he'd be giving Inabe tacit permission to overstep his bounds and meddle in the bureau's affairs.

"I refuse."

"Excuse me?!"

"This incident is under our jurisdiction, and our department's authority extends to the entirety of the city's economy. Therefore, even if you are this area's supervisor, we have no duty to comply with your orders."

Inabe scowled, for two main reasons. First, he knew Paji was correct. Second, Paji had used logic to defy him—which meant Inabe no longer possessed enough influence to overrule that logic.

"So that's your answer, then?"

"Correct. I apologize, Mr. Inabe, but please understand our position here."

Inabe gave a deep sigh. "I suppose there's no helping it, then. Very well—I ought to respect the judgment of the officials on the scene. There are times when one can only make a proper judgment by being on the field, after all."

"I appreciate your understanding," Paji said, relieved that the city executive had started to back down.

But Inabe wasn't finished. "However, that's only if the officials in question are *capable* of making a proper judgment. You'll regret this, you incompetent fools."

Paji looked incredibly alarmed as Inabe's voice cut out, the executive switching the call back to Akira.

"So, what do you plan to do?" Inabe asked the boy in a

completely different tone.

"That's what I was trying to figure out myself when you called," Akira said. "I've already ruled out throwing down my weapons and surrendering, though, just FYI."

Realizing Akira wouldn't even hesitate to come to blows with a unit of the city's forces, Inabe privately let out a sigh. At least Akira didn't really want to fight them either, if he could help it—he hadn't necessarily ruled out a peaceful resolution. For his part, Akira had actually been hoping Inabe would continue to talk to the unit and defuse the situation, and he felt incredibly disappointed that things hadn't turned out that way.

After a period of silence, Inabe suggested a compromise. "I suppose our hands are tied here, then. You don't have to discard your weapons or surrender, but avoid a full-blown fight. And if you have to defend yourself, keep your opponent's injuries to a minimum."

"I mean, that's easier said than done, and I'm sure it's easy for *you* to say, but what makes you think I'd agree to go easy on an opponent that's trying to kill me?"

"Well, it'd be in your best interests, for one."

"How, exactly?"

"Follow my orders and do as I say," said Inabe, "and then even if you end up harming a city official, you'll just be a hunter who got caught up in a power struggle between two city executives. You'll avoid making an enemy of the city."

That was, in fact, something Akira wanted to avoid. But even as this crossed his mind, he looked puzzled. "What? You mean this all happened because of your power struggle?"

"Yeah. Most likely, this is Udajima's doing." To an extent, the city was aware of how skilled Akira was. Therefore, if Akira was suspected of being a nationalist and the bigwigs found all the proof they needed to bring him in, they would need at least the city's defense force to force him to submit; after all, he'd taken out an army of mechs and a large group of Old World automatons. The fact that they hadn't done so and had sent the General Investigation Bureau instead meant that whoever had accused Akira had done so

without proof to substantiate the claim. And Inabe suspected that person was Udajima.

Realizing he'd once again gotten caught in the middle of something troublesome, Akira sighed. "All right, I'll try not to kill them, but no promises."

"That's good enough. You'll be the one exchanging blows after all, and I'm not going to tell you how you should fight."

"Really? So you'll let me fight how I want?"

"Sure, but just keep in mind the fewer casualties you cause, the easier I can defend you. That's all."

And with that, Akira knew how he would resolve the matter.

Even as Paji and his men kept the area cordoned off, Akira backed his truck out of the building. He drove slowly, so that it didn't look like he was trying to break through the encirclement by force. Paji ordered his subordinates to gather around the vehicle, but hold their fire. Then, when Akira had reached the place where Paji was standing, he got out of the vehicle. The path forward was blocked off by a massive truck.

Akira kept his hands at his sides, though he held a LEO in each.

Paji saw this, but didn't tell his subordinates to raise their weapons. He knew that here in the East, pointing a gun at someone was no different from pulling the trigger.

Akira approached Paji on foot, a deep scowl on his face. "Hey, that truck's in my way, so move it."

"Denied," Paji said sternly. "Once again, this is Kugamayama's General Investigation Bureau. You are suspected of being a nationalist. Drop your weapons and surrender."

Akira gave a small, irritated sigh, and his scowl deepened. "Inabe told me not to kill you guys, so get lost, and I'll let you go."

"Denied," Paji said. "Drop your weapons and surrender."

The atmosphere was growing tense, but not enough for a fight to break out. Neither side intended to retreat, and they kept their guns pointed down. Both sides could tell that the other was ready for conflict if necessary, but wanted to avoid it if possible—and that this mutual understanding was delaying their confrontation.

For some time afterward, Akira and Paji stood there, staring at each other without making a move. Paji's subordinates looked on in hopes that the incident would be resolved peacefully.

Akira was the first to take action. His severe scowl returned to a merely irritated one, and he let out a large sigh. Seeing that, Paji relaxed, thinking that Akira was going to give up. He'd been told Akira was strong, but he was just a kid, without the aura that other skilled hunters had. In fact, Paji was pretty sure he could take the boy in a fight. Even when demanding that they leave, Akira hadn't threatened them with his own strength; he'd used Inabe's name instead.

So it was that Paji ended up underestimating Akira's ability. After all, the man belonged to the city, and as a general rule, no hunter would willingly oppose the city with force. So even if Akira had refused his order to drop his weapons and surrender, he was confident that Akira would submit and come quietly in the end.

Akira walked right past Paji, over to the gigantic vehicle in his way. Then, while Paji and the others watched with puzzled expressions, he kicked the truck, sending it flying. While he wore his powered suit, his kicks had enough power to harm even a mech, so this one flung the truck over to the side of the road with ease.

"Wha—?!" Naturally, after such an act, Paji and the others could no longer remain idle. Before the surprise could even leave their faces, they raised their weapons.

But Akira immediately jumped out of their line of fire and unleashed both of his own weapons. Countless bullets struck their targets with perfect aim—faced with the might of C-bullets, which could overcome even Zone 2 monsters, Paji and his men were powerless.

And yet, even as Paji was sure he was finished, he dumbfoundedly realized he was still alive. Akira had targeted only their weapons and the machine guns on their vehicles—Paji and his people were completely unharmed (though some had been knocked off-balance or to the ground by the impact of the shots).

Akira made his way over to Paji once more, looking fed up. No one was able to stop him. As they all looked on in a daze, Akira

spoke nonchalantly.

"I'll at least escort you guys to the highway," he said, then jumped onto the roof of his truck and sped off.

Paji and his men involuntarily followed his truck with their eyes. At that moment, a large monster appeared. Noticing the reading on his scanner, Paji and his subordinates immediately prepared to attack—only to realize they were now defenseless, since Akira had destroyed their weapons. Their faces twisted in panic and terror.

But the next instant, the monster's head exploded—Akira had sniped it from afar. His voice came over the local channel on their comms: "Hurry up, or I'm leaving you behind."

Paji, looking humiliated and defeated, ordered his men to follow. "Come on, guys. Let's follow him and get out of here." They'd failed to capture Akira, so his next priority was to return home without letting any of his men die, and he made the executive decision to focus on retreating instead for the sake of his teammates' safety. Even so, he felt extremely bitter and ashamed at his own incompetence, having led his team into a situation where they had to rely on their target to bail them out.

"You'll regret this, you incompetent fools," Inabe had said. His words echoed in Paji's head even now.

◆

Upon reaching the highway, Akira left Paji and his men behind and made his way toward the city alone. The forward base was still quite a distance away, but the highway was free of monsters, so he had no reason to escort the city forces any farther. Figuring they could handle anything that was likely to crop up on their own, he got in his truck and drove off without a word of explanation.

Alpha gave him a knowing smile from the passenger's seat. *Looks like you've finally learned to handle confrontations more amicably. That's good—it's a sign that you've grown.*

Thanks, I guess, he replied dryly.

Just then, he got a call from Erio, who sounded panicked.

"Akira! We need you at Sheryl's base! It's an emergency—people

from the city are here!”

“What, did you get in a fight with them or something?” demanded Akira. “What are their forces like? How long can you hold out for?”

“N-No, nothing like that. Right now, the boss is handling the situation the best she can—but we can’t resolve it on our own! We need your help!”

“All right, if you say so. I’m on my way there now,” Akira said, and hung up. A stern look came to his face. “There too, huh?” he muttered to himself.

How much help would he be if there was no fighting involved? But even as he wondered this, he knew that the stronger the forces Sheryl had with her, the easier any negotiations would go. Maybe that was all the gang wanted him for. At any rate, he did as requested and made his way toward their base.

◆

Sheryl sat in her reception room, meeting with the members of the city’s General Investigation Bureau who had shown up on her doorstep. At first, she’d spoken to them with a polite smile, but as time went on, she was finding it harder and harder to maintain her cordial attitude. She made sure to not let any fear or anxiety show on her face, of course, but she couldn’t help but let a hint of annoyance toward her uninvited guests slip out as she spoke.

“As I’ve already explained multiple times now, I’ve told you everything I’m able to disclose. I have nothing further to say on the matter.”

She’d lost count of how many times she’d repeated herself—only to receive exactly the same reply:

“C’mon, let’s be a little more cooperative, shall we? Surely you can remember a bit more than that. This is a very important matter, so won’t you help us out?”

The only other people present were three members of the General Investigation Bureau, who had isolated Sheryl in this room and begun interrogating her. Suwong, their spokesman, sat opposite

her; the second stood behind her, and the third had taken up position near the room's entrance.

"You do realize that we'll leave without another word if you just tell us the truth," Suwong said.

"I *already* told you the truth. The Old World data terminals I sold in my shop were brought here by Akira." Sheryl sighed theatrically, though this was only partly an act. "What kind of businesswoman would I be if I shared intel about my clients? I can't violate their confidence, regardless of whether the same information is leaked by someone else. I need my customers to trust me, especially here in the slums. The only reason I've said as much to you as I have is because you're a special department investigating nationalist activity that would threaten the city."

"Yes, yes, we understand that. But if you realize the importance of our investigation, can't you give us a little more to go on? Think hard—anything you might have heard about how Akira got a hold of those terminals."

"I apologize, but I really can't help you any further." The more the conversation dragged on, the more Sheryl became convinced that what they really wanted wasn't information on nationalist activity but any excuse to declare that Akira was working with the nationalists. All this pestering her, trying to get her to "remember" things that hadn't actually happened—they were just fishing around for anything they could use to incriminate him.

Suwong and his men had quickly cottoned on to the fact that Sheryl was aware of their true aim. Yet they continued to pressure her. "C'mon, please—we're just looking for a little cooperation," Suwong said. "Don't worry about accuracy or certainty—people's memories can be fuzzy and unreliable, after all. Misunderstandings, outright errors—we don't mind! It's our job to ferret out the facts and verify claims. So relax: you can speak freely here."

"I've already racked my brain to recall anything, just in case, and I'm afraid that's really all I have to tell you."

Their conversation was getting nowhere, and Suwong was the first to lose his patience. His smile vanished. "You seem awfully calm, but know that we have the backing of a city executive. You

can’t just talk your way out of this.”

“I’m not sure what you—”

Suwong grabbed her head and slammed it against the table. The loud *thud!* reverberated through the room. “Our investigation of the nationalists is a matter of utmost importance!” he declared through gritted teeth. “Not even all the city executives are privy to the details! So no one knows we’re here, and you can kiss your chances of rescue goodbye.”

He lifted up her head, leaving blood on the table. “As you’ve probably already guessed, our investigation is just a pretext—but put another way, it’s important enough that it *can* serve as a pretext. Understand? So you’d better remember everything real quick.”

He released her, flinging her away so hard that she would have collapsed backward if the sofa hadn’t been there to cushion her fall. She slowly sat up, her hand on her forehead.

“Hey, that hurt, you know,” she said calmly.

Suwong growled. “Unfazed, are we? Perhaps you still don’t get it, or maybe you think I’ll let you live even if you don’t talk. Well, I’d think again if I were in your shoes.”

“Like I said, I’m not sure—”

He slammed her head against the table again, harder this time. Blood flew into the air and flowed onto the table, dyeing it red. “You’re a slum girl, right? You’re used to this kind of treatment, right?! So you developed thick skin and a stubborn streak, which let you overcome the odds and climb to where you are now! But that only works in the slums—against the city, none of that amounts to jack shit. Guess what? Those two big slum gangs, Ezent and Harlias? The city thought they were nuisances and crushed them.”

“I already...know that...” Sheryl muttered.

“Oh yeah? Then connect the dots, stupid! Realize what that means for *you*. Here, I’ll give you a hand!”

He slammed her head against the table once again. The blood already on the table splashed and stained the floor. He kept it up, over and over, until she could no longer rise on her own.

As she sat there with her head resting in a pool of her own blood, Suwong said, “Still alive? Can you hear me? Last chance, girl! The

more stubborn you are, the more certain I am that you're hiding something. Maybe it's not just Akira—maybe *you're* in cahoots with the nationalists too! If not, then *talk*!"

Sheryl muttered something, but her voice was so weak that Suwong couldn't make it out. He raised her head up.

"Did you say something just now? Repeat it more clearly this time. I can still spare your life. It's not too late to tell us what you know."

"I don't...know anything..."

"Hmph. You really are stubborn." He pushed her away again, irritated. Sheryl collapsed onto the sofa like a rag doll.

One of the other men sighed, annoyed. "What now, Suwong? I think it's pointless to press her any further."

"Yeah, I agree. Time for plan B. We'll give up on obtaining verbal evidence and resort to more direct measures." Instead of using Sheryl's testimony to set Akira up as a nationalist, they would just kill her here and make it look like an accident. This would put an end to the relic shop. Sure, Inabe would be furious, but Suwong and his men had Udajima's backing.

"Then let's finish her off," the other man said.

"Whoa there—careful!" Suwong said. "We have to make it look like an accident happened during the interrogation, remember? You can't just kill her carelessly!"

"Yeah, yeah, I know." The man reached his hand toward her.

And then the hand was gone, blown completely away.

A fresh bullet hole decorated the door to the room. The door opened.

And there was Akira.

In an instant, Suwong and his other accomplice whipped out their guns and aimed at Akira—only to lose their arms a moment later. They grimaced in surprise and agony as they stared at the boy.

"You?! You shouldn't be here! Y-You're supposed to be in Zone 1 of the depths!" Suwong raged.

Akira ignored them and hurried to Sheryl. He frowned. "Looks like I just barely made it—guess luck was on her side again."

He pulled out some medicine and was about to force-feed it to

her when a small moan issued from her lips.

"Good, sounds like you're conscious after all. Here's some medicine. Swallow it."

She didn't respond.

"Sheryl? Hey, you with me?"

"I don't...know anything..."

Akira froze. Dark emotions welled up from deep within him. But he suppressed them, telling himself to focus on treating her first. Even administered orally, the expensive, highly potent medicine healed her at an unbelievable speed. She would live.

Akira let out a deep sigh of relief. Then, without further delay, he shot the men in the head one by one.

At first, he'd planned to follow Inabe's advice and let the General Investigation Bureau members live. But the moment he'd heard those words from Sheryl's mouth, he'd changed his mind. "I don't know anything"—her voice had been weak and slurred from her injuries, yet this sufficed for Akira to understand what had transpired. The men had clearly tried to threaten her to get information, and nearly killed her in the process, but Sheryl had held her tongue. Given what had happened to Akira back in Zone 1, it didn't take a rocket scientist to deduce that the city's people were here because they suspected him of being a nationalist.

Each bullet he fired struck true. Three lifeless, headless bodies crumpled to the ground.

Alpha sighed. *Oh, Akira... You know they're going to come after* your *life now, right?*

Yeah. His response was brief, but unwavering.

Alpha only replied, *I see.* To his eyes, she only looked slightly exasperated, but privately, her concern skyrocketed.

Now *we've got a problem,* she thought to herself.

Chapter 179: The Nationalists' Declaration

When Sheryl awoke on the sofa, Akira was in the middle of talking to Noguchi, Inabe's subordinate and the person who had originally introduced Sheryl to the city executive. Inabe had dispatched him to address the current situation at Sheryl's base.

"According to what I've heard, you didn't harm any of the bureau's personnel in Zone 1—you even escorted them back to the highway," Noguchi said, clearly in shock. "Couldn't you have handled these guys the same way?"

"No," Akira said flatly.

The city official buried his face in his hands. "Well, just for future reference, can you tell me *why* you couldn't?"

"'Cause they were aiming guns at me, that's why. I just shot first. Besides, they hurt Sheryl, and since I can't be here all the time, I had to do *something* to make people think twice before they came here and tried this again."

"Did it never, in fact, occur to you that rather than deterring your enemies, your actions might cause them to go after you even more aggressively?" Noguchi demanded.

"Then I just need to do more to make them back off," the boy replied calmly.

Only then, hearing his nonchalant response, did Noguchi realize for the first time that Akira was truly dangerous.

Meanwhile, Noguchi's subordinates placed the remains of Suwong and his men in body bags. They also stuffed in any chunks of flesh large enough to be picked up, but of course they couldn't do much about the blood splattered all over the room.

"Noguchi, what do you want us to do about the mess?" one man asked. "Should we clean it up?"

"You don't need to go that far," he replied. "Just get their bodies out of here and go on back without me."

"Got it!"

His underlings left the room, carrying the body bags with them. Once they were gone, Noguchi turned an extremely annoyed look onto Sheryl.

"I hate to bother you when you've only just recovered, but I need to get up to speed on what happened here. Do you have a few minutes?"

"S-Sure," said Sheryl. And there, in the middle of that bloody, macabre scene, she sat down to talk again.

◆

Later on, submerging herself in her bathtub full of hot water, Sheryl let out a tired sigh. Her wounds were all healed now, thanks to the medicine, but her mental fatigue remained. So she'd decided a bath with Akira was in order, not only to wash the bloodstains from her body but also to heal her weary spirit.

"Say, Akira. What do you think's going to happen now?" she asked in an exhausted tone. Regardless of the reason, the crime of killing a city official merited severe punishment—the more so in the slums, since the city might use this as their excuse to finally burn the whole area to the ground.

Yep, she couldn't see any good coming out of this situation, to say the least.

But Akira replied serenely, "Well, whatever happens, happens, I guess."

Sensing his complete lack of concern, Sheryl felt better, and even managed to grin. "Yeah, I suppose there's no use worrying about it now, is there?"

She'd already done everything she could. Inabe had ordered her to conceal the deaths of Suwong and his men: the official story was that the bodies belonged to some slum residents who'd targeted Sheryl, so there had to be no trace that the General Investigation Bureau had ever come. The executive had also told her to make her

cover-up undetectable, and to feign innocence if she were ever questioned. But beyond that, Akira's and Sheryl's fates would depend on Inabe's ability to smooth things over. The children didn't have the power to overturn the city's decision themselves—as Akira had implied, they could only wait for the results, and deal with whatever happened afterward.

So Sheryl forced herself to stop worrying about the situation and to enjoy bathing with Akira instead.

Surely no one's going to call and interrupt us this *time*, she thought with a smile, and spent the rest of the bath savoring this precious chance to be alone with him.

◆

Another executive meeting was underway in the Kugama Building. It had originally been called to discuss how the city leaders were going to handle the nationalist presence in Zone 1, but had since devolved into a verbal dispute between Inabe and Udajima.

In the course of their arguing, Inabe turned to Sawatari, the chief director of the General Investigation Bureau, and demanded, "What proof do you have that the hunter you're targeting has any connection whatsoever to the nationalists in the first place? Had I not intervened, the men your department dispatched would have all been slaughtered! We would have lost personnel critical to maintaining the city's safety! I would just *love* to hear what circumstances compelled you to give that order."

"Make no mistake, I am grateful to you for stepping in before I lost my men, Mr. Inabe," said Sawatari. "However, our investigation into the nationalists is highly classified, especially since it is still ongoing. I'm afraid I can't disclose any results at this time."

"Sounds like Udajima paid you off pretty well," Inabe sneered. "Or perhaps he bribed you with the prospect of heading up your own lucrative territory in Zone 1?"

"I'd like you to refrain from baseless slander, please," Sawatari shot back scornfully. "Or has your party fallen so far that you can only fling base assumptions to compensate for your lack of

evidence?”

Inabe scowled, but he was ready for Sawatari’s response and answered accordingly. “Oh? Then why don’t you prove how far off base I am and explain to everyone here the grounds and circumstances that led you to suspect Akira? However confidential the information may be, it’s awfully strange that you can’t at least give us city executives a rough summary—*if* you have a legitimate reason, that is.” Inabe then turned to Riott. “Chairman Riott, if Director Sawatari here refuses to explain the reasoning behind his actions, I can only think he’s arbitrarily mobilizing the city’s forces so he can fabricate evidence to corroborate his false charges. Put more simply, he’s prioritizing his own interests over the safety of the city. Therefore, because he has either betrayed the city or failed to perform his duty—or both—I request that Director Sawatari be removed from his post.”

At that, the murmurs of the executives present reached a fever pitch—Inabe’s remark had done its job and sufficiently ruffled their feathers. Even Riott, who as the chairman had chosen to remain neutral in the two executives’ struggle for power, spoke up.

“Director Sawatari, I, too, would like to hear your reasoning.”

Sawatari hesitated a moment before speaking. “The relics that the hunter named Akira brought to the slum relic shop are of the same kind that the nationalists have been handing out to their clients as payment. It seems quite likely that both parties were getting them from the same source, and so we had to investigate the possibility that Akira was working with the nationalists.”

“Preposterous,” Inabe cut in. “There are a number of similar relics all over the East. Are you going to suspect every other hunter who’s found one of being a nationalist as well?”

“We simply determined that the possibility was strong enough to warrant suspicion. Old World data terminals in particular are highly valuable. And as they are rather uncommon, we have reason to believe both Akira’s and the nationalists’ terminals have one and the same origin.”

“Even if that were true, who’s to say both didn’t go to the same ruin and find the relics separately?” Inabe demanded. “That’s hardly

substantial proof that Akira is a nationalist, of all things."

"And that's exactly why we needed to take him in for questioning and confirmation," returned Sawatari. "The nationalists are up to something in Zone 1, and we wanted to find out whether Akira is involved in those plans."

"Then why didn't you just *ask* him what ruin he found them in?" Inabe queried. "Sure, he's a hunter, and hunters don't disclose precious info like that so easily, but you could have paid him enough to talk. So why did you immediately dispatch your men to arrest him instead, even knowing you'd be putting that team at risk by doing so? I'd like to hear your answer."

Sawatari was at a loss for words. Naturally, he couldn't tell them the truth—that he'd essentially done whatever Udajima had demanded, no questions asked, and had dispatched his men to apprehend Akira on the flimsiest of grounds.

"Isn't it because the hunter in question is simply that dangerous?" Udajima cut in. "Correct me if I'm wrong, but I hear this person has already killed three General Investigation Bureau members."

Murmurs broke out in the room once more. But Inabe was unfazed.

"I haven't heard anything like that," he scoffed.

"Oh, but I have."

"Really? Well, *I* heard that a slum resident disguised as a bureau employee headed to the shop and, jealous of its success, tried to kill the owner. But things backfired, and he got killed instead."

Sawatari, who of course knew that Suwong and his colleagues had really been from the General Investigation Bureau, couldn't help grimacing at Inabe's shameless deception.

But Inabe wasn't finished. "And since he was pretending to be from the bureau on official business, he apparently didn't move to kill the owner immediately. First he interrogated her, torturing her under the guise of collecting information—though, thanks to that, a hunter she was friendly with was able to make it there in time to assist her."

Now it was Udajima's turn to grimace—this was his first inkling that Suwong and his men had botched their assignment.

"Your version is intriguing, though," Inabe continued. "Considering that the impostor knew the bureau had their eye on the relic shop, I had thought the bureau's information must have been leaked—but what if the culprit was really a bureau agent after all? Perhaps we ought to undertake an internal investigation to find out whose orders they were acting on. Wouldn't you agree, Director Sawatari?"

Implicitly, Inabe was offering Sawatari a compromise. As things currently stood, Sawatari would be accused of ordering his subordinate to kill someone who supported a faction opposing Udajima's—and at Udajima's request. However, if Sawatari went along with Inabe now and at least distanced himself from Udajima's faction, he'd have a chance to save face.

And Sawatari understood exactly what was on the table.

Most likely, Inabe had already secured the bodies of Suwong and his men, so Sawatari couldn't just claim they had gone missing in action. He needed Inabe's cooperation to turn the outcome in his favor.

For his part, Sawatari had never ordered his colleagues to kill Sheryl, nor permitted them to use excessive violence to obtain her testimony. He'd only ordered them to go to her base and investigate. They had been allowed to threaten her verbally with the authority of the city, but that was all. The same went for Paji's crew, which he'd dispatched to apprehend Akira—while Sawatari had capitulated to Udajima's demands, he'd never intended for things to escalate like they had. In his calculations, a high-ranking hunter like Akira wouldn't want to come to blows with the city's forces, so Sawatari had figured both sides would want to avoid a fight at any cost.

Thus, as far as Sawatari knew, Udajima had only intended to harass Inabe a little and had never intended for the situation to blow up as it had. Only the unprompted actions of the personnel on the scene had complicated things, not Udajima himself. So Sawatari saw no harm in drawing back from Udajima's side and accepting Inabe's lifeline.

"Yes, Mr. Inabe, I agree. We'll open an investigation into the matter."

"In that case, let's wait for the results of that investigation before we do anything else here. I know we've spent a lot of time talking about the nationalists already, but we can't really continue that discussion until your internal investigation is settled, can we, Director Sawatari?"

"No, I suppose not."

With this, the truth that Akira had killed several city officials would be completely buried. The matter of him engaging in combat with city forces still remained, but that discussion would now also be tabled for the time being.

"Section Chief Inabe," said Riott, "may I take this to mean you rescind your request to remove Director Sawatari from his post?"

"You may."

"Then let's move on to the next item on the agenda: Section Chief Inabe's proposal to survey a large portion of Zone 1."

Inabe and Udajima gave each other dirty looks as the meeting continued, but Inabe had the upper hand. Under discussion was Inabe's proposal to assemble a large force and dispatch it to Zone 1 in order to locate, attack, and eliminate the nationalists' base of operations (though the executive's secret hope was that they would thereby clear more of his territory for him). And Udajima found it difficult to object to such a motion.

However, Inabe's advantage—and the topic itself—fell by the wayside when several city defense force members burst into the meeting room without warning. Their commander, Saeba, wore a grave expression.

"Pardon me for interrupting, gentlemen, but this is urgent," he said. "Please take a look at this."

The city's defense force was powerful in a military sense, inasmuch as they were tasked with the critical role of protecting the city, but they didn't have political clout; it was the city's leadership—in other words, the very people present at this meeting—who ultimately held sway over the entire city, including the defense force. So under normal circumstances, a group of defense force troops barging into an executive meeting without prior notice would never have happened. The shocked executives, therefore, rather than

being irritated and angry, immediately realized that something serious was afoot.

The commander transmitted a video to the large monitor in the meeting room. “Around an hour ago, this recording was transmitted across every comm network within a certain area, and has been looping ever since. We’re unsure where the broadcast originated, but we suspect it’s somewhere in the Kuzusuhara depths.”

All eyes turned to what was displayed on the screen. Against the backdrop of a room that appeared to be located in some ruin, a row of heavily armed personnel were standing behind a single figure, who seemed to be their leader. This individual—a boy—stood framed in the center of the video, and began to speak with a serious expression.

“We are the Alfoto Party! And right here, right now, we declare the founding of our new nation!”

This utterly preposterous proclamation left all the executives present floored. Their eyes, wide with disbelief, could not turn away from the boy on the screen as he continued his amateurish speech.

It was Tiol.

◆

Watching the recording, Yanagisawa wore a conflicted expression.

Tiol’s speech outlined the party’s plans for their new nation. Its territory would consist of the Kuzusuhara depths. Only those recognizing the nation’s autonomy would be allowed to enter. The nationalists had already negotiated with many hunters behind the scenes and had garnered supporters all over the East—and welcomed anyone who wished to join them. Supporters were free to hunt relics within the borders of the new nation, and they wouldn’t have to worry about being attacked by monsters while hunting either.

As if to prove Tiol’s claim, the video displayed a group of hunters calmly walking right into a pack of weapon dogs without getting attacked, passing through the monsters to collect some relics just beyond. It then cut to an image of their spoils—a batch of Old World

terminals piled up like a mountain.

The entire video, from start to finish, astounded everyone present. But what got Yanagisawa's attention the most was the boy himself—Tiol.

"Who are *you*?" he muttered under his breath.

Tiol had introduced himself as belonging to the Alfoto Party. But Yanagisawa had ties to that party—and he'd never seen Tiol before.

At that moment, Yanagisawa received a clandestine call. It was from Nelgo, a nationalist currently infiltrating Druncam's ranks under a different identity, and their conversation was carried out voicelessly to avoid eavesdroppers.

Comrade, I have something I need to ask you. Are you aware of the video going around depicting the boy claiming to belong to the Alfoto Party?

Sure am. I'm watching it right now, actually.

Is this your doing?

No, replied Yanagisawa. *And just for the record, I don't know who's responsible. I take it you have no idea either?*

That's right.

The two fell silent for a moment, trying to gauge whether the other was telling the truth.

Yanagisawa was the first to break that silence. *So tell me, what do you think of the contents of that video?*

It's so illogical and amateurish that I struggle to make sense of it. The boy is clearly a novice—he speaks like he's reading words off a script. And as for the speech itself, he didn't even announce their nation's name. It's all far too artless.

And yet he wasn't lying, returned Yanagisawa. *I noticed several of Kuzusuhara's defense mechanisms mixed in with those monsters, and they can distinguish friend from foe. This group must have an engineer skilled enough to hack the machines and let the hunters pass unscathed. In the worst-case scenario, it could be someone affiliated with the Rebuild Institute, which suggests the Anti-Rebuild Foundation might also get involved. But if they've got such a large sponsor backing them—*

No. You don't know them, we don't know them, and neither of

our networks have picked up anything about them, so it's not possible. And if they did have an organization like that supporting them, they wouldn't have prepared such a shoddy speech in the first place.

Yeah, I guess not.

Yanagisawa and Nelgo were equally baffled. *For the time being, I'll try and make contact with this group who claims to be the Alfoto Party*, Nelgo said. *What do you plan to do, comrade?*

Well, my course of action as a city executive will probably be decided during this meeting, so I guess I'll just play it by ear.

Then that's all for now. Goodbye.

Nelgo ended the call, and Yanagisawa turned his attention once more to the video on the screen. He watched intently as it looped, paying careful attention to every detail in order to better understand its message. Then he ruminated on who could have made it, how, and for what purpose. Finally, he reached a conclusion.

"Perhaps I could use this to my advantage?" he muttered under his breath.

His idea certainly wasn't guaranteed to work. However, it was worth a gamble. His goal wasn't the kind that could be achieved without taking risks, anyway. And he was determined to complete that goal before time was up, no matter what it took.

◆

Having now seen Tiol's video in its entirety, the executives were beside themselves with worry. Leaving this matter unattended would have an unprecedented effect on the city's economy, and the responsibility of cleaning up the resulting mess would fall on them. Inabe, seeing what was at stake, was about to join the others in discussing their strategy when Saeba came up to him.

"Section Chief Inabe, until this situation cools down, we'll need to keep you under our surveillance."

"What?!" Inabe barked. "Why?!"

"I can tell you if you'd like, but it's something I doubt you'd want me to say in front of everyone else here. Also, it's only surveillance.

We won't be interfering in your work, finances, or any other aspects of your life. That I can promise."

Inabe turned an intimidating glare on Saeba, radiating his full authority as a city executive. Saeba stared back into his eyes, unfazed.

"Fine," Inabe eventually said. "Chairman Riott, I'll be excusing myself. Some business has come up." He left the room with Saeba.

As the room fell into an uproar, Udajima could barely contain his grin. He didn't know the details, but Inabe had clearly slipped up somewhere. And now Udajima could take advantage of his rival's absence to steer the meeting in his favor and make up for his earlier misstep. The mere thought of this lifted his spirits.

But just then, another defense force member walked around to stand behind Udajima. Realizing what was about to happen, Udajima's face stiffened. "W-Wait, me too?"

"Yes. Until things calm down, we'll also be putting you under surveillance."

"May I ask why?"

"You may, as long as you're okay with me announcing the reason in front of everyone else in this room."

That gave Udajima pause. "Chairman Riott, I'll need to excuse myself as well." He headed out the door with the other defense force member.

The discussion over what to do about Tiol's group continued in their absence.

Inabe arranged for a car, and when it arrived, he and Saeba got in. They had additional security detail accompanying them, but the two of them had the back seat to themselves. The spacious area was ideal for holding confidential conversations.

"Now," said Inabe, "care to tell me what this is all about?"

"You should already know that without me having to tell you, right?" returned Saeba.

"Why should I have to disclose it myself? Regardless of whether I'm right or wrong, it'd be much easier for both of us if you just told me."

"I don't think so. I want to hear your guess first."

At that, Inabe looked puzzled. But Saeba seemed quite adamant about this, so with no other choice, Inabe said, "Suppose Akira did get those Old World terminals from making a deal with the Alfoto Party. Whatever he traded for so many of them had to be something significant. And you suspect I was part of that trade."

"That's one half," said Saeba, with a look that indicated Inabe should guess the remaining half as well.

"Even if there *is* more to it, I couldn't imagine what it might be."

"Then I'll tell you. Quite a while back, you got some of your people to plant those terminals throughout Zone 1 as part of some scheme of yours. And we can't discount the possibility that during this process, you might have made contact and dealt with the Alfoto Party. That's why."

Hearing that the defense force was aware of his plot, Inabe let out a long sigh. "And who tipped you off to my scheme? Noguchi?"

"Look, you know I can't answer that. Our source wants to remain anonymous."

"Yeah, I'll bet."

A long silence ensued. Finally, Inabe began to speak, his expression completely calm. "First off, let me say I'm not doing business with any nationalists. And just for the record, I didn't carry out this plan for my own amusement. It was my only chance to stop Udajima from gaining power." Then Inabe's tone grew more heated. "I admit it—I want power just as much as the next guy. I won't deny that. But more importantly, I'm not going to let this city be controlled by a bunch of cowards who've made arrangements to flee to some other town as soon as the going gets tough. However talented Udajima is, I won't stand for him and his lackeys being in charge."

Kugamayama City was within walking distance of the Kuzusuhara Town Ruins, so the threat of a large-scale monster attack was always going to be present. The city was protected by a heavily fortified wall, but that didn't guarantee its safety—there was always the possibility that someday, for whatever reason, the city wall wouldn't suffice. If that ever happened, Udajima and his faction would fly the coop—and Inabe knew this, because during the

previous monster attack, Udajima and his underlings had only cared about their own safety, quickly making plans to evacuate. For a resident of the city, and a city executive no less, such behavior was unacceptable. Inabe couldn't leave the city's future in the hands of people like that. And so he'd embarked on his rivalry with Udajima.

Having finally let out the feelings he'd kept bottled up for so long, Inabe sighed and regained his calm. Then he added, "I'm sure it would be great PR to say I'm looking ahead at the bigger picture, toward the future—but in reality, I just don't want people who would rather flee than defend their home to be in charge. If that happens, our city's as good as done for." He sighed again. "So, now that I've confessed, what are you going to do? Arrest me?"

"Nah."

"Really?!" Inabe had been certain that his political career was finished. Saeba's response took him by surprise, so much so that the executive actually let it show on his face.

"Look, I'm no paragon of justice either," said Saeba. "As long as you don't sell any information on the defense force to any other party, I'm not interested in taking you in. And you're not gonna do that, right?"

"Hell no."

"Then we don't have a problem. Like I said before, this is just surveillance. It's necessary for our investigation into the nationalists. We're not gonna interfere in any aspect of your life. And this little scheme of yours has nothing to do with our inquiry, so I'll look the other way."

In a sense, this was a shameless remark for a cop to make, and Inabe looked like he couldn't quite believe what he was hearing. Saeba grinned, amused by his reaction.

"Well, on a personal level," added the commander, "I'd also rather have you in charge than Udajima. Someone who runs away when the chips are down isn't likely to invest much in the city's defense, after all. I'll be anticipating that budget increase later when you're the one calling the shots, eh?"

"Appreciate the support. But if you're already turning a blind eye to my actions, why not just be my accomplice?" suggested Inabe

lightheartedly.

"Sorry, there're things I can and can't do in my position, and that's one I can't."

By now, though their statuses weren't equal, the two men were speaking quite cordially, even informally, to each other. The car, meanwhile, drove on toward Sheryl's base in the slums.

"So let me just ask you straight," Saeba said. "Do you really think that Akira guy's working with the nationalists?"

"Not to insult him behind his back or anything, but I'm not sure he's even capable of negotiating at that level, so I seriously doubt it. Given the circumstances, though, I can definitely see why he might seem suspect."

And the two men hoped that when they reached the base in the slums, they would learn the truth about this matter once and for all.

When the car came to a stop, Erio and his team immediately gathered around it, fully armed. Normally, this would have been an unacceptable way for a group of slum children to greet a city executive, but Sheryl had nearly been killed by someone from the city only days ago, so they couldn't just stand down.

However, the fight drained out of them when the bodyguards accompanying Inabe and Saeba pulled up in their own cars and emerged. Against a unit of the city's defense force, the support system calculated Erio and the others had no chance of winning. So instead, Erio called Akira and Sheryl in a panic and informed them of the sudden arrival.

◆

Akira had rescued Sheryl from imminent danger twice now as of late. To prevent a third such incident, Akira had agreed to stay at Sheryl's base for the time being. So Akira was on-site when Inabe showed up with the city's defense force, and he and Sheryl listened as the executive explained the details of the mysterious video in which Tiol had declared himself a member of the Alfoto Party. Then Inabe explained that he wanted Akira to tell him where he'd really

found the terminals, so that Akira wouldn't remain a suspect any longer—and the city leader offered to compensate Akira handsomely for his cooperation as well.

Enticed by Inabe's proposal, Akira looked conflicted. *Alpha, just to make sure, I still can't tell him, right?*

Right.

Figured. He looked disappointed and let out a large sigh. Then he raised his head and, looking directly at Inabe, gave his answer. "Sorry, I can't tell you."

Inabe had expected this reply and wasn't particularly surprised. He could also tell the boy wasn't putting on an act to try and get Inabe to sweeten the deal. Still, he frowned and replied, "You do realize that not cooperating will make it harder for me to defend you."

"I do, yeah. But I can't say what I can't say. Sorry."

"And why can't you say?"

"I can't say that either."

"Even as we speak, your standing within the city is getting worse and worse. Soon it will be unsalvageable. You understand that, right?" The implied threat was that Akira might be labeled a nationalist unless he came clean.

"Yeah. I understand."

Despite Inabe's threat, the atmosphere didn't turn violent—Akira grasped that Inabe was trying to protect him.

"All right, then let's do it this way," Inabe said. "You're not a nationalist, and you're not working with them, right?"

"That's right—I'm not a nationalist, and I'm not working with them."

"And you don't know who the individual in this video is, or anything about what he's saying, correct?"

All Akira had to do was deny any involvement or knowledge—then there would be no point in questioning him further. Inabe knew full well that if they tried to use force to make him talk, any information they obtained wouldn't be worth the casualties the defense force would suffer in the process. So Inabe hoped to bring matters to a close this way.

But Akira's reply caught him by surprise. "Actually, I do know him."

Inabe's and Saeba's eyes went wide with shock.

"E-Excuse me?" demanded the executive.

"Sheryl, that's Tiol, right?"

"Most likely," Sheryl said reluctantly, after some hesitation. "But I can't say for sure." It was obvious to her that telling the truth in this situation was the wrong move, as it would only put them under more suspicion. But Akira had already let the cat out of the bag, so she explained that Tiol had once been a member of her gang.

Honesty's admirable, but now's not the time to be honest! Inabe thought, at his wit's end.

For his part, Saeba smiled wryly. He could see now that Akira had told the truth about not working with nationalists—if the boy couldn't figure out that lying was the best option here, he didn't have the skill to negotiate with such a group in the first place.

"Okay, I understand," Saeba said. "Then as a member of the defense force, let me just ask you one question. If we asked you to kill this Tiol kid, could you do that? It would be the easiest and quickest way to prove your own innocence."

To Saeba, Akira would be a fool not to accept. But contrary to his expectations, Akira scowled.

"'And if you refuse, I'm sure you already know what'll happen to you.' Is that what you want to say?"

"I didn't mean it like that, no, but why would you *not* want to kill him to prove your innocence?"

"Wouldn't anyone not want to be threatened into doing something against their will?" retorted Akira.

"I see. Then..." Saeba thought a moment. "If we designated Tiol as a bounty, would you go and kill him?"

"Yeah. Actually, that'd be perfect—I was already planning on doing so if I ever saw him again."

Saeba smiled wryly again—how drastically Akira's attitude changed, depending on whether he was being coerced into something or was free to choose. What a troublesome boy! Beside him, Inabe heaved an exasperated sigh.

"All right, in that case, I've got work to do, so I'll get out of your hair," Saeba said. "Section Chief Inabe, what's *your* plan?"

"Good question. I guess for now, I'll take my leave as well. Akira, lie low for a while and don't go to any ruins. I'll call you later." He left and headed home.

As Sheryl and Akira watched him go, Sheryl wondered, "Say, Akira. What do you think's going to happen now?"

"Well, whatever happens, happens, I guess."

"Yeah, I suppose there's no use worrying about it now, is there?"

And suddenly remembering that they'd had this same conversation not long ago, Sheryl couldn't help but smile. True, the situation had escalated to the point that Akira's murder of several city officials was now considered trivial by comparison. Yet the two of them could stand here, quite relaxed, and espouse the same opinions as before.

In that case, she thought, things would probably work out just fine.

◆

While Akira was resting at Sheryl's base, he got a call from Kibayashi—the cutthroat negotiations over the Old World automatons had finally concluded, and Akira would be awarded a total of three billion aurum. Two billion would then be paid back to Inabe, allowing Akira to pocket one billion for himself.

He'd wanted to use the money earned in Iida to upgrade his bathroom and install that luxury bath, as well as for some other significant quality-of-life improvements. But now that he had a rematch with Tiol in the offing, he had to prioritize upgrading his gear instead.

He sighed in deep disappointment.

"What's wrong?" Kibayashi demanded brusquely. "Three billion not enough for you?"

"What? No, I'm not complaining about that—it'll be a big help."

"Then why the grand sigh?"

"Oh, that? A totally different reason. Don't sweat it," Akira replied,

trying to gloss over the matter.

But Kibayashi had already been in a bad mood even before calling Akira, and he pressed the boy further. "It wouldn't have anything to do with the Tiol incident, would it?" he asked, his tone almost accusatory.

"Well, technically, yeah. Sounds like you already found out about that too, huh?"

"If you're worried enough to sigh about it," Kibayashi snapped, sounding more irritated by the second, "then why didn't you just turn the city down? I had high hopes for you, but you've turned out to be just as boring as all the others!"

"W-Wait, hold up! What are you talking about?"

"I heard all about it, you know. The city threatened to label you a suspected nationalist, so you caved and accepted their offer to take out the Alfoto Party in exchange for clearing your name, didn't you? I'd thought for sure that you—of all people!—would keep living by your own rules and on your own terms, regardless of whoever threatened you, city or otherwise. Man, you really disappointed me!" Kibayashi had been so certain the boy—crazy, reckless, and rash—would fight back when the city threatened him. So he'd felt quite depressed at the news that Akira had chosen to accept their offer instead of coming to blows.

"Look, I don't give a damn about what you expect," Akira said, growing irritated in turn, "but I'm gonna do what I want regardless. Don't shove your weird expectations on me."

"What you want? Didn't the city coerce you into taking that job?"

"Hardly. I was already planning to kill that bastard anyway. He's gotten away from me twice now, in Kuzusuhara and in Iida, and I'm gonna make sure the third time's the charm. So the city's job offer just lined up well with my own plans."

"Then what was that sigh for?"

"Well, I really wanted to use the funds to renovate my bathroom. But since Tiol's hanging out in Zone 1 right now, and I've had some tough battles there lately, I'm gonna have to spring for better gear instead. So, yeah, I'm kinda bummed."

"One billion to renovate your *bathroom*? Just what kind of

monstrous tub are you planning on installing?!”

“Oh, shut up! Does it really matter?! I work my ass off, so don’t I deserve to have something nice for once?!” Not understanding where Kibayashi was coming from, he exploded in bewilderment and frustration.

Kibayashi realized the boy wasn’t lying. Akira was still willing to make an enemy of the city or whoever else stood in his way. Sure, the kid might think a billion wasn’t too much to drop on remodeling his bathroom, but he had still chosen to spend it on equipment instead. In other words, the Akira who Kibayashi knew and loved—the hunter who was the human embodiment of “crazy, reckless, and rash”—was alive and well.

This epiphany made Kibayashi’s day.

“Yes! That’s it—that right there! *That’s* my Akira! Oh man, sorry I doubted you! So many other hunters in your shoes would have submitted that I guess I just assumed you would too!”

Hearing Kibayashi in high spirits, Akira’s irritation gave way to pure annoyance. “What is wrong with you, anyway? Look, if that’s all, I’m hanging up.”

“Whoa, hold up, now! As a token of apology, mind if I help you out a little with your upgrades?”

“Yeah, I *do* mind. Because I already know you’re just going to make things even more complicated for me.”

“Oh, c’mon! Nothing complicated about it. Tiol’s bounty will probably be posted tomorrow at the earliest, and you’ll want to head out right away, no? Now, you *could* order the new gear from your favorite store, sure, but then you’d have to wait for it to arrive. Just say the word, though, and I’ll get it for you right away.”

“Well, I suppose, but—”

“Not to mention that right now, you’re suspected of being a nationalist. So it’ll probably be hard for you to order anything anyway. The proprietor of that store you always frequent might not mind, but the distributors themselves could very well reject your business. But if you leave everything to me, you won’t have to worry about any such hassle. How’s that sound?”

Akira saw his point: ordering from Shizuka in his current

circumstances might inconvenience her, to say the least. Reluctantly, he nodded. “All right. I’m counting on you.”

“Excellent! Then let’s discuss how you want that three-billion-aurum budget—”

“One billion, actually. The rest goes to repaying my debt.”

“In such a critical moment? Surely you can postpone that a little longer, right?”

“Absolutely not.”

“You sure are inflexible, you know that? Very conscientious, but only about the strangest things. Yet I guess that’s where your crazy, reckless, and rash nature comes from, so I won’t complain!”

Akira just sighed and shook his head. And during the entire lengthy discussion that followed, concerning how to allocate the boy’s budget, Kibayashi was all smiles.

◆

Udajima paid a visit to Druncam HQ, accompanied by an observer from the defense force. There he met up with Katsuya and Mizuha and made them an offer: the executive wanted Katsuya’s unit to wipe out the nationalists in Zone 1.

Katsuya listened to his request with a conflicted look on his face. Udajima was offering to support him as much as possible, which was tempting. But the young man had also lost comrades during the retreat from Zone 1, and he found it difficult to accept the proposal right away.

Udajima regarded them solemnly and added, “Let me just say I won’t force you to take on this assignment, so please don’t think I’m pressuring you to do this. I know you had to pull back the last time you were in that area, so I understand if you can’t do it, and I won’t blame you. Still, I would appreciate your cooperation.” Then the city executive bowed cordially to Katsuya—a mere hunter.

Mizuha, who sympathized strongly with Katsuya, piped up as though speaking for his team members by proxy. “I can’t force you to either, you know. You’re the one who’ll be doing the fighting, so ultimately it’s up to you to decide whether you can handle it. But I

believe in *you*, Katsuya. Akira might have had to help you last time, but I suspect that was just because he had better equipment. And with Udajima's help, I'm sure we can find you some better gear than Akira's. Isn't that right, sir?" she asked, turning to the executive.

"Of course," he assured them. "That won't be a problem."

Katsuya longed for them to shut up. His first impulse had been to bow out. But his thoughts were immediately swallowed up by a far more intense desire for strength and glory. This wasn't enough to sway him, however, and hesitation remained on his face.

"D-Do *you* think I can accomplish it, Mr. Udajima?"

"Regrettably, I can't say for sure. But I *want* to believe that you can. The future of Kugamayama City depends on it, after all."

Katsuya was shocked. He hoped that Udajima was just being dramatic.

Seeing his reaction, the executive continued, "I'm serious. I didn't want to tell you the details until you'd agreed, but I suppose now is as good a time as any. For the city's long-term prosperity, it is imperative that you win against Akira. I want you to take him out."

Now Katsuya was stunned into silence. When he found his voice, he demanded, "What? Why?"

"Those with outstanding power in the world come to define the world, greatly influencing it. And right here in Kugamayama, there are two hunters with that kind of power. Both of them have accomplished incredible things despite their youth, and either one of them could easily become an icon of the city. By now, I'm sure you know who I'm talking about. One of them is you, Katsuya—the other is Akira."

"Me and...*him*?"

"I wouldn't mind if you became Kugamayama City's symbol, you know—or rather, I'd prefer it. Your ability leaves no room for criticism, that's for sure. You're a prodigy! And what's more, you have a kind character and a strict moral compass that will ensure you don't get drunk on power. You're *perfect*, Katsuya. And I also know you have many supporters in the city's middle district. If someone like you becomes the standard for all hunters in Kugamayama, I have no doubt the city's future will be bright

indeed."

Then Udajima's face darkened. "But that other boy—Akira—is the opposite," he declared, with absolute conviction in his voice. "You two are night and day. He seeks power at all costs—he's got the mentality and morals of a slum rat."

With this declaration echoing in their ears, Udajima's reasoning left no room for doubt in Katsuya's mind. And the executive's words resonated within him powerfully, in part because Katsuya already disliked Akira.

"Now, I know some of the boys on your team come from the same background," Udajima went on. "But unlike those kids, who are at least making an effort to learn some ethics, Akira isn't even trying to better himself—and he's still gaining strength. One could even say that his power is going to his head, degrading his character even further."

That's right, came a thought that was not Katsuya's own.

"Hunters are always risking their lives, so to them, strength is everything. Personality, character, morals—those all take a back seat. I get that." Then Udajima's voice grew harsh. "But even so, there are limits. That boy killed several city officials without batting an eye—not to mention he's under suspicion of engaging in nationalist activity! Just what do you think will happen to this city if someone like *that* becomes the standard? Everyone else will follow in his footsteps, spreading lawlessness all over Kugamayama! I will not allow that to happen!"

This news immediately shocked Katsuya back to his senses. "H-Hold on a sec! If all that's true, then why's the city just letting him run loose?!"

At that, Udajima said bitterly, "This isn't something we're exactly proud of, and for your own safety as well, I want you to keep what I'm about to tell you to yourself. But another city executive, Inabe, is currently backing Akira so he can use the boy for his own interests. And this executive has essentially crushed all of the city's attempts to deal with Akira so far."

This wasn't a lie, so Udajima didn't have to do anything to make it sound convincing, and his story seemed that much more

believable to Katsuya. “N-No way...”

“It’s unfortunate, yes. I myself have made every effort to put an end to Inabe’s tyranny, but to no avail. I’m sorry.” Udajima bowed to Katsuya once more.

“N-No, this isn’t your fault, Mr. Udajima! Please don’t beat yourself up over it!”

“I do appreciate your generosity, Katsuya. At any rate, that’s why I want you to defeat Akira. I want you to win against him and become the shining beacon that leads Kugamayama City into the future. Naturally, I’m prepared to use every resource at my disposal to help you succeed.”

Katsuya knew well the boundless feelings and expectations that his comrades and supporters had for him, and as he listened, he felt them rising up within and threatening to overwhelm him. He found himself on the verge of agreeing with Udajima. But one thing held him back—he knew from experience how strong Akira was.

“Mr. Udajima, when you say you want me to win against him and take him down, what exactly do you mean? You want me to get rid of those Alfoto Party guys before he does?”

“No, no. That wouldn’t be any different from letting him run loose, would it? I want you to *secure* him.”

Katsuya knew that would be impossible without killing Akira, and he looked serious.

Seeing this, Udajima added gravely, “That’s right. Sugarcoating it here would be an insult to you, so let me be clear. I want him stopped, dead or alive. I’ll take full responsibility.”

Now Katsuya felt shell-shocked. A city executive, essentially hiring him to commit murder?! He’d killed other humans before, of course, but only in self-defense or retaliation. Never before had homicide been the goal. Others might have found this to be merely splitting hairs, but to Katsuya, it made all the difference in the world.

Sensing Katsuya’s thoughts, Udajima continued, “Of course, I’d prefer you take him alive, if possible. Then we can interrogate him and get him to spill the beans about Inabe’s wrongdoing, allowing us to hold that man accountable. Akira and Sheryl are the two figures propping up the relic shop that’s funding Inabe’s schemes, and if we

can remove just one of them from the equation, Inabe will suffer a huge blow."

At the mention of Sheryl's name, Katsuya recollected that she and Inabe were working together. "Sheryl? Oh, right! Sheryl *did* have a relic sh— Wait a sec!"

"What is it?"

"Sh-Sheryl's involved in this too?!"

"At the very least, there's no doubt she's the proprietor of the store Inabe's using."

"Oh man...!" There were many things Katsuya didn't know about Sheryl, and he could tell she was a woman with secrets, but he had never suspected she would take part in an injustice on this scale. At least, he hadn't *wanted* to believe she would.

Udajima took advantage of Katsuya's confusion. "That said, she might just be complicit without knowing it. Or perhaps Inabe has some dirt on her and is blackmailing her to cooperate. Or maybe the circumstances are even more complicated. But regardless, she's involved, and so there's a chance she's involved willingly."

"If she's being forced to work with him, could we just look into what he's got on her and help out somehow? Then she might work with us instea—"

"Impossible."

"B-But why?"

"Because the city's General Investigation Bureau has already tried that. They dispatched a unit to apprehend Akira and even sent some men over to Sheryl's as well. But both units failed. Apparently, they were all killed. And to make matters worse, if you can believe it, the bureau has caved to Inabe's threats."

Katsuya was speechless.

Udajima, meanwhile, concealed his true feelings beneath a facade of solemnness. "That's just another reason I'd like you to capture Akira. Like I said, I won't force you, but right now, you're the only one I can think of to turn to. That's why I came here." He smiled wryly. "But you know, it's strange," he said with a hint of hope in his voice. "When I look at you, I can't help but think you're someone I can count on, and I'd rather think it's not just because I

don’t have anyone else to rely on right now.”

With that, Udajima stopped speaking, and the room fell into silence. However, in place of noise, an imperceptible air of enthusiasm filled the room. Katsuya had listened intently to everything Udajima had said, and eventually the boy came to his decision.

“One last question. If I help you do this, will you help me save Sheryl?”

“You have my word.”

“In that case, I’m in.”

“I greatly appreciate it!” rejoiced Udajima, seizing both of Katsuya’s hands in his.

◆

After leaving Druncam’s facility and getting in his chauffeured vehicle, Udajima spent the drive back ruminating on the conversation he’d just had.

I know I laid it on a bit thick so that a young hunter like him would be more inclined to play ball, but I think I got somewhat carried away and revealed more than I intended. Why did I do that? Was I *the one that got taken in by* his *aura instead?*

He frowned, clearly concerned, but after mulling the question over some more, he decided it probably wasn’t such a big deal after all.

I’m sure I’m simply overthinking things. I probably just let my anger at Inabe and his camp get the better of me.

After all, he reminded himself, Katsuya was just one of several methods he had at his disposal—the boy himself wasn’t especially worth worrying about. And with that, he turned his attention to those other methods.

◆

With Udajima’s support, Katsuya hurriedly made his preparations. He had two objectives, one official—namely, going after the

nationalists—and one covert. With the assistance of the development team for Kiryou's all-in-one support system, Katsuya gathered the most powerful forces and equipment available to him. In his heart, he set his own goals—to defeat Akira and rescue Sheryl.

The girl from the world of white had tried her best to stop Katsuya. An outcome in which her subject and Alpha's ended up killing each other would be catastrophic for both trials, so she'd interfered with Katsuya's subconscious as much as she could to hold him back.

She was the same type of being as Alpha, and up until now, her words had exerted a profound effect on Katsuya. He'd never realized the massive influence she'd imposed on his judgment and decisions thus far.

But now, even her voice was being drowned out by all the cheers and fanfare in his head.

Chapter 180: Communication Breakdown

In his garage, Akira was sitting in the driver's seat of his large truck, awaiting the hour to depart, when he got a call from Elena inviting him to join them on a relic hunt.

"So what do you say?" she asked, after outlining their plans. "I know the Kuzusuhara depths are the only nearby ruin that Rank 40 hunters like us can make a killing in, but after all the recent commotion with the nationalists, I figure we ought to steer clear of there for a while. So, you in?"

"Well, uh, I appreciate the invite, and I'm happy you thought to call me, but unfortunately I'll have to decline. I'm on another job right now."

"Oh, really? Darn, that's a shame. Hmm... You know, I suppose we could postpone things for a few days if you really are interested."

"Um, I appreciate that too, honest, but I'm not really sure how long my current job is gonna take. Depending on how things go, it could either end today or several weeks from now."

"Very well. In that case, I guess there's no helping it. All right. I don't know what kind of job you've gotten yourself into, but please be careful."

"Yeah, I will. Take care." Akira hung up. Then he heaved a disappointed sigh. "Man, and after they thought to call and invite me too."

There was no way you could've gone, Alpha said, consoling him from the passenger's seat. *I'm sure there will be another opportunity.*

"Yeah, I guess you're right."

At that moment, a notification sounded from Akira's terminal. The bounty had been posted.

"Looks like it's time. Let's go." Bracing himself for what was to come, Akira sped out of the garage.

◆

The city had placed a bounty of fifty billion on Tiol and the Alfoto Party—far too high a reward for killing a single person. Such an amount was reserved for whole groups and organizations, and the job wouldn't be recognized as complete until all of the designated people had been eradicated. Then the reward would be divided among all participants based on their level of contribution. The targets were human, so hunters who drew the line at homicide wouldn't be throwing their hats in the ring—but for those who either had come to terms with killing other humans or outright didn't care, this was their time to shine.

Eradicating the nationalist threat would benefit the League immensely. So successful hunters would receive a much larger boost to their rank on this mission than they would from finding relics or taking down monsters. It didn't hurt that humans were generally far easier marks than beasts with abnormally high vitality or mechanical monsters with tough armor and powerful weaponry. The participants stood to gain much with little effort, so this bounty was a golden opportunity to hunters who were looking for their lucky break.

At the same time, the city was taking the opportunity to gauge its hunters' capabilities. If the pursuers could take down Tiol and his nationalists without any help, great—and if they couldn't, Kugamayama would just send in additional forces to make up the difference. Dispatching the defense force, on the other hand, would be expensive, and every dead soldier would cost the city a valuable asset that it had invested a lot of time and money in.

Plus, there was a chance that the nationalist threat in Zone 1 was just a diversion, drawing valuable forces away so the enemy could launch an all-out assault on the city. As with the previous large-scale attack on Kugamayama, the city couldn't mobilize the defense force unless monsters were already approaching the city. Even so, the powers that be had dispatched a large mech unit to the Kuzusuhara

Town Ruins forward base, just in case. When Akira saw the number of mechs lined up, he was rather taken aback.

"Damn, that's a lot. Wait, they think the enemy's so tough that they'll need this many?!"

Well, they are *shelling out fifty billion, you know*, Alpha reminded him.

"Point taken, but still."

Think of them as your competition. After all, if those mechs end up wiping Tiol and his group out right away, there'll be no chance for you to clear your name of nationalist suspicion.

"Yeah, I guess you're right!" Seeing Alpha's confident smile and relaxed attitude, Akira grinned back, enthusiastic once more.

Passing through the forward base and exiting onto the highway, Akira sped down the road toward Zone 1. As he drove, however, other eager hunters passed him by—quite a few, in fact.

"I know the early bird gets the worm and all, but they probably ought to slow down a little," he observed.

Hunters weren't the only ones looking for their golden opportunity in this bounty hunt. There were those who'd sold Old World data terminals in the past and, for whatever reason, couldn't divulge their sources (like the group who'd delivered the monster corpse to Tiol and Olivia); these people were also hoping to clear their names, lest they be suspected of dealing with nationalists. Even if the bounty turned out to be far too difficult for them to handle, they were desperate, compelled to press on at top speed.

They've probably got their own reasons for hurrying, Alpha said. *But more importantly, we can't let them beat us to the punch.*

"Roger that!" After all, Akira had just as much riding on this venture. So to ensure he didn't get left in the dust, he sped up as well.

Upon arriving in Zone 1, Akira made a beeline for the Tsubakihara District—killing Tiol first required finding him. There was no guarantee the boy was still in Zone 1, of course, so Akira was essentially shooting in the dark, but he figured it couldn't hurt to start by checking the most likely area—the place he'd rescued Sheryl

and Yumina, where he'd encountered the strange boys and that horde of monsters. As for why he thought it so likely, he'd noticed when he'd first laid eyes on the boys that they looked eerily similar to the bizarre abomination Tiol had become back in the Iida Commercial District. Suspecting there was a connection, he judged returning to that building would at least give him better odds than blindly searching all over Zone 1.

But as they made their way to the Tsubakihara District, Akira's face looked grave. Smiling, Alpha tried to encourage him.

Lighten up, you'll be fine! You won't have to break through a massive swarm of monsters this time. We can always turn back if things get too dangerous.

"Yeah, I guess so, huh?" he said, cheering up.

However, Akira's true concern lay somewhere else entirely.

Back when Akira had been on rescue duty in Zone 1, he'd heard the group of hunters he'd saved refer to the area as the "Tsubakihara District." It went without saying that this name had come from the nearby region that was also called Tsubakihara. Akira, of course, knew that the Tsubakihara Building lay in that direction—and given that the Old World city was called Tsubakihara, it made sense to him that the surrounding area would be called the Tsubakihara District.

Yet not a single hunter in all of Kugamayama—apart from him—knew that the massive wall of ruined buildings was hiding an Old World city. Akira hadn't known this either until Alpha had led him there. But for the name "Tsubakihara" to already be known among hunters meant that someone else, somewhere, knew as well—at the very least, it would seem odd if the person who'd first coined the name "Tsubakihara District" *hadn't* known. And Akira guessed this individual would have had to be present during Kugamayama City's founding.

Originally, Kugamayama had been built as an outpost to support the exploration of the Kuzusuhara Town Ruins, an effort spearheaded by Sakashita Heavy Industries. This corporation had organized a battalion of highly motivated relic hunters with firepower

rivaling the professionals who explored the ruins on the easternmost part of the Front Line. The hunters had entered the ruins intending to make their way as far as they could into the depths, and had been hugely successful. Thanks to their efforts, the humble outpost had grown large enough to be called a city. An enormous defensive wall had even been erected surrounding the city in order to protect Kugamayama from monsters so powerful that even the Big Five's most elite units would have struggled against them.

One day, however, Sakashita Heavy Industries had pulled out from the Kuzusuhara exploration effort without warning. Lacking the corporation's backing, the city had struggled to make much headway in the ruins. Further development of the city had ground to a halt. From then on, as just another key business hub for the League, Kugamayama had possessed a lot less freedom than before.

Akira suspected that this ancient band of hunters had known about the Old World city under Tsubaki's supervision, and a discovery so significant wouldn't have just been forgotten with time. In other words, someone had erased this information intentionally, and now the term "Tsubakihara District" was simply used to refer to the area between the highway and Tsubakihara.

Some hunters, now and then, probably *had* suspected something was hidden there, and had gone to investigate it for themselves. But the monsters indigenous to the area had proven so dangerous, and the relics so lackluster, that those people probably hadn't found it worth the trouble to continue exploring. And word had spread—fewer and fewer people had visited the district. Even after the city highway had been built and hunters had started flocking to the ruin's depths, no one had bothered returning to the Tsubakihara District—at least, not until Inabe had begun luring people there as his last, desperate play for victory in his power struggle with Udajima.

As Akira thought about this, he seemed to hit upon a possible explanation for why he was so strongly suspected of being a nationalist. Perhaps the Old World terminals the nationalists were paying people with strongly resembled the terminals he'd gotten from the Tsubakihara District. Far more terminals had been reportedly found in the Tsubakihara District recently than Akira had

ever given to Inabe.

Most likely, then, the source of the nationalists' relics and Akira's were one and the same. For whatever reason, Tsubaki was disseminating a vast number of these terminals. Was she behind the activities of Tiol and his nationalists? Back when Akira had first heard about Tiol's group from Inabe, none of this had occurred to him, but now that he'd had some time to mull it over, this seemed a plausible conclusion to him.

As they penetrated deeper into Zone 1, heading toward the Tsubakihara District, Akira shot a furtive glance at Alpha. *Is it really okay for me to do this?* he wondered to himself.

If Tsubaki was in fact the mastermind behind this incident, should he really be getting involved? Such was Akira's real worry. Tsubaki was undoubtedly on the Old World's side, so he hesitated to antagonize her without sufficient cause. At the same time, he also hesitated to bring up his concern to Alpha. She and Tsubaki clearly had a history, and by now even Akira had deduced that the two of them were in all likelihood similar entities. Was heading to the Tsubakihara District the right course of action, then? Doubts plagued his mind.

So when Alpha had tried to cheer him up, he'd taken note of the fact that she wasn't telling him to stop or turn back, and was therefore probably fine with proceeding as planned. In that case, he would be fine as well. Just like he had always been. Reassured, Akira smiled back at her.

At that moment, his vehicle's scanner detected countless readings—from above. A legion of black mechs—Kokurous—were flying through the sky over the ruins. Transport trucks had delivered them to Zone 1 via the highway, and they were now carving a path as the crow flies toward the Tsubakihara District.

"Whoa, hold up! Now they're bringing *those* out?!" he exclaimed, startled. He knew what Kokurous were truly capable of—he'd seen them in action in Zone 2. Such a large unit might obliterate Tiol and the nationalists before Akira or any other hunters could even get to them. Then *everyone* would lose their shot at clearing themselves of

suspicion.

"Weren't they going to wait and see if the hunters could take Tiol's group out first? Wasn't that why they slapped a bounty on them in the first place? What's going on?"

Remember: that was just Inabe's explanation. It's possible someone else within the city has their own plans. They are *in the middle of a power struggle, after all.*

One thing was for sure: things were getting even more complicated. Even so, Akira pressed on.

◆

Inabe and Saeba arrived at the forward base's control room in order to monitor the developing situation.

It was Inabe who had ordered the bounty on Tiol, and it was also he who had convinced the city to trust the hunters, rather than the defense force, to get rid of the threat. Inabe had ties to Akira, so he was clearly proposing this for his own benefit, but the advantages for the city were also too great to ignore, and the motion had passed.

Even so, the executives couldn't bring themselves to leave *everything* in the hands of the hunters—the defense force couldn't just rest on its laurels, after all. The military was ordered to be ready to move the moment it became clear the hunters couldn't handle the task on their own. That judgment was ultimately left up to the defense force, but whatever decision they made would be Inabe's responsibility. So he had to keep an eye on how things unfolded.

"Good grief," he sighed. "Thanks to Udajima, it took me a whole week to post the bounty. What's that fool thinking, anyway?"

"Probably been up to no good in the meantime, I'd say," opined Saeba. "There are signs he met with Druncam and Yoshioka. He even contacted the defense force, trying to sound out whether we plan to send a unit to protect the city."

"Should you really be telling me all this?"

"Well, you're a city executive, so I figured you ought to know, given your position."

“Makes sense.”

The two grinned at each other. One had been tasked with monitoring the other, yet they’d hit it off rather well.

Then Inabe turned serious. “In that case, can I ask you one thing? If you can’t answer, don’t worry about it.”

Sensing Inabe’s change in attitude, Saeba also grew more thoughtful. “What is it?”

“Just how much sway does Yanagisawa have with the defense force right now?”

There was a long pause.

“I can’t answer that,” Saeba finally said.

Inabe found this disquieting. Saeba was essentially admitting that Yanagisawa already had enough influence to mobilize the defense force whenever he felt like it.

Such a man was dangerous.

Then Saeba added, “But you should already have an idea, considering you and Udajima had to work together to overturn his vote in the executive council.”

“I can’t argue with that,” Inabe said with a small smile. After all, this was why he was being monitored. “All the more reason I need to do something about Udajima first. You know why by now.”

“Good luck with that. It won’t be easy.”

“Well, I’ll do my best,” Inabe remarked. He didn’t intend to say more, but at that moment, something caught his attention. “What’s that?”

On the large monitor in the control room was a map that covered the entire distance from Kugamayama City to the Kuzusuhara depths. Here Inabe could see the positions of the deployed units—including a legion of mechs on its way to Zone 1.

“Hey, Saeba! Weren’t the mechs supposed to be on standby here at the forward base?”

“Oh, that group? These guys don’t belong to the defense force; they’re Yoshioka’s personal unit. We’re still data-linked with them, but they’re separate from us, so they’re more in the hunters’ camp than anything else.”

“Udajima,” Inabe growled.

"Most likely."

Inabe scowled. He had finally realized what Udajima was up to.

◆

The large army of black mechs continued tracing its path through the skies above Zone 1. Each machine boasted as much power as those that had been dispatched to Zone 2, and their pilots were all the cream of the crop.

Naturally, mobilizing such a unit had cost an inordinate sum of money. Yet at Udajima's bidding, Yoshioka Heavy Industries had dispatched the mechs nonetheless. In return, not only would they have the honor (and advertising potential) of exterminating the nationalists, as well as the bounty reward, but Udajima had also promised them he would integrate the Kokurous into the city's defense force.

Udajima himself would also benefit, by halting Inabe and his plan to gain influence in their tracks. The way things were currently going, a vast swath of Zone 1 would become explorable and subsequently fall under the jurisdiction of Inabe's faction. Udajima wouldn't have cared if that territory was nothing but barren wasteland, but recent intel had suggested that this supposedly desolate area—the Tsubakihara District—was the source of a treasure trove of valuable relics.

At first, Udajima had figured this rumor was poppycock, just another one of Inabe's schemes. But the results of the General Relic Appraisal Department's investigation, as well as the fact that Tiol's people possessed a massive stock of Old World data terminals, had made him reconsider. He didn't know why so many valuable relics had turned up there, but he was now convinced they had. And allowing Inabe's faction to control that area could completely obliterate the lead Udajima currently held in their power struggle. So he'd plotted in secret to redistribute the various sections of the ruin.

Naturally, Inabe's party would have voted down any such measure in the executive committee—so Udajima had chosen a more direct approach. Though taking care of the nationalists was

supposed to be left up to the hunters, he'd negotiated with Yoshioka so that with their army of Kokurous, he could steal the hunters' glory—and Akira's opportunity to clear his name along with it. If all went well, his faction would enjoy great success, and everyone would lose trust in Inabe's party. Then it would be much easier to renegotiate the territory distribution in his favor, effectively barring Inabe from making a comeback.

Udajima had bet everything on this.

He'd also requested the same thing of Yoshioka that he'd requested of Katsuya—namely, to capture Akira dead or alive. But Yoshioka had turned him down: they knew from their previous experience with Akira that the less they were involved with him, the better.

Making its way to the Tsubakihara District, the unit of black mechs spotted Akira's truck below. "C1, the hunter's here, just as our sponsor said he would be. Looks like he's heading in the same direction we are."

"C12, looks like it," responded Merte, the pilot of the lead mech, whose call sign was C1. "I suppose that means the nationalists' base really is in this direction after all."

"But C1, wouldn't that only be true if the hunter's actually working with the nationalists? Do you really think that's the case? I certainly don't."

"C13, it's not our job to decide that—what if we were only given this intel so that, if the base *did* turn out to be in this direction, more suspicion would fall on the hunter regardless?"

"Oh, now *that* sounds intriguing!"

Once they'd passed Akira by, Merte received a suggestion from C12. "Hey C1, how about several of us mechs fall back and tail him?"

"Negative, C12. Higher-ups told us not to bother him, remember?"

"Yeah, yeah, I know. But that's only if we attack him, right? I'm just suggesting we tag along, is all."

"'Tag along'?"

"We're looking for the nationalists' base, sure, but we don't have any proof it's around here. That hunter might end up finding it

before we do. But if we keep a few mechs nearby, we could steal his kill, get my drift? Our sponsor doesn't want him to succeed either, so wouldn't that be in his best interests as well?"

"Ooh, C12, I like that idea! Let's do it! I'll go too, if you want!"

"All right, why not? C12, C13, you're on tailing detail."

"C12, roger!"

"C13, roger!"

And so, while most of the unit continued on course, two black mechs veered away on their own.

◆

When Akira noticed the pair of mechs breaking formation and heading toward him, he immediately went on the alert. Exiting his vehicle through the back door, he climbed onto the roof. On his back, he wore a support arm carrying a cylindrical, high-capacity energy tank, to which the LEOs in both his hands were connected. With this setup, Akira could fire C-bullets at maximum charge without having to be on his bike.

Akira knew he'd need at least this much firepower should the mechs prove hostile. So he was pulling out all the stops, using his most powerful arsenal from the get-go. However, as they drew closer, the mechs signaled that they were friendly, so he couldn't very well greet them with guns pointed at them. He would have to wait to see how they behaved, then respond accordingly.

Once the mech in front was directly over Akira's truck, it slowed its speed to match his. The other mech came abreast of the truck, dropping low until it was flying alongside him. Perplexed, Akira turned to follow it with his eyes—when all at once, the pilot emerged from its back hatch and leaped aboard Akira's vehicle.

"You?!" Akira muttered, scowling.

"Hey, Akira! Fancy meeting you here!" cried Nelia.

From Akira's expression, it was clear that her surprise visit was an unwelcome one. But Nelia was all smiles.

"Relax, I'm not here to fight."

"Oh yeah? Then why *are* you here?"

"Well, a few things have happened since we last met, and the upshot is I'm gonna accompany you for a while. As for why, it's a secret—but I'm pretty sure you can guess, right?"

Akira looked puzzled, so Alpha clarified what Nelia was hinting at. *She most likely came to get in your way so that you can't clear your name and don't get the bounty reward. She didn't come to fight, but should you encounter Tiol and the nationalists, she plans to beat you to the punch.*

Oh, so that's *her game.* Akira's scowl returned, deeper this time, and he gave a sigh for good measure.

Now he was in a pickle. He already knew well that telling her to leave would be a waste of time—but he also couldn't use force to drive her off, as was the custom in the wasteland. She was after the nationalists just like he was, so like it or not, she was an ally. Rather, any move against her might lend greater credence to the charge that he was siding with the nationalists. And then there was the biggest reason he couldn't attack her: she'd be all too happy to fight back. In other words, for Akira, there was no obstacle more annoyingly effective than Nelia.

"I think I probably already know, but did Udajima hire you?"

"That's a secret too."

"You don't say. Be warned—don't think I'll hesitate to shoot you just because you've got a city executive backing you." With his hands tied, so to speak, he settled for a warning and the most intimidating glare he could muster—a look that would probably have left an average hunter breathless in fear.

But Nelia just looked even more thrilled. "Oh, I would never even *dream* of it!"

Akira dropped his glare and heaved a heavy, irritated, and exasperated sigh. *Right, I forgot. That's just how she is*, he thought.

Then he relaxed. Knowing her, as long as he didn't attack her, she probably wouldn't pick a fight with him. She was eccentric, for sure, but oddly enough, this in itself meant he was safe.

Nelia sensed that Akira had no plans to fight her for the time being. "By the way," she said lightheartedly, "if I recall correctly, last time we chatted, you told me you had a girlfriend. What's she like?"

"I don't have to answer that."

"Aww, why not? I'm curious. Is she your age? Older? Is she a freak like you?"

"What do you mean, a freak like me?!" Akira shouted. He could never tell if Nelia was just joking or completely serious, and this drove him up the wall. But perhaps Akira might have enjoyed the breeziness of the conversation a little too—if Nelia hadn't been the sort to casually joke around with people she was about to kill.

Akira continued making his way through the ruins, his two unwelcome companions shadowing him. By now, they were quite a distance from the main road.

Up ahead, a group of behemoths appeared on his scanner—monsters so enormous he found it curious that he hadn't detected them earlier. While the black mechs could fly over the creatures, Akira and his truck didn't have that option.

He'd expected something like this would probably crop up, but he wasn't exactly happy about it.

"Hey, you're in the way!" he called out to Nelia, who was still chilling on the roof of his truck. "Get back in your mech."

"How cold!" Nelia mock-pouted. "You're not going to at least demand I help out?"

"*Move.*"

His forceful tone took her aback. With a light shake of her head, she leaped from the roof back to her mech, which then pulled away.

Meanwhile, Akira held his LEOs steady and aimed at the group of monsters ahead. *Ready, Alpha?*

Of course. Fire at will!

Unlike his last visit to Zone 1, when he'd only been riding his bike, this time he drove a truck crammed with an abundance of spare ammo, plus plenty of energy to charge his bullets. So he had no worries about running out of either as he opened fire, both guns blazing.

A hail of bullets, too many to count, sailed toward their myriad targets. The behemoths surged like a raging wave, yet so dense was the storm of projectiles that it didn't just keep the enemies at bay—it drove them back. C-bullets obliterated the beasts in the front,

enveloping the monstrous insects behind them with blood and guts. Then the next wave of bullets blasted the bugs—and the massive cannons sprouting from their bodies—to shreds.

Spiderlike robots met the same fate as they scaled the ruined buildings, reduced to scrap before they ever had a chance to fire their mounted machine guns or missile pods. The monsters were helpless to resist as Akira mowed them all down—the best defense was indeed an overwhelming offense.

His success depended on correctly prioritizing which enemies to take down first. The organic monsters, with their resilient vitality, could have pushed through his gunfire, while the robots would have torn him apart with their heavy weaponry. The slightest mistake, and he would have been done for.

But Alpha's peerless calculations ensured he kept the upper hand, always informing him of the optimal course of action. And the boy followed everything she said without question. Making full use of his powered suit, he moved nimbly on the narrow roof of his truck, dodging enemy gunfire, missiles, and cannon blasts even as he slaughtered monsters in exactly the order that Alpha instructed.

The vast horde blanketed the entire area. Yet with Alpha's support, Akira remained untouchable, leaving a hellish scene of countless broken and lifeless corpses, organic and inorganic alike, in his wake.

Nevertheless, as though following some duty to eliminate the intruder even at the cost of their own lives or those of their comrades, more monsters charged relentlessly over the remains of their fallen brethren. Seeing no apparent end to their assault, Akira felt bewildered.

Why are there so many?! What is this, a gathering of every monster in the ruin?!

Heads up, Akira—they're coming from behind now too.

Ugh, for real?! No way! Tiol and his goons aren't even in sight, and I've already got my hands full, he grumbled, aiming one of his guns at the monsters on his tail.

But before he could even fire, their front rank exploded—defenseless before Nelia and her Kokurou. During the gang war, the

black mech's cannon had laid waste to part of the slums, and though firing excessively heavy artillery was technically prohibited within the city, such a ban didn't exist in the ruins. Nelia's Kokurou unit had been outfitted with even more powerful weaponry in order to clear out the Zone 2 monsters. One shell from her mech sufficed to destroy not only the monsters but the dilapidated buildings nearby as well.

"Akira, I'll handle this," came Nelia's voice over the wireless.

"What are you up to?" Akira asked suspiciously.

"I'm oh so sorry," she said cheerfully, "but I'm here to steal your glory! Kiss your kill count goodbye!"

When Akira heard that, he couldn't help but smile wryly. "Yeah? I'm so bummed."

"Sorry!" she repeated—not sounding sorry in the least—then cut the transmission.

Leaving Nelia to deal with the monsters behind him, Akira focused once more on the swarm ahead.

As Nelia was in the middle of fighting, she received a transmission from the other mech.

"C13, should you really let him go like that?"

"C12, take a chill pill. It's all good. All we have to do is make sure Akira doesn't accomplish anything here, right?"

"Well, I suppose—"

"Plus, wouldn't it be boring if Akira simply gave up and went home?"

"Boring? Interesting? Fun? Is that all you base your decisions on, C13? Well, whatever. Might as well snag some of that glory for myself. I'm heading up front with him."

"Be my guest!"

Now that the mechs were helping him, Akira had a chance to catch his breath. He got back in the cab, intending to switch out his magazines and energy tanks, when he had a sudden thought.

All these monsters, yet where's Tiol and his guys? After watching that video, I thought they would attack me the moment I set foot in

Zone 1.

You're right, it's strange. But you'd be in a pickle if they showed up now anyway, so let's just consider it a stroke of luck that they haven't. That is, even if Tiol did appear at this moment, Nelia or some other mech pilot would likely finish him off before Akira could.

Well, when you put it like that, sure. While Akira wasn't hell-bent on getting his revenge on Tiol, he still needed to clear himself of suspicion—he couldn't let anyone else have his kill.

So Alpha was right—it was indeed lucky that Tiol hadn't appeared. And since bad luck seemed to dog Akira wherever he went, he found himself reasoning that maybe he was about due for some good luck for a change, and didn't think about it any further.

◆

Meanwhile, the rest of the black mechs had already made it far into the unexplored region of Zone 1. The pilots could see monsters on the ground here and there, but none of them seemed aggressive, even weapon dogs with antiair artillery. Some were heading in Akira's direction, while others were just standing there, as still as statues.

"C1, it looks like C12 and C13 are getting swarmed. Are they gonna be all right?"

"Don't worry, C2, they'll be fine. From what I can tell, they're dominating the battle, and they haven't requested any backup. If things get too difficult, they can always fly away any time they want, unlike that hunter down there."

"Yeah, I guess so."

"Besides, we can't afford to send a third unit. Sure, it's not like we'd be screwed if we lost one more, but the more units we keep here, the better."

"Yes, sir. Roger that. Say, what's this? C1, I'm seeing a large building dead ahead. Man, it's *huge*!"

Indeed, ahead of the mechs rose not just one but many huge, crumbling skyscrapers, all lined up in a row. They towered to such heights that not even the mechs, flying at a high altitude, could see

beyond them. The small gaps between the buildings had been filled in with debris and wreckage as well. Consequently, the buildings resembled a massive defensive wall that seemed to stretch forever into the distance on both sides.

Even Merte, their commander, caught his breath. "To think that something so large only came into view after getting this close! It's nothing we need to be too concerned about, but the colorless fog around here seems especially dense."

"What should we do, sir? Fly over the wall and check out what's beyond it?"

"No, we're already traveling as high as Kugamayama City will allow."

"Oh, c'mon, just up to the roofs of these buildings! Surely that won't hurt, right?"

"Just because the sky fiends don't usually come down that low doesn't mean it's okay to fly above the legal altitude," Merte said to his subordinate. But then a thought occurred to him. "At the same time, we *are* on the hunt for the nationalists, and there's a chance that this might be their base. So we should at least make sure. All units, ascend!"

The black mechs flew up to the top of the defensive wall, making sure to go no higher than necessary. As they crested the buildings, what they saw beyond utterly shocked them.

"Wh-What is this?!" gasped one pilot.

A completely unblemished, intact Old World city was spread out before them.

"I can't believe it... Has something like this been here all along?!" wondered another.

The pilots were now chatting excitedly. "Looking at our coordinates, we're technically still in Zone 1 right now—and yet all of these buildings are completely unharmed! We didn't somehow skip right past Zone 2 without realizing it, did we?"

"You don't think this might be the nationalists' base, do you?!"

Despite his subordinates' elation, Merte kept his head. "All units, stay on guard! Prepare for combat, as though we're heading into Zone 2! Be ready for anything! In the meantime, we'll report what

we've found here to the higher-ups and await further orders!"

Merte then tried to contact the forward base—but the connection failed.

"That's strange," he muttered.

"C1? Something wrong?"

"Our long-range comms have gone completely dead. But why? The colorless fog hasn't gotten any denser than before, so we shouldn't have trouble connecting—"

At that moment, Merte's mech suddenly picked up something right beside it. The Kokurou's high-powered scanner came with a built-in camera, which immediately snapped a picture of the target and sent it to the pilot.

The image depicted a woman in a black dress—Tsubaki, the AI Akira had encountered in the Tsubakihara Building.

◆

The forward base's control room was in an uproar. The large monitor on the wall had been displaying data from each of the units in Zone 1—but without warning, it had gone dark.

The commanding officer in the room frowned at the blank screen. "What could've happened?"

"Looks to me like they met with some severe communication interference on their end," said a subordinate. "As for the cause, well, that's anyone's guess. Doesn't seem like the colorless fog got any denser all of a sudden, yet the long-distance comms in the area are all completely shot. We can't connect to any of the relay points we set up in Zone 1 either."

"What about the wired line on the highway? Is that dead too?"

"No, that's still active."

"Good! For now, let's treat this as an attempt at interference by the nationalists. With the comms down, we'll have a hard time watching the hunters to see how they perform. Send a unit to restore the comms. And should they encounter any nationalists, they have permission to attack."

"S-Sir, don't you mean 'counterattack'?" his subordinate asked,

puzzled. “If you give them clearance to exterminate the nationalists on sight, won’t that defeat the purpose of letting the hunters handle the situation?”

“Now that things have gotten this serious, it may very well have to come to that,” the commander said with a slight smirk.

“Understood,” his subordinate replied. He grinned, realizing his superior’s intention. “Let’s do it!”

The plan to set a bounty on Tiol’s group and have the hunters take care of them had been largely devised by Kugamayama’s bigwigs. But many in the defense force would have preferred to handle the threat themselves, and now that such an opportunity had presented itself, they were raring to go. The defense forces on standby at the forward base—the mechs Akira had seen there on his way to the highway—had been unleashed.

As the excitement and tension in the forward base climbed, however, Inabe looked less than pleased.

“I know how you feel, Inabe, I really do,” Saeba said, “but our hands are kinda tied here.”

The defense force commander really did sympathize with Inabe—he knew the executive wanted Akira to defeat the nationalists so the boy wouldn’t be a suspect anymore. But if Inabe opposed the defense force here, he might get accused of siding with the nationalists. So he couldn’t make any careless moves.

“Look,” he added, “just because we’re dispatching our unit doesn’t necessarily mean we’ll get to the nationalists before Akira does. Just take a deep breath and relax—”

But Inabe shook his head. “No, I actually agree that we need the defense force out there right now. My real concern, in fact, lies elsewhere.”

“How so?”

“The situation’s become worse than you know. Enthusiasm is all well and good, but if you and your buddies are thinking that this is some windfall of good fortune, you’re sorely mistaken.”

At that, Saeba glanced around and gauged the mood in the room. Everyone now wore grim expressions like Inabe. None of them could

deny that they'd been a little too giddy at this sudden development. "You're right. Then I'll let my men know they need to rein themselves in and stay vigilant."

"I'd appreciate it. Oh, and by the way, what's Yanagisawa up to?" Inabe asked offhandedly, as though he didn't find the matter particularly urgent. "The nationalists have declared Zone 1 to be their territory, and since that'll interfere with the extension of the highway, I'd imagine he's taken some sort of action. But I haven't heard anything about it."

Saeba's face grew tense. "Honestly? We're just as clueless. What's more, he hasn't contacted us at all for the past several days. We even asked his closest subordinates, and they don't know where he is either."

"Say what?!" All of a sudden, Inabe felt *very* apprehensive.

◆

Thanks to the support from Nelia and the other mech pilot, Akira managed to survive the monster horde. Now, back on the roof of his truck, he breathed a sigh.

Finally! Looks like that's the last of them. Hey Alpha, this would be a pretty impressive result for one of those general extermination jobs the Office puts up, no?

Indeed. For a warm-up, that was a little intense, wasn't it?

A warm-up? Really? If that was the warm-up, then I can't wait for the main event, he said dryly.

Alpha just gave him her usual smile, brimming with confidence. *Don't worry, Akira, you'll be fine! With my help—*

But at that moment, Akira suddenly became dizzy, and his head throbbed with pain. He nearly lost his balance, regaining it just in time. *The hell was that?* he thought. *Am I just more exhausted than I realized or something?* Now that he could take a breather, was his fatigue catching up to him? He'd have to be more careful about that in the future.

No sooner had that thought crossed his mind, however, than his vehicle collided with the corpse of a large monster. The crash threw

him from the truck's roof.

"Whoa?!" The monster's corpse hadn't even been blocking the whole road, so he could have easily swerved around it. And even if not, he could have braked before crashing into it. Akira landed on both feet unharmed, but he was so shocked he couldn't think straight.

A-Alpha, what happened?!

He sought out Alpha's figure in his augmented vision, but she was nowhere to be seen. He even looked around the area, just in case.

She was gone.

Alpha...?

There was no reply.

Chapter 181: Ambush upon Ambush

Alpha?! Where are you?!

Try as he might to locate her, she was nowhere to be found. Of course, she had only existed in Akira's augmented vision—she'd never had a corporeal form to begin with. So if he couldn't see her now, he was never going to find her, no matter how long he searched. But so distressed was he that he forgot even this simple fact.

Alpha! he screamed again. She didn't answer; his telepathic message disappeared fruitlessly into the void.

By this point, he'd realized what had happened—his connection with Alpha had been severed.

No! This can't be happening!

She had warned him before—when in a ruin other than Kuzusuhara or when going underground, there was always the danger of losing his connection to her. But here he was currently in Kuzusuhara, *above*ground, and Alpha had still disappeared. This had him completely disoriented.

A-All right, calm down! he told himself. *Did Alpha mention anything about this before?* He recalled the last thing she'd said to him before disappearing:

Don't worry, Akira, you'll be fine! With my help—

She hadn't finished her sentence, but based on what she'd said, Akira determined that she hadn't expected to get cut off from him either—otherwise, she probably would have warned him.

D-Don't panic! Stay calm! Think rationally! Whatever you do, don't freak out! That's the worst thing you can do in this situation!

He spoke to himself insistently, trying to stay calm—he knew that if he didn't, he would completely flip out. He was trying to steady his

panicked breaths by breathing deeply, in and out, when he got a call from Nelia.

"Akira, you all right over there? Still alive?"

"H-Huh?! Y-Yeah..."

It was clear from the anxiety in his voice that he was anything but fine, but Nelia assumed that he was still shaken up from his crash.

"Good. It looks like you're not hurt too bad, and your truck seems to be fine too."

"Y-Yeah. I'm good. S-Sorry about that," he replied, trying to sound calm.

He made his way back to his truck. The two mechs landed beside him, each Kokurou so tough that even with Alpha's support, Akira hadn't been able to completely destroy a single one during the gang war. And these models were even tougher than Rogert's had been. Now there were two of them right beside Akira—and Alpha was missing in action.

Akira's anxiety spiked.

He caught Nelia looking at him. "What?" he snapped.

"Does that truck of yours have a remote navigation system?"

"Wh-Why would you think that?"

Alpha had been driving Akira's truck, so technically, Nelia's guess was right on the money. This made him worry that she suspected something close to the truth, and he clumsily tried to dodge her question.

"Well, the long-distance comms on my mech went completely dead just a few minutes ago, so I thought maybe you crashed because your nav system went out too."

Akira checked his own comms. Indeed, they were completely offline. "Yeah, mine's dead."

"So it's not just on our end. Widespread interference, then? Even though the colorless fog's no more dense than before?"

As concerning as this was, Akira felt a bit more relaxed now. If an areawide communication disruption was the reason for Alpha's disappearance, then she would reappear once the problem was fixed.

Then he recalled how Alpha had told him that in the event this ever happened, he was to retreat to safety right away. Immediately, he switched his truck into remote-driving mode, hopped in through the back door, and sped off in the same direction he had come from.

Nelia and the other mech followed after him.

"What's wrong, Akira? Leaving already?" she asked.

"Yeah, I used more ammo than I expected to, so I'm running low. And with the comms out anyway, I figure better safe than sorry. I'll come back later."

Akira frantically switched out his energy tanks and magazines, then swallowed as many recovery capsules as he could fit into his mouth, essentially preparing their healing effects just in case he ran into trouble. He was taking every measure he could think of to survive as long as he could without Alpha.

"Are you sure you want to do that, though?" Nelia asked. "Weren't you going to take out those nationalists to clear yourself of suspicion?"

"Why do *you* care, when you came here to stop me as it is?" Akira snapped back.

"Point taken!" she said cheerfully, amused by his heated response.

Akira just shook his head in exasperation, though her relaxed attitude did help him calm down considerably. "Here's the thing: with the comms down, there won't be any proof for the guys at the forward base that I wiped out the nationalists anyway. I could kill them all, and Udajima and his faction would just bury that achievement in the end. There's no point in going any farther right now."

"I guess that makes sense," Nelia said, sounding convinced.

Inwardly, Akira breathed a sigh. None of this had been a lie, but he'd come up with all of it on the spot, disguising the real reason for his retreat.

But as he drove toward the exit of Zone 1, he found a ruined building obstructing his path. The building had only toppled over, preserving most of its structure, and so Akira found he couldn't simply drive around it.

"Shit! Why'd this have to happen *now*, of all times?!" His first thought was to take a wide detour. But before he could, an enormous reading appeared on his vehicle's scanner, stopping him in his tracks. He could hear the sound of buildings crashing behind him as well.

Just one building could have been a coincidence—collateral damage from Nelia and her companion engaging the monster horde. Akira could have chalked that up to his own bad luck. But if edifices were toppling before and behind him, blocking his path on both sides, he could only conclude this was deliberate. He leaped out of the rear door of his truck and held his gun at the ready, looking all around him.

At that moment, both his truck's scanner and his own picked up countless readings surrounding him. Armed individuals appeared on top of the nearby buildings, one after another—and their weapons were all trained on Akira.

They opened fire.

Akira fought back immediately. But without Alpha's support, he was uncertain how much energy to charge his bullets with. Not only did he end up overcharging them, he fired a great deal of them at the highest rate of fire his weapons could handle. In an instant, the area became engulfed in bullets and cannon fire.

Akira was still able to track and dodge the projectiles' trajectories. Controlling his sense of time granted him abnormally quick reflexes—so quick that he felt like he was darting along at high speed even as everything around him crept along in slow motion. This feat was only possible thanks to Akira's mastery of his own powered suit. Even if they surrounded him and fired at him from all directions, average marksmen were no match for Akira now.

Unfortunately, his enemies weren't average marksmen. The boy was moving so quickly and irregularly that the enemy lost sight of him if they even blinked—but even so, some of their bullets found their mark. A few struck his torso. One even hit him in the head. He was skilled, but not enough to dodge them all. He only survived because he had drawn on the energy in the tank on his back to cover himself with a layer of maximum-strength force-field armor.

More bullets struck the shield covering his head. The light from the impacts blotted out his vision, but he didn't have time to be surprised. His scanner didn't just display its findings in his vision—it also alerted him physically to the presence and positions of threats, functioning like an additional organ. So even while temporarily blinded, he sought out his enemies' locations and continued firing.

The enemy had the high ground, which would normally have put Akira at a disadvantage—but with his current gear, their position didn't make much difference. His fully charged C-bullets pierced right through buildings that would normally have served as cover, blasting his attackers off into the air. Without Alpha's support, Akira couldn't conserve energy by adjusting how much he put into his C-bullets while he was in the middle of combat, so he just put the maximum amount of power into each one. This was terribly inefficient, of course, but on the other hand, each shot contained devastating power, and the enemy unit simply couldn't withstand his gunfire.

Still, some enemies proved more formidable than others, and not all of Akira's bullets struck vital areas. While some of the corpses were flung away, others just tumbled off the buildings, giving Akira time to notice the color of their blood.

Green?! I know what that means! When he'd fought Tiol in Iida, the other boy's blood had also been green, as had the blood of the strange boys he'd encountered while rescuing Sheryl and Yumina. Were the enemies here the same kind of creature? If so, there might well be someone as strong as Tiol among them. Akira couldn't help scowling.

Not ten seconds had passed since the battle began, yet the scenery had already been reduced to a hellscape. Huge potholes punctured the road, and countless craters marred the surrounding buildings. Edifices crumbled all around them, and rubble seemed to fall toward Akira in slow motion as he dashed across the battlefield.

And more enemies approached him, this time along the ground.

But they hadn't been destroying the area alone—Nelia had also been doing her part, raining down cannon fire on Akira's attackers from the air. Now she landed her mech right beside him. The machine was holding a gun in one hand and a chain saw sword in

the other.

"Hey, Akira! You just said there's no point to you defeating the nationalists with the comms down, right? Then let us take care of this for you!" she said with a grin, as her mech fired and slashed at enemies, and even trashed the buildings they were occupying. Her bullets blasted the attackers to pieces, and her chain saw, with its countless rotating blades, tore them to shreds.

Akira couldn't help but smile grimly. His current attackers were most likely Tiol's nationalist group, and Nelia's job was indeed to make sure Akira didn't get any credit for taking them out. But whether that was her true aim or only a pretext, her presence here and now was a huge help for Akira. So he replied, "Take as many as you can handle! Looks like these bastards wanted to become *my* kills, but I'm feeling generous!"

"Really? In that case, I won't hold back!"

Akira and Nelia—one a kid, the other a woman piloting an enormous, powerful mech—fought back-to-back, covering each other despite the ridiculous difference in their heights. Thus far, Akira had struggled, under fire from all directions, but with Nelia taking care of the enemies behind him, much of that burden was off his shoulders. *I can handle this*, he thought, trying to encourage himself. He didn't worry over how much energy he had in his tank or how much ammo he had left, merely focused both of his LEOs on the enemies ahead and sent a relentless barrage of C-bullets their way.

He now had only half as many bullets coming toward him, since Nelia was drawing some away, and he could afford to concentrate his own gunfire twice as much as before. Opposing units were mowed down, one after another, almost as soon as they appeared.

Akira and Nelia were completely dominating the battlefield.

But they were still far from victorious. Enemy reinforcements kept coming, and no matter how many the two of them killed, the assault didn't cease. Their behavior more closely resembled that of the mechanical guards or monsters than humans, and they seemed determined to eliminate the intruders even at the cost of their own lives.

What the hell are *these things?!*

Only a minute had passed since the battle's start, yet the buildings in the area were already mountains of rubble.

◆

As Akira and Nelia fought on the ground, the other mech, whose call sign was C12, observed them both from the air.

The attackers aren't trying to engage me at all, and they only targeted C13 once she started fighting alongside Akira. So Akira's the only one they're interested in. Come to think of it, the monsters we encountered before the comms went offline also seemed focused on him alone. But why?

As odd as this was, the man could hazard a few guesses as to the cause. But none of them seemed very plausible, so he shelved his speculations for the time being. *I'll have plenty of time to think about it later. Right now, I've got to consider my next move.*

He took another look at the situation on the ground. The assailants were appearing in droves from all directions, seemingly without end. Even so, the pilot was convinced that Akira and Nelia would eventually win.

For the man felt an even greater aura of strength from Akira than when he'd first met the boy, during the attack on the warehouse in the slums. Though Akira didn't have Alpha to support him, his gear was still incredibly powerful—and more importantly, he'd racked up a wealth of combat experience.

And the pilot knew Akira had to be important. For starters, Yajima and Yoshioka's mech demonstration in the slums had been ruined, all thanks to Akira's presence. To make sure he didn't interfere in their second attempt, the corporations had conspired to chase Akira away from Kuzusuhara and send him to Iida instead—just in time for an outbreak of Old World automatons in the same place. Then, when an executive of Kugamayama City had tried to use Akira to gain power over another executive, the fallout had aggravated their power struggle on both sides.

And now, a group calling themselves the Alfoto Party had

declared they'd founded their own nation, which had led the city to initiate a large-scale bounty hunt to eradicate them—placing Akira squarely in the middle of yet another disturbance, and one especially mysterious and baffling.

To the pilot, however, the key factor was that Akira was once again involved—Akira, who brought about one surprise after another wherever he went. The man had always been worried that Akira would one day prove an obstacle to his organization's cause—worried that one day, one of his little surprises would overturn their efforts. And as long as Akira was in the picture, the man knew, fear would always be in the back of his mind.

So he had to kill him before that happened. Before it was too late. And this time, he couldn't fail.

I lost to you once, Akira. But this time, you're going down! Determined to succeed, the pilot—Zalmo—took action. Hovering in midair, he trained his mech's enormous cannon on the ground below and opened fire on Akira.

The projectile he fired was massive, normally reserved for attacking targets a great distance away. And when it struck the ground, the resulting blast even swept up Zalmo's own mech.

Quickly correcting his mech's balance in the air, Zalmo surveyed the ground below. The fumes from the explosion blanketed the area.

"Did I do it?" he muttered. Looking around at the damage he'd caused, he didn't imagine anyone could have survived an explosion like that. But he couldn't allow himself to relax. Akira was an anomaly—had he been the type to die so easily, he would have died long ago during the war in the slums. So as Zalmo scanned the ground, he remained on high alert.

Suddenly, Nelia's mech burst through the cloud of smoke and streaked up toward Zalmo at high speed, as though to ram him with all her might. She swung her chain saw sword at him. Zalmo couldn't dodge in time, and her blade—designed to negate force-field technology—tore into his mech's armor. Still, she hadn't struck a critical blow—Zalmo's armor was extremely tough, and the explosion moments before had significantly drained Nelia's power.

Zalmo immediately moved to counterattack. As her blade

continued to eat into his armor, he swung his own chain saw sword at her, but Nelia dodged it. For the average mech pilot, a battle in the air largely consisted of moving the mech forward, backward, left, or right—no different from a battle on the ground. But Nelia was a skilled enough pilot to use the altitude of her mech to her advantage. And in an aerial battle, since staying upright at all times wasn't necessarily a requirement, she could execute more complex, precise movements, like coming in to attack at a forty-five-degree angle.

Zalmo blocked her slash with his own blade, then flipped it around and delivered a slash of his own. The two swords clashed, the teeth of their chain saws grinding against each other.

Nelia's delighted voice came over Zalmo's close-range comms. "C12, if you were going to fire, you really should have warned me first. What was that for?"

"Sorry for getting you caught up in this, C13, but I just couldn't leave Akira alive any longer. Is he dead?"

"We were ordered not to lay a hand on Akira, remember? You know that's not permitted."

"Oh, put a sock in it! As soldiers, we've got to be flexible and adapt our actions to fit the situation, right? And yeah, that was technically going against orders, but no one's gonna find out now that the comms are down. Chill out."

"Oh, but *I* found out."

"Then you'd better keep your mouth shut."

"I don't think so. I might not look like it, but *I* take my work seriously. Sucks to be you!"

Zalmo and Nelia grinned as they talked, as if teasing each other lightheartedly.

"Well, that's a shame," he said. "Then I guess it's business as usual—and I'll just need to destroy the evidence!"

At the same moment, both mechs suddenly leaped away from each other, then clashed with their blades once more. Their movements were incredibly agile for such large machines as they swung the chain saws again and again—darting through the air, dodging, and counterattacking as each sought to land a fatal blow

on the other.

Their machines had identical specs. But thanks to the explosion, Nelia was at an extreme disadvantage. Her mech was severely damaged, and she'd lost all of her weaponry besides her blade. She'd also used up most of her energy strengthening her force-field armor to its limit in order to ride out the explosion. Her melee skill made up for these, though, and she drew on what energy she had left to boost her speed and power, making her even more formidable.

Thanks to her decision to forgo defense in favor of offense, however, Nelia could only keep her force-field armor at minimum intensity—just enough to keep the machine from collapsing under its own weight or losing any limbs to the recoil of her agile movements. At this rate, her armor wouldn't even withstand one of Zalmo's bullets. All he had to do was get some distance and fire once, and victory would be his.

Zalmo realized this as well. But he couldn't pull this off, because while the Kokurou could propel itself forward quickly, it couldn't move quite as fast in reverse. As long as Nelia was advancing on him, Zalmo couldn't distance himself. And if he tried to shoot from his current position, he'd leave himself wide open. At worst, Nelia might even finish him off right there.

So though he knew he was playing right into her hands, he could only fight her at close range with his blade. But he wasn't worried—he remained confident in his eventual victory. Nelia's superior offense was pressuring him for now, but she couldn't keep that up much longer. Sooner or later, she'd run out of energy.

I just have to stay calm, let her tire herself out, and I win. Impatience will only give her an opening, so I'll just bide my time. He also reflected that if Nelia's mech had suffered so much damage from his explosion, even with her force field, there was no way Akira would have survived. He had to be dead—and to Zalmo, that was a *huge* relief.

Now to just kill Nelia! He could report to his unit that both she and Akira had died during the battle, killed by a group of suspected nationalists. Letting her escape was out of the question. With

newfound resolve, he concentrated entirely on finishing her off.

As they fought, their clashes in the air scattered impact luminescence through the sky.

◆

Akira was still alive.

He'd taken the brunt of the explosion, gone flying, and struck the ground like a rag doll, but he was still conscious. He still didn't know what had just happened, though.

Wh-What was that*, Alpha?! What's the situation?*

She didn't reply. Then he remembered his connection with her had been severed, and realized that he must still be disconnected. "Urgh... Goddammit!"

He heard a rumble overhead and looked up to see two black mechs duking it out in the sky. One was clearly much more damaged than the other. Then he realized how careless he'd been and grew furious with himself. *I'm an idiot! Why did I assume the other mech wouldn't attack?! Talk about negligent!*

If only he'd been prepared for such an ambush! Then he could have done a much better job avoiding it—or so he thought, at least. He was also disgusted with how lax he'd become—he certainly wouldn't have made a mistake like that if he were still living in the back alleys of the slums. Otherwise, he wouldn't still be alive.

Without realizing it, Akira had become overly reliant on Alpha's support. He was used to her warning him whenever something dangerous was about to happen, and the reassurance that she'd always be by his side had made him more careless about keeping his guard up.

Still lying on the ground, Akira looked around him and spotted his truck a short distance away. While it hadn't been struck directly, the blast had knocked it over. It lay on its side but—as far as he could see—still intact, no doubt due to the extremely sturdy (if ridiculously expensive) armored tiles covering its surface.

At least the truck's safe, he thought with a wry smile. *And that means the stuff inside's probably okay too. Guess going with*

Kibayashi's recommendation was the right call after all.

Just before the projectile had hit him, Akira had raised his suit's force-field armor to maximum strength—and not a moment too soon. Since strengthening one's force-field armor too much could crush the user to death from the inside, a limiter usually kept the armor's power within a safe range. Alpha had removed this limit when she'd rewritten the powered suit's OS, but Akira's normal energy packs didn't contain enough power anyway. Now, however, Akira had switched to energy *tanks*.

He didn't worry about getting crushed, as he was already so physically fit that someone had once asked if he was trying to become a superhuman. Besides, he'd already swallowed enough recovery capsules to mitigate any damage. At twenty million aurum a box, the capsules contained nanomachines that were as effective as they were expensive: they could ensure that someone who'd received an otherwise instantly fatal injury could survive for a while and, given enough time, make a mortal wound severe but not lethal.

They'd barely kept Akira alive.

During his recent discussion with Kibayashi, the official had recommended several helpful purchases—the armored tiles for his truck, the energy tanks, and the recovery medicine. Without any one of these, the blast would have killed him. He'd survived only with the help of all three.

Now the energy tank on his back was empty, and the energy pack in his suit was depleted. He was also severely injured. Detaching his empty energy tank and leaving it on the ground, he crawled on his hands and knees toward the truck. He kept reminding himself that the more obvious his movements, the easier he'd be seen. To diminish the chance of an enemy scanner picking him up, he resisted the impulse to make a mad dash, inching along as carefully as he could and spitting up blood as he crawled.

Halfway to the truck, he spotted one of his assailants collapsed on the ground. Akira almost cried out in alarm, but clamped a hand over his mouth. *Don't panic. He's dead—or even if he's alive, he can't attack me in that condition. Just keep going.*

He crept past his enemy anxiously, not caring to check whether

he was alive or dead. The boy remained motionless, however—the explosion had killed all of Akira's foes in the vicinity.

Above, he heard the sounds of battle. The mechs were apparently too preoccupied with fighting each other to worry about anything on the ground below—at least, so he told himself in order to stay calm. He kept going. How long would their fight last, and how soon would it be until they looked down and noticed him on the ground, in plain sight? Any minute now, or even the very next second. Just dragging his injured body forward was exhausting what little stamina he had left. The rest of his medicine was in the truck, but he wasn't sure he had the energy to make it there.

So if I don't make a beeline for the truck as fast as I can, I might not make it at all. His mounting anxiety made the risky maneuver seem all the more appealing in his mind. It demanded every bit of willpower to restrain himself, focus on remaining calm, and inch forward. Slowly but surely, he drew closer and eventually arrived at the truck.

Crawling inside at last, he first searched through the scattered cargo for his medicine, then stuffed his cheeks with it. In no time at all, the meds had healed his ghastly wounds. Then, as though the concept of a recommended dosage didn't even exist, he went ahead and swallowed another mouthful, just for good measure.

Next, he swapped out his powered suit's energy pack—now he was ready to fight again. But with the enemy mech still in the sky, he wasn't out of the woods by any means.

Akira took a deep breath.

All right, now what? I could rejoin the fight, but one more explosion like that will be the death of me. Holing up in his truck wouldn't help—his enemy might decide to destroy it just in case. The boy looked around for something that might help him—and spotted his bike, toppled over on its side, and a spare energy tank.

"Well then, I guess that's my answer," he muttered.

A reckless gamble. But Akira was in this not to survive, but to win—and winning, as he knew well by now, demanded taking risks. Just as he'd done in every do-or-die situation since escaping the back

alleys of the slums, Akira summoned all his resolve.

◆

For some time, the aerial battle between the two black mechs had hung in the balance, but their fight was now swiftly approaching its conclusion. Nelia's force-field armor was so weak by this point that Zalmo only needed to land one more blow to win. This forced her to time her attacks carefully even as she dodged everything he sent at her. Her mech couldn't keep up with such high-speed, irregular movements much longer.

Then it happened. Under the pressure of such precise maneuvers, Nelia slipped up, and her mech lost its balance. Quick to seize the advantage, Zalmo pressed his attack and immediately swung his blade toward her in a wide arc, intending to deliver the coup de grâce.

But suddenly her mech righted itself.

She baited me! Zalmo realized too late.

Nelia dodged Zalmo's sweeping, powerful blow by a hair's breadth. He was open! With the last dregs of her energy, she darted in close and struck him one final time.

Her timing had been spot-on. She'd noticed Zalmo observing her mech closely, waiting for her to reach her limit. By pretending to be off-balance, she'd lured him into attacking her, capitalizing on his plan and turning the tables.

Nevertheless, Nelia had indeed hit her limit exactly when Zalmo had expected her to. Even if this final attack of hers destroyed Zalmo's mech, she didn't have the energy to remain in the air—before long, she would drop like a rock and hurtle to the ground. She no longer had any hope of winning; a draw was the best outcome she could hope for.

Her rotating chain saw blade slammed into the machine's surface and chewed through its force-field armor, scattering impact luminescence far and wide. As severely damaged as her own mech was, this was the best she could do. But Zalmo's armor held. And with her blade embedded in his armor, Nelia was wide open for

Zalmo's counterattack—she had no energy left to evade.

Zalmo's blade sliced right through the torso of her mech, and its severed halves fell out of the sky. *I win!* Zalmo gloated. He relaxed, relieved.

At that moment, his mech's scanner picked up a strong reading. He called up the feed from its built-in camera in his augmented vision—and saw Akira, speeding along the ground on his bike.

The ruined buildings blocking the road had been blown to pieces in the course of the battle between the mechs, but the ground was still littered with rubble. Surely, no bike could traverse such a landscape—yet there was Akira, barreling through everything in his path, forcing his way forward.

"You've gotta be *shitting* me!" Zalmo was facing the impossible: there was no way Akira should have survived that blast. Only moments before, the pilot had been riding the high of his victory over Nelia—so seeing Akira right then shocked him all the more.

But he recovered right away and aimed his cannon down at Akira once again. *This time, he's* toast*!* Zalmo thought as he lined the boy's bike up in his cannon's sights. And then, just before he fired, a second surprise shocked him—Akira *wasn't* riding the bike.

No one was.

A backpack had been tied on top of the seat, large enough that one could certainly mistake it for a rider. But the rough drive had thrown the backpack off, revealing to Zalmo that the seat was empty and the bike unmanned.

"A decoy?!"

As though to confirm Zalmo's suspicions, his scanner picked up something else—then his Kokurou rocked as if from a heavy blow. *Someone* had leaped from the ground straight into the sky and collided with the mech.

And through the mech's camera, overlaid in his vision, Zalmo could see that someone aiming two large guns directly at him—Akira.

◆

While the mechs were wrapped up in their duel, Akira was also busy. He quietly exited his vehicle, then crept along the ground until he was beneath the mechs. One glance from the enemy, and he would be dead meat—yet he swallowed his fear and bet everything on his one hope of victory. Remotely controlling his bike, he drove it out of his truck and down the road at high speed. Then, while Zalmo focused on the bike, Akira leaped with all his strength. The only way to attack his opponent's mech outside the reach of its cannon was from point-blank range.

His first gamble—landing on the mech itself—had paid off.

He couldn't have done it without Nelia. Not only had she been monopolizing Zalmo's attention so much he couldn't afford to look down, his carelessness in the wake of his victory over her had left an opening for Akira. Without her, Zalmo would certainly have noticed him.

Now, fixing the boots of his powered suit to the machine's surface, he gripped one LEO in each hand and trained them on his enemy. Would this firepower suffice for victory?

Here was Akira's second gamble.

Of course, he wasn't foolish enough to think shooting from this distance would overpower such a formidable mech. Nelia's Kokurou had withstood Zalmo's cannon, so assuming Zalmo's mech was just as tough, simply firing fully charged C-bullets at close range wouldn't do the trick.

It was time for some of that crazy, reckless, and rash thinking that Kibayashi was so fond of.

Thus far, Akira had already fired a number of C-bullets charged to the max—but "max" merely meant the most one could charge a bullet with without breaking the gun.

In theory, there was no limit to how powerful one could make C-bullets; in practice, however, beyond a certain threshold the gun would break under the strain. But what if someone didn't care?

Right then, Akira had no energy tank on his back, nor were either of his LEOs receiving any external power through energy cables. Instead, he had installed the energy tanks directly into his weapons, and was charging the loaded C-bullets with everything in the tanks.

This would certainly destroy the LEOs—and possibly Akira. But he glared resolutely at the black mech in front of him and went for broke.

"Please work!" he begged, pulling the triggers.

The overcharged bullets erupted from his guns so fast it seemed the entire magazine had discharged at once, disintegrating in midair into brilliant streams of particles. Innumerable rays converged into a single blazing torrent, with a destructive force that rivaled a laser cannon.

The attack pierced right through Kokurou's resilient force-field armor—even as Akira's LEOs exploded in his hands.

With its core components destroyed and a gaping hole in its armor, the Kokurou plummeted downward, carrying Akira with it, and they hit the ground together. Already critically damaged, the mech was now completely motionless.

But Akira was alive.

Rising from the ground sluggishly, he looked down at his arms. A wave of relief washed over him—they were both still attached.

"Thank goodness that worked!" he said with a sigh.

To endure the effects of overloading his C-bullets, Akira had once again overcharged his suit's force-field armor, just like when he'd survived Zalmo's missile. True, he'd had to weather the sensation of being crushed inside his suit, but the resilient armor had kept both of his arms attached even when his guns had blown up in his hands. And with time, the rest of his body would recover, thanks to all the pills he'd swallowed while still in the truck.

Akira stood up, reached for his remaining two LEOs, which were attached to his back, and held them at the ready, one in each hand. He'd bought them on Kibayashi's recommendation and kept them as spares in his truck. Now the boy had mixed feelings—Kibayashi's suggestions had proven useful, but Akira felt they had been *too* necessary. He'd had to use them all just to survive one single crisis.

He'd defeated the mech. But that didn't mean he was out of the woods yet, and he approached the fallen machine with extreme caution.

The mech was lying face up, so he kicked it over and climbed

onto its back. He smashed the cockpit door in with one foot and pointed his guns inside.

Zalmo's corpse lay in the pilot's seat. The soldier had been wearing a powered suit as well, but with no way of escaping the cockpit, he'd been helpless in the face of Akira's mech-destroying assault.

Akira was finally able to sigh in relief. "Glad he's already dead. Guess I'll shoot him one more time, though, just to make sure." He'd seen people survive countless times with only their heads intact, after all. Akira lined up Zalmo's head in his sights and was about to pull the trigger when something occurred to him.

"Wait a minute... Haven't I seen this guy's face somewhere before?" A memory surfaced, and Akira grew confused. "His name was—what was it—Zalmo, right? But didn't I kill him already? What's going on?"

As Akira struggled to wrap his mind around this discovery, Nelia's voice came over his comms. "Hey, Akira! Still alive?"

"Whoa! You're not dead, Nelia?!"

"How cruel! Don't just kill me off—but that said, I can't really move on my own right now. Since you're alive, can I have a little help?"

"Sure thing. I'm on my way." He shelved the countless doubts in his mind for now and went to aid his ally. First, though, he blasted Zalmo's head, just in case. The gory remnants revealed no sign of cybernetics. In other words, *this* time Zalmo was dead for good.

Or so Akira told himself as he left the scene.

Out of energy, and with no armor whatsoever to protect itself, Nelia's mech had scattered to pieces upon landing. As Akira was searching through the debris littering the ground, Nelia called out to him.

"Over here!"

When Akira turned to look, he saw Nelia collapsed on the ground. Everything below her chest was missing, and her left arm had been torn off at the shoulder. But she still wore the same relaxed expression as always. For a split second, Akira could have believed

she wasn't at death's door.

He grabbed her by the hair and hoisted her up.

"Hey, can't you be a little more gentle?" she complained. "I didn't take you for the type to play rough with women!"

Akira ignored her joke and stared right into her eyes. "Why did you defend me back there?"

When Zalmo had fired his projectile, Nelia had rushed in front of Akira to take the blast for him. Thanks to that, Akira was still alive—but Nelia had taken the brunt of the damage. Akira hadn't pegged her as the type to protect allies out of the goodness of her heart, nor had she and Akira officially formed any alliance to begin with. So Akira suspected she had some other reason for protecting him, and his wariness was evident on his face.

But Nelia replied cheerfully, "Well, that's easy. It was due to our unit's directive."

"Your directive?" Akira echoed. "I thought you came here to get in my way. Weren't you planning to kill me if necessary?"

"It's true that I was sent here to prevent you from racking up any achievements—but not to fight you. I was just going along with orders."

She then briefly explained the circumstances that had led to her dispatch. Akira listened while carrying her back to his truck. After flipping his overturned vehicle right side up, he placed Nelia inside, where she continued her account while he got ready to move out. She told Akira that the unit she and Zalmo were in belonged to Yoshioka Heavy Industries. Udajima had asked Yoshioka to bring Akira in dead or alive, but the company had refused on the grounds that they didn't want to get involved with the boy ever again.

That made even less sense to Akira. "So *that* was the only reason you defended me? Because your teammate went against the unit's orders?"

"Pretty much."

"That's really the *only* reason?" Akira looked like he didn't buy it.

"What do you mean? It's *the* reason. C12 and I belonged to the same unit. Even if I told you C12 acted on his own, would you really believe me? I had to show you *somehow* that I wasn't on his side,

right?”

“Er, well, I suppose.” More than anything, Akira felt shocked that such simple honesty had actually come out of Nelia’s mouth. But then he thought of it another way—if she was already the type of person to hit on someone she was fighting to the death, she probably just had some bizarre standards he’d never be able to understand anyway. So he decided to let her off the hook. “Well, whatever. Anyway, what are you gonna do now?”

“You’re heading back to the city from here, aren’t you? Then if you wouldn’t mind, could you drop me off at the forward base on the way?”

“And what makes you think I should do that for you?” he said with an icy glare. While they hadn’t come to blows *this* time, Nelia was still an enemy in his eyes.

But she looked completely unfazed. “Oh, c’mon, man! I protected you, and even distracted C12 so you could do whatever you were up to on the ground. Can’t you at least do me a solid?”

“So you *knew* I was below you?”

“Well, yeah.”

Akira’s glare intensified, but only because he knew he could no longer argue her down. After all, this confirmed that he owed Nelia his life. Without her taking the brunt of the missile’s explosion for him, he would have died. And if she hadn’t drawn Zalmo’s attention and damaged his mech, Akira probably wouldn’t have survived. Besides, he’d waited until Nelia had been defeated to send his bike out to distract Zalmo—a decoy that might not have worked if Zalmo hadn’t been rejoicing over his victory.

The more Akira thought about it, the more he felt he owed Nelia big time.

“All right, fine! I’ll bring you to the base. But I’ll warn you now, don’t think I’m gonna let my guard down just ’cause you’re dismembered.”

“I *knew* I could count on you! Thanks a mil!” she said with a grin.

Akira just sighed.

His bike, which was still functional, automatically made its way back. After loading it with as much of the truck’s luggage as would

fit, he drove off with Nelia.

Chapter 182: The Colossi

Around the time Akira was under attack from the monster horde, Merte and his unit had just risen above the wall of demolished buildings, when the commander was shocked to see Tsubaki suddenly appear beside his mech.

What?! How?! The scanner says she's not a hologram—yet it didn't even detect her until a moment ago!

Now the scanner was picking up Tsubaki's voice. "So it didn't even take fifty years to get discovered? I *told* them we needed to raze that forward base before it was too late, but did they listen to me? Of *course* not! What were they even *thinking*?"

Merte thought she sounded incredibly put out, even hostile—but was she actually an enemy? To attack, or to wait—the decision fell to him, and the wrong choice could mean devastation far beyond the destruction of his unit alone.

Merte was a competent leader, so he chose the optimal solution—attacking immediately. He swung his Kokurou's gigantic chain saw with all its might. Whenever Merte was up against deadly monsters armed with guns, cannons, and other ranged weaponry, he would deliberately get up close and personal, relying on the Kokurou's overwhelming melee capabilities. Since the mysterious woman was much smaller than the mech, he put all of his power into this strike, expecting to finish her off in a single blow.

By all rights, this was the right call—but proper judgment wasn't enough to save him. Tsubaki raised her hand and effortlessly blocked his strike.

"What the hell?!" he cried.

Kokurous were not to be underestimated. Nelia's had been able to cut through another Kokurou's force-field armor, even after losing most of its power in the missile explosion, and now Merte had channeled the full force of a mech in pristine condition into his

assault. Yet Tsubaki was blocking it merely by raising her arm—even the teeth on the chain saw ground to a halt with a screech. She herself was completely untouched.



Tsubaki yanked the blade, ripping both of the Kokurou's arms from its torso and sending the mech itself flying off overhead.

The other pilots were aghast but immediately stepped in. Quickly descending, they aimed their massive guns and cannons at Tsubaki from above and opened fire. Streams of bullets pinned her down, allowing the cannons to focus their destructive power on a stationary target. The pilots' offensive was expertly coordinated and perfectly in sync, and Tsubaki was swallowed up by an explosion that even shook the wall of buildings.

The mech unit watched with bated breath as the smoke and fumes from the explosion cleared.

There stood Tsubaki, unharmed.

"Impossible!" one pilot gasped. As though on cue, the mechs resumed their assault as one, and another barrage streaked toward Tsubaki.

But none of them hit their mark—just before reaching the woman, the first wave of massive bullets stopped, as though colliding with a thick, invisible barrier. The next wave slammed into them, and they all crumpled under the impact, smashing together and forming a metallic wall that coated the unseen barrier. A moment later, the artillery shells struck them, and the ensuing explosion blasted the metallic wall to dust.

And there, as before, Tsubaki stood, completely calm.

Panic began to spread among the pilots.

"You've gotta be joking!" screamed one. "After all that, she doesn't even have a scratch?!"

"What's protecting her—some massively high-output force field? But I don't see any impact luminescence coming from it. Could she be using some brand-new undiscovered technology?"

"C1, respond! What are your orders? Should we continue attacking or retreat? C1, do you read? C1! Damn, no good, huh? C2, what do we do?!"

Merte's second-in-command stepped in. "This is C2! As C1 is unresponsive, I'm taking command! Fall back! C3 and C4, you're with me! We're going to keep the target at bay and buy time for the rest of the unit to escape! The rest of you, stay alive and make sure

the base learns what happened here!”

“Dammit!” C3 spat.

He propelled his mech forward. C2 and C4 fell in beside him, and the three zoomed toward Tsubaki as the other mechs began retreating.

Entering melee range, C2, C3, and C4 raised their blades to attack. Ranged attacks had yet to make the target so much as flinch—but Tsubaki had raised her hand to block Merte’s chain saw, meaning it had reached her. To all appearances, she’d stopped the blade effortlessly, but there was a chance she’d actually concentrated all of her force-field armor into her hand and maxed out its power. If so, couldn’t a coordinated attack from three chain saw blades at once break through her defenses?

C2 was banking on this. He ordered each mech to route all of its remaining energy into its force-field armor, its blade’s anti-force tech, and powering the blade proper. Tsubaki’s sudden appearance had left Merte without time to prepare, but C2 was convinced he’d enjoy greater success.

Three large mechs couldn’t approach too close to such a small target without getting in each other’s way. Still, they drew as near as they could and delivered the most powerful attacks their Kokurous were capable of, aiming for a swift victory—or at the very least a tie. No thought of retreat crossed their minds. They took up positions to her front, left, and right, gambling that she could only block two simultaneous attacks at most.

It was a perfect plan. It had to work—or else they’d never stood a chance.

But as the three blades swung at her from different directions, Tsubaki’s slightly perturbed expression didn’t change; no trace of fear or surprise appeared. She performed a flawless roundhouse kick—and completely missed the mechs. Being so much smaller than her opponents, she was in range of their long blades, but her limbs couldn’t reach them.

Yet all three machines were instantly crushed under a devastating force. Her kick had only grazed the air, but the colorless fog that blanketed the atmosphere carried the impact, pulverizing the

machines right through their maximum-intensity force fields. All three pilots died instantly, before they could even process what had happened.

The force of the kick tapered off as it traveled, but it still reached the rest of the mechs in the midst of their retreat. Scanner data from the destroyed mechs and their visible remains confirmed their demise.

"Gone in one hit?! Just how strong *is* that woman?! What is she—some kind of Old World automaton?!"

"Then she's a military model! She's definitely far more powerful than any of those security guards or love dolls you find in the ruins!"

"You know, I was wondering why the nationalists wanted to found their country in a place like this, when they were just going to get crushed in the end. But what if that's their secret weapon?! They knew no one could ever touch them!"

"This is C5—I'm taking command! We stick with the plan and retreat! Our only goal is to get out of here alive—we can't let our comrades' sacrifices be in vain! We *must* get this data back to base! All units, fly like your lives depend on it!"

Tsubaki watched them go, looking dissatisfied.

"Drat," she muttered. "None of this is enough of an excuse for me to leave my assigned district. But this is just the beginning. Let's just hope the child's efforts live up to my expectations."

Behind Tsubaki, a massive group of enormous sentries was assembling from all over the Old World city.

"Still, I suppose I can at least give pursuit, even if it's just pro forma."

The sentries zoomed off after the fleeing mechs.

◆

Akira continued through Zone 1 on his bike. Alpha still hadn't returned, so he needed to get far away from the communication interference. He rode as fast as he could, trying not to let his panic get the best of him.

Nelia, who was to accompany him as far as the base, was stuffed

in the bike's large pouch, alongside all the ammo he could fit. Only her head poked out of the pouch, but she was quite able to converse leisurely with Akira.

"I've been meaning to ask—why were those nationalist guys targeting you anyway?"

"Because I came to kill them," Akira said, wondering privately why she would even bother asking.

"That's not what I mean," she said. She reminded him that he'd been attacked by the swarm of monsters even before the suspected nationalists had cropped up, and both groups had seemed to have the same goal—eliminating Akira. Nelia had only gotten caught up in the fight as collateral damage—the enemies had ignored both mechs until Nelia had come to Akira's aid. And C12 hadn't been attacked at all, leaving him free to fire his missile when he'd seen an opening.

Perhaps, Nelia suggested, the nationalists had found some way to control the monsters, which would explain why the beasts in the video had left the nationalists alone and why so many had attacked Akira at once. But it didn't explain why they were targeting him specifically. By all rights, they should have prioritized the two mechs, both of which had much higher firepower and so posed the greater threat.

"No idea," Akira answered grimly. "Must've pissed them off somehow without knowing it."

"Oh, come on! I bet you at least have *some* idea."

He hesitated. "Well, one of the guys in that video *has* attacked me several times before."

"Oh? So he's attacked you more than once *and* lived to tell about it. Now *that's* impressive! What's he like?" she asked eagerly, sounding suddenly intrigued.

Akira just grunted and refused to answer. Then he demanded, "Hey, I have a question for *you.* That pilot who attacked me—what was his name?"

"Why do you want to know? Gathering up the names of everyone you've killed?"

"Who cares? Look, I'm giving you a lift, so you can at least tell me that much."

"I think his name was Zalmo? Though I never heard his full name."

Akira stiffened. "Really, now?" If their names were the same too, then this wasn't just someone who resembled the pilot he'd fought in the slums—there was no doubt he was the same person.

He felt unease in the pit of his stomach.

Nelia took notice and grinned with interest. "You know, Akira, here I was assuming he attacked you because Udajima paid him off. But did you two have a history, perhaps?"

"I-I wouldn't know, so stop asking!" Akira replied, a little too loudly, and ended the conversation there. *Sure, the dead might have come back to life, but he's dead now for good*, he told himself. *So I don't need to worry about it.*

◆

As the widespread communication breakdown was starting to affect Kuzusuhara, Yatsubayashi was in the room of a derelict building near the border between Zone 1 and 2, performing maintenance on the strange youths. That said, there was nothing "strange" about them at present, as they looked no different from ordinary children.

This was because, at the moment, they *were* ordinary children.

"All right, you're done. Next!"

The boy who'd been lying on the bed got to his feet with a blank expression, and another expressionless boy lay down in his place. Yatsubayashi got to work.

"All right, next!"

As the doctor continued working, one of the boys sitting near the bed grew more and more fearful, then shocked, then astonished.

"J-Just how strong *is* he, anyway?" the child stuttered.

"Did something happen, Tiol?"

"Yeah, he destroyed them all! The monsters, the unit we sent after him—they've all been annihilated!"

"All of them, huh? I'm impressed," Yatsubayashi said, sounding more amused than anything else.

The doctor's flippant attitude made Tiol scowl. "You're just acting like it's not your problem at all."

"Well, that's because it's really not. I'm cooperating with you, but that's only because you're my patient and research subject. If you thought I had any stake in your victory at all, I'm sorry, but I really don't know what to tell you."

"Oh yeah?" Tiol spat. "Well, whatever. Just remember that you made a promise to cooperate with me until I get my old body back."

"Of course, and I intend to do just that. Your current body is a smorgasbord of incredibly valuable data, after all. I won't let you die so easily."

Indeed, right then Tiol's body was a treasure trove of precious technology. Like a glutton croc, he could devour organic and inorganic creatures and take on their properties to mutate his own body. Moreover, he could produce other specimens resembling himself and even interfere with the security system of a ruin, bringing the monsters there under his control. Combining Yatsubayashi's advanced engineering, the strength of the monsters Tiol had devoured and absorbed, and the Old World tech that Tsubaki had rebuilt him with, the boy had become a truly extraordinary entity.

After Tiol had gone missing in the Kuzusuhara ruins, Yatsubayashi hadn't seen him—until he'd spotted the boy in the nationalists' video. The doctor had then made his way to Zone 1, fully aware of the danger of doing so. There he'd found Tiol and struck a deal with him, offering to cooperate with the boy in exchange for experiments on his body.

"Do you really want your old body back, though? You'll go back to being a weak, average boy who can die from a single gunshot wound, you know, and you'll lose all of that Old World intelligence you have now. Wouldn't that be a waste?"

Tiol looked conflicted for a moment, then gazed reproachfully at the doctor. "Someone like you could never understand how I feel," he said sharply.

"No, I suppose not," the doctor grinned, unfazed. "Which is why I'd also like to take a look at your psychological data, if you wouldn't

mind. You have great physical potential, but that mentality of yours gets in the way of realizing much of it. It's kind of like how people continue to shun my medicine, oddly enough, despite its proven effectiveness—"

"Duh, it's green and glowing. Who'd want to put that shit in their body?"

"But it looks cooler that way!" Yatsubayashi protested.

Tiol couldn't help but smirk at the doctor's abrupt change in attitude, but suddenly his face turned grave. "They're here!"

Yatsubayashi glanced at the door but saw no one. Tiol must have been referring to something elsewhere. "The city's defense force, eh? They showed up sooner than I expected. With that bounty on your head, I figured they were planning on having the hunters come after you first to see if they'd be capable of handling the threat."

"I don't know or care about any of that. Later."

With that, Tiol severed his connection to the boy in the room, who became expressionless like all the others.

"This is it, Tiol," Yatsubayashi said to himself with a grin. "Do or die. Well, break a leg, I suppose." With that, he went back to his work.

◆

A large defense force unit from the forward base arrived in Zone 1—not only mechs but tanks and foot soldiers as well. It had mobilized quickly, almost as if the defense force had been prepared for a full-scale invasion of Zone 1.

They began by occupying the areas adjacent to the highway, one by one. The mechs and tanks secured the areas outside, while the soldiers worked to clear out the buildings. Slowly but surely, they took over more and more of the ruin, setting up multilegged comm relays as they worked to restore communications in the area. Long-distance signals were still impossible with the current interference, but short-range comms remained, so by stringing lots of relays together, it was possible to contact even the forward base. The relay machines could climb, spiderlike, over mountains of debris to expand

the defense force's comm range, and even scout out areas ahead and send the data back to the unit. The mechs, tanks, and soldiers all used this data to advance farther.

As the unit proceeded toward Zone 2, however, they detected a large reading up ahead.

"Damn, that's a big one," said one of the scouts. Then he stared at the scanner results. "Human? That can't be right."

"Kind of resembles a huge mech, but it can't be one of the advance hunters. There's no record of anything like that heading down the highway, for one."

"Then it's either a mech belonging to the nationalists, or a big-ass humanoid monster. Either way, it's an enemy. Everyone, take your positions!"

Outdoors, the tanks and mechs dealt with most of the threats; the soldiers followed behind, ready to counterattack and provide support. Now the white mechs emerged from their cover behind the ruined buildings and pointed their guns down the road leading to Zone 2, while the tanks readied their force-field armor and locked on to the target with their cannons.

Then, emerging from the dense colorless fog blanketing the road beyond, the creature finally revealed itself.

It was a colossus—a human figure towering forty meters in height and wearing a bulky, heavily armored powered suit. Wielding a ridiculously large machine gun, the titanic figure lumbered toward them.

A violent firefight ensued. While the tanks weren't as flexible or mobile as mechs, they more than made up for it with the strength of their artillery, and they bombarded the colossus relentlessly. Meanwhile, the white mechs darted around the target and attacked from the air, with an agility possible only because of the experience and talent of their pilots.

In contrast, the colossus lacked all dexterity thanks to its size, and might as well have been a stationary target. When hit directly, the creature didn't fall—or even flinch. Its defenses were so strong they nullified all the incoming attacks.

Then it raised its massive weapon and counterattacked.

The destructiveness of a machine gun derived from its ability to fire a large number of bullets over a wide area—so naturally, the colossus's enormous machine gun proved absolutely devastating. The spray of massive bullets didn't just knock the surrounding buildings over—it pulverized them. The defense force had the topographical advantage, but that meant nothing against an opponent whose attacks could reshape the landscape itself. Tanks were destroyed; mechs were buried under falling rubble and blown to pieces along with the nearby buildings.

Still, a defense force division couldn't be wiped out so easily. In addition to the group that had previously worked in Zone 2, the toughest, most elite units had been sent out to take on the nationalists. Skillfully adapting to the changing battle, they countered accordingly. And since the colossus was far too large to evade their attacks, its eventual demise was inevitable. Guns and cannons bombarded the enemy, destroying its armor, and while it still had the abnormally high vitality of an organic monster, its machine gun did not—and finally, having suffered critical damage, the weapon exploded.

Now the defense force assaulted the colossus one-sidedly with all they had. As large as the creature was, it was unsuited for melee combat, and the defense force far outnumbered it. More of its armor was torn off, revealing the flesh underneath—flesh that was then riddled with holes. Eventually, the colossus couldn't withstand their onslaught any longer, and it collapsed to the ground in a pool of green blood.

The members of the defense force let out whoops and cheers. But they didn't celebrate long, and quickly moved to analyzing their situation.

"How many injured?"

"Around thirty percent."

"Halt the advance! Request backup from the other units! Prioritize rescuing the wounded!"

"Understood!"

They immediately fell to work. Meanwhile, the survey scout who'd first detected the reading looked over at the fallen colossus with a

grim expression.

"So it wasn't a mech after all. That thing was a living, breathing organism."

"Yeah. That armor looked like a powered suit, but was actually its exoskeleton. And as for its gun, did it produce that thing itself, like a weapon dog?"

"Dunno. But I know for a fact there aren't any monsters like that in Zone 1, so it had to have come from Zone 2. But that would mean..." The scout trailed off, horrified.

"Yeah. We're in deep shit. Now, on top of the nationalists, we've got Zone 2 monsters to contend with."

"I hope that's all. What if this was one of the nationalists' weapons? What if they have the Zone 2 monsters under their control?"

They looked grave at the thought.

Then the blood drained from their faces.

"Numerous readings coming from Zone 2! They're... No, please no—it's more of them?!"

Colossi were appearing all over their scanners. The defense force prepared for round two.

"Fire as you retreat! Contact base and request even more reinforcements—if you're out of comm range, run back to the damn base on foot! Just get the word out—we need all the help we can get!"

There was no longer any question of competing with the hunters—this was shaping into a fight that no one *but* the defense force could handle. Everyone present knew it, and they focused on surviving in the face of this new wave of threats.

◆

Akira was speeding toward the highway on his bike, but much slower than if he'd had Alpha's support. Not only was Alpha much better at maneuvering than he was, Akira would have a harder time handling any enemies if he was going too fast. Because he was driving instead of Alpha, he had to divide his attention between

handling the bike and combat at the same time, and that made all the difference in the world. So he had to resist his impulse to go at top speed and kept a steady, cautious pace.

"Akira, want me to drive instead?" Nelia suddenly suggested.

"Why do you ask?" Akira said warily.

"'Cause it'll be easier on you, right? Besides, I'm bored just sitting back here as your cargo."

"Yeah, but how are you gonna drive with your body like that anyway?"

"You can control your bike remotely, can't you? Just hand that authorization over to me instead."

Akira felt conflicted. Had someone he trusted completely made the offer, it would have been a huge weight off his shoulders.

But this was Nelia.

"No thanks."

"Really? Well, it's up to you. I won't force you," she said with a carefree grin.

Her response stirred up Akira's self-loathing. Back when he'd lived in the slums, suspicion, doubt, and fear had ruled his life and governed all of his decisions. He'd *had* to assume that every person he came across was out to get him, that someone waited to ambush him around every corner, and that there was no such thing as a safe place. He'd never known what security truly felt like—until he'd met Alpha. And as she'd helped him through everything that had come afterward, his wariness of those around him had lowered considerably.

Yet it hadn't completely disappeared. And now, disconnected from Alpha, his anxiety had once again dredged up that impulse to doubt everything and everyone. Deep down, Akira knew that the chances of Nelia planning to take control of his bike, throw him off, and escape on her own were incredibly slim, and that her proposal would free him up to scout the area for monsters and fire more accurately, raising his likelihood of survival. Logically speaking, he should have agreed.

But he couldn't bring himself to. Even if his worries were unfounded, he couldn't help but suspect that Nelia had ill intent.

Maybe he hadn't made any personal progress at all—maybe he'd only thought so because he'd had Alpha for a security blanket.

Nearing the forward base, he stopped his bike. As desperate as he was to restore his connection with Alpha, the sight ahead compelled him to pull up short.

Numerous armored colossi were engaged in a firefight with the city's defense force. White mechs fought from the ground, black mechs were attacking from the sky, and tanks and soldiers were firing guns, cannons, and missiles from long range. The colossi were taking everything head-on and even firing back. Buildings fell, were reduced to rubble, or were entirely blown away. The ruined city was being flattened into a plain before his eyes.

He stared in astonishment—he'd never even imagined such a scene, or that the fight against the nationalists would escalate to such an extreme.

"Guess those giant things are nationalist forces?" he muttered.

"Looks like it," said Nelia with a smile, only mildly surprised. "I was wondering why they would try founding a nation so close to the city when the defense force would just perceive them as a threat and crush them. But maybe the whole point was to draw out such a large part of the defense force's manpower."

Akira took another glance at the colossi. In addition to the dozen or so on the front lines, he could see more approaching from the direction of Zone 2. "Is it just me, or is fifty billion aurum for the nationalists starting to seem more and more like a scam?"

"Well, the city didn't know how formidable the nationalists' forces would be. Maybe they'll raise the bounty if the defense force can't succeed. That's how bounties typically work, right?"

"Well, yeah, I suppose. Wait a sec—my eyes aren't playing tricks on me, right? Are some of those things turning my way?"

"It seems so."

"Thought as much. But why?!" he wondered, completely bewildered.

At that moment, his bike's scanner detected something approaching quickly from behind him. He instinctively turned, and saw several black mechs flying through the air—the remainder of

Yoshioka's unit in full retreat. Several of the survivors had been taken out by flying security drones they'd encountered along the way, but the rest had finally made it this far.

"Oh, it's *them*!"

"If we stay here any longer, we'll get caught in the middle," Nelia observed.

"Yeah, I'm aware!"

Akira knew he couldn't afford to get caught in the cross fire between the black mechs and the colossi. But the entrance to the highway was blocked off by the fight raging in front of him, and he couldn't safely force his way through. There were other routes he could take out of the ruin besides the highway, but this would mean traveling along paths so rough that hunters had avoided them for years. Akira had only managed to do so with Alpha's outstanding maneuvering, when driving to Tsubaki's city. The only remaining escape was back the way he'd come, and he drove off as fast as he could.

Dammit! How am I gonna get back in touch with Alpha now?! Cursing inwardly, he accelerated to max speed. No longer could he keep his promise to himself that he would only move forward out of the blackout zone as quickly as possible. Now his primary goal was to escape the battlefield of black mechs and humanoid behemoths, by whatever means possible.

At that moment, however, a colossus's bullet struck the ground near him, blowing the paved ground into chunks and knocking Akira and his bike backward. He somehow managed to land without toppling over.

"What was that, a stray shot?! Get a grip, big guy! Aim more carefully!" He assumed the creature had missed a shot at one of the black mechs.

Now Nelia looked concerned, though for a completely different reason. "Akira, if you're not going to let me control your bike, could I at least scout for you? There's something I want to confirm."

"Well, I suppose... Here, let me set it— Whoa! Again?!" Akira's bike once more lost its balance. He tried to keep it upright, but one gigantic bullet came flying after another, blasting huge holes in the

road and nearby buildings.

"Man, are they just firing at random?! Where are they aiming?!" he shouted angrily.

"They're aiming at you, Akira," Nelia told him.

Akira was floored. "Wait, what?"

"Those colossi aren't going after the mechs over there—they're after you. I just confirmed it with your scanner."

In a panic, Akira checked the scanner himself. Sure enough, as far as he could tell, the guns of the colossi were aimed directly at him.

"Why me?!"

"That's what I wanted to ask *you*!" she said. "What could you have *possibly* done to make them behave like this? They're sandwiched between the defense force on one side and mechs on the other, yet they're choosing to target *you*. Doesn't that strike you as *too* strange?"

"How the heck should I know?!"

Just then, his scanner detected objects approaching at high speed from the colossi. One of them had fired a missile pod, and the missiles were streaking through the air toward Akira. His face tightened—considering the carnage still being meted out at the battle near the highway, he could easily imagine that one of these might blow up the entire area. He doubted even maxing out his force-field armor on his suit and bike would help him survive. Making a snap decision, he popped the LEO from its emplacement on his bike and tried launching a cluster of micromissiles as defensive fire. With Alpha's support, his counterattack would have been completely successful—but right now, he was on his own. As he emptied an entire extended magazine, he could only hope the micromissiles would hit their targets.

No such luck. Micromissiles weren't as powerful as C-bullets, and he lacked Alpha's accuracy, but a number of them did hit the enemy's missiles. Yet the missiles were all protected by force-field armor and didn't explode. His counterattack had failed.

Now other colossi were firing at him. Akira tried desperately to dodge, but this meant he couldn't try to intercept the missiles with

the gun in his hand.

"Shit!"

One missile flew overhead, the kind that shot high in the air over its target before locking on and rapidly descending. In his slowed sense of time, Akira couldn't help but track the missile with his eyes as it ascended through the sky nearby.

Suddenly, before it could reach its target, the missile exploded—the black mechs, thinking the colossi were targeting them, had shot it down. The impact razed the nearby buildings to the ground, pulverizing them—and blasting Akira away with them.

Chapter 183: Breakthrough

Tiol had been at death's door, physically and mentally. His fight with Akira in Iida had taken a massive toll on him, as his body had warped and mutated over and over.

He'd survived, but at what cost?

His life had already been spiraling downward before his first encounter with Yatsubayashi had left him implanted with the defense system. This system allowed his body to preserve and protect itself automatically while Tiol remained in an unconscious state. Afterward, his body would repair itself, and he'd regain consciousness.

Then he'd met Tsubaki.

The AI overseer had rewritten and rebuilt Yatsubayashi's system, making it even more powerful. Tsubaki's new version had entrenched itself even deeper into Tiol's mind—now she could control him without him ever realizing it. But his original consciousness and the system had also started integrating, and Tiol could now affect the system himself.

So it was that his fight to the death with Akira had pushed his mind and body to the brink, greatly accelerating his transformation. Through sheer will, he'd made his body into a creature that resembled a gluttonous crocodile—even Tsubaki couldn't do this, as she didn't have the authority. But the delicate balance between the system and his natural mind was slipping, and the system was starting to take over. Though he recovered from his serious physical injuries, his consciousness hadn't returned to normal.

He couldn't even remember his own name.

He'd become a puppet, following the bidding of Olivia, under Tsubaki's orders. At her behest, he'd devoured monster after monster through the gaping maw in his left arm, birthing countless strange boys who resembled him—for what purpose, Tiol himself

didn’t know, nor could he even question it. Day after day, he lived with merely a tenuous thread of self-awareness, no better than a zombie.

Until Sheryl had called his name.

◆

His clones, which seemed so uncanny to others, functioned like computer terminals that Tiol could log in to remotely. By consuming one of the Old World data terminals, he’d become a kind of artificial Old Domain User, and could now control isolated Old World systems. More accurately, their operating systems routed everything through Tiol, so he could share their vision, hearing, and other senses. But he was not conscious of any of this. He received the visual and auditory data the “terminals” were sending him, but had no real awareness of what he was seeing or hearing.

Therefore, when Sheryl’s image appeared in the feed from his terminals, he shouldn’t have been able to recognize who she was. Yet, for some reason, seeing her had stirred his self-awareness deep inside the system—not enough to wake him up, but his attention had subconsciously been drawn to her. He’d felt a desire to focus his attention on her, even if doing so would dull the movements of the other boys controlled by the system.

Then his chance had arrived.

“Tiol?” called his beloved.

A shock ran through him, and he remembered his name. His ego, buried deep within the recesses of the system, abruptly started to surface. At last, he began to recall who he was.

As if emerging from a dream, Tiol looked at Sheryl—and seeing her face, he fell in love with her all over again. Caught up in strong emotions, he forgot everything else and awakened as himself once more.

No longer was he a slave to the system—he reclaimed the territory it had seized in his mind. His consciousness, a mere accessory of the system only moments ago, regained its identity as *Tiol*.

At that moment, he collapsed to the floor of the room from which he'd been controlling his terminals. He hit the ground hard, and though he felt no physical pain, his expression was contorted in misery and anguish. The terminals were flooding his brain with information—over ten times the normal stream of sensory data. The average person, capable of perceiving only one scene at a time, couldn't handle such an experience. What's more, the data also included information from sensory organs that humans didn't possess. Thus far, the system had been able to process everything without difficulty, but now that Tiol had regained his independence, the deluge of data was far, far more than he could handle.

He felt like he would pass out from the extreme pain. But Tiol fought to hang on.

Sheryl!

If he lost consciousness here, the system would usurp him once again, and there was no guarantee he'd ever be able to return. This fear drove Tiol to hold on desperately to his awareness.

"Sheryl!"

He called his beloved's name. He imagined her in his mind. His feelings for her helped keep his consciousness afloat. Now awake, he grappled with the system to try and control the input he was receiving. He succeeded, and the source of his pain vanished. The anguish disappeared from his face.

In its place was hatred.

He leaped to his feet and furiously aimed his left arm at Olivia, who stood nearby. She'd been manipulating him, using him however she saw fit.

Fired at close range, the shell blew Tiol backward as well. Flames and smoke from the powerful blast engulfed the room. Tiol slammed into the wall but landed on his feet. Looking at the cloud of smoke before him, he grinned triumphantly.

"*Hell* yeah! Take that! Serves you right!"

Fumes obscured his vision, but his shell had definitely scored a direct hit. Thinking she had likely been blown to smithereens, he smirked. But when the smoke cleared, his smile froze.

Olivia was standing there, unharmed. Her maid uniform wasn't

damaged. She didn't even need to brush any dust off, as there was none anywhere on her body.

Her gaze fell on Tiol. He flinched and took a step back, looking frightened. But anger immediately clouded his face once more.

"Oh, so *that's* how it is," he growled.

Yet there was no hostility in Olivia's eyes. Even though he'd clearly intended to kill her, she didn't even recognize him as an enemy. Her gaze had not changed from when he had still been her puppet, robbed of his free will—she didn't even register him as a threat. Any fear he'd felt vanished, swallowed up in his rage.

Through the system, Tiol summoned all of the remote terminals inside the building to his side. The strange youths filed into the room, one after another, forming a mighty army, and raised their weapons in Olivia's direction.

"There! *Now* am I a threat to you?! All units, kill—"

Halt.

Tiol heard a voice directly inside his head, and the boys froze. Tiol found himself unable to move, his face expressionless.

Then Tsubaki appeared before him. She was neither corporeal nor a hologram, just an image in his augmented vision—but to Tiol, her cold glare felt genuine.

I'm impressed that you were able to regain your consciousness, given the state you were in, but this *is the first thing you do with your newfound freedom? Do you believe we can still use him in his present condition, Olivia?*

"Use him, yes," said the robot. "But in his current state, he's not likely to bring about your goals."

Right, we can only guide a puppet so much when it's actively rebelling against us. Very well.

Tsubaki reached out and touched Tiol's forehead. Her finger slipped past the skin and into his brain. Because she was just an image in his vision, her finger wasn't physically piercing into his head, and Tiol didn't suffer any external wounds. But the hellish pain he felt was far more intense than if she had drilled into his flesh.



His mind, the data that made up his identity, the existence that his beloved had referred to as Tiol—they were all being overwritten from the outside. Tsubaki was altering and erasing his real self, a feat only possible because his consciousness and the system were in joint ownership of his mind.

I can't turn him completely into a terminal, she thought, *because then he would move entirely according to my own will. That would leave no room for him to process my orders according to his own interpretation. But if giving him free will is ultimately just going to lead to rogue behavior, then I have no choice but to erase him.*

Tiol struggled against Tsubaki's interference. *Like hell—will—I—let you erase me!*

He preserved his dwindling consciousness by thinking of Sheryl. He no longer had the authority to control his body, yet he strove to anyway through sheer force of will. His determination and resilience surprised even Tsubaki.

Gradually, emotion began to flicker in Tiol's expressionless mask. Slowly but surely, his body moved—he reached up to pull Tsubaki's finger out of his brain. These were both futile efforts, of course—he still didn't have enough control over his body to actually fight her or even escape. Nevertheless, in making these small motions, he'd done what should have been impossible.

Tiol had overridden the system with nothing but his willpower.

So you can still move, Tsubaki murmured, sounding impressed. *In that case, I've changed my mind—erasing you would be a waste. You may move as you see fit.*

Now with his faculties returned to him and able to move freely, Tiol instinctively leaped back from Tsubaki. Glaring at her and Olivia, he panted heavy, ragged breaths. Tsubaki, for her part, looked more relaxed, even giving him a hint of a smile. Instead of gazing at him like he was a criminal lower than dirt, as she had before, her gaze was now somewhat warm, like she'd come to recognize his merit.

Your name is Tiol, isn't it? Would you be interested in striking a deal?

Tiol looked bewildered by her sudden change in attitude, but even in his current state, he understood that his answer would

determine whether he lived or died. Cautiously, he gave his response.

"A deal? Like what?"

I'd like to hire you for a job. If you succeed, you'll be free to do whatever you want afterward. I'll even excuse your various transgressions, to the degree my authority allows. What do you say?

Tiol realized that his opponent was trying to get him to compromise, and that stoked his anger even further. First he'd been given this outlandish body, then he'd been forced to do a number of even more outlandish tasks. When he'd tried to reclaim his own consciousness, she'd almost erased it merely because she found it inconvenient. And now she had the gall to ask him to let bygones be bygones and work for her? Just how little did she think of him? He was nearly about to blow his top.

But then Tsubaki's icy, unfeeling gaze returned, extinguishing all of Tiol's anger in an instant.

Look, I won't force you. We can do this the other way, if you prefer.

And as though the previous few minutes had never happened, suddenly Tsubaki stood right in front of him once more, her finger on his forehead. If Tiol refused her offer, she had no reason to leave his mind intact.

The terror of having his self rewritten or erased again left him helpless to resist. Trying not to let her see him tremble, he raised his voice. "All right, I get it! I just have to complete your stupid job, right?! Goddammit!"

He spoke harshly, a last involuntary act of defiance. Depending on the circumstances, such a reply could have upset his opponent and ruined their negotiations. But Tsubaki had never expected decorum from the likes of Tiol in the first place, and she overlooked his rudeness with a smile. And Tiol, seeing that her gaze had become warm again, regained his composure.

"So... What do you have in mind?"

Tsubaki spelled out the particulars of the job to Tiol. When she was done, he looked wary.

"Why do you want me to do something like *that*?"

I'm not obligated to answer. Just get it done. I'll let you decide how exactly you want to go about it.

"Oh yeah?" he snarled. "All right, fine. I'll do what I can. And if I'm successful, you better keep your end of the bargain."

Of course I will. I always keep my promises. Now then, good day. With that, she vanished.

Tiol finally breathed a sigh of relief. But as though to eliminate any feeling of security, she reappeared once more a few seconds later.

Oh, a word of warning, she added coldly. *I despise those who* don't *keep their promises. So make sure you keep yours.*

She disappeared, this time for good. And for quite some time afterward, Tiol struggled to get a hold of himself and stop trembling in fear.

◆

As it turned out, Tsubaki had tasked Tiol with luring as many of the city's forces as possible to Zone 1 and then wiping them out. But she had also laid down several important conditions. In particular, she cared less that he won and more that he fought with every intention of winning—he was forbidden from just engineering a small battle for an easy win.

Tiol didn't understand why she was asking these things of him. But if he wanted to be free from Tsubaki once and for all, he had no choice but to obey. So he began to plan. Mulling over how he could accomplish this task of hers, he started by imagining what kind of scenario might mobilize the defense force en masse. Then he remembered that a swarm of monsters from the Kuzusuhara ruins had attacked the city not too long ago, reportedly the work of nationalists.

Perhaps if the nationalists were to try something similar again, the city might send out a large unit to deal with them, he thought. For example, what if they were to occupy a nearby ruin? The city would probably move to exterminate them with every bit of firepower it had.

Seeing this as a promising approach, Tiol played the nationalist to the best of his ability. At his request, Olivia assisted with making the video. She refused to fight alongside him, but she was willing to help him out with various other tasks, just as before.

The fake Alfoto Party members who appeared in the video were all remotely controlled terminals birthed by Tiol, and the monsters he'd either generated himself or taken control of via Tsubaki's version of the system. (He'd chosen to call his fake political group the Alfoto Party simply because this was the only nationalist group he was aware of. A genuine Alfoto member did contact him not long after his declaration, but he let Olivia handle that instead.)

Tiol was satisfied with the plausibility of the video he'd created, for the most part. He did wish he'd been able to announce the name of his new nation in the video, as even he knew it would look suspicious otherwise, but Tsubaki had prevented him.

The video was broadcast far and wide, and shortly thereafter, Yatsubayashi appeared to see Tiol. Now the boy was glad he'd shown his real face in the video, and he decided to ask the doctor for his cooperation.

Contrary to Tiol's expectations, Yatsubayashi readily agreed. The boy had been ready to use coercion, threatening to frame Yatsubayashi for leaking his body modification and camouflage technology to the nationalists through Tiol. But the doctor eagerly offered his help before Tiol could resort to such tactics.

So Tiol expounded upon the task he'd been given in detail. Upon hearing it, Yatsubayashi suddenly grew so excited that Tiol flinched. In exchange for getting to research and analyze Tiol's current body, he promised the boy his full support—including helping him expand his forces and even returning his body to normal, if he so desired.

With his powerful new ally, Tiol worked to amass a military presence that could stand up to Kugamayama City's defense force. He was fighting to win.

Fighting to regain his freedom.

And most of all, fighting to make his greatest desire come true.

◆

As the colossi threw themselves against the defense force, Tiol himself was in their midst—as one of them.

The gigantic creatures had all been created by him. With his newfound autonomy and Yatsubayashi's scientific expertise, he had crafted the colossi from the corpses of formidable Zone 2 monsters and many advanced Old World relics provided by Tsubaki. And as the icing on the cake, he'd turned his own body into a colossus as well.

Now everything below him looked like a miniature display. The defense force mechs might as well have been toys, and the surrounding derelict buildings were the size of models. As he fired upon them, the toy mechs were blown away, smashed to pieces like broken playthings. Some of the miniatures fought back, but their bullets had no effect against Tiol's exceptionally tough armor, and Tiol blasted them away one after another.

Was this really the Kugamayama City's defense force, which had seemed so awe-inspiring back when he had been just a regular hunter? Here he was, mowing them down with ease. Enthusiasm surged through him, driving him on.

Check it out*! I'm literally unstoppable! No wonder Yatsubayashi said it'd be a waste to go back to my old body!*

His colossi couldn't speak or make other vocal noises. But his delight at how powerful his new form was broadcast telepathically. He felt invincible.

He wanted *more*.

With this kind of power, I wonder—could I kill even Akira?

Tiol longed to finish Akira off. They were already enemies—if Tiol did get his old body back, there was a good chance Akira would find him and kill him. So Tiol wanted to eliminate Akira while he was still strong enough to do so.

But fear or self-defense alone were poor motives for killing Akira—Tiol could just as easily alter his face, change his name, and move so far away that Akira would never find him. No, there was another purpose driving him.

Just let me at him! Then everything else will fall into place!

In his heart of hearts, the reason Tiol wanted Akira dead was Sheryl. Tiol was determined to obtain her at all costs, even if it

meant removing the obstacle Akira from the picture entirely. The first time Tiol had fallen in love with Sheryl, it had struck him like a bolt from the blue, but no more. The second time, however, she was the very foundation upon which Tiol had rebuilt his identity, the trigger allowing him to reclaim his unstable consciousness from the system. *She* had been his main source of resistance against Tsubaki when the latter had attempted to erase him. His feelings for Sheryl had saved him then—were the very reason he was Tiol now. Even if he lost his identity again somewhere down the line, he was certain he would return to himself—if only she was by his side, if only she called his name again.

But Akira was in the way.

If only he didn't exist!

Now that he had Yatsubayashi's full support, the doctor could probably make Tiol's original body much stronger than before, if Tiol asked him to. And with Akira out of the picture, Tiol could probably use that strength to support Sheryl's gang in Akira's place. Then he'd have Sheryl like he wanted. Everyone knew his face thanks to the video, but he could easily change his appearance—he could even make a dummy corpse with his current face and fake his death. He could keep the same name and claim it only matched the "other" Tiol's name by coincidence. At any rate, he'd find some way to make his dream a reality.

Deep down, even he knew his thinking was naive. But he longed for that future so badly that he couldn't bring himself to dismiss it as impossible. He was held captive by the prospect of his success. Yet at one point, he'd come to his senses—when he'd seen Akira arrive in Zone 1 and had thrown all of his forces at the boy. Akira had mowed them down, and though Akira had been supported by the Kokurous, Tiol had realized then that he still wasn't strong enough to win against him.

Now, however, he had the ultimate power of his colossus form. With this, he could *surely* kill Akira! This time, undoubtedly, he'd win—and then Sheryl would be within his reach. He yearned for that outcome as though wishing hard enough would make it happen.

But he wasn't in a position to hunt down Akira yet. In the first

place, Tiol didn't know where the other boy was. His army of remotely controlled terminals could have let him scan the area—but they'd been destroyed in their firefight with Akira, and Tiol didn't have the time or patience to search the ruin blindly for someone who might not even be there in the first place. More importantly, killing Akira was only a side mission—his priority was fulfilling Tsubaki's request. He'd already accomplished the first part by luring the defense force to him; now he just needed to wipe them out. He couldn't drop his main mission to go find Akira instead.

If only Akira was here too, he thought disappointedly. *Then I could kill two birds with one stone.* But he didn't let those thoughts get in the way of his mission, remaining focused on cutting down the city's forces as much as possible.

And then Akira made his entrance.

He was driving toward the highway, with the fleeing Kokurou unit following him some distance behind.

Can it be?! It's him! Was he sent to back these guys up?! No, the reason doesn't matter—this is my chance! My prey has come right to me, so like hell am I gonna let him escape!

Now targeting Akira would just be part of eliminating the city's reinforcements, and Tiol seized his chance with both hands.

◆

But seeing the black mechs intercept the missiles he'd fired at Akira, Tiol grew visibly enraged.

How dare you all get in my way!

He and his colossi launched a rapid-fire barrage from their enormous machine guns, targeting the black mechs. The massive bullets pierced the air as they streaked toward their targets—but the mechs dodged them. The Kokurous might have lost to Tsubaki and fled, but Yoshioka had prepared them specifically to find and eliminate the nationalist hideout—evading attacks like this was child's play for them. Several of the mechs split off to report to the base, while the remainder encircled and attacked the giants. They darted around irregularly, guns and cannons blasting their

comparatively sluggish opponents. To any observer watching their highly skilled, coordinated offensive, it would have been clear that Tsubaki's victory over them had been the exception, not the rule.

But Tiol and his titanic allies wouldn't go down so easily either. Beneath the armor that had withstood the city's defense force, they remained secure, no matter how often the Kokurous hit them, and retaliated with gunfire nearly equal in power and size to that of the mechs. The resulting destruction ravaged the nearby structures, toppling them one after another and flattening any rubble that remained. Rising clouds of dust and debris were blown away in the face of the explosions, then blossomed anew beneath the continuous destruction and cannon fire.

In the noise, light, smoke, and blasts, Tiol lost sight of Akira—scattered debris and mech projectiles were greatly hindering the colossi's scanning.

Shit! Where'd that bastard run off to?!

He couldn't let his golden opportunity go to waste! And so he frantically stormed around the battlefield searching for Akira, unleashing his fury all the while on the eyesores that kept getting in his way.

◆

The blast from the missile had sent Akira flying, but he was still alive. In the end, three factors had saved his life. He'd avoided a direct hit. The surrounding buildings had shielded him. And as this was his third time raising his force-field armor's intensity above the safety limit, he was starting to get the hang of it.

However, the explosion had thrown him a considerable distance from his bike, through the wall of a dilapidated building, and onto the floor of a room inside. Still chock-full of meds, his body immediately began healing itself. Almost instantly, he was back on his feet.

"Damn it all! My bike!"

Without his bike, he wasn't just less mobile—he'd lost most of the ammo recovered from his ruined truck. He had as much as he could

carry on his person, but that was a pittance compared to what was still packed on the bike.

He connected his short-range comms to the bike to check its location. The bike itself had been protected by its own force-field armor, so it was still intact, lying on its side a short distance from the building Akira found himself in.

"Over there, huh?"

He turned to go, but at that moment, the building began to collapse around him. Akira dashed out before he could get buried under the rubble, but in his haste, he neglected to check for threats outside first.

He leaped from the crumbling building and onto the surface of another that already lay toppled.

That was close, he thought, breathing a sigh of relief—then instantly caught his breath.

Tiol, in his colossus form, stood right there, looming over him.

And Tiol spotted him.



Found you!

Of course, the eager voice didn't reach Akira's ears. But it didn't need to—Akira could sense that the giant wanted nothing more than to kill him. He instinctively leaped out of the way. An instant later, countless projectiles—far larger than average bullets—struck the place where he'd stood. They pierced right through the toppled building and into the ground below, sending enormous shock waves through the air and blasting away everything in the area.

Still in the air from his jump, already slowing his sense of time to its limit, Akira could see Tiol through the scattering debris. The colossus moved with unbelievable speed for something of its size, but to Akira, it might as well have been on a leisurely stroll. Still, he panicked when Tiol aimed his enormous weapon at him—without Alpha's help, he found it nearly impossible to form the force fields that allowed him to dodge in the air. He could attempt it on his own, but his movements would lack the accuracy necessary for him to avoid the enemy's gunfire.

Subconsciously he realized he had no way of evading. In one last desperate bid for help, Akira cried out, *Alpha!*

He recalled how even when he'd lost her in Mihazono, she'd appeared again with perfect timing to save him at the critical moment. Perhaps she would do so again—and he hoped, wished, and counted on it to happen.

But there was no response. With that, it finally sank in that his connection to her had truly been severed. She wasn't going to help him. He could no longer look away from the despairing reality staring him in the face—death.

The realization that his end was approaching began to crush his spirit. His eyes met the muzzle of the gun aimed right at him. Through his mind passed the inevitability of his demise and the misfortunes upon misfortunes that had led up to it. To him, the muzzle of Tiol's gun symbolized all of the bad luck he'd had up until now.

And Akira laughed.

"I know what you want to say! 'Do something on your own for once,' right?!" he shouted defiantly. His voice, released according to

his own sense of time, would have sounded unintelligible to anyone else who heard it. But that was fine—he didn't need anyone else to hear it besides himself. "I already know that! So just you watch! I'll show you *exactly* what I can do!"

Then, with a yell of renewed determination, he tore apart the heavy chains keeping his spirit down. The debilitating influence that Alpha's extraordinary support had placed on his mindset, his dependence on her—at long last, Akira tore it all apart with his own hands.

Instantly, his vision—in which everything hung as close to motionless as he could make it—was dyed white. And his narrow, dull perspective lit up with startling vividness.

Tiol opened fire. He'd already lined up his aim to match the direction his target was moving—under any other circumstances, it would have been far too late for Akira to evade.

But Akira did. He kicked off a force field in the air to avoid Tiol's line of fire, then flew forward, weaving past every bullet as he closed the distance to Tiol—he'd finally succeeded in upgrading his awareness to high definition. The whiteness in his vision indicated the part of his perception that his brain had deemed unnecessary—and not just his vision but all five of his senses had been similarly optimized. The part of the world Akira focused on had narrowed, but in exchange, the speed and accuracy with which he processed reality had increased dramatically. Higher processing made it easier for his brain to make sense of the world around him, reducing the discrepancy between reality and his perception of it substantially, if incompletely.

With his newfound control of his perception, Akira could stay a step ahead of his opponent. At every moment, while Tiol's mind was still in the process of perceiving the world around him, Akira had already finished making sense of it.

In short, Akira started reacting so quickly that to his opponent, it seemed like he was predicting the future.

Akira now had the leeway to dodge otherwise unavoidable attacks, using the time saved to increase the accuracy of his shots—and to generate midair footholds at the exact angle desired.

So dodging the gunfire, Akira bounced through the air, making his way to Tiol. He felt the force from the enormous projectiles on his skin as they passed him by. Then he landed on the front of the colossus's armored body, so forcefully that the creature nearly toppled over.

Standing on top of the giant's chest as naturally as if it were the ground, Akira temporarily switched his mind back to normal perception. A splitting headache was telling him just how much of a toll the upgrade took on his mind.

I finally managed to trigger it on my own—but I can't believe it hurts so much when I only used it for such a short time!

By shedding his dependence on Alpha, he'd been forced to face the reality that he was truly in a do-or-die situation—and by resolving to overcome it on his own, he'd awakened to a new power. But that power was a double-edged sword: if he didn't use it carefully, he'd end up frying his own brain.

Still, when all he had was a hammer, he had no choice but to treat everything like a nail—it was either that or certain death. So he'd steeled himself and used it.

He'd gained a new power and renewed resolve. And both had strengthened him.

"But *now* what?" he muttered, holding his hand to his head.

His new power was useful and dangerous, but not enough on its own to defeat his enemy. So far, he'd only moved in close where Tiol's bullets were unlikely to hit him—Tiol himself was still unharmed. With no better ideas, he fired relentlessly at the armored body with his twin LEOs. The highly charged C-bullets each struck with the force of a tempest, as the energy tanks inserted into each LEO filled them with energy well beyond the safety limit. He didn't charge them with reckless abandon like he had during the fight with Zalmo, because he didn't want to lose any more guns than he already had; still, the bullets were exceedingly devastating. With Zalmo, Akira'd only had an instant to catch him by surprise and kill him, but now there was no need to rush. In a sense, he could relax and take his time.

Before long, the continuous fire from his LEOs blew a large hole

in Tiol's armor with devastating force—armor that had even withstood attacks from a Kokurou.

But Akira looked grim. "This thing's so huge that I'm not doing any actual damage. And is it just me, or is this a living, breathing organism?!"

Despite the damage to its armor, Akira had injured only a tiny portion of its overall girth. And through the hole, he could see not metal but wounded flesh peeking out. Organic monsters had abnormally high vitality, so this kind of damage was hardly more than a scratch. Even another two or three bullet holes wouldn't amount to much. And though it wasn't coming from the armor itself, he could see green blood leaking from the injured flesh underneath —which was already starting to regenerate.

"No wonder this guy didn't go down even when surrounded by the black mechs," he muttered. "Well then, what to— Whoa!"

He leaped up as the colossus's hand reached down to brush him away. Then, leaping off force-field footholds once more, he quickly landed back in the same position on its chest.

"Looks like it's not gonna give me time to think about it, huh?!" he said with a wry grin and dove back into the fight once more.

Chapter 184: Marked for Death

Tiol tried his best to bat Akira away.

Dammit! Get off me already, you tenacious little shit!

But he couldn't quite get him. Even when he slammed his giant hand down on top of Akira, intending to crush him, the boy adroitly dodged it and went right back to his spot on Tiol's body.

Bastard! Let's see you dodge this*, then!*

He broke into a run with all his might and slammed his massive body into the nearest building—already structurally weakened from the battle thus far, it immediately became a mountain of rubble. Nor was Tiol done. He slammed himself into the building next door, destroying one side and causing the whole structure to cave in.

But Akira's feet kept their grip on the giant body, even as the boy ran up and around the armor, dodging the collisions.

Bullshit! Tiol shouted, so furiously that had it been audible, it probably would have been heard beyond the horizon. Since it was just telepathic, however, naturally there was no sound.

Nonetheless, Akira frowned, puzzled.

As their battle wore on, the black mechs started to shell Tiol once more. Akira now had to worry about surviving their attacks as well, barely hanging on in their three-party battle.

Still, he doggedly held his position on the armored body, and Tiol's irritation mounted.

You cocky shit! Think you're safe clinging to me? The longer you stay there, the more vulnerable you are to their shells. You'll soon get blown away!

Akira himself was of the same mind. He wanted to use Tiol's body as cover, but this required him to sense their attacks in time to dodge—and tracking so many fast Kokurous individually was a challenge at the best of times. In that sense, too, he was hanging by a thread.

But then something happened that neither Tiol nor Akira had expected.

The Kokurous launched another salvo—only bullets, no shells at all.

Why?! screamed the colossus in silent frustration.

◆

After Akira latched onto Tiol, the giant body began stumbling around erratically.

"The hell? What's it doing?" demanded one Kokurou pilot, knitting his brow.

"No idea," responded another, equally perplexed. "Wait, is there a creature clinging to it? Looks like it's trying to knock something off its body."

"Yeah, I can see something tiny there. Hold on, let me zoom in—What in the world?! It's freakin' Akira! What's *he* doing here?!"

Their day had consisted of one bizarre event after another, but they didn't have time to make sense of things just then. They had to decide whether to continue the fight or fall back.

"What should we do? We have strict orders not to harm that hunter, right?"

"Right, so don't use your cannons against that giant—only guns."

"But what if he still gets hit?"

"We'll cross that bridge when we come to it. Why should we get shot at one-sidedly out of fear of accidentally hurting a single hunter?"

"Point taken!"

◆

Facing down a wave of bullets, Tiol was dumbfounded and began to panic. *Shit! This* can't *be a coincidence! They're deliberately trying to avoid hitting him! In that case*, he decided, *I'll make the other giants aim at him instead.*

But he sent out his call just a tad too late.

Tiol was the strongest of all the colossi, so by focusing on Akira, he'd given the black mechs more room to attack. And they'd seized their chance to focus on the other colossi. Of course, the latter were tethered to Tiol—they were more powerful than Tiol's other terminals, but they weren't as powerful as he was. While their tough armor protected them well, their comparatively weak machine guns were a different story, and these quickly shattered under the Kokurous' sustained attacks.

Unable to launch ranged attacks, the colossi were little more than large, slow-moving targets for the mechs. Nor could they shoot at Akira; the best they could do was try to hit him with their fists.

Goddammit! Enraged, Tiol aimed his gun at the mechs.

Something smacked his weapon *hard*, throwing off his aim. His shots went wide.

This was Akira's handiwork. A few C-bullets had sufficed to interfere with Tiol's shooting. The colossus tried repeatedly to correct his aim, but Akira shot his gun again. At his wit's end, Tiol bellowed in fury.

It was a telepathic yell, so it didn't reach anyone's ears. But it didn't particularly matter, because it was so primal that no one would have understood it anyway.

◆

Akira quickly caught on to the mechs' plan and decided to cooperate. Obviously, he couldn't let his guard down entirely after what had happened with Zalmo, but at the moment they were aiding him greatly, so he did his best to prevent Tiol from shooting back at them.

In the meantime, the other colossi surrounded him and tried to hit him. Akira leaped out of the way, and their fists, larger than Akira himself, punched right into Tiol's gut, causing him to sway.

But they didn't stop. Gathered around Tiol, they continued to throw punch after punch.

"Sure beats gunfire, at least!" Akira quipped, darting over Tiol's body to avoid the flying fists.

The unprecedented battle raged on as the colossi continued to miss Akira and hit Tiol by mistake. Weaving around, Akira kept firing at Tiol's gun whenever he was about to shoot, disrupting his aim time and again—aided by the punches that knocked Tiol off-balance. The black mechs easily avoided the erratic spray of bullets as they pelted the colossi with the most powerful guns at their disposal.

While those who fought were all humanoid in shape, each side—Akira, Tiol and his colossi, and the black mechs—was different from the others. They possessed different weapons, builds, numbers, and methods of attack. Some were organic, others mechanical. Yet they inflicted total devastation on their surroundings all the same. The site of their battle, once populated with unending buildings, was already a vast, barren swath of land.

In the midst of fighting, Akira remembered that his short-range comms were still connected to his bike. *I wonder if it's still okay. Should I get out of here and go check on it? No, that's probably out of the question right now.* If he tried to escape, Tiol would undoubtedly shoot him dead. And if he issued a remote command to his bike to have it come to him, it might get destroyed by stray gunfire.

Come to think of it, what about Nelia? Is she still alive? I'm guessing no, but just in case, I might as well do something. He transmitted a new command to his bike, then went back to concentrating on the battle.

◆

Nelia *was* still alive. Peeking her head out from the backpack straddling his toppled bike, she was watching Akira and the others as they fought.

"Man, I'm *soooo* bored," she said with a sigh.

The backpack she was currently in was an add-on Akira had purchased for his bike. The backpack came equipped with its own force-field armor, which even surpassed that of the average protective coat. When the missile had exploded, blasting Akira away, he had managed to max out the armor of both his bike and the

backpack, protecting Nelia in the process. But she couldn't exactly join the fight in her current condition, so how much did her survival really matter?

All she had left below her neck was a portion of her torso and her right arm. With the comms still down, she couldn't call for help, and she couldn't control Akira's bike since he hadn't authorized it. She *had* attempted to hack into the bike, just to see if she could, but its security had been unexpectedly tight, forcing her to give up.

Her only option was to observe—or so she thought. But suddenly a look of surprise crossed her face.

"What's this? A message from the bike?"

Akira had briefly texted her "I'll let you borrow it, so get home on your own," plus a copy of the OS's authorization code, by way of the bike. Nelia read the note, and her grin returned.

"Well, *that's* a surprise! I thought you said you weren't going to hand it over."

She tapped into the bike's remote steering and righted the vehicle. Next, she had its arm emplacement pick her up and place her on the seat. With her remaining hand, she gripped the steering wheel to anchor herself to the bike, then sped off as fast as it would allow.

◆

Eventually, the fight between Akira and Tiol, which had seemed evenly matched, began to shift in Akira's favor. Tiol's allies were dropping like gigantic flies. Fierce gunfire blew a massive hole in one colossus's armor—and a moment later, a shell from a black mech sailed into the gap, blowing up the giant's insides. Mortally wounded, the creature fell to the ground. Its sturdy body wasn't completely annihilated, but it died all the same.

One by one, other colossi were following suit. Tiol was the only one who still had a gun, and as Akira kept interfering with his shooting, the titanic figures were defenseless against the mech attacks. No matter how tough their armor, none of them could withstand the constant, one-sided barrage.

Now I might actually have a chance, Akira thought, his spirits lifting.

But his rejoicing was premature. The nearby battle between the defense force and the other colossi had been moving gradually in his direction, and it finally reached him. Stray shells from the defense force began to land around him, and huge explosions rose up on all sides. What was more, a few of the colossi were heading over to support Tiol.

As if these changes weren't enough, the black mech unit that had been indirectly supporting him began to retreat. The approaching battle threatened to leave them on the front lines with no support and very little energy and ammo. And they wouldn't take Akira with them, because they'd been ordered not to meddle in his affairs outside of their mission.

"Dammit!" Akira spat.

Tiol cackled. *Ha! They're leaving you to die! Now you're done for!*

Akira frowned again, puzzled once more. But his expression soon returned to its usual seriousness: his scanner had picked up a massive cluster of micromissiles heading his way. They struck all around him and scattered explosions left and right. Some even hit Tiol, but his massive body received no damage—it just got engulfed in smoke.

Those aren't gonna work on me! Tiol said smugly, assuming they'd been intended as an attack on him. *They'll just hit* you *instead!*

But Akira took a different view. He had noticed some of the micromissiles colliding with each other, which had blanketed his view in a curtain of fumes. *Was that a smoke screen? But who caused it, and why?*

At that moment, the answer appeared—Nelia burst through the shroud, riding Akira's bike. An LEO was still mounted on the bike's support arm, and she'd deliberately fired an entire extended magazine of missiles in Tiol's direction at a low altitude. With Tiol's scanner thus blinded by the smoke, Nelia had been able to sneak up close without him noticing.

She didn't stop when she reached them. The bike had incredible

traction, and she drove straight up the colossus's body. Pulling up alongside Akira, she activated the emergency brake and grinned at his astonishment.

"You know, if you promise a girl you'll escort her, you really ought to follow through instead of abandoning her on the way and telling her to go home on her own."

A joke, in this desperate situation? Akira couldn't help smiling. "Sorry, things got a bit busy."

"I can see that. Want a lift?"

"Hey, that's *my* bike, remember? But sure, I'll let you handle the driving just this once!"

He hopped on, and Nelia accelerated—not a moment too soon, as Tiol's massive hand swept through the space where the bike had just been. The bike vaulted off the immense body and made a perfect landing on the ground far below. Though their path was littered with piles of debris and rubble, she sped forward without slowing down, even as she stirred up a second smoke screen behind her with another magazine's worth of micromissiles.

"Wow, not too shabby!" Akira remarked, impressed.

"See? You *should* have let me drive from the start!" she said smugly.

"My bad, I guess," Akira replied, smiling abashedly. It wasn't lost on him that had he just listened to his better sense and let Nelia drive, they might already have made it to the base.

Then Tiol burst through the smoke screen behind them and trained his gun on Akira. *I won't let you escape!*

At the same moment, Akira turned the two LEOs in his hands on Tiol's massive frame. "He's gonna shoot, Nelia! Get ready to dodge!"

"On it!"

Tiol and Akira opened fire as one. Countless shots crashed into each other, but Akira's bullets were smaller and less powerful. The colossus's huge rounds struck the ground with such force that the scattered hills of debris were blown clean away—carrying large chunks of the earth below with them.

But nothing hit Akira or Nelia.

Now that Akira was back on his bike, well supplied with energy

and ammo for the moment, he fired without reserve at Tiol's gun, disrupting the latter's aim once again. Doing so placed a heavy burden on his own guns, but he just barely managed to keep them together. Even from a considerable distance away, the rapid spray of C-bullets knocked the massive gun's shots off course in random directions. Some of Tiol's bullets still landed close by, causing the ground to quake and Akira's bike to jolt into the air along with the debris. But thanks to Nelia's expert handling (and Alpha's more advanced reprogramming of the bike's control system), they were able to maintain their speed on the dangerous road without toppling over.

"I seriously doubt we'll make it to the highway as things stand," Nelia said. "What's the plan?"

"Yeah, looks like you're right. Let's see..." The battle between some of the colossi and the defense force still lay between them and the highway. "Well, our only other option is to take that dogged guy down, isn't it? But how?" He held his head in his hands, seemingly at a loss.

Nelia looked surprised. Then a grin came to her lips. "Wake up, Akira! You wanna defeat that thing, right?"

"If it's even possible, yeah. What, you've got an idea?"

So, even in this situation, Akira still *hadn't* given up on fighting. And Nelia—the same Nelia whose personality was so warped that she welcomed fighting her loved ones to the death as a distraction from the tedium of life—found his drive invigorating.

"Actually, I do. It'll be just a *little* risky, though."

"As long as there's a chance, I'll take it."

"You're sure? Then here we *go*!"

Making an abrupt one-eighty, she sped off in the opposite direction, away from the highway.

◆

As the bike whipped around and zoomed toward him, Tiol kept firing at Akira and Nelia. Dirt and debris were flung up in the air with each impact from his shots. He only had to hit Akira once—even the

boy's powered suit wouldn't protect him.

But none of his bullets struck home. Despite the unceasing bombardment that rained down around Akira and his bike, every one missed its target.

Just once! Please, just once! He only needed to score a single hit to immobilize the boy—then he could finish him off at his leisure. Yet as Akira continued to evade his shots, a seed of doubt sprouted in Tiol's head. The faintheartedness and fear he'd been suppressing rose once more.

In moments, Akira would pass him by, escaping his line of fire and leaving Tiol to contend with the defense force up ahead. Was Tiol all out of options? Would he have to give up on killing Akira? Had his goal simply been impossible from the start? Doubt in his own power continued to seep into him. Not that this was necessarily bad in itself—doubt could help one rethink a reckless decision, just as cowardice could make one prioritize their own safety and keep them from underestimating a dangerous situation.

Guess I've got no choice. I'll let you go—this time. Trying to rationalize his decision, Tiol lowered his gun.

But at that moment, Akira's bike crashed into a pile of debris, causing it to topple. The boy was thrown off the bike and flung onto the hazardous, bumpy road just a short distance away.

For a few seconds, Tiol stood paralyzed in shock. He'd already given up, so he hardly registered the golden opportunity that had just landed in his lap.

Before Tiol's eyes, Akira staggered to his feet, then limped toward his bike, so unsteady that it looked like he might fall over again any minute. Visibly struggling, he lifted his bike back upright and mounted it once more.

At that moment, Tiol came back to his senses and frantically started firing. But he missed every shot—the bike zoomed off before any bullets could hit it. Despite the uneven terrain, the bike gained enough speed to dodge ahead of Tiol's line of fire.

Hesitation, self-doubt, *weakness*—and he'd let his golden opportunity slip through his fingers. In regret, he screamed out, *Goddammit!*

At the same time, however, he was now more motivated than ever. *Of course! Why didn't I realize it before?! After all that fighting, he's* got *to be completely exhausted! He's probably already near his limit—else he wouldn't be trying so hard to escape! I* can't *let him get away now! I've got to kill him* here*!*

Tiol ran after Akira as fast as he could. In his bulky body, his movements were admittedly a little sluggish, but only in the sense that he couldn't nimbly dodge incoming gunfire. His top speed while running still surpassed that of the average car.

Tiol didn't have time to wait around for the other colossi. They were busy fighting the defense force right now—even if he called them over immediately, it would take them a while to retreat and join him. In any case, none of them could match his speed. By the time they caught up, Akira would be long gone.

I'm the only one who can defeat him! And with my power, I can catch him! This *time, I'm gonna win! That bastard's going down once and for all, and when he's finally out of my hair,* Sheryl will be mine*!*

His eyes clouded by desire, Tiol ran with all his might, reaching out to grasp the future he imagined awaiting him upon victory.

◆

Speeding across Zone 1, Akira turned around to look behind him. "Do you think it's chasing us?" He checked to see if Tiol was appearing on either his scanner or his bike's, but the colossus was too far behind for him to be certain.

"If it didn't take the bait, it means we lost our bet," Nelia said in a carefree tone. "Let's think of something else."

"You don't think it started chasing us, but lost sight of us, do you?"

"I've been trying to keep our speed within range of its scanning precisely so that wouldn't happen. But I can't actually see that range for myself, so I've kinda just been going with my gut. And if I go *too* slow, it might think it can afford to wait around for its buddies. We definitely don't want *them* joining the party." A single colossus was

one thing—a crowd of them would drastically diminish their hope of winning. So Akira and Nelia first needed to lure Tiol away from the rest.

This, after all, was the reason that Akira had deliberately fallen from his bike, hoping to bait Tiol into chasing after him.

"You'd think as big as that thing is, it'd be easy to tell whether it's following us. The density of the colorless fog around here really is dangerous, huh?"

"On the other hand, without the fog, the enemy would have already seen us and sniped us."

"Well, you've got a point there." Indeed, Akira and Nelia were on the losing side when it came to range—the colorless fog here was actually working in their favor. "But if we can't tell whether the enemy's actually following us, isn't that kind of, well, not great?"

"I agree, so while we'll be running a little risk, how about we take a moment to check?" She fired the LEO, launching a small cluster of micromissiles in their wake. These disappeared into the colorless fog and vanished from sight. A few seconds later, readings from the missiles' explosions appeared on their scanners.

"Looks like it's following us after all," Nelia said with a smirk. The fact that they'd exploded relatively nearby proved that Tiol had taken their bait—either the missiles had hit him, or he'd shot them down as they approached. In any case, they hadn't flown as far as they would have in Tiol's absence.

And a moment later, even more proof came sailing their way. Tiol was firing haphazardly in what he guessed was Akira's general direction, based on the perceived origin of the micromissiles. Bullets whizzed past Akira on both sides.

"Nelia! It's firing back at us!"

"Hey now, you're not the type to panic over a little something like this, right? Toldja it'd be a little risky, but don't worry. I'm not gonna let you get hit. Probably."

"*Probably?!*"

"If 'probably' isn't good enough for you, then intercept them on your own and make *sure* they don't hit!"

It was a joke, but Akira wasn't laughing. Perhaps he would've

grinned if he'd had Alpha's support, but his face was grave as he trained both guns in his hands on the incoming projectiles. Then he concentrated with all his might.

White seeped into his vision from around the edges, narrowing his field of view.

Akira had to rely on his limited high-definition awareness of reality—he was too far away to hit Tiol's gun, forcing him to intercept the bullets before they reached him. He focused until he could only see the trajectories of the bullets in front of him—the countless projectiles that sailed past him on either side didn't even register in Akira's mind.

They were outside of his world, after all.

So haphazardly were the bullets being fired that none of them were likely to hit; in fact, Nelia felt secure enough to assist with another wave of micromissiles. But as it turned out, Akira pulled the losing ticket: purely by chance, one bullet's trajectory aligned with the bike. Akira instantly perceived the bullet and rapidly fired both LEOs at it—but without Alpha's support, his reaction time was too slow, and he couldn't fire enough C-bullets to shoot it down. He did succeed in reducing the bullet's momentum, however, bending its trajectory just enough to avoid a direct hit on the bike.

Instead, the enormous projectile was now headed straight for Akira himself.

The boy raised his powered suit's force-field armor to the max and then, an instant later, kicked the bullet to the side with all his strength. With the bullet's momentum and force already reduced, his kick won out, and the dented bullet went sailing through the sky out of sight.

Akira's vision returned to normal. He let out a sigh, at which Nelia laughed out loud. Still plugged into his bike's scanner, she understood exactly what an outrageous feat he'd just accomplished.

"I know I said to intercept them on your own, but I didn't think you'd actually try it!" she said with a smirk.

"Oh, shut up! Concentrate on getting us out of here already! I don't wanna have to do that again!"

"You got it! Be sure not to fall off, okay?!"

Now that they knew Tiol was pursuing them, Nelia had no more need to hold back. She accelerated to top speed, pulling away from Tiol's gunfire, and said, "But hey, with you pulling stunts like that, I've got a lot to live up to so you don't outdo me. You *sure* you don't want to go out with me, Akira?"

"Gonna be a cold day in hell!"

"Jeez, man, you could at least take a second to think it over. You sure are a tough nut to crack."

And she smiled merrily at his scowl.

Having left Tiol in the dust, Akira and Nelia made it to their destination without incident.

The two destroyed black mechs, Akira's abandoned truck with all his supplies, and the vast collection of corpses that had once been his attackers were all just as the two had left them.

"Well, Nelia? You think we'll manage?"

"Probably. Now let's get everything ready, and quickly."

In order to defeat Tiol once and for all, Akira and Nelia began making preparations on the very site where they'd fought Zalmo not long before.

◆

As Tiol continued to chase Akira, another cluster of micromissiles came his way. But he charged right through them without even attempting to evade. They pelted him all over, of course, but his colossus body was completely unharmed.

You'll have to do better than that!

The fact that they were firing micromissiles again indicated they were desperate—he had to be close enough to catch them *this* time. He wasn't going to make the same mistake twice. Had they been following a smooth, well-maintained road, he would have had no hope of matching the bike's speed, but there were very few roads like that in the ruins. And this path was absolutely packed with debris—surely his prey would have to slow down at some point. As a colossus, Tiol could maintain his top speed no matter how rough the

terrain was, and so when it came to speed, he had the overall advantage.

The exploding micromissiles obscured his vision, causing him to lose sight of Akira temporarily. But as long as he headed in the direction the projectiles were coming from, he'd eventually catch up. Reassured, Tiol charged forward with everything he had.

In fact, he was almost correct. He could have caught a fleeing Akira, and he really was close to his target. But he was in fact closer than he realized—and by the time he *did* realize this, it was already too late.

What?! he gasped telepathically.

From the edge of his scanner's reduced range, he picked up something barreling toward him at high speed.

It was Akira, on his bike.

And he wasn't running away—quite the opposite. He was closing the distance to Tiol at a rapid rate.

◆

After Akira and Nelia had finished preparing, they waited atop an intact, maintained section of road for the right moment to approach Tiol, constantly firing micromissiles from three LEO multifunction guns in the meantime. Akira emptied their magazines, then swapped them out with new ones until he'd exhausted all the micromissiles he had left in his vehicle. Tracking their explosions on the scanner, Akira and Nelia could follow Tiol's precise location, as well as make sure that no other colossi had shown up to accompany him.

"Get ready, Akira. It's almost time."

"Yeah, I'm on it!" After switching his two guns' ammo from micromissiles back to C-bullets, Akira got on his bike again. In addition to the usual LEO, the bike's support arm now also held one of the Kokurou's huge chain saw blades.

"Nelia, I'll ask one more time, just in case: Are you *sure* this is actually gonna work?"

"Sure enough that I think it's worth trying. No promises, though. Why, getting cold feet?"

"No, I'll do it."

"That's what I like to hear! Ready?"

"Yeah!"

The moment arrived. Nelia directed the bike toward Tiol at top speed.

In order to defeat Tiol, Akira had to get back onto the colossus's body. But the closer he drew, the greater the danger of getting hit by one of Tiol's enormous projectiles. So they'd lured Tiol to a section of road that was maintained well enough for them to approach Tiol at maximum speed, under the cover of the micromissile smoke screen.

Tiol was slow to react—by the time he realized Akira was approaching, the boy was already too close. And the shock of suddenly seeing Akira closing in instead of fleeing stunned him momentarily. He recovered in less than a second, but at the speed Akira was traveling, even this was a critical mistake. Tiol would have required even more time to stop running and ready his giant weapon—in fact, even without taking any time to aim, he would have been too late.

Akira was already in range, ready to shoot Tiol's gun.

Now that he was close enough to fire back, where Tiol couldn't pelt him without fear of retribution, Akira stood on top of his bike and let loose with both guns. The impact from his shots kept Tiol from aiming straight as Akira got even closer.

Then Akira leaped, flying from the bike toward Tiol's chest. He landed firmly on Tiol's body and blasted the armor at his feet with his LEOs.

From prior experience, he already knew how much power he would need to destroy Tiol's armor. Akira charged the C-bullets in one LEO with maximum power, knowing full well this would destroy his gun. Still bearing the scars from the black mechs' attacks, the armor simply couldn't withstand the shot. It shattered apart, even as the bullets kept going and ravaged the exposed flesh underneath.

Yet even a wound of this caliber was minor, thanks to the extraordinary vitality that Tiol's bulky body afforded him. Akira knew this, and so had refrained from firing fully charged C-bullets the last

time he'd been clinging to Tiol. He'd judged then that risking an attempt to severely wound Tiol wouldn't be worth losing one of his guns. But *this* time, he was ready to take that risk.

Everything from this point on would be a gamble.

Akira leaped up into the air, and the giant chain saw blade from the support arm landed directly in front of him. He kicked the blade's hilt down with all his might, driving the chain saw into the gaping hole in Tiol's armor. The rapidly rotating chain saw blade tore into the colossus's flesh, spewing blood and guts everywhere.

Nor was Akira done. Leaping high into the air with his force-field footholds, he launched himself from an even greater height and kicked the blade's hilt downward, embedding the blade even deeper. The recoil from the rotating blade jerked the chain saw around inside Tiol, tearing his insides to shreds. His flesh immediately started to heal, but the damage being dealt was so severe that his regeneration couldn't catch up.

Even so, the giant didn't fall, not even to its knees—had Tiol been so weak, the black mechs would have finished him off long ago. But Akira had expected this. So far, everything was going just as planned.

Next, he fired at Tiol's gun. This time, he charged his C-bullets beyond the limit that the LEO could handle, but not so much that it would immediately break. His barrage struck the colossus's sturdy weapon, damaging it. Up until now, his bullets had only knocked the gun off course—this time, they were far more effective.

Yes! Nelia was right—it worked! Time to finally finish this thing off!

He'd won his bet and had a path to victory at last. Now that he knew he could win, his spirits soared to new heights. Success was within his grasp!

When Nelia explained to Akira what she had in mind, she also detailed the thought process that had led to her idea—considering in particular what made the colossi function the way they did.

First off, she reasoned, the nationalist group calling themselves the Alfoto Party wouldn't have laid claim to a territory unless they

had some sort of powerful, reliable force to defend themselves with—almost certainly the colossi. But then why had they chosen to claim Zone 1 of the Kuzusuhara Town Ruins, which was practically in Kugamayama City's backyard? Their forces clearly rivaled the city's defense force, so why didn't they just stake out some other place much farther away from the city, harder for the defense force to reach? Wouldn't this have made it easier for them to occupy a territory and establish a nation? Why go out of the way to pick a fight with the city?

It was safe to say, then, that the nationalists knew this and yet had antagonized the city anyway. Most likely, they'd had no choice—in other words, Zone 1 was the *only* territory they were capable of occupying. But why?

Nelia had a feeling the answer was somehow related to how abnormally resilient the colossi were.

Of course, a variety of monsters possessed above-average toughness. Some were simply hardy by nature, but others only amplified their defense under specific conditions. For instance, the snaillike monsters in Zone 1 could absorb energy from the buildings they nested in to increase the intensity of their force-field armor. And creatures like these were typically unable to venture beyond those areas where they had the advantage. Nelia suspected that perhaps these colossi were the same—they were receiving energy from some remote source, and as long as they remained near it, their armor, movement, and regeneration capabilities would receive dramatic boosts.

And perhaps that source could only reach the territory designated as Zone 1.

Sure, the colossi were formidable enough to stand up against the defense force, and the strongest one—likely their leader—had been able to hold its own against a coordinated offensive from a unit of Kokurous. But what if this only held true within Zone 1, and what if the declaration video had been made for the sole purpose of luring the city's defense force there?

Akira thought Nelia's reasoning made sense. After all, while his battle with Monica back in Mihazono had been on a much smaller

scale than this one, he remembered her Old World powered suit could only draw its power from within that ruin. Then Nelia unfolded her plan to defeat the colossus. First and foremost, they needed to do something about that hypothetical remote energy source.

Off the top of her head, the first idea that came to mind was to lure the colossus out of the source's range. But this wasn't an option—assuming the source's radius spanned the entirety of Zone 1, Nelia doubted whether she and Akira could manage to escape that radius themselves. And even if the area covered was smaller than expected—merely the highway's surroundings, for example—she didn't think the colossus would leave the area, no matter how hard they tried to lure it out. It would probably just stop chasing them before it reached the edge of its range. And their goal was to defeat the colossus, not simply run away from it.

So Nelia had come up with another method: drive the Kokurou's chain saw blade deep into the colossus's body. Even if, hypothetically, the remote source had an inexhaustible supply of energy, there was probably a limit to the rate it could be transmitted. By jamming a rotating chain saw blade inside the giant and dealing constant injury to it, they would ensure that its body would need to continually regenerate. The energy required for this would eventually exceed the amount that could be supplied—and when it did, the colossus's armor would lose its enhanced endurance. In fact, if Nelia's guess was correct, the creature's armor would weaken enough for Akira's C-bullets to finally work against it.

All speculation. All inference. There was no guarantee any of this would succeed. The risk would be immense. So before they set out, Nelia stressed this to Akira once more, and asked him one more time whether he was really up for it, just to make sure.

And he said yes.

Nelia's suspicions were, in fact, wrong on many counts—but her solution, founded on many misunderstandings, turned out to be right. Tiol's weapon had indeed become weaker as the energy protecting it decreased, until Akira's gunfire alone was enough to damage it. So far, Akira had won his bet.

Still, the battle was far from over. He had only secured a *chance* at victory. But now that they were on a relatively even playing field, Akira was more determined than ever to turn that chance into reality.

◆

Tiol frantically tried to remove the huge chain saw blade buried in his chest. He reached into the gaping hole in his armor with his giant hand, grabbed the rotating blade along with a fistful of tattered flesh, and, as the blade battered his fingers, attempted to yank the weapon out.

But Akira wouldn't let him. Putting the destruction of Tiol's gun on hold for the moment, he fired a continuous spray of C-bullets at the hand. At the same time, he tossed away the broken LEO and drew his Old World blade in its place. The liquid-metal blade swiftly extended to its full length, and he slashed at the hand that was even larger than he was.

The impact from his bullets knocked Tiol's hand sideways, sending it crashing into the edge of the hole in his armor. A long fissure appeared in the hand, and a silver blade, broken off from the hilt, was wedged in the middle of it.

Bastard! Tiol roared.

As if to mock his anger, however, Akira kicked Tiol's arm, sending it flying away from his chest. Then he caused the Old World weapon's hilt to form a new blade and resumed firing at Tiol's gun.

A titanic creature, even larger than some of the surrounding buildings, was getting led around by the nose at the whim of a young boy smaller than the creature's own hand.

Their evenly matched struggle continued. Tiol tried to knock Akira off of him so he could attempt to remove the chain saw once more. This time, though, he didn't use his hand—he slammed his body on the ground and rolled around. Akira leaped into the air before the large body's rotations could crush him, then jumped around on force-field footholds until Tiol stood up again—at which point Akira landed on him once more.

By now, Tiol was at his wit's end. No matter what he did, he couldn't. Get. Rid. Of. Akira! The chain saw was still inside him, rupturing his insides. And the other colossi were much too far away to offer support.

He'd *thought* his opponent was nearly at his limit. He'd *thought* Akira was so exhausted that he was having trouble even getting on his bike. He'd *thought* that if he just chased after Akira and caught up, he would win.

But now, Tiol was the one who was cornered. *He* was the one at his limit.

Goddammit! Why?! Just what the hell are *you, Akira?!*

Akira was so much *punier* than he was right now. Tiol was powerful enough to take on the entire city defense force! And yet, no matter what he did, he couldn't kill Akira.

Was this boy some kind of monster?!

And before Akira, Tiol grew anxious and fearful.

Meanwhile, Akira, too, was growing concerned. *He can still move like that, even after I slammed that huge blade into his stomach and ripped his insides apart?! Shit! I'm running out of time!*

The chain saw blade needed two things to function—user authentication and an appropriate supply of energy, usually provided by the mech that used it. But as long as it had both, it didn't necessarily need to be *held* by the mech. Nelia had hacked into the mech and taken care of the authentication side of things. And the energy problem had been solved by fitting the blade with as many of the spare energy tanks from Akira's truck as the weapon had room for.

Thanks to that, the blade was able to saw Tiol's guts apart at full power.

Of course, this consumed an unimaginable amount of energy, and it couldn't last forever. Therefore, on top of all the other factors necessary for victory, Akira also had a time limit that he needed to keep track of. Could he finish the colossus off before the clock ran out?

He knew no good would come from worrying about it, and that he ought to focus on completing his task instead. Seeing that Tiol

was still fit enough to move so energetically, however, he couldn't help but be concerned.

Akira had shot Tiol's hand so many times now that all its armor had been blown off, and he was at present attacking that bare, fleshy palm with his liquid-metal blade, slashing it to pieces. But it healed quickly and attacked Akira once more. Though the armor didn't regenerate, a bare hand was all Tiol needed to yank the chain saw out of his body—after which his armor might well start to regenerate too. Over and over, Akira sliced the colossus's hand off—and each time, he watched the hand regenerate from its stump. Over and over, he shot its fingers off, and each time, he watched new digits sprout up.

And each time, Akira's face grew graver.

Despite the difference in their sizes, neither of them had what they needed to finish the other off. Both of them were equally cornered.

Then opportunity struck. Tiol's gun couldn't endure Akira's onslaught of C-bullets any longer, and the gun exploded. Akira let out a whoop of joy, but Tiol now had a hand free, and he attacked Akira with both hands at the same time. Akira had only barely managed to evade his one-handed attacks thus far—the same measures wouldn't work anymore. Instinctively, he dodged by leaping high into the air.

And then he realized his mistake—he'd put too much distance between himself and Tiol.

Shit! he thought, but it was already too late. By the time he'd landed on a nearby building, Tiol had already ripped the chain saw blade out of his body with his armored hand. Then, looking directly at Akira as though to mock him, Tiol crushed the blade in his fist.

Aw, too bad, Akira! Tiol chortled. *It was a good effort, but not good enough! Your time is* up*!*

However loudly Tiol shouted, his voice wasn't going to reverberate around him—it was all being processed as telepathy. Not that Tiol especially wanted Akira to hear him in the first place—he was just expressing his joy.

But hear him Akira did.

"I know that voice. That's Tiol."

Tiol had addressed Akira with telepathy a number of times now, not caring whether Akira could hear him. And Akira was an Old Domain User, so he had the ability to hear Tiol's voice. He hadn't clearly understood it from the start—at first, it had just been noise he couldn't comprehend. But over time, the voice had become clearer until he was finally able to recognize it. Normally, such noise would have been eliminated by the filter Alpha had placed on him, but currently his connection to Alpha was severed.

Akira was surprised to discover that the colossus he'd been fighting all this time was actually Tiol, but he wasn't particularly shocked. He'd already witnessed the other boy mutate into an abomination during their fight in Iida, after all, so seeing him as a colossus was only mildly eyebrow-raising to him.

However, now that he knew his opponent was Tiol, his mindset completely changed.

"Guess it's time for you to die, then."

Up until this point, Akira had mostly been fighting to survive rather than outright murder his opponent. But now, his gaze filled with bloodlust. He no longer saw Tiol as an obstacle to get through, to resist, to remove.

The enemy before him was marked for death.

And at that moment, Tiol's joy evaporated. His feeling of superiority and accomplishment at having turned the tables on a mere nuisance of an opponent felt utterly meaningless against the savage intensity radiating from the figure before him. For telepathic messages weren't just transmitted as words and voice—sounds, images, intentions, wills, sensations, and feelings could also be sent.

And bloodthirst was no exception.

Normally, such an attitude was only detectable through one's tone and expression, and so needed to be inferred. But there was no room for doubt in the telepathic message Akira sent to Tiol, so densely packed with murderous intent that Tiol felt like he was going to suffocate.

He's going to kill me. Tiol suddenly *knew* this with certainty, and he grew frantic. Instinctively, he raised his left arm and pointed it at

Akira—and instantly, it began to mutate, growing larger and larger until it had transformed into a humongous cannon, far larger than his giant arm had been originally.

Bite the dust! he shouted, and fired a shell bigger than a car toward his nearby target (at least, "nearby" from his perspective as a colossus). The shell exploded immediately upon impact; the explosion was so powerful that it even lifted Tiol's gigantic feet off the ground, knocking him backward.

I did it. He's dead! Tiol thought to himself as he hung in the air, and a feeling of elation and relief washed over him.

Then his expression twisted in shock and dismay.

There was Akira, right before his eyes.

Firing the cannon had been a mistake. Akira had recognized the movement of Tiol's arm from previous experience. And switching to his high-definition perception for a second time, he'd been able to anticipate what was coming.

In his vision, white all around except for the gigantic figure in the very middle, he'd waited for the very instant that Tiol fired his cannon to leap toward the colossus with all his strength. Then he'd survived the explosion by raising his powered suit's armor to its absolute maximum, riding the ensuing shock wave to propel himself toward Tiol even faster.

Now, standing in front of the colossus, Akira gripped his Old World weapon, extended its liquid-metal blade as far as it would go, and delivered a gigantic horizontal slice to the creature's neck. Tiol had removed the chain saw from his body, but with such a remote energy source, the power he'd lost couldn't be replenished immediately—his armor wouldn't regain its previous toughness for quite some time. What's more, transforming his left arm into a cannon—not just sprouting a cannon from his arm, but mutating his entire limb into a weapon—had also used up a massive amount of energy. Performing such a feat when his energy reserves were already nearly depleted meant that his armor was now even weaker than when he'd had the chain saw embedded in himself.

The blade slipped right through the armor on Tiol's neck like

butter, followed by the flesh and bone underneath. With that one mighty swing, Akira lopped Tiol's head clean off.

I'm not done yet!

Akira already knew this wouldn't be enough to finish the colossus off. Platforming through the air, he launched himself into the space between the giant body and the severed head. Then he stabbed his gun into the massive neck stump and held his blade ready in the other hand, glaring at the head that seemed to hang in the sky above him.

"Looks like *your* time is up, Tiol!"

To Akira, everything appeared suspended in midair, and even his own voice sounded garbled. He pulled the trigger, this time charging the bullets to their true full capacity and practically guaranteeing the gun would be destroyed, while also slicing his blade upward at the head with enough force to snap the liquid metal off. An incredible amount of maximally destructive C-bullets burst from the gun, bombarding the colossus's body, just as its head was bisected by the gleaming blade. The LEO exploded into pieces at the same moment that the Old World blade shattered into droplets of liquid metal before evaporating entirely.

Having exhausted every possible means of attack at his disposal, Akira dropped in a free fall. But he managed to land on his feet, avoiding a harmful collision with the ground. A moment later, the left and right halves of the colossus's head hit the ground with a deafening crash. But he had no time to be startled because the giant body was also collapsing on him from above. With his last ounce of energy, he barely managed to dash out of the way before the titanic being collided with the earth.

He breathed a heavy sigh. Then he looked behind him anxiously. "That did it—right?"

At the very least, the colossus was no longer moving.

Chapter 185: Impostor

Seeing the enormous figure lying motionless on the ground, Akira couldn't help but doubt that Tiol was actually dead.

"Did that really, *truly* finish him?" he wondered aloud. It seemed likely, but he couldn't be certain. After witnessing Tiol mutate in Iida, and now seeing his new colossus form, Akira figured anything was possible. He certainly *wanted* to think the fact that Tiol wasn't moving meant he was dead, but he couldn't bring himself to relax.

If only Alpha were here! I could just ask her whether he's dead, and I wouldn't need to worry so much. He tried calling for her one more time, just in case. *Alpha!*

No response. His connection with Alpha still hadn't been restored.

No good, huh? What if...? What if she never comes back? He'd been aiming to make it outside the ruin on the assumption that he could restore his connection to her, but in the end, that had just been speculation on his part.

What if he'd lost her forever?

Just thinking about it made him grimace, and he let out a small sigh.

Yet there was no hint of fear on his face. He still found Alpha's support extremely reliable, of course, but he no longer felt like he couldn't live without her. If he couldn't have her help, he'd just manage on his own. The thought came to his mind naturally—he'd outgrown his subconscious dependence on Alpha.

At that moment, Nelia drove up on his bike.

"Nice going, Akira!" she said. Had her strategy failed, or had Akira at any point decided to retreat, Nelia would have driven by, picked Akira up, and sped out of there as quickly as she could. So she'd been watching from a distance for the whole fight, completely out of range of the blast from Tiol's enormous cannon. "I know *I* came up with the plan and all, but man! To think you actually defeated a

hulking thing like that! You sure are something else, kid."

"So I *did* finish him?" he said, looking doubtful.

Seeing the champion in question look so uncertain, Nelia couldn't help but snicker. "If that *didn't* finish him, what would?"

"Well, I suppose, yeah..."

"You worry too much, you know that? Well, even if it *isn't* dead, what say we get out of here before it has a chance to wake up? Hop on!"

She was right. Whether Tiol was dead or still alive, there was no reason to stick around. Akira did as she said, and the two of them drove off.

Akira returned to his truck with Nelia to stock up and recover as much as possible. Comparing his current supplies to his inventory when he'd set off for Zone 1, he let out a sigh. "Damn... I sure did burn through a lot already."

Normally, he would have been exceedingly overprepared, as he had followed Kibayashi's recommendations to bring an excess of ammo, medicine, and energy tanks—not counting the additional two hundred million he'd spent on his fifth LEO. Yet his truck was now almost entirely empty, proof of the challenge he had just faced.

"If I'd ignored Kibayashi's suggestions, I'd probably be dead right now. He couldn't have predicted all this would happen—right?" Kibayashi was sharp, but surely he couldn't predict the future. More likely, he had just assumed that Akira would get into some comparable situation before long, and he wanted the boy to be prepared when it happened. Then the boy would get all crazy, reckless, and rash and amuse the city official to no end. That *had* to be all it was.

In any case, he was sincerely grateful to Kibayashi for saving his life, but when he imagined the city official's irritating smirk, he scowled. He decided to silently thank him just this once, then exited the vehicle.

"All right, Nelia, I'm ready."

"Great. So what's the plan now?"

"Plan? Well, I might as well ask: Would you be up for heading

back to the city without using the highway?"

"Are you asking whether I'm skilled enough with a bike to make it out of the ruin's depths and back to the wasteland on my own? To be honest, that sounds pretty tough."

"Yeah, I figured as much." Such a feat would be impossible without Alpha's support—that was why hunters eagerly paid through the nose to use the highway, after all. But he'd figured it wouldn't hurt to ask anyway.

Still, as long as the defense force and the colossi were blocking the path to the highway, Akira and Nelia were effectively trapped in Zone 1. Akira, at least, certainly didn't feel like risking life and limb to try breaking through. So in the face of Nelia's inquiry, he was stumped.

At that moment, however, his bike's scanner picked up several readings. Someone was coming toward them at high speed—a unit of mechs belonging to the city's defense force.

Upon hearing Akira and Nelia's account of what had happened, the leader of the mechs, who'd descended from his vehicle, couldn't hide his shock. "You really beat that thing?! Seriously?! By yourselves?! That's incredible!"

His unit had been dispatched to take Tiol down. The defense force had known that the superior colossus was probably controlling all the others. Working under the assumption that eliminating it would likely cause the colossus chain of command to crumble, the defense force had reorganized a portion of their main forces and tasked them with this mission.

However, by the time the mechs had arrived on the scene, the colossus in question had already been defeated. Upon investigating the area, they'd spotted Akira and Nelia and had approached to ask about the situation. The man had been shocked to learn that Akira had defeated the colossus almost all by himself, but Akira had shown him the data logs from the bike's scanner, leaving him no choice but to believe it.

No wonder Executive Inabe wanted Akira to back him—and the opposing faction leader, Udajima, tried to frame him as a nationalist.

As impressed as the mech leader was by Akira's strength, he felt a little sorry for him as well.

"Well, since your target's already taken care of, you're heading back now, right?" Akira asked. "Can you take us back with you?"

"Oh, I'm terribly sorry, but I can't. Given my position, I can't assist anyone who's under suspicion of working with nationalists."

"Huh? *Still?!* You've got to be kidding me!"

"Look, I know what you want to say. You think defeating that giant should have already cleared you of any suspicion. Well, I hate to say it, but that's not enough for me to go against my orders and make an arbitrary decision. If the comms weren't down, I might be able to ask my boss for permission, but as things are now, that's not an option."

"Oh, I see. All right," Akira said, looking downcast but reminding himself that he wasn't the only one in difficult circumstances.

"I really am sorry, kid. Truly," the man continued. "I get that taking down that thing was no small feat. But if I made the executive decision to help you, my superiors would let me have it afterward. Until you can say you defeated that nationalist leader named Tiol, I can't take you back."

Akira wanted to reply, "Then I'll say it," but he stopped himself and frowned. He couldn't tell them that. Even he hadn't known that the colossus was Tiol until he'd recognized the latter's voice through telepathy. If he asserted that he'd defeated Tiol, he'd have to explain that he was an Old Domain User, and that was something he absolutely could not reveal.

Just as he was about to give up, however, the man said something he hadn't expected.

"I suppose what really has me feeling sorry for you, though, is that Druncam's probably just gonna take the credit for beating that colossus you just killed."

Akira's eyes immediately narrowed. "What do you mean by that?"

"Oh, well, some hunters found the nationalists' base and are fighting the force stationed there as we speak. That Tiol fellow's there as well, apparently, and the Druncam unit's chasing him down."

Akira looked shell-shocked. Hadn't the creature he'd just defeated been Tiol? Now he wasn't sure what to think anymore. "And where is that base?" he asked.

"Why, planning on heading there yourself? I think even if you went there right this instant, you'd be too late."

"I don't care. Tell me," he said, looking deadly serious.

The man felt conflicted. He'd already guessed that the presence of Akira and Druncam in Zone 1 was related to Inabe and Udajima's power struggle. If he told Akira where the base was, would he be indirectly supporting Inabe? Wouldn't that be a conflict of interest for the defense force, which was supposed to stay neutral? On the other hand, *not* telling him might be seen as an attempt to interfere with the extermination of the nationalists, which could get the man in even deeper trouble. So he mulled this dilemma over, and ultimately decided that there was nothing wrong with telling a hunter the location of a bounty.

"Well, I guess I don't mind, if that's all you want to know. Here."

He showed Akira the coordinates being transmitted from the hunters on the scene. The long-range communications were still out, but data was still moving over the short-range relay devices set up at intervals through Zone 1. As soon as the data finished downloading, Akira got on his bike, took Nelia out of his backpack, and passed her over to the man. "You can't take me with you, but you *can* take her, right? Get her back to base safely."

"What a shame! In the end, you still didn't finish escorting me like you promised. You're so mean," she said, pretending to pout.

At least one of us will make it back safely, Akira thought with a smile. "Sorry, something else came up. Maybe another time, all right?"

"Sure. See you, Akira!"

With that, the boy sped off. Nelia watched him go with a soft smile, then addressed the man.

"Now then, would you all mind taking me back to the base?"

"Not a problem, but let me ask one question first. I can see that your superior is Yanagisawa. Are you in the middle of an assignment for him right now?"

"Well, something like that. I'm not really at liberty to discuss the details. If I say too much, there's this bomb inside my head that'll explode, you see. I don't want that to happen, so I kinda have to be discreet."

"I suppose so. Well, whatever. Let's move out!" The man returned to his mech with Nelia in tow, and he and his men left the area.

Akira raced toward the nationalists' base on his bike. Restoring his connection with Alpha was critical, but if he couldn't do that yet —if he couldn't get out of the ruin on his own right now anyway— then he might as well wrap up the task he'd come here for in the first place.

Besides, he had to see with his own eyes. Had he *really* killed Tiol? And if not, what in the world was going on? He had to find out —and then, this time, he'd make sure Tiol *stayed* dead.

With such thoughts racing through his mind, Akira sped up. Too much was at stake.

◆

Tsubaki stood on the edge of the wall surrounding her city. Far off in the distance, she could see the headless body of the colossus— Tiol—lying on the ground.

"Why, with all these forces gathering outside my walls, I do believe this qualifies as an emergency," she said. A bewitching smile rose to her lips. "At long last, I can leave the borders of my territory!" The regulations that guided her only loosely defined "emergency," and a large foreign military presence on her doorstep arguably counted, allowing her to go beyond the wall that normally marked her limits.

Tsubaki leaped off the edge of the wall. She dropped like a rock, free-falling from a height taller than a skyscraper, and landed on the ground calmly and without a sound. Then, still wearing her black dress that looked completely out of place in the ruin, she began walking.

"Still, to think he defeated him even without *her* help. I really

should have asked that boy to help me instead. Hmm... Maybe it's not too late? At present, his connection to her is still severed. There may yet be room to negotiate—"

She stopped, and her smile vanished. She glanced to the side. Some distance away, on the far side of a mountain of debris and several toppled buildings beyond, a man aimed an enormous gun in her direction.

It was Yanagisawa.

He pulled the trigger. The bullet that erupted from the gun passed through the toppled building in front of him as easily as though the structure were a hologram, leaving only a perfectly cylindrical hole somewhat larger than the bullet itself, with no sign of impact. In the same way, it continued on through all the obstacles in its path, the warhead absorbing and erasing every bit of matter it came into contact with.

It struck Tsubaki the same moment it was fired.

Instantly, with an efficiency that seemed to belie entropy, the round converted all of the matter it had absorbed on its journey into raw energy and exploded. The shock waves from the massive, devastating blast compressed the surrounding air to its absolute limit —and crushed the colorless fog that permeated the atmosphere along with it.

When the colorless fog reached a certain density, it took on a unique characteristic: it absorbed shock waves, slowing their expansion exponentially and creating a confined and concentrated explosion. A spherical blast erupted that wiped the entire area around Tsubaki from existence, leaving a massive crater.

Tsubaki—or what was left of her—stood in the middle of the depression. She'd lost seventy percent of her body. The remaining thirty percent collapsed to the ground like a puppet with its strings cut.

Yanagisawa made his way to the explosion site, stared down at Tsubaki's motionless remains, and grimaced. "Was that overkill, maybe? I thought it better to err on the side of caution, but maybe I went too far."

For quite some time, Yanagisawa had kept himself hidden

beneath his cutting-edge camouflage, lying in wait. He'd come equipped with annihilation warheads, a type of ammunition extremely difficult to obtain even with all his connections, and used one to destroy the Old World terminal that served Tsubaki as a remotely controlled body.

Suddenly, in response to some instinct, Yanagisawa ducked, just narrowly avoiding Tsubaki's kick. Her foot sent shock waves through the air into a nearby mountain of debris, smashing it to pieces. Tsubaki had kept a spare terminal on hand in stealth mode, and now, having switched control to it after the destruction of her previous one, she'd caught Yanagisawa by surprise.

Without stopping, she struck at him with her bare hand. Yanagisawa dodged and grabbed Tsubaki's outstretched arm by the wrist, and she found herself restrained under the strength of his powered suit.

"Pleasure to meet you," he said, smiling but on edge. "The name's Yanagisawa. You're the AI overseer of this area, I take it? How about we make a deal?"

Tsubaki glared at him coldly. "First you open fire, and now you want to negotiate? Is that just how you people say hi? Color me skeptical."

"I just wanted to show you what kind of power *I* hold first, that's all," Yanagisawa replied. "You don't negotiate with an ant you can crush underfoot, now, do you? I could kill you if I really tried, you know—it's just not worth the trouble. But you wouldn't give me the time of day otherwise, right?"

Yanagisawa leaped backward, putting some distance between the two of them. Then, breaking out in a cold sweat, he brandished a black card.

"Also, I have this."

"This" was the card Yanagisawa had obtained in a section of Kuzusuhara near the entrance to the ruin's depths. At the time, he had sicced a monster swarm on Kugamayama City—with fewer monsters to fight along the way, he'd found it much easier to obtain the card. And it had been worth every effort.

Tsubaki narrowed her eyes. "If you think you can bend me to

your will just by waving that in my face, you're sorely mistaken."

At that, Yanagisawa's smile—and his confident front—slightly faltered. But he quickly rallied. "Perish the thought! Rather, consider that I waited until you'd gone beyond those walls to shoot you so that I wouldn't destroy them. If I was truly inconsiderate, I would have gone ahead and shot you while you were on top of the wall, in plain sight. Wouldn't you agree that this at least distinguishes me from the common rabble, who have no decorum whatsoever?"

Tsubaki's expression softened somewhat. She no longer regarded him with the hostility she reserved for boorish intruders, but her expression was still icy. "Is that so? Then you can start demonstrating your manners by dropping your weapon—if you're serious about negotiating with me, that is."

Yanagisawa's smile stiffened. He hesitated for a moment, then steeled himself and threw his weapon on the ground, just as ordered, and even removed his powered suit. There they lay on the ground—his gun that fired annihilation warheads, and his powered suit capable of matching Tsubaki in hand-to-hand combat. Now he stood unarmed before her.

A brief silence passed between them—but it felt much longer to Yanagisawa. Just as the sweat on the city executive's face was growing uncomfortable, Tsubaki smiled gently.

"All right. If you're that determined, follow me to a place where we can negotiate properly."

"We can't just do it here?"

At that moment, a building damaged during the earlier attack finally collapsed and fell toward them. Tsubaki glanced at it and delivered a roundhouse kick to the air. The shock wave traveled through the colorless fog, struck the building, and flung it over in the opposite direction.

"Does this place look suitable for talking to you?" she said with a smile.

"Point taken," he replied pleasantly.

Yanagisawa followed her in the direction of the defensive wall. Along the way, he passed by two more Tsubakis.

That makes four so far, he thought, his expression tense. *How*

many does she have in reserve? Ten? A hundred? Maybe even a thousand? No wonder Sakashita didn't think it worth exploring Kuzusuhara any further and pulled out. Then his grin grew wider. *They didn't know about* that*, though, did they? Otherwise, they would have undoubtedly kept searching. But I* do *know, and it'll be mine. Just let this talk go well, and nothing will be able to stop my plan to extend the highway. True, I've had to take risks—but nothing ventured, nothing gained.*

His smile vanished altogether, replaced by a look of extraordinary determination and resolve. *I'm almost there! Just a little more, and all the obstacles will fall away!*

◆

As the colossus-Tiol was facing defeat at Akira's hands, one of the silent, expressionless boys in the skyscraper that served as the fake nationalists' base suddenly screamed out in terror. "Ahhhhhh! Ahhhhh! Ahhh—! Huh? What?"

His eyes, widened with the fear of death, took on a look of confusion, then pure bafflement. As his fear gradually subsided, consciousness took a stronger hold of him, and he looked about at his surroundings, more and more puzzled.

"This is the base? Huh? B-But how? Why?"

In the midst of his perplexity, however, one thing stood out in stark clarity: Akira wasn't here. And that alone calmed his nerves. His body went slack with relief, and he collapsed right there on the floor.

"I... I'm safe?"

It went without saying that the consciousness within the boy was Tiol himself. Just before Akira had delivered the final blow to his colossus form, Tiol's fear of impending death had once again blurred the line between the independent part of his mind and the portion occupied by the system. He'd wished to be saved—by whatever means possible—and the system had responded to his wish by ejecting Tiol's consciousness from the colossus and transmitting it back to one of his remote terminals. So even though he'd lost his

original body, his mind was still alive.

What was the self, really? What did it truly mean to be alive? The Old World technology was so advanced it made him question these fundamental concepts, but thanks to that same science, Tiol had "survived"—or at least, anyone from the Old World would have said so.

He didn't understand why he was alive or what had happened. But bewildered as he was, he felt extremely relieved he hadn't died out there on the battlefield.

"Well, no matter. However it happened, the important thing is that I'm alive. I can think about the rest later. Now, how are things here?"

He gathered information from nearby terminals to get an idea of the situation inside the building—and couldn't contain a scream.

"No way! Shit... We're losing over here too?!"

He'd stationed special terminals, remodeled and reengineered to be much stronger than the others, all throughout the base. Working together as a unit, they could even take down one of Tiol's colossi. Their role was to kill any hunters that tried to enter the base, with the ultimate goal of luring the city's forces there.

Yet despite being indoors, where the enemy's mechs couldn't enter, the terminals were losing. He couldn't believe what he was seeing. In a panic, he contacted Yatsubayashi.

Doctor! What's happening?! Why are our forces in the base losing?!

Oh, if it isn't Tiol! Well, ever since you started taking command of the ones on the battlefield, things have been pretty busy here— Wait, what did you say? Tiol, where are you right now?

I'm inside the base!

But mechs shouldn't be able to enter this building, objected Yatsubayashi. *What's going on?*

That's what I'd *like to know! At this rate, my forces will keep losing, and that means trouble.*

As Tiol and Yatsubayashi conversed, both were focused on their own interests, but Yatsubayashi was more or less able to grasp the boy's current situation. *All right, calm down. First off, you feel you're*

in danger right now and want to escape, right? Then just disguise yourself as one of the hunters those terminals are fighting and slip out unnoticed.

Slip out unnoticed?! They'll know it's me right away! My face is all over that video we made! Well, I guess I could wear a helmet or something.

Yatsubayashi thought a moment. *Don't worry. The terminals stationed in the base can change their appearance at will, to a degree. As long as you alter your face, equipment, and whatever else that could possibly identify you, I doubt anyone will recognize you. That should be easy for you to pull off now, Tiol. Go ahead, try it out!*

Tiol considered it. *All right, I'll give it a shot.*

If you run into any problems, just let me know. And good luck!

As Tiol ended the call, he realized that in the course of talking to Yatsubayashi, he'd calmed down considerably. Taking a deep breath, he was filled with new determination. "All right, let's do this! Like hell am I gonna let myself die here!"

Before changing his appearance, he decided to create another terminal to leave collapsed on the floor in his place, and so he summoned several nearby terminals to his location. This made the battle even more hopeless for his forces, but he didn't care anymore as long as he made it out safely.

The terminals came to him, and Tiol promptly went to work. He transformed one of the strange boys' faces to look like his appearance in the video, then grinned, admiring his handiwork. "Awesome, it really does look just like me! Amazing what can be done!"

Yatsubayashi had realized it would look suspicious for all the supposed nationalists to have the same face and build as Tiol. So he'd made it possible to adjust their looks—compared to transforming an arm into a large cannon or a body into a colossus, this was a minor, much simpler mutation. Still, making subtle, precise changes to the terminal's facial structure was incredibly difficult. Merely having a feature preinstalled didn't automatically make him an expert at using it. But Tiol never realized that.

"I think this might actually work! As for my gear... Let's make it look really powerful. Like the equipment a real nationalist leader would use!"

When he thought about gear that looked powerful, the first thing that came to mind was the equipment Akira had employed to take him down. Merely recalling it filled him with fear all over again, but stuff like that couldn't have been cheap—it wasn't the kind the average hunter would use. It had to be extremely expensive, devastatingly powerful gear only accessible to high-ranked individuals. So Tiol decided if he wanted to look strong, his best bet was to model his terminal's gear after Akira's.

"Let's see... That's pretty much how it looked, right? Some of the finer details probably aren't correct, but oh well, good enough, I guess."

He nodded in satisfaction, then suddenly looked alert. Through the terminals battling on the floor below him, he could sense that hunters were rapidly approaching the level he was on.

"They've already made it this far?! What are they, monsters?! They're way too strong! Are they specially trained to kill other humans or something?!" Hunters usually only specialized in killing monsters and weren't as skilled at fighting people—hence Tiol had expected his humanoid terminals to have the advantage over them. But then realization dawned. "Oh, right. If these hunters came to get rid of the nationalists, they probably don't have any trouble fighting other humans, do they? Hell, they might even be better at that than Akira."

He was merely muttering his thoughts aloud, but doing so made him realize just how grave his situation was. Then he looked at his terminal, whose gear was now modeled after Akira's.

"Wait a minute—could this actually work?" he muttered.

He wanted to kill Akira, if possible. But he knew he wouldn't survive a rematch against him.

So what if he got someone else to do it?

Tiol decided to bet everything on his new inspiration.

◆

Inside the same building, the hunters clashed with Tiol's terminals. One group in particular had fought its way to the upper floors. This was Druncam's elite unit—Katsuya and his team.

Naturally, the other hunters were fighting with everything they had as well. But for many, the terminals had proven too tough to handle, and they'd either retreated and left everything to the Druncam team or followed behind the latter and worked to secure an escape route by eliminating enemies that tried to come down other staircases and ambush them from behind.

Meanwhile, Katsuya's group pressed on. After successfully advancing to yet another floor, Katsuya announced to the other hunters, "Floor 23 cleared! We're now on Floor 24! Keep Floor 23 secure!"

"Roger! Leave it to us! You all stay safe too!"

The other hunter units belonged to different organizations and varied in number, but since the long-range comms were currently offline, they'd all connected their short-range comms together to form a localized, all-purpose communication network. So Katsuya was making use of it to issue orders to every team.

When it came to the hunter profession, fighting monsters was part of the job description, and the fear of death was a constant presence. Thus, hunters tended to hold the strong in high regard. This was, in fact, a key reason the veterans of Druncam despised the desk jockeys so much—despite making all the syndicate's executive decisions, none of the latter had ever participated in live combat. So perhaps it was only natural that the strongest hunter team present, Katsuya's, took charge of the others.

That said, these were all people who'd answered the call to defeat a fifty-billion-aurum bounty—in other words, the most elite hunters Kugamayama City and its environs had to offer. Katsuya was only leading them temporarily, of course, but this very fact meant he was now skilled enough to command every other hunter in the city's vicinity.

And Yumina, fighting alongside him, had mixed feelings about that.

Their team was truly strong. They were taking out enemies that

even the most elite hunters in the city couldn't handle, advancing inexorably, floor after floor. She didn't doubt that they were powerful. But they weren't invincible. Going up against an enemy with such a bounty, they were sure to suffer some casualties. Katsuya was behaving like a proper leader, taking a back seat and giving orders rather than rushing out on the front lines and trying to protect all of his teammates. But this meant some of those teammates would certainly die—they would no longer have his protection to rely on. And each time he lost someone he could've protected by abandoning his role as commander—each time she saw grief and regret disfigure her beloved's face—Yumina's heart also hurt.

"Katsuya, are you okay?" she asked worriedly.

"Yeah... I'm fine," he said. "We've gotten this far already—we just need to push forward a little more. Let's give it our all."

"Right! Let's finish this and go home." It was clear to her that Katsuya was just putting up a bold front so his comrades wouldn't worry. She played along and smiled back.

Not stopping Katsuya from joining Druncam was probably the wrong move, she thought suddenly. With Katsuya's natural talent, given enough time, he would have done just fine as a hunter even without Druncam's support. Then he could have solely focused on protecting his few close friends, a burden he could actually manage, and made a name for himself in the hunter profession. The support from Druncam had greatly accelerated Katsuya's growth, but in exchange, he now had to bear responsibility for the lives of many others—and not just their lives, but their expectations and wishes as well. This was all too much for Katsuya to handle on his own.

He'd definitely grown stronger—that was a fact. But perhaps his growth had caused him to suffer more than it had helped him, Yumina found herself thinking. *Maybe once this job's over, I should sit Katsuya down and have a serious heart-to-heart with him about all this. I know he had some pressure from a city bigwig, but he's participating in a job to exterminate a nationalist threat. Hasn't he already done enough for Druncam?*

And she made up her mind. After this was all over, she'd convince

him to leave the syndicate somehow. It was for his own good. But she knew now wasn't the time to bring it up, so she kept her thoughts to herself for the moment.

The battle raged on. And as they continued to push through the enemy lines, more of Katsuya's comrades fell.

Then something wholly unexpected happened—Tiol himself appeared from behind a corner of the hallway.

"You did well to get this far, I'll admit," he announced with a smirk. "I recognize that you're powerful! How about joining us instead? Then you won't have to keep being the city's lapdogs in order to survive."

Seeing that the enemy was willing to hold a conversation, Katsuya stepped up to the front line to reply, as was his duty as commander. "Over my dead body! Now surrender at once!"

"Bummer. Well, in that case, we're gonna come at you with everything we have. It's down to just the two of us now, but together, we're more than capable of crushing you! Let's take 'em down, Akira!"

And as the Druncam hunters gasped, Akira leaped out from behind the same corner Tiol had and began shooting. Katsuya and the others immediately fired back, and the hallway was filled with a storm of bullets flying in both directions.

By the time the gunfire ceased, Tiol and Akira had disappeared. Grinning smugly even as countless bullets struck him, Tiol had leaped backward into the shadows and disappeared around the corner he'd come from. No longer needing to back Tiol up, Akira also retreated, his face expressionless.

The hunters who remained had only suffered minor injuries. Thanks to their commander, who had ordered them to raise their force-field armor out of an abundance of caution, no one had died. But they were stunned at what they'd just witnessed.

"H-How?" Yumina uttered, her eyes wide with shock. "Why was Akira here?"

"No way," Katsuya exclaimed. "Is he really one of them?"

They were both surprised and bewildered, but their words betrayed the difference in how each of them perceived the situation.

Katsuya was the first to clear his mind of unnecessary thoughts and snap his attention back to the situation at hand. "All right, guys! We've found their leader! We're almost done, so let's finish strong!"

They pushed ahead at his command—all except Yumina. For a brief while, Yumina stood still as they passed her by, but she came to herself and hurried back to Katsuya's side.

She couldn't stop him from leading them forward. She didn't have a good reason to—even if it meant fighting Akira.

What should I do?

Her head was a mess, but she followed Katsuya's lead. And Katsuya pushed forward without hesitation.

They clashed with Tiol and Akira several more times after that. Just as Tiol had declared, the pair came at Katsuya, Yumina, and the others with their full power, displaying a ferocity far beyond that of any other enemies encountered thus far. In the face of such assaults, Katsuya's unit finally found themselves on the back foot and were forced to halt their advance. They still had the advantage of numbers and position, but this barely sufficed to keep Tiol and Akira away. At this rate, they wouldn't win.

"Hey, Katsuya," Yumina asked, her face grim. "Do you think that's really Akira?"

Katsuya grimaced. "To be honest, I don't want to think there are doubles out there as strong as him."

"Well, sure, but—"

"Look, Yumina. Whether he's the real deal or not, it doesn't change the fact that we have to defeat him, right?"

"Yeah, I guess you're right." Yumina really hoped the Akira they were fighting was an impostor. She wanted to think that the reason she couldn't connect to him over short-range comms, no matter how many times she tried, wasn't that he was too busy fighting to talk, but that the Akira in front of them wasn't the real one at all.

Tiol and Akira ambushed them once again. In the midst of combat, she couldn't let her emotions rule her. She had to fight. Even so, she aimed only at Tiol, leaving Akira to Katsuya.

Their fierce firefight continued. The enemy duo got away again in

the end, but their movements had grown noticeably sluggish.

Just a little more, Katsuya thought, and rallied his team onward.

They were almost to the top floor.

◆

Seeing that his plan to create a fake Akira had gone even better than expected, Tiol felt anticipation swell within him. "Come to think of it, couldn't I do even more with this guy?" he wondered.

Tiol had tried to make the impostor resemble Akira as much as he could, but in the end, it only looked like Akira as Tiol envisioned him. If someone who knew Akira well had encountered his doppelgänger, they would have probably recognized it as a fraud.

But the hunters hadn't spotted any difference—at least, not enough to be sure. Part of the reason lay in the fact that Tiol had striven to replicate Akira's battle prowess to an extent as well. He'd raised the terminal's energy use until it was just short of its breaking point, at the cost of burning it out in short order. Every time a terminal's energy ran out as they clashed with Katsuya's team, he'd retreat, destroy the terminal's appearance beyond recognition, then abandon it for a new one. No one would ever be able to tell that it had once been a fake Akira.

By repeating this process, he was able to continue emulating Akira's strength. His declaration to Katsuya's team that only the two of them were left had, naturally, been a lie. Each terminal could only hold out a few minutes at best—and less than a minute at worst—but in exchange, they were much more powerful, and his opponents had to struggle for every step they advanced.

These encounters gave Tiol a firsthand taste of just how formidable the other side was—and he was banking on that skill of theirs to save him. "It's almost time for the final battle," he muttered. "Just one last push, and I'll win!"

Tiol stood confidently on the top floor, waiting for Katsuya and his team to arrive.

◆

They spotted Tiol immediately as they charged across the threshold. He was leaning against the wall, covered in scarlet blood and heaving ragged breaths, clearly on the verge of collapse. When he spotted the hunters, he flashed a victorious grin.

"I never thought...you'd push me this far," he said between breaths. "Way to go! But too late...it's our victory."

Katsuya kept his gun on Tiol as he spoke, his face deadly serious. "Toss your weapon and surrender! Where's the other one?"

"You...wanna know? Then I'll tell you! Run, Akira!" he screamed suddenly, looking off to the side. "From now on, I'm appointing you leader of the Alfoto Party! Escape, and make our dream a reality!"

Katsuya involuntarily followed his glance. There, before his eyes, was Akira, attempting to escape through a large hole in the building's wall.

"No!" Katsuya exclaimed.

And with everyone distracted, Tiol seized his opportunity to aim his gun at Katsuya. Before he could fire, the others shot him dead—but Akira had already vanished outside.

"Pursue the injured individual who just leaped out of the building from the top floor!" Katsuya shouted into his comms. "He's the nationalists' new boss!"

Then Katsuya dashed after Akira. Naturally, he and his teammates couldn't leap through the hole and off the building like the impostor had, so they had no choice but to hurry back the way they'd come.

Once they were gone and the room was silent again, Tiol carefully peeked out from under cover of the darkness of a corridor. "Looks like they're gone. All right—so far, so good."

Much like the fake Akira, the Tiol who Katsuya's team had been fighting all this time had been an impostor. The real one had been hiding on the top floor the entire time. He certainly wasn't going to risk his life fighting a group of elite hunters who could potentially win even against Akira.

"Now I just need to send that fake to where the real Akira is. I don't foresee any trouble there, so now it's time to make my escape."

And thus, while the hunters were preoccupied chasing after the impostor Akira, Tiol quietly sneaked out of the building undetected.

◆

Though all the hunters inside the building had qualified to participate in exterminating a terrorist threat, some were weaker than others, and more than a few had dropped out halfway through. Many had only come along because, like Akira, they themselves were suspected of cooperating with the nationalists for one reason or another, and so were aiming to clear their names.

Then they heard Katsuya's declaration that the new boss of the nationalists was alone and wounded. Here was an opportunity they couldn't pass up—even hunters of their caliber might stand a chance of defeating him! Even if they couldn't in the end, they agreed to search for him first and make that judgment call once they cornered him.

"Where is he?! Where'd he go?!"

"I see him! He's over there!"

The fake Akira stood on the road a short distance away, poised to hop on his bike and escape. Seeing this, the man who'd just spotted him ran to his own vehicle in order to pursue him. Another saw the first one drive off and hurried to do the same. In no time at all, a swarm of determined hunters was hot on Akira's tail.

His pursuers seemed caught in a frenzy to capitalize on this sudden, miraculous windfall of opportunity—unnaturally so, in fact.

But their "chance" spotting of the impostor had been orchestrated by Tiol. The "bike" the fake Akira had mounted was just a jury-rigged contraption formed from the remains of mechanical monsters, with tires attached to the bottom. (The only reason Tiol hadn't crafted a truck instead was that Akira had been riding his bike during their battle.) Now he had the impostor ride at a steady pace—not fast enough to lose his pursuers but not slow enough for them to catch up—toward the real Akira's location. Tiol wasn't sure whether Akira was still where they'd fought, but it seemed plausible.

Since Akira was already on his way to Tiol's base, however, Tiol achieved his objective sooner than expected. Laying down jamming smoke so that the hunters wouldn't see the two Akiras together, he succeeded in goading the real one into killing the fake immediately—just in time for the arriving hunters to attack the real Akira all at once, thinking he'd been with Tiol.

Perhaps one could have attributed all this to Akira's bad luck—and essentially, that was correct. But another factor had come into play: Akira had outgrown his dependence on Alpha. Had he clung to her like usual, he would have prioritized escaping the ruin and restoring his connection to her rather than going after Tiol on his own. But now he had quit relying on her for everything—her support was just another tool in his toolbox. And Akira wasn't the type to quit fighting just because he'd lost one weapon. (Nor was he confident, in fact, that he could reconnect to Alpha even if he *did* leave the ruin.)

Yet these factors had conspired to lead him toward Tiol's base, which in itself could be considered unfortunate. So in the end, it was accurate to say that this was all a matter of happenstance—Akira's luck, whether good or bad, had been entirely to blame.

Just as Zalmo had feared, Akira's unpredictability had struck once again, and a great number of people's fates had become intertwined with his own.

Chapter 186: The Local Network

Akira ducked into a nearby building to escape, and the hunters surrounded it. Among them was the genuine nationalist Nelgo, who had infiltrated Druncam's ranks. When Katsuya and his contingent arrived some time later, Nelgo approached them.

"You showed up after all?" he inquired. "Are you sure you don't need to rest?"

"Don't worry about us," Katsuya replied. "We'll be fine."

"Really? In that case, I'll leave you to it. As much as I'd like to join the fight, I have a feeling that with my skill level, I'd just drag you guys down," Nelgo said, sounding regretful.

"No, no, don't say that!" Katsuya shook his head. "Just by agreeing to command one of our teams, you've done plenty in my book. Anyway, what's the situation?" His face grew more grave.

"Akira's in there," Nelgo said grimly. "My team and the others have him surrounded. Many have already gone inside, but, well, the only survivors were those who retreated without engaging in combat."

Katsuya was shocked. He'd seen Akira wounded—besieged as their target was by so many hunters, how was he still alive?

"Not that I'd ever doubt you," Nelgo added, "but are you sure he's actually injured?"

"Of course he is! We shot him up pretty bad—he has to at least have a severe wound or two! Otherwise, he wouldn't have run from us!" Losing his composure for a moment, Katsuya sounded harsher than he intended—he still hadn't fully recovered from the shock of seeing Akira fighting alongside Tiol.

"My apologies. I didn't mean to upset you," Nelgo said, trying to console him. "I just wanted to be sure. But in that case, we've got a problem—that means he's powerful enough to wipe out all those hunters even when he's heavily wounded. Maybe we shouldn't send

anyone else in after him if we're just going to end up losing them."

Katsuya listened and nodded. "Oh, I see what you mean. Sorry for getting all heated. I misunderstood."

"Don't mention it. So anyway, your orders?"

"Right. Leave it to us—we'll go in there after him." Then he added resolutely, "We were the ones that let him get away, after all."

At that, some of the nearby hunters who were eavesdropping on their conversation cheered. Encouraging voices could be heard among them as their enthusiasm rose.

"If it's you, Katsuya, I know you can take him down!"

"Avenge our fallen comrades!"

Observing their behavior, Nelgo thought to himself, *Given the right circumstances, it's certainly possible for a normal human to stir this level of emotion in others. But what if this is due to his special power? It only took him half a day to secure everyone's faith in him. Hmmm... Given that he's an Old Domain User unaware of his ability, it's no wonder our comrade's been keeping an eye on him.*

Nelgo had long known that Katsuya was an Old Domain User.

◆

Around the time that the dust from the gang war in the slums had been settling, Yanagisawa sat in a secret refuge within the city, reviewing private documents as he waited for Nelgo to show up. These documents, rendered as 3D images in his augmented vision, displayed the figures of two hunters—Akira and Katsuya.

Yanagisawa first directed his gaze to Katsuya. "You're definitely an Old Domain User, there's no doubt about that," he murmured. "That much is obvious just by looking at the data from the hypersynthetic snake battle. But that's not what's important." His gaze slid over to Akira. "I don't have any definitive proof whether you're a User just yet. But if you are, maybe *they* are supporting you. This would certainly explain your abnormal rate of growth."

He looked back and forth between the two images. "Now then, which of you will it be? You? Or you?" The thought crossed his mind that he probably ought to kill both of them just in case—but he

ditched that idea right away. Even if they were both Users, he'd gain much more useful data by leaving them at large.

"I mean, for one thing, they're both far too weak for that coterie to approach them with an offer. Akira's been sent to the hospital multiple times now, and the hypersynthetic snake nearly devoured him. *They'd* never put their support behind someone like that." His eyes went back to Katsuya. "Then is it really you after all? But you're still so green that I just don't know..."

He felt like he was *so* close to the answer, yet it seemed just beyond his grasp. And his frustration was evident on his face as he went on, "Let's suppose that one, or even both boys, are Users. Even so, why make deals with hunters who are so weak? Neither could have met the coterie's criteria in terms of ability—*they* would want hunters more capable than their previous failures. So why?"

He spoke his thoughts aloud, hoping this would help him better make sense of it all. And it worked, in a sense, because at that moment, Yanagisawa hit upon a possibility. "Wait. Don't tell me—have they switched strategies? Instead of finding individuals to conquer their goal, are they looking for multiple hunters to secure it as a group?"

He looked at Katsuya again. "Thanks to you, Druncam's in a state of internal strife. But the way things are looking, it won't be long before you have the entire syndicate under your control, at which point your lack of skill as an individual won't matter anymore. And if you expand your sphere of influence through Druncam out to the city, you might even be promoted to serving as part of the city's main forces. This would certainly allow you to reach that place..."

In the end, this was all just hypothesis and speculation on Yanagisawa's part. Yet it seemed plausible enough that the city executive's eyes narrowed as he stared at Katsuya. "So, are you a User, or aren't you?"

At that moment, however, the scheduled time came, and Yanagisawa got a notice informing him that Nelgo had arrived. The executive plastered on his usual carefree smile and had the entrance open remotely.

"Sorry for calling you to an out-of-the-way place like this," he

greeted Nelgo, not sounding sorry at all. “But given my prestigious status within the city, I can’t exactly meet with average hunters like you in the Kugama Building, now can I? Now, what did you feel was so confidential that you had to meet with me directly to tell me?”

“I’ll get right to the point,” opened Nelgo. “I want the boy Katsuya. Surely you don’t mind?”

“Whoa now, back up! I’m not exactly sure what you’re asking,” Yanagisawa responded with a hint of theatrics.

Nelgo deliberately ignored his act. “Either you mind or you don’t—or you really don’t know what I mean, in which case don’t worry about it. It has nothing to do with you, so it shouldn’t affect you in any way, comrade.”

“Hey now, despite how I might act, I’m a city executive, you know? I can’t just sign off on you kidnapping a hunter all of a sudden—my position wouldn’t permit it,” Yanagisawa retorted, still maintaining his flippant demeanor.

“Katsuya is an Old Domain User,” Nelgo declared. “What’s more, he’s a User with a history of activity in the Kuzusuhara Town Ruins. In other words, comrade, he’s exactly the kind of target you’ve been looking for. Isn’t that one of the reasons someone of your standing and influence chose to settle in Kugamayama, an obscure city indistinguishable from any other in the East, when by all rights you could be somewhere much nicer? And yet, despite having found Katsuya, you haven’t made a move to secure him. That tells me that perhaps I’ve misunderstood something and, for whatever reason, Katsuya isn’t integral to your plan. If so, there shouldn’t be any issue with us taking Katsuya for ourselves. Now then, do you mind or not?”

For all his extra explanation, Nelgo’s question remained the same. Yanagisawa’s smile vanished, and he stared hard at Nelgo. *How much does he know, I wonder? How much is he sure of, and how much is he guessing at? Is it enough to consider him an obstacle to my plan?*

“I don’t know what you’re planning, if that’s what you’re wondering,” Nelgo confessed, as though he’d read Yanagisawa’s thoughts, just before the city executive marked him as an enemy. “I

don’t know your motives, or what your ultimate goal is. And that’s exactly why I wanted to ask you in person, to clear up any misunderstandings that might lead to misguided hostility between us. If taking Katsuya would somehow present some sort of obstacle to your plan, then I’ll back off. It’s true that we want Katsuya for ourselves, but not enough to make an enemy of you, comrade. If you want me to stand down, just say the word.”

Nelgo fell silent and stared at the man across from him as though waiting for his next move. A hush hung in the air—it could have either been a preface to negotiations or the prelude to a fight.

Finally, Yanagisawa spoke up again, his expression unchanged. “Well now, I suppose that depends on what you want to use Katsuya for. Please explain your intent so there won’t be any misunderstandings between us, as you say.”

“Very well.” Nelgo paused for a moment before speaking, choosing his words carefully.

“Old Domain User” was a blanket term for any human who naturally possessed some sort of communication power inexplicable with modern technology. Despite the name, one didn’t actually have to be connected to the Old Domain to qualify—in fact, a majority of people in the East were technically Old Domain Users. However, to liken them to data terminals, the sensitivity and output of their sending and receiving capabilities were strikingly low, and an error in their settings kept them from being able to connect to the Old Domain. Thus, in the East, the term “Old Domain User” was generally only reserved for those in whom the communication power was sufficiently stable.

One such technique, known as telepathy, allowed for the transmission not just of voice but also of noises, images, and various other data perceived by the five senses. It even included mental data like emotions and impressions, and this was what Nelgo was after. He was planning to obtain Katsuya, persuade him to join the nationalist cause, and then use him to broadcast a favorable impression of the nationalists. The average populace would receive this telepathic transmission in their subconscious, and without ever realizing it themselves, their bias against the nationalists would

disappear, creating more sympathizers to their cause. The League had spread such a bad impression of the nationalists all over the East that Katsuya was absolutely integral to their success, Nelgo felt.

Yanagisawa listened to his explanation silently. Then he said, "In that case, you can have Katsuya. But I won't let you use that as an excuse to protect him. If I decide it's necessary, the boy dies. If you don't like that, then you'd better carry him so far away from me that I can't possibly reach him. And if I were you, I'd do it quick. That's as far as I'm willing to compromise."

"Understood. Thank you, comrade. I am grateful."

Yanagisawa's expression relaxed, and his histrionic attitude returned. "No, no, thank *you* for being so understanding. I've got circumstances I need to be wary of too, you understand, so I do apologize. By the way," he added with a grin, "I've been meaning to ask you something. You know that hunter Akira? The kid who caused all that ruckus in the slums? Do you think he's an Old Domain User too?"

"He's not part of Druncam, so I can't do a proper investigation of him like I did with Katsuya, but from what little information I do have to go on, my guess is no."

"Oh? And your reasoning?"

"He was born and raised in the slums. Were he an Old Domain User, he would have died long ago."

Until Old Domain Users became aware that they were Users and learned to control their abilities, they had a tendency to broadcast their own thoughts and feelings as telepathic messages to everyone in their vicinity. As a result, many formed personal relationships that could be considered rather extreme, to say the least. For instance, a User who had unspoken feelings might accidentally transmit those feelings to their crush directly, and the recipient's inner feelings would be sent back as well—often either excessive affection or utter loathing.

For someone who lived on day-to-day rations in the slums, this frequently proved fatal. The slums were a harsh and unforgiving environment. In order to survive, one first had to recognize that they were powerless, then proceed carefully and accordingly. If someone

continued to accidentally announce to the world that they were weak and powerless, they'd get underestimated by everyone around them. Their enemies might be more prone to harm them or try to get away with something. And their suspicion of others, the most important factor to surviving in the slums, might even get broadcast publicly, destroying any trust those around them might have had in them.

This made communal activities especially troublesome. The best that Akira could hope for if he joined a group in which everyone thought he was weak, pathetic, untrustworthy, and unreliable was to be tossed out. At worst, he would be worked to the bone like a slave, shouldering the burden of the rest of the group's flaws. In such an environment, if he wasn't able to make allies or collude with other slum residents, all that awaited him was death.

But Akira had survived, and so, Nelgo reasoned, he wasn't an Old Domain User.

Yanagisawa also thought that sounded reasonable. "Makes sense to me. Oh, and while I'm at it, one more question. What's the status of Katsuya's local network these days?"

"Most of Druncam's rookies, executives, and supporters within the city walls have all been incorporated. That's another reason our organization wants Katsuya."

"Impressive! Well, when he's that handsome and naturally talented, I suppose I shouldn't be surprised."

Sometimes, when a true Old Domain User came into contact with someone who was technically a User but had very weak abilities, a local network would form with the stronger User as a transmitter. If this User was unaware of their power, they would incorporate participants into their local network unconsciously. The network would judge who to include by the positive feelings a candidate held toward the original User, like favor, affection, sympathy, and fellowship.

And Katsuya, who was used to being highly regarded by everyone around him and who could amplify those feelings telepathically, was especially likely to absorb anyone who regarded him with even the slightest favorable impression into his local network—all without

even knowing it.

Once Nelgo had left, Yanagisawa ruminated on what he'd learned, then looked at the images of the boys again. This time, he turned to Akira. "So you aren't, as I thought."

Even if, hypothetically, Akira were an Old Domain User and had somehow possessed the talent to survive in the unforgiving slum environment regardless, he would have had an extremely difficult time transmitting positive mental data through telepathy. The more one became accustomed to their ability as a User, the more they improved at using it, but they also tended to reinforce certain kinds of signals. If they tried sending positive impressions through telepathy after getting used to sending out only negative mental data (which seemed likely for someone who'd lived in the slums a long time), they'd never receive any positive data back. And a local network required positive data to be constructed.

Yanagisawa concluded that even if Akira was a User and *they* had decided to prioritize teams over individuals, the boy wouldn't be of any use since he probably couldn't build a local network.

"Then is it you after all?"

And Yanagisawa slid his gaze back to Katsuya.

◆

As the hunters surrounded the building where Akira had taken refuge, Nelgo recalled his earlier conversation with Yanagisawa and glanced at Katsuya again.

His ability to construct a local network is a tad abnormal, the nationalist thought. *At this rate, rather than sympathizing with our cause, Katsuya might assimilate our founder into his network and turn him into a terminal. Could an Old Domain User who's unaware of his condition really garner such influence in so short an amount of time? And could that anomaly have anything to do with why our comrade is so fixated on him?*

Nelgo couldn't help a suspicious frown as he looked at Katsuya, earning him sharp looks from all of the boy's supporters, save for

Yumina. It almost seemed like they were saying, “We won’t stand for you looking at Katsuya like that.”

Well, if they’re regarding me with such looks, they still recognize themselves and Katsuya as separate identities for the moment. That’ll change in due time, though. The local network was nearing completion, at which point their coordination would be perfectly in sync, the unit would share one will, and the presence of a leader figure would no longer be needed.

At that moment, a man emerged from the building they had cordoned off. His gait was steady, but they could tell from the wounds all over him he’d been in combat with Akira. And yet he’d somehow survived.

Katsuya was thrilled to see someone come back alive after hearing from Nelgo that everyone inside who’d fought Akira so far had died. “It’s a relief you’ve returned safely,” he remarked.

“Sure,” the man grunted harshly.

Katsuya recoiled. Nelgo also looked taken aback. The hunter—an individual who should have been assimilated into Katsuya’s local network along with the others—was looking at Katsuya with clear distrust in his eyes.

◆

Many hunters had charged into the building, trusting Katsuya’s report that the enemy was alone and wounded. Now they were lying all over the building, motionless. After all, Akira had no knowledge of the confusion that had occurred over his identity, and so he hadn’t hesitated to act.

The first band of hunters who’d followed him in were those who’d remained outside Tiol’s base. Seeing as the enemies there had been too hard for them, they’d never stood a chance of defeating Akira to begin with. And their bodies served as monuments to Akira’s strength for all the hunters who came after them.

The next group, arriving some time later, had managed to help secure the ground floor of Tiol’s refuge. Realizing the previous hunters couldn’t overcome an opponent even Katsuya and his

supporters hadn't managed to, they had taken it upon themselves to pick up where the others had left off and finish the job. In the end, however, they'd shared the same fate.

Finally came the hunters who'd survived fighting Tiol's terminals all the way to the base's upper floors. These were far more skilled than either of the previous groups—so skilled that one actually survived his encounter with Akira.

Akira approached the severely wounded man lying on the floor. With the last bit of his strength, the man trained his gun on the boy. But before he could fire, Akira shot the gun out of his hands. He placed the barrel of his own gun on the side of the man's head, then spoke in a stern voice.

"Why are you trying to kill me?"

"Huh?" The man was so surprised by the question that he almost forgot he was on the verge of being killed. But his utterance revealed to Akira that there was some critical misunderstanding between them.

"Just answer me. Why are you all trying to kill me?"

"The hell are you saying? Isn't it obvious?"

A murderous glint appeared in the boy's eyes. Akira was currently keeping the man alive for information, and the man wasn't answering his question. "You've got two options. Fight me and die, or answer me and live."

During their fight, Akira hadn't intentionally held back or planned to incapacitate the man for interrogation. This hunter had survived due to his skill alone. Seeing he was already incapacitated and no longer a threat, Akira had decided on a whim to question him before killing him. That was all. From the look in his eyes, the man could tell that Akira didn't want the answer so badly that he was willing to negotiate.

"All right. I'll talk," the man said. With his life on the line, he gave Akira a brief account of the circumstances that had led him to this point.

Akira buried his face in his hands. "No way! Are you *serious*?" His situation was even worse than he'd thought, and he sighed deeply.

"This is all news to you, isn't it?" said the man, observing him closely.

"Yeah! I mean, I wasn't even *at* the base—I was fighting somewhere else at that time! In fact, that's where I was headed when you hunters ambushed me."

"You expect me to believe that?"

"Suit yourself," Akira spat, and started walking off.

"Hey, wait!" the man called after him. "If you're gonna leave me alive, can't you at least pass me some meds first? Otherwise, I'll just die right here anyway."

Akira turned around with a scowl. "Regardless of the reason, you still attacked me. Why should I help you?"

"It's in your best interests, isn't it? If I die here, I can't tell the others outside that this was all a misunderstanding."

"Like I care. Die, then." Akira turned away again to leave. After all, who would believe him even if they heard the truth? Learning he'd been framed had caused the distrust of others he'd developed while living in the back alleys of the slums to flare up once more.

Realizing Akira meant what he said, the man grimaced. His wounds were severe—he doubted he could make it outside on his own. "All right, then how about a deal? You give me some meds, and I'll give you info."

Akira stopped in his tracks. Then he turned around. "What kind of info?"

"Meds first."

"I don't think so. Intel first."

"Who's to say you'll hold up your end of the bargain?" said the hunter. "If you're just going to leave me to die anyway, I'll take the information to my grave."

"Oh yeah? Be my guest." Akira turned his back on him once more.

"All right, all right, fine, I'll spill! Dammit!" the injured man cried, sounding desperate.

Akira walked back over to the hunter and took out some medicine—and held it out of reach. "Tell me what you know, and I'll cram these meds in your mouth—if it was worth hearing."

"You've got a bounty on you right now. Five billion aurum," the

man said.

"Bullshit! Even if they really do think I'm the nationalists' boss, they couldn't have set a bounty on me that quickly."

"Not one from the Office. An unofficial bounty."

"Seriously? Who the hell would put that much money on *my* head?"

"Well, since it's unofficial, the client's not been disclosed, so I wouldn't be able to figure that out even by investigating who announced the bounty. But considering its size and the fact it was announced first thing this morning, I think we both have a pretty good idea."

"Quit being cryptic. Who is it?"

"You really don't know?! That city bigwig Udajima, of course. He probably wants you killed while this brouhaha over the nationalists is going on." Seeing the shock on Akira's face, the man sighed in exasperation. "You really *are* clueless! And here I was thinking that you were killing us indiscriminately because you *did* already know, and that there was nothing to discuss between us. That's why I was so surprised when you asked me why we were attacking you."

"*What* don't I know?"

"You just can't connect the dots, can you? What I mean is, whether you're a nationalist or not is already irrelevant. Udajima just wants an excuse to crush one of Inabe's most useful pawns."

Hunters weren't assassins. In fact, the act of killing another hunter in the pursuit of money was directly at odds with the ELGC's image of an ideal hunter. But if the target were a nationalist, all bets were off. And with the promise of an enticing five billion on Akira's head—not to mention the connections his killer would gain with the city's top brass—then at least some hunters would certainly go after him, regardless of whether they thought he was actually a nationalist.

It didn't help that Katsuya and Akira were backed by rival city executives. Even if Akira surrendered to the hunters and asserted his innocence, they'd most likely ignore him. This fight was already nothing more than a standoff between Inabe and Udajima—a mere extension of their power struggle. Initially, the wounded man had

assumed Akira already knew all this and was killing every hunter on sight because trying to talk things out would be a waste of breath.

Akira listened to him and nodded. His eyes narrowed. "Then you, too, came to kill me for money and connections."

"I won't deny it. I thought that taking down the nationalist group's boss would be a huge feather in my cap, it's true, not to mention the other benefits. Besides, we were informed that you were alone and wounded. How could I not jump at the chance?"

"And you really think that info's enough for me to give you these meds?"

"Well, think of it this way. If I *hadn't* told you that, you would have probably ended up surrendering to Katsuya's coalition. And considering what your fate would have been, I'd say my intel was valuable enough. Am I wrong?"

"Hmph." Akira stuffed the meds into the man's mouth and stormed away.

The medicine began rapidly healing the critically injured hunter. Once the man was capable of standing up and walking on his own, he headed out of the building on steady feet, looking grim.

◆

When Katsuya heard the man's report, he couldn't help but raise his voice as he demanded angrily, "You're not telling me you actually *believe* all that, are you?!"

"I'm just relaying what he said," the man replied gruffly. "Who knows whether it's true?"

"But he was *right there* in the base! He leaped out of the window and escaped from the building. I *saw* it!"

"And *I* didn't," the man returned. "I'm not suggesting you're lying, but I only have your word for it, just like we only have Akira's word for his version of events. So I can't say for certain whether *either* of you are telling the truth. That's the bottom line."

"'Can't say for certain'?! What do you—"

Katsuya was positively shouting by this point, but Yumina cut him off. "All right, Katsuya, that's enough. Get a hold of yourself." Then,

to the other hunter, she added, "Sorry about that, sir. So according to what you've said, there's at least a chance that the Akira in there is the real one, and the Akira we fought back at the base was a fake. Do I have that right?"

"If what he told me in there's true," the man confirmed, "then yeah, that'd have to be the case."

"Very well, I appreciate you telling us." With a serious look on her face, Yumina turned to her childhood friend. "Katsuya, I'm going in there to get to the bottom of this. Wait here until I get back."

Katsuya began to freak out. "Wha— A-Are you *crazy*, Yumina?! Even if that *is* the real Akira in there, he's already killed every hunter who came near him! And you want to meet him *alone*?! He'll murder you in a heartbeat!"

"Perhaps so. But if he's been acting on a misunderstanding, maybe he can still be stopped. And if I go alone, I think Akira will at least want to hear me out. Who knows? I might even be able to convince him to surrender. Then no one will have to fight or get hurt, right?"

"B-But—"

"Hey, Airi!" said Yumina with a grin. "If Katsuya tries to do anything stupid like run after me, please stop him."

But Airi shook her head, looking miserable.

"Um, what's wrong?"

"I'm sorry, Yumina," said Airi. "I can't stop him once he's made a decision."

"Yeah... I suppose not, huh?" *Airi's doing the right thing*, Yumina thought, knowing full well that she herself was the one in the wrong for defying Katsuya's orders and going alone. Yet she stuck to her decision—she had to stop Akira and Katsuya from fighting each other to the death, no matter what.

She turned to Katsuya, her expression deadly serious. "Katsuya, whatever you do, do *not* follow me in there. Otherwise, Akira won't feel like talking—he might even shoot both of us on sight. If you really care about my safety, you *cannot* agitate Akira." Then she gave him the same smile she'd shown Airi. "So just wait for me here like a good boy, okay?"

Katsuya knew that smile. She'd soothed him with it before when he'd tried to stop her from heading off into the ruins with Akira. He relented. "All right. I'll wait for you."

He'd said the same thing back then, so Yumina gave him the same reply. "Of course you will—you need me to keep you in line. Later, then!"

"Yeah, later. Take care, Yumina," he said with a grin.

Yumina headed into the building on her own, and Katsuya watched her go. But once she was out of sight, Katsuya's face became grave. "Airi, if anything happens to her, we're heading in there."

"Yes, sir!"

Even if he couldn't see Yumina, he could monitor her condition via their support system. If she even received so much as a scratch, he would charge in with his team to rescue her. There was a limit to how much he was willing to compromise.

◆

Upon entering the building, Yumina first tried to contact Akira via the short-range comms. But the call didn't connect.

"No good, huh? But maybe that's just because of the jamming smoke in here. I bet I can reach him once I get close enough."

The first group of hunters heading into the building had used jamming smoke that their own equipment wouldn't be affected by. But each team carried a different kind of smoke, which inevitably interfered with all the other teams. Over time, the smoke had cleared up, so it wasn't impeding Yumina's scanner all that much, but the residue clung to the walls and ceilings, greatly reducing her communication range. Even so, her connection to the all-in-one support system remained intact—Kiryou had designed its communication link to resist the effects of jamming smoke. After all, such smoke could sever the suit's connection to the system, rendering the product completely useless.

Yumina wandered through the building, calling out for him. "Akira! It's me, Yumina! I don't want to fight you. I just want to

talk!” She was armed, but she wasn’t holding her gun. In other words, she was giving away her position while leaving herself unable to counter right away if he decided to attack. Hers was a high-risk gamble, the more so given the possibility that the Akira in this building was actually the impostor after all.

Well aware that she might be thus walking to her doom, she nonetheless continued to shout for Akira.

After she’d walked around for some time, he appeared around the bend of a hallway, clearly wary. His gun was raised, but Yumina could tell that his line of sight was focused *behind* her, not *on* her.

Yumina smiled to get him to relax. “It’s all right. Don’t worry, I’m alone.”

Akira did not relax. He looked all around and behind her. Though he didn’t think she was lying, he knew there was someone who was very likely to follow her on his own. So he waited until he felt sure there were no enemies in hiding or signs of anyone backing her up.

Akira finally lowered his gun.

Yumina breathed a sigh of relief. Akira beckoned to her, and she followed him.

The two of them found a room that provided an easy exit in the event of a sudden ambush. Then they sighed and relaxed.

“Been a while since we last saw each other, hasn’t it?” Akira said. “So what was it you wanted to discuss? Trying to get me to surrender?”

“Well, first, I’d like to make sure we’re on the same page as to what’s going on. The hunter who came out of the building told me what you said, but I didn’t really get what it meant.”

“I doubt you’d believe me even if I told you,” he said glumly.

“Well, I definitely can’t believe you if you *don’t* tell me. So be honest with me, and I’ll be honest with you, even if you don’t believe me. Sound good?”

“All right, you got me there.” Given her attitude, he decided there was no harm in at least filling Yumina in.

When Yumina heard what Akira had been up to, she looked

shocked. “Hold on, you’re telling me you defeated that giant thing on your own? Way to go, Akira!”

“Yeah, thanks. It was pretty close, th— Wait, you actually believe me? Honestly, even as I was saying it out loud, I thought it sounded pretty ludicrous.”

He had no proof to show her. His scanner didn’t record every single battle he fought—while configuring it for optimum performance, Alpha had completely removed its full-time recording feature. Alpha could remember all of those battles herself, so she’d figured it was redundant and unnecessary. But now Akira didn’t have Alpha with him. His bike’s scanner had probably grabbed at least a little footage of his colossus battle, but it had blown up along with the bike. For all Yumina knew, he might as well have been spouting nonsense.

But she did believe him and said as much. “It doesn’t look to me like you’re lying, and I already know how strong you are from watching you in Iida. So since I can see you have even better gear now than you did then, it wouldn’t surprise me at all if you won such a fight.”

“R-Really? Wow. Thanks!” Someone out there actually believed what he had to say, and had faith in him! He couldn’t stop himself from grinning.

Yumina brightened up as well. She teased, “And besides, if you were going to lie to me, I’d expect you to prepare a more believable story.”

“Yeah, point taken!”

For a little while, the two of them joked around like old friends, enjoying each other’s company. And to Akira just then, that time couldn’t have been more precious. Like all valuable things, however, it was in short supply and came to an end far too soon.

“Now that we’ve hashed everything out,” Yumina said, growing serious, “it sounds to me like you’re in this situation because the fake Akira coincidentally escaped in the same direction you were coming from, and that this is all just a big misunderstanding. Problem is, it’ll be tough to convince the others that you’re telling the truth.”

There might not have been any records of Akira's battle, but there were certainly records of his doppelgänger. With Akira under suspicion of nationalist activity and responsible for the deaths of many hunters—allies of those still outside—Yumina couldn't see how she could possibly persuade them to take his side now.

"Listen, Akira. I probably already know the answer, but just in case: Can you please surrender? I know you're ridiculously strong and all, but aren't you tired of fighting by now?"

"Sorry, Yumina, I can't."

"Yeah." She sighed. "I figured as much. But then, what will you do? You're completely surrounded right now, you know?"

"I was just gonna wait here until the comms problem fixed itself. Then I'll get in touch with Inabe and ask him to lend a hand. If that doesn't work, well, I'll come up with something else." His real priority in waiting for the comms to go back up was to restore his connection to Alpha. But he couldn't tell Yumina that, and in any case, he had to wait.

"Inabe...? That's that city executive, right? You sure you can count on him?" A city executive would indeed have the influence necessary to mediate this mess, so Yumina found herself thinking that perhaps this would serve as a solution after all.

"I'm not really sure, but apparently all this happened as a result of Inabe and Udajima's power struggle, so he'll probably at least be motivated to help me out."

"Huh? What do you mean?"

Akira recounted what the injured hunter had told him. When Yumina heard, her face turned pale.

"No way... Akira, is that true?!"

"I mean, that's just what that guy told me, so I don't know. If the comms were working, I could contact some of my friends in the city and find out. But that's not an option right now."

"You're right. Akira, I'm gonna head back. Please, just stay here for now, and don't do anything rash. I'm going to try convincing Katsuya to fall back. I'll remind him that we're hunters, not pawns in some game between city execs."

Akira nodded. "All right." As he was waiting for the comms to

come back online anyway, he saw no reason to refuse.

Yumina returned his nod, then ran toward the building's exit.

Once she was gone, Akira moved to another room, sat down, and closed his eyes. Manipulating his sense of time and perceiving in high definition had both taken a toll on his mind. He needed to rest.

He fell asleep right away—incredibly dangerous, but Akira knew that the moment he sensed a threat, he would automatically wake up. For a time, his instinct for danger had gradually dulled, thanks to Alpha's support being so powerful. Now that he'd outgrown his dependence on her, however, he'd regained that sharp intuition—the very same intuition that had allowed him to survive on his own for so long.

And that instinct was telling him he needed to sleep, despite the danger all around him—just as it had in the old days, in the back alleys of the slums, when his life had likewise been at risk.

Chapter 187: Akira and Yumina

Akira awoke. Somehow his instinct told him it was time to get up.

He stood and took several deep breaths, gradually feeling himself calm down. But "calm" really meant no more than forcing himself to accept the reality ahead.

Returning to the room he and Yumina had conversed in before his nap, he wasn't surprised to see her there once more. Nor was he surprised to see grim determination on her face.

"Akira... Please. Won't you surrender?"

"I won't."

Yumina didn't lower her gun.

For a third time, Akira wasn't surprised.

◆

When Yumina returned to Katsuya and attempted to persuade him, his response had been disappointing.

"However much support Udajima may be giving us right now, we're hunters, not his personal soldiers," Yumina insisted. "We ought to wait this out and see how the situation develops."

"That's assuming Akira didn't lie about being in cahoots with the nationalists," Katsuya replied. "He didn't have any proof, right? Then we have no reason to retreat."

"The other hunter said he wasn't involved either, didn't he? Wait, where is he, anyway?"

"He left. He said taking down the nationalists was one thing, but he didn't sign up to be part of a power struggle between city executives."

"Well, at least *someone* has some sense. We shouldn't be here either, you know."

Yet despite Yumina's best efforts to talk him down, Katsuya

remained stubborn. Yumina thought this must be because he was thinking of his duty as a commander, as a leader needed to stand by his actions. So she changed her approach and tried to get him to retreat, conceding a little in the hopes that he might budge somewhat.

"Then how about this? We'll wait until the long-range comms are back online and request backup from the city. If they send Akira an official order to surrender, I'm sure he'll give up. In the meantime, we'll stay here and keep the building cordoned off to make sure he doesn't escape. We won't go in, but if he tries to head outside, we shoot. How does that sound?" Yumina hoped he would pick up on the fact that she was compromising—and that he'd be willing to compromise in turn.

"Hmm. Well, I suppose..." Part of him wanted to agree to a request from his cherished childhood friend. And if Yumina was backing down a little, he figured that for her sake, he could at least consider meeting her halfway.

But then Katsuya received a call. "Oh, sorry, Yumina, I gotta take this. It's from Mizuha. I'll be right back."

"Sure thing." Katsuya had at least shown an intent to compromise. And that made Yumina smile in relief.

Inside the Druncam command vehicle, Katsuya took the call from Mizuha, who immediately showered him with praise. The news that Katsuya's team had defeated Tiol had already reached her via the multilegged relay devices that the defense force had set up.

"You really are amazing, Katsuya! Now you'll definitely be recognized as the top-ranked hunter in all of Kugamayama City! And with this level of success, Druncam is as good as ours! We can finally end this foolish war between the factions! Honestly, I can't thank you enough!"

"Um, well, I couldn't have done it without you and your colleagues' support, so I should be the one thanking you. But actually, we're not quite finished here yet. With all due respect, if there's nothing else, can we continue this later?"

"Oh, is that so? Then I apologize. I just wanted to express my

gratitude to you before I turn the call over to Udajima. I'm connecting you now, so please, be on your best behavior!"

The call switched over from Druncam's normal line to an anonymous one. "Udajima here. First, let me commend you on your achievement, and offer my personal gratitude as well. With this level of success, I'll finally be able to corner Inabe once and for all."

"N-No, I should be the one thanking you for your generous support." *I said I wanted to save this for later!* Katsuya thought, irritated.

But Udajima had more to discuss. "This makes it even harder to deliver the news I have for you, but it's necessary. Do you remember when you asked me to help Sheryl, and I promised I would if you helped me out? Well, you did what I asked, so I set out to hold up my end of the bargain. But at the moment, it doesn't look like that'll be possible."

"Wh-What do you mean?!" Katsuya cried.

As Udajima explained to him, an investigation had revealed that, albeit for a brief period of time, Tiol had been employed by Sheryl. This meant there was a link between Sheryl and the nationalists' former and current leaders. Furthermore, the probe had uncovered that when Akira had shot down the investigation bureau officials at Sheryl's base, she had been present as well. At this rate, regardless of whether she really was involved, it would be impossible for Udajima to paint Sheryl as an innocent victim who'd just happened to get caught up in everything, even using all of his influence as a city executive.

Hearing this, Katsuya was dismayed. "Y-You've got to be kidding! Isn't there *anything* you can do?! Oh, that's right! Apparently there's a chance that the Akira at the base was actually a fake! Does that help at all?"

"Excuse me?" Udajima said sharply. And when Katsuya brought him up to speed, the city executive sounded grim. "I'm sorry, but we've already been sent video evidence of Akira at the base. His own testimony won't be enough to defend him."

"B-But if you investigate that footage more closely—"

"Look, if such a claim were to come to light, Inabe would

probably just kill the real Akira and say he was the fake so as not to be suspected of cooperating with a nationalist. Then your achievement would be for nothing. You'd be mocked and derided for getting fooled into treating an innocent, unrelated hunter as the boss of a nationalist organization, while letting many hunters die in the process."

Katsuya looked anguished. "Please! Th-There must be something you can do for Sheryl! Anything! I *need* to save her!"

A short silence ensued. Then Udajima answered. "This is just a possibility, mind you. I can't guarantee things will turn out the way you want. But if you defeat Akira, I might be able to do something." If Katsuya became known as the hunter who had overcome Akira and Tiol—both of the alleged heads of the nationalist organization—the city's top brass might be more inclined to hear him out. At the very least, they wouldn't be able to ignore him. And Inabe would probably also look the other way if it meant clearing one of his pawns—Sheryl—from suspicion.

Katsuya clutched at this sliver of hope. "All right. I'll give it a try!"

"Is that so? In that case, I'd go sooner rather than later if I were you. Once the battle near the city highway cools down, Inabe will probably send his forces to join you. So you're on a strict time limit. Good luck."

The line went dead. For a while, Katsuya hung his head and stood in silence. But when he finally looked up, the hesitation on his face was gone.

Only determination remained.

When Katsuya returned and announced his intent to storm the building, Yumina was stunned.

"Huh?! But why?!"

"Sorry, circumstances have changed. For various reasons."

"Various reasons...?" She wanted to stop him, but upon seeing the look of resolve on his face, she realized nothing she could say would make a difference. At that, Yumina steeled herself as well. "All right. But before you begin, let me go one more time and try to convince Akira to surrender. If I tell him you're serious about killing

him, he'll probably change his mind." She sighed. "I'm not sure what Mizuha told you back there, but surely she didn't order you to kill Akira, right? So as long as he surrenders, we've done our job."

Katsuya hesitated before replying. "Very well. Just be careful."

Yumina nodded and headed back into the building. Katsuya watched her leave. He hadn't been able to tell her no. But she had returned safe and sound once already, so he reassured himself that she would be fine this time as well. Besides, by indulging Yumina's selfish request, he felt a little less guilty about denying the petition of a precious friend in order to prioritize his own desire.

◆

And so it was that Yumina was now facing off against Akira.

"I...see." She'd known what his answer would be. And yet, she'd asked anyway to make herself realize she had no other choice.

"Will you please leave, Yumina? I really don't want to kill you." Even Akira was surprised to hear those words come out of his own mouth.

"I'm sorry," she said quietly. "I know you don't."

She knew how Akira felt about her. In fact, one of the reasons she'd come alone was because she hoped his feelings for her might make him hesitate even the slightest bit in battle. She felt awful for thinking that way, but she had to use whatever she could to gain an edge in battle and a higher chance of survival against an opponent who greatly outclassed her.

"You already knew, huh?"

Her gamble had paid off—his feelings *did* have an effect. Yumina was serious about fighting him, so she'd make the first move if he didn't beat her to the punch. And Katsuya and the others could also join in to support her at any given moment. The longer he hesitated, the more time reinforcements would have to arrive—yet he didn't move.

He didn't want to be the one to attack first. In a battle where the slightest hesitation could mean the difference between victory and defeat, Akira was essentially handing over his advantage.

But that didn’t mean he intended to lose.

He concentrated as hard as he could, and the edges of his vision filled with white. Everything he sensed seemed sharper, more detailed. His sight narrowed, omitting everything unnecessary, but making everything he was seeing appear much more vivid in exchange.

And before Akira’s eyes, Yumina looked so bright that she was practically shining.

Yumina didn’t think she could win against him. She doubted she could even fight him to a draw. But she was here—here to give her all for Katsuya’s sake.

Had she fought together with Katsuya, the latter would probably have made every effort to protect her—she’d seen as much working alongside him at Tiol’s base. And Akira was ridiculously strong, so Katsuya would probably die trying to protect her. She couldn’t let that happen. She had returned to Katsuya’s side so she could keep him safe, not the other way around. Katsuya dying for her sake was the one thing that she would absolutely never allow.

Even if she lost her life in the process, as long as she could raise Katsuya’s chance of victory—his chance of survival—she’d do everything in her power to wound Akira.

She’d already slowed down her sense of time to her absolute limit. But she knew this wouldn’t be enough. *I’ll never let Katsuya die. I swear it.*

With this resolve driving her forward, she tore apart the chains holding her innate talent back. As everything around her seemed to move at a snail’s pace, the edges of her vision began to fill with white.

And as one, both Akira and Yumina burst into action. Each could see nothing but their opponent in their white-rimmed vision. A battle to the death had begun.



◆

Katsuya waited for Yumina to return, all while preparing to charge in if necessary. Suddenly, the all-in-one support system informed him that Yumina had engaged in battle.

"Shit! Everyone, let's go! We're heading in!" Regretting his decision to allow Yumina to meet Akira alone, he led his comrades as they rushed into the building.

◆

Yumina's opening move was a dash to the side. They were in an open room with no obstructions one could hide behind, so she would have been a sitting duck otherwise. She'd heard Akira had used C-bullets to pierce a Kokurou's armor and even topple a colossus—she doubted her force-field armor would protect her. So she planned to prioritize dodging instead, making the most of her powered suit to dart agilely at high speed and thereby avoid Akira's line of fire.

At the same time, she fired continuously, emptying her extended magazine in horizontal sweeps as though to slice him in half. She wasn't going to let up until the battle was over—she couldn't afford to. Her opponent was Akira, after all. She probably wasn't going to survive long enough to empty her magazine at a normal rate, so she figured she might as well keep the trigger held down.

The world dragged around her sluggishly. Even though she was zipping around the battlefield at the speed of a bullet, she felt that her own movements were infuriatingly slow. As she continued to keep her gun trained on Akira, she could feel its weight resisting her movements. Nevertheless, she kept up her rapid barrage, leaping to the side to avoid his return fire—

She saw him take out a blade.

What, is he out of ammo? Or is he planning ahead and trying to conserve it? Either way, what luck! And it looked like his blade was just the standard length—now he would need to get up close to attack her. *He must have consumed a lot of his energy*, she judged.

She kept her distance from him—dodging at high speed, moving irregularly across the small room—shooting all the while. Her bullets sprayed all over the sturdy Old World walls, filling them with holes.

Akira wove through Yumina's stream of fire as he closed the distance to her. Unlike Yumina, who could only move along the ground, Akira darted off the walls, ceiling, and even footholds in midair as he dodged.

He's evading all of my shots?! That's ridiculous! Just how strong is *he?!* Still, it was taking all he had just to avoid her fire, and he failed to reach her. *If Akira keeps overexerting himself like that, he'll tire out eventually! Victory is actually possible!* She couldn't match Akira's speed, and her movements were still taking a serious toll on her body. Akira had to have been feeling a much heavier burden—the longer the fight continued, the better her shot at overpowering him.

But then she reconsidered. *No! Katsuya's undoubtedly on his way here already! I have to wrap this up before he gets here!* If Katsuya arrived before the battle ended, he would definitely do something reckless to try and save her—and Akira would kill him while he was distracted. That absolutely could *not* be allowed to happen. Therefore, regardless of the victor, this battle had to reach its finale before then, lest it defeat the purpose of her coming here at all. She was only here to keep Katsuya alive.

Urgency now drove her to engage him at close quarters. She drew her own blade—the very same blade he had given her—then closed in on Akira to kill him. He'd probably never imagined at the time that she'd use it against him, and she felt guilty—but she didn't hesitate. Her blade stretched beyond her own height, and she swung it in a horizontal slash.

Akira dodged—and found himself facing a spray of gunfire. He was forced to use extremely demanding movements to evade, draining his energy. But now she was in range of his blade, so he attacked in turn. Their blades clashed, and for a moment, the recoil stunned Akira.

Bullets streaked toward him again, and again he had to resort to intense, energy-depleting moves just to dodge. Their blades sliced

the air all around them, yet Yumina never let up on her gun's trigger.

Not even twenty seconds had passed—but to both of them, it felt like several hours, during which time neither of them had let up for a single second.

Yumina had already pushed herself beyond the point that her support system could help her. The burden on her body was so extreme that it seemed like she was getting pounded into mincemeat, or that her insides were liquefying. She felt like she could faint on the spot, but she nonetheless poured every ounce of her talent, energy, and hopes into reaching Akira's level.

All to no avail.

This was the first time Yumina had ever upgraded her perception of the world to high definition, while Akira had done so several times by now. He was more familiar with the sensation, while she overexerted herself, reaching her limit far sooner.

Her movements grew much duller. And Akira didn't miss that opening, closing the distance to her in an instant.

He pierced his blade right through her heart.

Then he knocked the gun and blade out of her hands and, to seal her movements, embraced her.

Yumina didn't die right away. She'd ingested as many powerful meds as she could before this fight and so had barely survived. But death was only a matter of time as long as Akira's blade remained in her heart. Perhaps, had she removed the blade immediately, she could have pulled through, but Akira gave her no opportunity.

Yumina exhausted every last drop of strength to resist. But her powered suit was nearly drained of energy, thanks to her absurdly fast dodging, and she was far weaker now. Akira's blade had also punctured her suit's control device on the way to her heart, so her suit was malfunctioning. And with the extreme toll the battle had taken on her body, the meds she'd taken beforehand were already about to run out. So she lacked the power needed to throw him off.

And so, once her meds were depleted, she would die. She knew she was beyond saving now—and yet she couldn't help but smile. *I just wasn't good enough in the end, I guess. But at least I did all I could...right?* With that thought, a strange sense of satisfaction filled

her despite her defeat.

But at that moment, even while he was still embracing her, Akira pointed his gun at the room's entrance and fired—a warning shot to keep Katsuya's team, who'd finally arrived, from coming in.

A warning shot? But how? Wasn't Akira supposed to be out of ammo, or at least close to empty?

Hadn't that been why he'd used his blade? If he had ammo to waste on firing warning shots, he must have had the ammo to kill Yumina all along. So why hadn't he used it? Why resort to the blade instead?

Then it hit her. Akira so far outclassed Yumina that he'd had the luxury to *choose* the way he'd kill her. At that, she was aghast. *You've got to be kidding... There's no way! He was* that *powerful all along?!*

Yumina's suspicion was right on the money. Had Akira employed his C-bullets, they would have blasted her to pieces, not even leaving behind a corpse. She would have been cruelly reduced to scattered shreds of skin and flesh. And Akira didn't want to inflict such an end on her with his own hands. He still had to kill her either way, of course, so this choice was just for his own self-satisfaction in the end. Even so, he'd chosen to use his blade, and rather than slicing his opponent in half, he'd chosen a much cleaner stab through the heart.

I seriously underestimated him, Yumina lamented.

She'd once stopped Katsuya in his tracks by pointing her gun at him. She hadn't done so this time because she knew the rest of her team members would have held her down if she'd tried. Then they would have confined her and headed into the building without her to face off against Akira. So she'd chosen to fight Akira on her own instead.

But if Akira had been this capable all along, she should have made Katsuya retreat at all costs, even if it meant fighting both boys in the end. She felt deep regret over her mistake.

I'm sorry...Katsuya... I messed up...

The effect of her meds wore off completely, and darkness began to swallow her vision. As Akira continued to hold her close, Yumina's

short life met its end.

Her body went limp, and Akira realized she was dead. He gently laid her on the floor, then removed his blade from her corpse.

Nearby, Katsuya's tortured scream resounded off the walls. The support system had notified Yumina's team of her death.

◆

As Katsuya charged into the building to save Yumina, he prayed that his dear childhood friend would stay safe until he got there. But as a commander with a duty to his subordinates, he directed the rescue less like he was helping a friend and more as one backing up a comrade—and so, as leader, he stayed behind the front lines. Therefore, when Akira fired the warning shot at the hunters in the lead, Katsuya wasn't among them.

But then he received the notice of Yumina's death. Bellowing in despair, he charged ahead of everyone else straight into the room. He acted alone and gave no orders to the others, leaving them behind, past the doorway.

Inside the room, Katsuya and Akira stood opposite each other. Slowly, Katsuya's comrades filed into the room and took positions behind him. Still, no one moved to fight—so heavily did Yumina's death weigh on both boys.

Akira backed away from her slowly, as though giving Katsuya permission to approach. Katsuya walked up to her, got down on his knees, and hugged her corpse.

A silence followed—much too short to serve as mourning, yet much too long to be occurring right before a battle. Then Akira spoke.

"I'll let you live, so just go home."

Katsuya's voice was choked up with emotion. "Do you really think I can just go home after this?!"

In contrast to Akira's calm tone, Katsuya's was laced with fury, as though on the verge of exploding with anger.

"I guess not, huh?" Akira spat, feeling equal parts anger and relief. *It's exactly because you're like this that I ended up having to*

kill her! he thought, and that made him furious. But he was just as relieved, because if Katsuya and the others had actually given up and gone home, he would have killed Yumina for nothing.

And rising above both of those emotions was another one, much stronger than either. He *would* trample on Yumina's feelings. He would kill the boy she'd wanted to save so badly she'd paid with her own life.

He walked slowly to the side of the room. Katsuya quietly laid Yumina back on the ground, then followed him—were they to fight in the middle of the room, they might accidentally hit Yumina. Neither cared that she was already dead. Neither wanted to involve her in their fight. Without saying a word to each other, Akira and Katsuya came to an agreement and sought a different battleground.

They drew near the wall—and suddenly both boys sprang into action at exactly the same time.

Akira had killed many people up to this point, so he didn't feel any hesitation in doing so. But until now, he'd never killed someone he hadn't wanted to, even on the streets of the slums.

Katsuya, for his part, had saved many people up to this point. There were also those he hadn't had the power to save, and many more he'd let die; however, he and his comrades had come to terms with those deaths. But never before had any of those deaths included an irreplaceable childhood friend—never had it been someone he'd been together with as long as he could remember.

Akira and Katsuya fixed their gazes on each other. Whether directly or indirectly, each saw the boy in front of him as the reason for his own despair.

In the next instant, their anger exploded. Their bullets, charged with their resolve to kill each other, sailed across the small room in both directions.

Chapter 188: Desire's End

Akira's fight to the death with Yumina had concluded—his fight to the death with Katsuya and his cadre had begun. Unlike during his earlier clash, however, Akira couldn't have cared less if he blew his opponents to smithereens. So without hesitation, he unleashed his C-bullets as he dodged the enemy fire coming toward him.

Katsuya, spurred on by his rage toward Akira, had already committed to killing him the moment the battle had begun, even if it meant getting roughed up in the process—by nature, Katsuya never minded sustaining a few injuries for the sake of his comrades.

A ferocious firefight was thus unavoidable. Peppered with enemy fire, Akira found the bullets' impacts knocking him backward off his feet—and toward the exit, as he made sure to take the hits at the right angle. He seized his chance to escape into the hallway, then dashed down the corridor, firing behind him continuously as he ran to place as much distance between himself and the others as possible.

Shit! Just now, they coordinated their fire perfectly, trying to leave me nowhere to run. They're a better team than I expected. If I cross paths with them again, I'm as good as dead.

Usually, when a number of attackers fired simultaneously at the same person, their bullets would concentrate on one point, allowing the target to easily dodge to the side. But rather than training their guns directly on Akira, Katsuya's team had targeted points around him, hindering him from fleeing. Upon realizing this, Akira had immediately raised his suit's force-field armor to the max, and thankfully it had endured their dispersed shots.

That said, he hadn't made it through unscathed. His suit's armor had withstood the Kokurou's cannon fire only because the conditions at the time had favored him. Now, with Udajima's support, Katsuya and his team had been equipped with cutting-edge gear so as to

take down the nationalists. At least, that was the pretext—Udajima's true aim in upgrading the team's gear was so they'd win against Akira. So their guns all packed quite a punch—Akira's suit had drained nearly all of its remaining energy to defend against their shots, and it still hadn't been able to block them entirely.

Turning a corner to get out of the line of fire, Akira stuffed a handful of meds into his mouth, then hurriedly swapped out energy packs for his gun and suit.

"Dang, I'm down to my last energy pack?" *Now I have even less of a chance of making it out of here alive*, he thought with a grimace.

Even so, his determination didn't waver. He would seize even the slightest chance of victory—whatever it took to win. So rather than fleeing the building, he headed deeper in.

During his earlier fight with the waves of hunters, Akira had familiarized himself with the building's layout as best he could. This had included searching out positions that would give him an advantage against teams. So he headed to the nearest one he could think of.

He'd had to kill Yumina in order to survive, so he had absolutely no intention of dying here. It didn't matter how cornered he was—he wouldn't let her death be in vain.

As their fight began, Katsuya carefully observed Akira's movements. He saw the muzzle of the other boy's gun aimed perfectly at him and leaped backward, calmly calculating that Akira would have no trouble hitting him if he tried dodging to either side.

A moment later, Akira's C-bullets erupted from his gun. His energy tank was already nearly empty, so none of the bullets possessed the same power they had when he'd fought the Kokurou or the colossi. But each one still had the power to kill Katsuya if it struck home.

Yet none did. Katsuya's teammates raised their suits' force-field armor to maximum strength and stood in front of their leader, protecting him from Akira's assault. And Katsuya's backward leap allowed more of his comrades to serve as his shields. The C-bullets pierced through three rows but failed to penetrate the fourth—

Katsuya remained safe.

The rest of his team fired back, but Akira ducked out of the room before he could be killed.

The clash had lasted only an instant, yet Katsuya had already lost two comrades. One more was fatally wounded and about to die, and still another was severely injured. Seeing even more losses besides Yumina, Katsuya did not mourn—he grew furious.

"Blast that bastard! Everyone after him! He's going *down*!" Fueled by his desire to avenge Yumina, Katsuya led his team forward.

Deep down, he had the slightest feeling that something was off. But by now, that was hardly enough to stop him.

◆

The desperate battle between Akira and Katsuya's team raged on. Akira raced through the building, doggedly pursued all the way. But in terms of offense and defense, both sides were evenly matched, and neither could make much progress.

All Katsuya needed was for his whole company to gang up on Akira one more time. Such an ideal situation wasn't likely to occur now that Akira was actively trying to prevent it, but the more people who could attack Akira at once, the more likely they would be to defeat him.

Naturally, Akira was aware of this as well and was doing everything in his power to make sure the enemy couldn't make use of their numerical advantage. In fact, he led them into situations where their numbers put them at a *dis*advantage, like forcing them into narrow corridors and then turning his guns on the ones in front.

Then, all at once, four more enemies appeared, blocking the path ahead of him—an ambush! With Akira's way forward obstructed, it wouldn't take long for the team pursuing him from behind to catch up, leaving him surrounded.

So Akira dashed toward the four in front of him. The hall was narrow, but Akira still had room to evade their fire. Accurately estimating the trajectories of their bullets, he leaped off the walls and ceilings, dodging and closing in on the ambushers. Then he fired

C-bullets, charged so full they drained his gun's energy pack in no time flat. Within that brief instant, he took out three of his enemies as he ran toward them, his bullets piercing right through their force fields. Each death left fewer shots to dodge and allowed him to devote more attention to targeting those who remained. The last he killed when he was right on top of them—and a moment later, four headless corpses collapsed to the ground.

Akira removed the now-empty energy pack from his gun and was about to replace it when one of the headless corpses suddenly sprang into action, aiming for Akira with the gun in its hand—just as another body grabbed Akira's leg to trap him in place. The all-in-one support system was still controlling their powered suits.

For a surprise attack, this should have been quite effective—but it didn't work on Akira, who immediately dodged the shot, then kicked away the corpse holding his leg. He finished placing the new energy pack, then blasted the corpses' abdomens. The bullets pierced the bodies and destroyed suits' control systems. Now the corpses could no longer be manipulated. A couple more shots dealt with the other two before they, too, could start moving again.

A victory, but he couldn't afford to stay where he was. He had to keep moving. But first, he stopped to collect the spare energy packs from Katsuya's fallen comrades. His own packs had long been depleted; he'd been scavenging from defeated foes for some time now.

Weapons and gear meant for high-ranking hunters often came with strict authentication locks so that no one other than the owner or their teammates could use them. But consumable, widely available items like energy packs had no such restriction, and energy packs in particular were designed to be compatible with most weapons. So Akira could use them in his gun.

I mean, it's not like I never looted dead bodies when I was living in the slums, Akira thought with a wry smile. In fact, as he grabbed all the packs he could find at a glance and hurried off, he felt almost nostalgic.

◆

When Katsuya saw his headless comrades lying on the ground with massive holes blown in their torsos, he froze.

For Katsuya to stop running now, in the middle of his pursuit, meant that the very comrades he'd sent on ahead to cut Akira off, and who now lay before him, had died in vain. But he paused anyway—once again, he felt like something was severely wrong.

At first, his anger at Akira had let him ignore the uncomfortable sensation. But each time one of his comrades died, the feeling grew stronger. And now, seeing the sight before him, he wondered, *Have I made some terrible, fatal mistake here?* But when he reviewed everything in his head, he couldn't see what he'd done wrong—or even whether he *had* done anything wrong.

The support system had strongly urged him to retreat, but Katsuya had ignored it—after sacrificing so many of his comrades already, there was no way he was going to turn tail and escape on his own. Instead, he'd manually changed the system's settings to exclude the suggestion to fall back—no matter how injured he got in the process, he was determined to avenge Yumina and the rest of his team. What was so wrong about that, after all? So he had decided that the discomfort he was feeling was merely his hesitation to put his own life on the line for the sake of his teammates—in other words, cowardice.

Now barred from proposing retreat, the support system had determined that his unit's only other option for survival was to take Akira down regardless of how many losses the unit suffered. The system had thus formulated a strategy based on that premise, and Katsuya had gone ahead with it. Let him be one of those casualties himself, for all he cared—if it helped him kill Akira, he wouldn't hesitate!

He wanted to believe his thoughts and actions were his own. But were they really? The discomfort swelling within him was strong enough to make him doubt for a second—but a mere second wasn't enough to hold him back. He pressed onward, ordering his precious comrades to follow.

◆

Meanwhile, Akira was still running through the building when he detected a change in the readings behind him.

They sped up all of a sudden, he thought, frowning. *Going that fast, they won't be able to dodge my shots. What are they up to?* Thus far, Akira had been careful not to get surrounded, but if the enemy was just going to charge at him with all their forces, his best bet was to let them catch up and then attack them. Of course, they had to know this as well, which was why they'd been keeping their distance. Their sudden change in approach meant they were probably scheming something.

Even so, Akira couldn't just let them get close unhindered. He stopped, turned around, and raised his gun, ready for them to emerge from a T junction in the corridor. Then he checked his scanner.

They're not stopping? Are they really just going to charge into my line of fire?! Don't they know I'm just gonna slaughter their front line? Puzzled, he nonetheless attacked as soon as Katsuya and his team appeared around the corner.

His bullets hit home but didn't take any of them out. Every single person had maxed out their force-field armor with all their spare energy packs—in fact, the force fields were putting an excessive burden on the suits' wearers. But Akira wasn't intimidated—this just meant they would take more than one shot. As long as the impact of his bullets kept them from raising their weapons, he could just hold the trigger down until they were all dead.

However, at that moment, some of Katsuya's fighters stepped up to the front to shield their leader and comrades. With them in the way, Akira couldn't get a bead on Katsuya. But neither could those behind target him, and if Akira kept firing, he'd eventually pierce through the front lines and hit those behind, including Katsuya.

Then, contrary to all his expectations, the entire cohort of enemies opened fire at once—those in the front and those behind them alike. The impact of their combined shots blasted Akira backward.

Th-They shot me right through their teammates*?! And that's not all—the ones in the front row disengaged their force-field armor at*

the exact moment the back row fired! Why are they willing to go so far to get me?!

The thicker a shield was, the more it would slow any bullet passing through it. But sans their force-field armor, the hunters' powered suits might as well have been paper, and the barrage pierced straight through suit and flesh alike on the way to Akira.

And Akira had been so caught off guard that he hadn't had a chance to evade.

Still, he'd managed to raise his defenses in time. By maxing out his suit's force-field armor, he'd managed to survive, thanks in part to having already taken out a number of Katsuya's forces by this point and thus having much less firepower to contend with than at the battle's start. But the force of their coordinated attack slammed him against the wall so hard that he bounced off of it, and he was severely wounded.

He panicked in midair. At this rate, he'd hit the ground, leaving Katsuya and the others free to target him. *Shit! If they catch me now, I'm done for!* He desperately tried to flee, but he could tell his movements were more sluggish than before. He knew he wasn't going to make it.

And then, contrary to his expectations, he *did* make it. The moment he landed on the floor, he dashed into a corridor off to the side, making good his escape before anyone could shoot at him.

Wait, how the heck did I do that? This should have been their golden opportunity to finish me off! Did I manage to hit more of them than I thought, perhaps?

As mysterious as his survival might have been, however, he wasn't about to miss his chance. He ducked into a nearby room to take refuge.

◆

Katsuya, meanwhile, stood aghast.

What... What did I just do? I-I just killed my own comrade?! His gun fell from his hands, and he dropped to his knees. He'd been so incensed that he hadn't even realized what he was doing—and now

that he'd come to his senses, he couldn't believe what he'd done.

In his mind, he replayed all his recent actions. He was shocked that he'd done any of them—but he remembered doing them all, so he couldn't deny that the deeds were his. He recalled how he'd ordered his own comrades to shield him from Akira's gunfire—and how naturally he'd made the decision to sacrifice the very teammates he'd vowed to protect, even at the cost of his own life.

Katsuya's scream of despair echoed throughout the building.

As an Old Domain User, Katsuya had incorporated many of his acquaintances into his local network without being aware of it himself. This meant they were more likely to receive his will via telepathic messages and subconsciously sympathize with him. Having an entire network of people on his side had greatly contributed to his growth as a hunter.

But Katsuya had likewise been affected by them. Though he might have only been slightly influenced in this way, the larger his network had grown, the stronger their impact had become. And it was possible, if worse came to worst, for such a network to grow too large and even usurp the will of its transmitter.

In Katsuya's case, something very similar had happened the moment he had steeled himself and accepted Udajima's request to kill Akira so that he could save Sheryl. Back when the executive had met with him at Druncam's facility and had asked him to bring Akira in dead or alive, Katsuya hadn't made his choice on his own—those in Katsuya's local network who wished for him to rise higher and higher, and who longed for him to lead *them* to even greater heights in turn, had heavily influenced his decision to accept the job. So heavily, in fact, that not even the girl who aided Katsuya from the shadows, much as Alpha supported Akira, had been able to interfere.

Worried that at this rate Katsuya might be freed from her influence entirely and thus cause her trial to fail, the girl had manipulated his local network, making its members feel not merely camaraderie or sympathy toward Katsuya but a sense of identity, as though they and Katsuya were one and the same. This granted

Katsuya dominion over his local network once more.

Of course, the network's members thereby ran the risk of turning into his drones, and Katsuya himself could end up viewing them as a part of himself, but the girl didn't see this as a problem. After all, one might sacrifice the limbs for the head's sake, but not the head for the limbs. As long as the head, Katsuya, survived, she would sacrifice any number of limbs.

Members were removed from the local network upon their death. At that moment, Katsuya ceased to recognize them as himself, and saw them once again as his comrades. That was why he looked so pained and remorseful every time one of his teammates died, even though he himself had sent them to the slaughter. (When Katsuya had attempted to protect Yumina at Tiol's base, he'd done so because he'd recognized Yumina as a comrade requiring his protection—she wasn't a part of his local network. Otherwise, he would have seen her as himself, just like he did the other network members.)

Little by little, his view of himself and his network had been wavering. Thanks to the communication breakdown in the area, the girl could no longer interfere with the network. Yumina's death had also dealt a devastating blow to his mental state, and after losing so many members in such a brief span of time, the network had grown unstable. Thus, once the uncertainty had finally grown too intense for him to ignore, he'd snapped back to his senses.

Katsuya was now lucid for the first time in a long while. But he'd woken up in the middle of a tragedy he himself had created, and his clarity of mind made him all the more aware of what he had done.

Feeling the weight of his misdeeds, Katsuya might have gone insane right there on the spot—were it not for one comrade's voice.

"Katsuya! Get a hold of yourself!" Airi called desperately.

"A-Airi?"

Hearing her kept his sanity hanging by a thread. Then he remembered they were still in the middle of their battle with Akira. He'd lost many comrades, but he couldn't allow himself to get bogged down in self-pity when many more were still alive. His

number one priority was to make sure they all returned home safe.

He gritted his teeth. "Everyone, retreat! Airi, I'm passing control of the unit and the support system over to you! Lead them all to safety!"

"And what about you?" Airi asked.

"I'll stay behind and hold Akira back."

"No! If we're going to retreat, then you should also—!"

"*AIRI!*" he bellowed in anger, causing the girl to flinch. "Just... Just do as I say! Please, just get out of here!" Tears formed in his eyes. The only tenuous support for Katsuya's mental state right now was a single thought: *At least I can spend what remains of my life doing what I can to protect them.*

Sensing Katsuya's resolve, Airi couldn't find it in her to refuse. "All right. I'll get them out safely."

She led the rest of their comrades away. Watching them go, Katsuya felt a small sense of relief. This way, at least, he wouldn't get any more of them wrapped up in his fight.

◆

After taking a moment to catch his breath in the room where he was sheltering, Akira began thinking about what he should do next, torn over how to proceed.

With this, I've used the last of my meds. I've got enough energy packs to switch out if I need to, but I'm worried about the condition of my suit in general. What to do, what to do...?

He'd been on the run for quite some time. Perhaps he could try going on the offensive? Katsuya had largely been commanding his unit from the back, but Akira had noticed him stepping up to the front at the end there. Maybe this meant their unit was nearly worn out, so that their leader could no longer afford to hide behind them.

Akira also considered trying to escape the building. He didn't have his bike, so the anti-nationalist hunters would likely chase him down in their vehicles. That sounded bad, but might it be preferable to fighting Katsuya and the others in the building?

Or he could keep running like he had been—this had worked for

him so far, after all. He only needed to hold out until the comms in the area were restored.

Considering his options carefully, he decided, "Guess I'll keep moving around for now. I'm not sure why, but they don't seem to be following me like before."

His current hideaway was fine for a breather, but it wasn't suited for holing up in the long term. So once more, off he headed.

As he made his way through the corridors, Akira entered a room almost completely by coincidence. He just wanted to catch his breath again and had vaguely remembered a room near his location.

But it turned out to be the same place he'd killed Yumina. Her corpse was still lying on the floor. And Airi was there as well.

To Airi, Yumina had been special. If the hunters were going to retreat, she wanted to at least carry Yumina's body off with them. So after guiding everyone else to the entrance, she'd doubled back to this room on her own.

Neither Akira nor Airi had expected to meet the other person here. They both froze in surprise. The presence of Yumina's body on the floor kept them from launching into combat right then and there, but neither had any intention of letting the other live. The pause merely delayed their inevitable confrontation briefly.

Airi spoke first. "Just one request," she said. "No guns."

"Works for me," Akira said, putting his gun away and drawing his blade.

Airi likewise stowed her gun and pulled out a blade of her own. Then, at exactly the same time, they launched themselves toward each other.

Airi had several reasons for her request. First, she knew she couldn't win against Akira in a firefight—that much was clear based on their previous battles alone. If she wanted even the slightest hope of surviving a shoot-out with him, she'd need the rest of her team.

She guessed Akira knew this as well. But since Yumina was here on the floor, and he had shown himself reluctant to hit her with a

stray bullet, he might be willing to concede to a sword fight, which could increase her odds of winning. She wanted to kill him, if possible—to avenge Yumina, and also so that Katsuya, who'd clearly lost it and was in no shape to fight, didn't have to.

Moreover, she could tell Akira was considerably spent. If Katsuya pulled back now, Akira would eventually come after him, given his personality. Then they'd have to fight him again, but this time while he was at full strength—a truly hopeless scenario. Airi *had* to kill him here.

She wasn't about to waste this opportunity. She would go all out to defeat him.

They clashed in a flurry of slashes, each one meant to kill. Akira's blade was an Old World model, so it could penetrate Airi's powered suit with ease. Airi's blade, on the other hand, was of modern make, but it had an anti-force design that let it slice through force-field armor. As Akira's suit was already severely damaged, her blade had more than enough power to cut him.

Thus, both blades were equally capable of killing their targets—for each combatant, one delayed reaction or false move would spell their doom. Yet they swung their blades with nearly equal skill.

Had Akira been in peak condition, Airi would have already fallen. But the critically injured boy was approaching his limit—willpower and resolve alone weren't going to get him through this time. Yet at the same time, without these factors, he would have collapsed long before this. Though his self-reproach and regret over having killed Yumina might have been driving him, his willpower and resolve were the only things keeping him on his feet right then.

If I'm going to let myself die here, I might as well have let Yumina kill me. Therefore, I can't die. And so on he fought, desperately.

Both of them had the ability to win against the other. But Airi was used to working on a team, whereas Akira was accustomed to fighting alone—and this ended up being the deciding factor. They each realized that they wouldn't hold out much longer if they didn't finish their opponent off soon, and so both lunged forward and put

everything they had into one final, mighty, lightning-fast attack. But one came out on top.

Akira's blade bisected the control system of Airi's powered suit—and her heart. As she finished her strike, she collapsed to the ground.

She didn't die immediately. But she was beyond saving, and there was no hope of her winning now. As she sank into the pool of her own blood, she called Katsuya's name in her head one final time.

I'm sorry, Katsuya... I couldn't do it.

And at her call, he appeared before her eyes. It was just an image, of course—he wasn't actually there in front of her. But she *was* really seeing him—the local network had transmitted a live feed of Katsuya into her vision.

He was running desperately to save her. Extreme grief filled his face—he must have sensed that she was on the verge of dying. Death went hand in hand with the hunter profession; hunters had to get used to their comrades, friends, and acquaintances dying on them. Airi had known that even her closest companions were no exception, and that she herself could die at any time.

But if she had to die, she wanted Katsuya to grieve for her. She wanted to know that she'd at least left a mark on his life. This was her greatest desire: she didn't want him to treat her like just another dead hunter—she longed for him to *miss* her.

Thanks to the instability in the local network, Airi no longer saw herself and Katsuya as the same entity. And so, right before she died, she was able to remember her wish.

He really is grieving for me, she thought. *Thank goodness!*

Satisfied that her ultimate wish had been granted, Airi breathed her last.

◆

After the rest of his team departed, Katsuya remained where he was. He'd told them he was going to stop Akira, but his true goal was just to buy time until his teammates finished escaping. He had no need to actually kill Akira. Let the other boy keep running from

him like he'd been doing! Even if Akira attacked him first, Katsuya just had to stay here and fend him off so as to protect the other hunters. Thus, he stayed put until the support system informed him that his comrades had made it out of the building.

Good! Now I'll have the hunters outside stop surrounding the building, and— Wait, where's Airi?

Realizing that she wasn't among the teammates who'd escaped, he checked her position.

Oh, Airi... You're going after Yumina, aren't you?

Imagining how she must be feeling right then, he didn't have the heart to tell her to get out of there immediately. In fact, he wondered if maybe he should go and help her out—or should he look for Akira instead?

Then, as he remained indecisive, he received the notification that Airi had engaged in combat with Akira.

He ran to her location as fast as he could.

But he didn't make it in time.

He hadn't been able to save Yumina—and now he'd lost Airi as well. He was supposed to have been protecting them both, even at the cost of his life, and he'd failed. His grief was so overwhelming that he wouldn't have minded dying on the spot.

Under his extreme mental anguish, his local network ceased to function. Completely free from the network's influence, feeling for the first time like he was alone in the world, he came to a realization.

Slowly, he began walking forward. It was time to put an end to what he'd foolishly started.

◆

Katsuya appeared so vulnerable in front of Akira that the latter didn't even raise his weapon, simply letting the other boy approach. For some reason, this time Akira didn't feel the bizarre sense of irritation he normally felt whenever Katsuya was nearby. Even more strangely, he didn't even sense any hostility from Katsuya as the latter walked up to Akira with barely audible footsteps.

When Katsuya spoke, his voice was similarly quiet. “I think I already know the answer, but it won’t hurt to ask. Any chance that you’ll surrender?”

Akira hesitated before answering. “No.”

“No matter what?”

“Not at all. Otherwise...” He paused. “I’ll have killed Yumina for nothing.”

“Oh... I see.”

Silence reigned.

Then Akira spoke. “What about you? Will you retreat?”

Katsuya, too, hesitated. “I can’t.”

“No matter what?”

“If I do, well, I’ll have let my comrades die for nothing. I can’t turn back now.”

“Gotcha.”

There was an odd sort of mutual understanding between them as each realized, *In that case, there’s no avoiding this.*

Katsuya looked at the fallen girls. Then he tossed his gun away and drew his blade. He’d immediately picked up on the fact that Airi hadn’t been wielding her gun, nor had Akira used his to kill her.

Akira followed suit and held his blade ready. There was no longer any hatred, jealousy, anger, hostility, or murderous intent between them. But if neither was going to retreat, they had no choice but to fight each other—to end a quarrel that they’d never intended to get so out of hand.

Akira and Katsuya stepped forward as one and swung their blades.

An unwitting Old Domain User, as a child Katsuya had influenced everyone around him, and had in turn been influenced by everyone around him. In the orphanage, the children—who’d lost their parents, guardians, and systems of support—had leaned on Katsuya as their anchor, and Katsuya had met their expectations. They’d thanked him, praised him, and wanted even more from him. So he’d met *those* expectations. The cycle had continued until all of the children were naturally dependent on him.

When Katsuya had left the orphanage and become a hunter, many more people started expecting greater things from him. And Katsuya had enough natural talent to meet all of their hopes. The hunter profession was extremely dangerous. Katsuya didn't want to die, but neither did he want to let down those he'd already saved and who had praised him. And as the hunter environment was so unforgiving, his fellow hunters counted on that much more from him. "You'll save me next time too, right? You'll get us out of this, right? You'll lead us all to victory, fame, and fortune, won't you?"

For as long as he could remember—long enough that the burden had come to feel completely natural—Katsuya had shouldered the expectations, hopes, and desires of everyone around him. And of course, he hadn't minded. Each time he'd had a comrade rely on him, or received praise or gratitude from someone whose life he'd saved, he'd genuinely felt happy. So he'd continued to chase that high. But in the end, he'd just been granting the wishes of others, not his own. He was always one to put them first before himself.

This was why he'd been so fixated on Sheryl. For the first time in his life, he'd felt a desire he could truly call *his*—a longing to get closer to her. No one had asked him to. No one expected him to. No one wanted him to. He, and he alone, had decided it. It was the first time Katsuya had ever felt anything resembling greed—and it swallowed him whole.

Now, free for the moment from his network's influence, Katsuya could view himself objectively for the first time in what felt like forever. He beheld someone who had allowed his avidity to tempt him into letting everyone around him die. And so he had sought out Akira in the hope of finding atonement.

Akira and Katsuya attacked with all their might, their blows equal in power. But there was a crucial difference between each boy's mindset—one didn't care if he died, while the other was determined to survive.

And that difference decided the outcome of their battle. Only one attack reached its target.

Katsuya's blade fell from his hand. "Hah..." he wheezed. "So, in

the end...I wasn't good enough, was I? Guess I should have...expected as much..."

He crumpled to the ground. A pool of scarlet spread out around him. In his waning vision, he saw Yumina—saw the moment she had been poised to head to Iida with Akira, right before he'd refused her outstretched hand. He realized that if he'd taken her hand back then, she and Airi wouldn't have had to die. Though it was now far too late, he realized he'd made the wrong choice.

A sad smile formed on his lips. *Yumina... Airi... I'm...*so *sorry...*

Thus, just before his consciousness faded for good, Katsuya had a fleeting vision of a future in which he'd made the right choice. And he died with the regret of not having made that vision a reality.

Katsuya, Yumina, Airi—on the same day, in the same place, all three had become hunters. And now, on the same day, in the same place, all three had met their end.

Akira, the sole survivor, walked out of the room, abandoning his sentiments there. Behind him, three corpses lay on the ground, lined up neatly in a row and resting in peace.



Chapter 189: Duty and Life

Akira's fight against Katsuya's team had ended, but he wasn't out of the woods just yet. The other hunters still had the building surrounded, and Akira himself was nearly at his limit. His body and mind just wanted him to pass out so he could rest, but he forced himself forward with sheer willpower.

I guess I could at least hide somewhere and take a breather, he thought.

But the moment he left the room, he felt a presence right beside him. According to his scanner, no one should have been there. Startled, he swung his Old World blade on reflex.

But his slash was blocked laughably easily. He gasped.

"It has been some time since our last meeting, hasn't it?" Tsubaki said with a smile, holding his blade between her middle and index fingers. "Don't worry, I'm not here to fight you."

She let go of his blade. Akira was bewildered, but put his weapon away. He was surprised that she'd stopped his attack so casually, but even more baffled at Tsubaki herself, appearing as she had out of nowhere. Back in her Old World city, he recalled, the AI had looked extremely put out with Alpha. And now that he was no longer connected to Alpha, she had reappeared in front of him.

He wasn't sure how he ought to treat her.

Tsubaki handed him a capsule. "You look awfully exhausted. Use this—it should help."

"Uh... Thanks, I guess," he replied awkwardly, but accepted the capsule and put it in his mouth. The next instant, he was hit with a splitting headache—but once it subsided, he felt as good as new. His pain and fatigue were gone without a trace, and his mind was crystal clear. *Old World meds really can't be beat*, he thought, sighing with relief.

"How do you feel now?" she asked.

"Oh yeah, right—much better."

"I'm glad to hear that," she said, smiling once more.

How radically different her behavior was from when they'd first met! Akira was amazed.

Tsubaki didn't seem to mind his wariness toward her at all, though. "Let's go somewhere else, shall we? I want to talk business, and a place like this is hardly ideal."

"U-Um, but I..."

"Don't worry. As long as you're talking to me, I guarantee you'll be safe."

"O-Okay." Tsubaki wasn't giving him the option to refuse, so he obediently followed her.

Along the way, he spotted the destroyed body of a cyborg lying in the corridor, but there was no way he could have known it had belonged to Nelgo.

Once they reached the roof of the building, Tsubaki looked out at the ruined landscape and began speaking. "Look at this view! Isn't it just miserable? Such is the fate of most precincts with no AI or management to govern them. How unsightly! Do you remember what *my* territory looked like? What a world of difference it was from this dilapidated ruin? Its pristine condition was all thanks to my tireless upkeep."

"Y-Yeah, I remember." Akira was a hunter—that is, in the war between the Old and New Worlds, he stood on the same side as those who had ravaged the landscape he was looking at. Interpreting Tsubaki's words as caustic, disguised reproach, he looked uncomfortable, and his voice came out slightly higher than he'd meant it to. "So, wh-what business were you wanting to discuss?"

"Yes, no need to beat around the bush, is there? The truth is, I've been wanting to expand my precinct for quite some time now, and I'd like your assistance. Naturally, you'll be compensated suitably. And so I have come here to negotiate those terms with you."

"O-Oh. In that case, I'm sorry, but I'm going to have to refuse."

"No need to make a decision immediately," she rejoined. "I'll

grant you plenty of time to think about it. Shall I not at least tell you the details of the assignment and what you stand to gain thereby? Then you can ask me whatever questions you have and come to your decision. I swear to you that I will answer honestly, if answer I can. Take all the time you need, then, to weigh the pros and cons."

Akira was torn. He knew Tsubaki was being perfectly reasonable, but he felt like this matter was something he shouldn't decide on his own without Alpha (and because it was Tsubaki he was talking to, he didn't think there was anything wrong with mentioning Alpha). "A-Actually, that's not the sticking point. Thing is, I've already accepted a job from Alpha, so I'd feel wrong doing the same for you without talking to her about it first. But since we're not connected right now, I can't exactly ask her..."

"Isn't that ideal, though?" Tsubaki said. "Think about it: this is the perfect opportunity for you! She can't hear anything you're saying right now. Worry not, she'll never know—I guarantee it."

Akira detected something disquieting in Tsubaki's tone. "And how can you say that for sure?" he said, his eyes narrowing warily.

"Because with the communication interference in this area, you'll never be able to connect to her."

"Except it'll probably get fixed any minute now," Akira objected.

"Except it won't."

"And why is that?"

"Because I caused the interference."

Akira's mouth dropped open in shock. "So all this was *your* fault!" he nearly shouted out, but he restrained himself, merely scowling a bit. Instead, he said, "Look, I realize you probably had your reasons, but if possible, I'd like you to remove that interference."

"I refuse," she said with a smile.

Akira's scowl deepened. But that was all he could do. It was already clear to him he would have absolutely no chance of victory if they fought. And since he and the rest from the Kugamayama City environs had shown up in her territory uninvited, she'd probably set up the interference as a defensive measure against the city's forces. He couldn't very well tell her to disengage her defenses when he was one of the trespassers.

"It's been quite some time since you've been free from her surveillance, hasn't it?" she pressed. "If I were you, I'd take advantage of this precious time by using it wisely and efficiently."

"'*Precious'?* I nearly died without her help!"

"Relax. While you're negotiating with me, I guarantee your safety. And if you accept my proposal, I promise you security even beyond that, as just a small part of your reward."

"And if I refuse, you'll kill me, right?"

"No, of course not! I'll just disappear and leave you here to fend for yourself—which is really no different, I'll admit, but I do have various restrictions and regulations I must abide by, you see. Therefore, if it's not part of the terms of our negotiation, I can't escort you back to Kugamayama City. You understand, I'm sure."

"Hmm." Akira felt conflicted. It seemed like Tsubaki was trying to negotiate with him reasonably and fairly, but he didn't feel he could just nod and agree. At the same time, he knew he wouldn't last long in his current situation without help. And now that he was aware Tsubaki had brought the comms down, he couldn't count on waiting until they were restored. Most of all, he wasn't confident he could make it back to the city on his own.

I guess I could at least hear her out... Or maybe say I'll listen to her if she agrees to take me back to the city? No, that won't work. Judging from her attitude, she wants to close this deal while I'm not connected to Alpha, I bet. He knew seeking to persuade Tsubaki would be safer than trying to head back to the city himself, so he started thinking about how he could convince her. But Akira had never been a master negotiator to begin with, so no good ideas came to mind.

Tsubaki interpreted the look on his face quite differently. "If you're worried that making a deal with me and annulling your arrangement with her will lead her to seek revenge on you, you could state in your terms that I will help you break ties with her as peacefully as possible."

Akira looked surprised by her suggestion. Sensing she now had some leverage to work with, Tsubaki's smile widened.

But then Akira responded firmly, "Sorry to disappoint you, but I

don’t plan on annulling my arrangement with Alpha. If you want me to accept your offer, you’ve got to let me talk to her first. That’s nonnegotiable.”

This time it was Tsubaki’s turn to look surprised. Then she said, puzzled, “With all due respect, that woman is merely a foreign entity to you—just something beyond your understanding who calls herself Alpha, nothing more. You’re afraid of her power and what she’s capable of, aren’t you? So ask me about her *true* identity. I’ll answer to the best of my ability.”

“Her true identity? To be honest, I *am* really curious. But I’m not very good at playing dumb. So I won’t ask.”

Tsubaki looked even more baffled. “I just don’t understand. At present, you shouldn’t have any reason to prioritize her request over mine.”

“I guess I’m just stubborn like that. Look, I’m not asking you to understand anyway, so don’t worry about it.”

“May I at least ask why you feel that way?”

“I owe so much to Alpha,” he said. “So to repay my debt, I want to prioritize completing her request as best I can. That’s really all there is to it. Although sometimes I get a little distracted and prioritize other things... Then Alpha scolds me,” he added with a small smile.

Tsubaki looked at him seriously. “A debt, you say? But is it really the debt you consider it to be? She’s got her own motives, and she’s using you for her own purposes. Rather than helping you survive, wouldn’t it be more correct to say she’s putting you in danger for her own benefit?”

“Well, perhaps,” Akira agreed. In fact, he’d long since suspected that when he and Alpha had first met and he’d been attacked by weapon dogs, Alpha herself had led the dogs to him—probably testing him to see whether he would really follow her orders. And later in Mihazono, when he’d first “lost contact” with Alpha, he’d guessed after the fact that she’d never actually gotten disconnected from him—or if she had, only for a very brief period. She’d probably just disappeared from his sight and removed her support, as she had when he’d been training in Yonozuka. Otherwise, she couldn’t have

come back with such perfect timing during his fight with Monica. Most likely, it had all been a ruse to get him to realize how much he needed her support. Now that Akira had experienced how being disconnected from her truly felt—after the hypersynthetic snake had swallowed him, and again now—he could tell when she'd been faking it.

So Akira clearly knew Alpha wasn't always entirely honest with him. "Then why decline my offer?" Tsubaki asked.

"Because she's done so much to help me that it cancels out the bad stuff," he said with another small smile. "I still owe her greatly."

It was clear from her expression that Tsubaki wasn't satisfied with that answer, so he continued.

"Before I met her, I was just some slum rat. Just another one of those kids who head to a ruin seeking fame and fortune as a hunter and get themselves killed." He reflected for a moment on his behavior back then. "But thanks to Alpha's support, I've gotten capable enough to be here, with you offering me a job. That's pretty strong! I've gained so much power since that time—and accumulated that much more debt to Alpha along the way. You wouldn't have ever come to talk with me like this if I'd never met Alpha, would you?"

"I won't deny that. But I think you're failing to realize something. The biggest reason you've come as far as you have is your perseverance in the face of death, not to mention your tireless efforts to improve. *She* helped, of course, but only to the extent it helped her too. Why should you feel indebted to someone like that?"

"Maybe you're right. But that's simply how important she is to me—just how I feel. Like I said, I'm not asking you to understand."

"Even if she ends up controlling your life for you?"

"Hey, she *already* controls my life. After all, if I hadn't met her, I'd have died long ago." Akira had experienced one harrowing event after another ever since meeting Alpha. But he'd never once wished he hadn't met her. He'd never once wanted to be dead instead. "Alpha has given me so much as an advance for her job, and even now, I've still got a long way to go until I'm ready. I haven't been able to pay her back one bit so far for all she's done. I might think

otherwise if she told me she didn't need repayment, but at the very least, I'm not one to skimp out on returning what I owe. That's what it comes down to in the end." He smiled.

At that, Tsubaki's expression softened. "You really do have a strong sense of duty, don't you?"

"For us dirt-poor weakling slum rats, our duty and our lives are really all we've got to offer."

"You say that, but those actually prepared to offer such things are surprisingly few and far between. More often than not, people just squander them." She suddenly grinned, looking surprisingly cheerful. "All right, then, I understand. I don't want to upset you by dragging this out any longer. It's a pity, but I yield."

In the next instant, Alpha reappeared by Akira's side. Tsubaki had lifted the communication block.

Akira! Are you okay?!

"Alpha?" Shocked, Akira turned to look at Tsubaki.

Tsubaki just smiled knowingly. Alpha gave her a piercing glare, but Tsubaki ignored it. "Well then, I'm off. Akira, if you ever change your mind, you know where to find me. I'll be waiting." She turned on her heel and walked away. But after only a few steps, she turned back around with an impish grin. "Oh, and by the way, since our negotiations are over, my guarantee of your safety ends here. You'll have to manage without my help from now on, I'm afraid. Farewell!" Still smiling, she switched on her active camouflage and disappeared from sight.

Immediately, a deafening roar resounded from below.

"Wh-What was that?"

The building began to shake. *Something*—the source of the roar—was scaling the side of the structure at high speed.

It reached the roof, and its form came into view.

There rose a gangly-looking colossus—a massive ten meters high, with ten slender arms protruding from its body. The multisegmented arms sprouted not just from its shoulders but from all over its back. One had morphed into a giant cannon. The creature looked vaguely humanoid—but closer to a monster than a person.

The behemoth roared again, its voice terribly inhuman. It almost

sounded like speech, but it was so unintelligible that no one could have comprehended it.

Except for Akira. As he'd already received the colossus's telepathic messages before, he immediately realized that the creature was shouting his name.

Before Akira was Tiol—or rather, what remained of him.

◆

After having the impostor Akira lure the hunters away from his base, Tiol slipped away and headed to the building the real Akira had holed up in. His sharp senses served as a built-in scanner, and he was able to observe the situation from a distance while avoiding the hunters who were staking out the building.

Eavesdropping on their conversations, Tiol was horrified to hear that Akira had taken out nearly every hunter who had charged in. He couldn't believe his ears—even after Akira had exhausted himself in battle with Tiol, he *still* had the skill and stamina to kill all of his attackers? Well, surely Katsuya and his team would be victorious. And so, placing his last hope in them, he watched with bated breath as the events inside the structure unfolded.

So intently was he focused that he failed to notice a nearby monster heading in his direction. But it came from Zone 1, so it posed no threat to him anyway. When the creature got close enough for Tiol to finally register it, he just shooed it away, irritated, as though ordering it to leave him alone.

The beast did.

By the time Tiol realized his mistake, it was too late. Though the hunters were mostly paying attention to the situation inside the building, they were seasoned professionals, constantly vigilant of their surroundings and ready to take notice of the presence of a nearby monster. And when they turned in the direction of the threat, they saw Tiol waving the monster away with his hand.

The hunters knew of only one group capable of pulling that off—the nationalists they were supposed to exterminate. They immediately pulled their guns on Tiol. "He's from the Alfoto Party!

Get him!”

Caught off guard, Tiol shot back in a panic. Their firefight only lasted an instant, but Tiol won, thanks to his drastically modified body boosting his skill. Even so, he hadn’t been able to avoid a fatal wound.

“Shit...” he cursed, struggling to keep himself upright. Determined to avoid death at any cost, he made his way over to the monster’s corpse—collateral damage from his clash with the hunters—and reached out his left arm. His arm’s gaping mouth devoured the monster’s body.

Tiol didn’t like doing this, as it reminded him he was no longer human. Thus, despite their immense size, he’d had his giant terminals fight like humans for the most part, using human weapons. Even when he himself had been a colossus, he had avoided mutating during his fight against Akira until he’d had no other choice. But mutating was certainly preferable to dying, and here was a handy creature available.

His original body, altered by Yatsubayashi’s genius engineering and Tsubaki’s Old World technology, could undergo rapid transformations safely. But his terminals didn’t have Tsubaki’s tech installed in them—and it completely slipped his mind that at present, his consciousness was merely being transmitted into one of these. So when he attempted to force his body to mutate, it went berserk, turning into a grotesque abomination. This time, the reaction was even more severe than when a monster had nearly killed him during Yatsubayashi’s clinical trial, and because the system inside him had long since invaded his consciousness, his mind, too, became as unstable as his body’s appearance.

Hearing the commotion, more hunters gathered around him. But Tiol’s desire to at least *appear* human had been holding him back—and with those shackles now removed, he was more than a match for any hunters who’d struggled against his terminals back at his base. Emitting a roar that no human vocal cords could possibly produce, his mind so overrun by the system that he couldn’t even remember his own name, Tiol easily slaughtered them all.

During their conversation on the building's summit, Tsubaki had kept herself and Akira camouflaged from sight. As soon as she disengaged the camouflage, Tiol spotted Akira on the roof and scrambled furiously up the walls to reach him. Amid his hazy, jumbled consciousness, overtaken by the system, one thought held him prisoner—Akira's death would make everything work out! If he could just get rid of the other boy, he could finally make his wish come true—even if he could no longer remember what that wish was.

◆

Now that Akira's connection to Alpha had been restored at long last, the sight of Tiol clambering up the building only made him grin. *All right, Alpha! Sorry for putting you to work right after you've come back and all, but let's save the chitchat for later! Right now, I want you to help me finish this guy off for good.*

Alpha looked taken aback for a moment, but then gave him her usual confident smile. *Sure thing. Leave it to me!*

Akira held his blade and gun at the ready. Even with Alpha's support, he knew his life was on the line. But he'd risked it over and over by now, and Alpha had helped him get through every single time. So he felt no need to be anxious.

Swinging its countless fists, the colossus Tiol delivered a relentless flurry of punches. Each strike was quick, heavy, and extremely powerful. But Akira wove through them all, correctly anticipating where they would pass and dodging so precisely that each punch missed him by only a hair's breadth. At the same time, he swung his blade back and forth. Though Tiol's arms looked thin compared to the rest of his body, they were still as thick as tree trunks—yet Akira lopped them off one by one like so many twigs.

Several more of Tiol's arms had transformed into giant cannons and were firing shells at Akira even as he fought back. Employing such ordnance at close range would damage Tiol too, but the combination of his punches and the relentless barrage kept Akira from escaping. So he didn't hesitate, firing multiple shells at once. A

single massive explosion followed. Several of Tiol's limbs got blasted off, and the front of his body was singed—but his unyielding body was built for enduring such powerful attacks to begin with.

And yet Akira dodged them all, shells and arms alike. Alpha had flipped his awareness into its high-definition mode, allowing him to accurately perceive each and every one of Tiol's attacks and avoid them with perfect timing.

Once most of Tiol's limbs were gone, the monstrosity collapsed face down on the ground. Akira looked wary, unsure whether he'd really finished Tiol off this time. *Whew, that was pretty tough, huh? If I hadn't had your support, Alpha, I probably wouldn't have survived. But it's really over now, right?*

Not quite yet—look!

Reptilelike legs sprouted out of Tiol's abdomen on both sides. A crack appeared at the top of his head and ran down it, then split vertically to form a gaping, fanged maw. Seeing this grotesque display, Akira couldn't help but grimace.

Ew! What the hell?!

This monster's probably been altered for absorption, like a glutton croc, Alpha observed.

Does it have a weak point?

Most likely, but now that it's mutated to this degree, we'll have to search for it. Given the way it looks now, surely you don't think merely blowing off its head will suffice to kill it?

No, I guess not. Akira sighed. *I wonder if it's my fault for beheading him the first time around. He probably realized such an obvious weak point would make him easier to take down.*

Alpha gave him a questioning look, as though she wanted to ask him what had happened.

But he shook his head. *Never mind that. Are we even capable of killing him? Maybe I should just make a run for it.*

Oh? If you think you can't handle it and want to flee, I won't stop you, Alpha said smugly.

Well, that depends on whether your support is good enough! he said, grinning right back. *If it's too much for* you*, I'd better hightail it outa here.*

Oh, now you've said it! We're doing this. Prepare yourself, Akira!

When am I not *prepared?*

At that moment, Tiol's massive jaws snapped dangerously close to Akira, even as they continued to grow. Akira raised his gun and opened fire, refusing to let up. He was nearly out of C-bullets and running dangerously low on energy, but thanks to Alpha, who was distributing the energy to his bullets extremely efficiently, each shot hit Tiol with optimal force, annihilating huge chunks of his massive body. But Tiol didn't flinch and kept approaching. Darting at Akira with such speed that it was hard to believe he was merely crawling, his fanged head, already the size of a small car, lunged at Akira to devour him.

Holding his blade high above him, Akira leaped at the creature. Just as its jaws snapped shut, swallowing him, he swung downward with all his might. The Old World blade bisected the head from the inside. Then, blowing open a hole through which to escape, he leaped out of the remnants of Tiol's mouth and landed behind him.

Well, I destroyed the head. Now what?

At that moment, brand-new arms reared up from Tiol's back, each with a hand brandishing a gun—imitations of the gear from the hunters he'd devoured earlier. Akira immediately opened fire once more, again while delivering quick slashes with his blade. He severed Tiol's arms and shot down his guns.

I knew *that wouldn't be enough to kill him! Alpha, any luck in finding his weak point?*

Not yet, alas. Each time he mutates, anything that could have been a vulnerability changes along with him.

As he attacked even more arms that were sprouting from Tiol's back, his face became grim. *Then what should we do? At this rate, we'll be fighting him forever!*

"Akira! Get away from there!" came a sudden voice over his comms. The warning caught Akira off guard, but he obeyed and leaped away from Tiol's back. The next moment, powerful bullets streaked through the air and struck Tiol in quick succession. Akira turned to find out where they'd come from and saw a transport plane speeding toward them from the direction of the forward base.

On board were Elena and Sara, their guns raised and ready to fire again.

The two women had been planning to take a trip to the ruins, in part to distance themselves from the commotion regarding the nationalists, but when Akira had turned down their offer to join them, they'd changed their minds and postponed their expedition. Not long after, greatly concerned about the situation developing in Zone 1, Kugamayama City had deployed several of the city's high-ranking hunters to stand by at the forward base in case of an emergency. Elena and Sara were among these.

While on standby at the forward base, they had been approached by Inabe. The city executive had hired them to retrieve Akira but had been tight-lipped with the details. Even so, the women had immediately accepted his request. Inabe had provided them with the plane and they'd taken off to go rescue Akira. Upon approaching his location, they'd seen him fighting a huge monster on the roof of the building and had quickly prepared to support him.

"Elena?! Sara?!" Akira cried out in surprise.

Grinning at the shock in his voice, Elena answered without letting up her assault on the beast. "Hey, Akira! The city hired us to come pick you up! But looks like we gotta take care of this thing first!"

Both women wielded enormous guns that could easily reduce any Zone 1 monster to mincemeat. And with their combined firepower, Elena had been confident they could take out any creature Akira was up against. But she'd been naive. Even after taking their barrage, Tiol was still standing. He trained newly formed arm cannons right on their vehicle.

"Oh, shit!" Elena yelled. "It's still moving?!"

Indeed, he was. Yet their attacks had damaged him severely. Struggling to keep his balance, he could no longer aim properly. Each shell missed the vehicle by a wide margin, toppling a distant building instead.

Seeing the sheer power his artillery packed, Elena grimaced, then turned to Sara with a forced smile. "All right, Powerhouse—now's the time to show off!"

"Roger that!" Sara said, her look just as strained. "I didn't think we'd be up against something *this* tough, though. Hey, Akira! This might take a bit longer than we thought, so just hang tight up there!"

Akira might have surpassed them both in ability and hunter rank, but they had no intention of dragging him down. They *would* show him that they were capable of partnering with him whenever he needed it. And they put all their resolve into bombarding Tiol.

Now that Akira had Elena and Sara backing him up, Alpha smiled. *Okay, time to wrap this up!*

Really?! You found his weak point?

No, but with those two around, we've got options. And we wouldn't want to keep them waiting, so we ought to finish this while we can. Elena's and Sara's gunfire, Alpha added, was incredibly powerful. So as their weapons still weren't enough to take down Tiol, he was probably being supplied with energy from a remote source. Thus, they needed to exterminate him before further mutations helped him absorb and utilize that energy more efficiently.

Gotcha. Then we really ought to make this quick, huh?

Yes, but it's going to be a little tricky. Are you ready?

Of course! I mean, you said it yourself. Resolve is my burden to shoulder, right?



Akira held his blade ready, and as Alpha deliberately overcharged it with energy, it transformed into a blade of light. Seeing this, Tiol abandoned his attack on the plane and mutated his large arm cannon even further. He sensed that artillery shells alone weren't enough to finish Akira off, and so he focused his energy into his cannon, evolving it into a glowing sword as well.

The two figures faced each other, and though one was far larger than the other, with far longer reach, they swung their swords as one. Behind Akira was his Alpha-augmented powered suit—behind Tiol, the extraordinary strength his monstrous body granted him. Their blades—energy molded with force fields into sharp weapons—clashed together. And Akira's weapon severed Tiol's, which crumbled and dissipated.

Some Old World items could mysteriously continue to function even without a local power source. There were various reasons for this, varying from relic to relic, but sometimes they drew energy in some way from a remote source instead. Akira's sword could do something similar. However, in order for it to draw energy from a remote source, its wielder first needed to be authorized by said source—and Alpha had obtained for Akira the necessary authorization. Thus his blade had briefly gained access to an overwhelming amount of energy—even before Alpha had overcharged it, turning the weapon into an extremely powerful beam of light.

Akira slashed down, slicing right through not just Tiol but the entire building on which they stood. The energy leaking from his weapon scorched Tiol's body. At long last, Akira's enemy had met his end.

For Tiol had no more terminals to transfer his consciousness into. Once his current body died, he would expire along with it. But just before he perished, he regained his senses for a fleeting moment.

Wait... Come to think of it, what was I even fighting for in the first place?

He knew he'd had some extremely important motive, otherwise he wouldn't have been so determined to win. Then, at the very last

second, he remembered.

Right... Sheryl...

And so Tiol passed, remembering the name of his beloved even before he recalled his own.

Akira fell to his knees. *Alpha... That did it, right?*

Yes, it did. You won!

Thank...goodness... Akira looked at his hands. The raw energy from the blade of light had burnt them both black. The blade had incinerated itself without a trace, hilt and all. *I can't really move my hands, though. Man... Hope the body inside this suit isn't just as banged up as the suit itself.*

You'll be fine.

You sure?

Yes. You're going straight home now, after all.

Yeah, guess so, he said with a tired smile.

Elena and Sara landed the plane on the roof and hurried over to him.

"Akira! Are you all right?!" Sara cried.

Seeing the worry on her face, Akira tried to sound lighthearted. "Actually, if you could just get me a pillow, I'm ready to pass out right here."

His thin attempt at humor did *not* mollify or reassure her. The crease in her brow deepened, and she lifted him with both hands and carried him to the plane. "Let's fly, Elena! We need to hurry."

"W-Wait, Sara!" he insisted. "I can walk on my own!"

"Quiet," she said, loading him onto the aircraft.

The plane took off at once. Lying on a long bench seat in the back, Akira tried to take the box of medicine Elena passed him. But he couldn't move his hands properly and ended up dropping it on the floor. Looking stern, Elena picked up the box and held a pill to his mouth.

With a smile that seemed to say, "Don't you dare refuse," she told him, "All right, say 'Aah!' One word of complaint, and I'll just cram them all in your mouth. Capisce?"

"Y-Yes, ma'am." Akira obediently let Elena feed him.

When she judged he'd swallowed enough capsules that his life wouldn't be in danger, her expression finally softened. "For crying out loud, what am I going to do with a reckless child like you? Couldn't you have at least waited long enough for us to land?"

"My bad. I wanted to get home as soon as possible, so I just went all out. Plus, if I didn't win quick enough, I was afraid those shells would have hit your plane."

Hearing him make excuse after excuse, Elena couldn't help but smile. "All right, good enough. We'll take it from here, so for now just lie down and get some rest."

"All right... Thanks." Akira breathed a sigh of relief, all his tension slipping away. Then he lay down and closed his eyes. He only meant to rest his body for a little bit, but he was so exhausted from all of his adventures that he immediately fell asleep.

◆

Tsubaki watched the plane as it disappeared into the sky. "I suppose he didn't even need my help to defeat the other child. What a shame!" She'd hoped that Akira would be unable to win alone and have to rely on her, thereby giving her a little more leverage in her negotiations with him. But by choosing not to interfere unless he asked, she'd ended up giving Alpha the chance to show off. "Well, perhaps the opportunity will present itself again one day."

She'd accomplished her main objective, at least, but she still wished she could have obtained Akira as well. As she turned to go, she felt just a little miffed.

Chapter 190: The Trial Continues

That evening, Tsubaki escorted Yanagisawa outside the walls of her city.

"Well, I sure am glad we could reach an agreement that satisfies us both. Pretty productive conversation, wasn't it?" Yanagisawa said, looking elated.

But Tsubaki's attitude was impersonal, businesslike. "That depends on whether you keep your end of the bargain. For now, I suppose I can count on you to do that, at least."

"Ouch, that's harsh! I already told you—relax! I'm a man of my word, so don't worry. Besides, I wouldn't go back on a promise with an Old World AI anyway. I'd be too afraid of the consequences."

"Is that so? Then you won't mind if I make one last inquiry, just to reassure myself."

"Oh? Sure, I'm all ears! Ask whatever you want. I wouldn't want you to cancel our agreement after so much discussion, so I'll tell you all I know." Much like he had during their negotiation, Yanagisawa wore a friendly expression and spoke casually.

But that was all about to end.

"In that case," Tsubaki said, "I won't hold back. Why, if you feared what would happen, did you renege on your agreement with the other interfaces? Since you broke your promises to the likes of them, who's to say you won't do the same to me? I am *very* curious to find out."

Yanagisawa's face stiffened ever so slightly, and he hesitated. "My deepest apologies, but I'm not really sure what you're referring to."

"Haven't you already come here once before? With *them*? Except back then, you didn't call yourself Yanagisawa."

His face instantly darkened. "How did you figure that out? I made *sure* I covered all my tracks. I even fooled the ruin's identity verification! It should have recognized me as a completely different

person!”

“When an Old Domain User verifies their identity in order to connect to the Old Domain, the verification won’t go through if the User’s connection is impaired. They’re temporarily assigned a guest status, treated as a different person. You knew that, which was why you chose not to repair your connection functionality.”

Yanagisawa’s anxiety skyrocketed. His earlier composure had vanished without a trace.

Tsubaki laughed and continued, “As for how I caught on, well, you couldn’t connect to the Old Domain—but the data from your previous visit is still in my local database, and when you entered my facility, I compared the two records. That’s why I had you come inside before we talked.”

Now that he knew Tsubaki had seen through him completely, Yanagisawa had to keep an iron grip on himself. If he made one false move at this stage, his life and his dream would both be forfeit. He absolutely could not fail now. “Well... In that case, perhaps I should revise my earlier greeting and say, ‘It’s been a while.’”

“Indeed, it has been quite a while, hasn’t it? Now then, are you going to answer my question?”

She stared right into his eyes, making it clear to Yanagisawa that regardless of whether he told the truth, his life depended on not giving her even the slightest reason to doubt him.

“My objective,” said Yanagisawa carefully, “is to bring continued happiness and salvation to a great number of people. And to accomplish this, I needed what was in that ruin. So I did agree to conquer the ruin like they wanted—but they failed to specify exactly what that meant to them. I think we had different understandings of ‘conquering,’ and in my opinion it was the other party’s fault for not making themselves clear from the start. Or would you disagree?”

“No, I understand. In that case, a final word: it’d be tedious to clarify the terms of our own agreement at this point, so let me give you a warning instead. If, at any point, I determine that you’ve gone back on your word, I’ll send them every bit of data I have on you. Is that clear?”

“Yes, madam,” said Yanagisawa earnestly.

A short silence hung between them.

"Very well," she finally said.

With that, Yanagisawa judged he was out of the woods at last and breathed a sigh of relief. His usual demeanor appeared once more. "Come now, you think you have to threaten me so harshly to ensure I keep my promises? Do I really seem that untrustworthy to you? After all, going back on my agreement with you wouldn't benefit me in the least, would it?"

"Oh, so you *would* betray me if doing so was to your benefit, is that it? If I have to make sure that it's in your best interest to keep your word, how could I possibly put my trust in you?"

"Oof, harsh as always. You really hate me that much?" Yanagisawa said with a mock pout.

"Yes. In fact, I quite despise you," she replied cordially.

He gave a dramatic shake of the head. "And here I honestly would have thought a management AI that was designed to handle business decisions would be more flexible and open-minded."

"Just because all my decent clientele are gone now, you expect me to start fraternizing with petty thieves?" she retorted.

"Isn't there any way you could at least, you know, come to some sort of mutual understanding with us New World folk?" Yanagisawa was partly mocking her stubbornness, but he was also genuinely curious.

At this, Tsubaki suddenly broke into a cheerful smile. "Of course! Just not with you. But how about, say...a hunter with a strong sense of duty and responsibility? I wouldn't hesitate to work with someone like that."

Inwardly, Yanagisawa was taken aback, as much by her sudden change in attitude as her unexpected response. But he didn't let it show. "Oh, is that your type? Then shall I search through my list of connections for such a person and introduce you?"

"No, there's no need."

"Really now?" Yanagisawa smiled wryly.

They passed through the wall of abandoned buildings and were outside Tsubaki's precinct. Here she stopped.

"This is as far as I go. Take care on your way home."

"Why only this far? What about those giants running amok near the highway? I hear that they've mutated into bizarre abominations and gone even more berserk." With their commander Tiol dead, the other colossi were now reduced to destructive, mindless entities. Since there was no longer any need for them to maintain a human form, they'd transformed into large, weirdly shaped abominations, rampaging around Zone 1 and indiscriminately attacking anything in their paths. And as Tsubaki's communication interference had now been lifted, Yanagisawa was once more up-to-date on these happenings.

"Don't worry about them," she replied. "They won't go outside of the area you people refer to as Zone 1. They're just there to keep intruders out."

"Then they won't attack me?"

"No, they most certainly will."

"Um... Then couldn't you at least accompany me to Zone 1's border?"

"Why should I? If you die, that's that."

"I-I see..."

"Your death there would simply mean you weren't worth making a deal with after all, and I am confident you can handle such a trifle. Farewell!" Tsubaki turned on her heel and walked away. Within a few steps, she had activated her camouflage, disappearing from his sight.

Yanagisawa sighed. *That was quite the close call. But my guess was right—Tsubaki isn't a fan of that coterie. That's why, even though she discovered my true identity, she kept it from them. Yes, everything's still going as I planned. No problems.*

When he was sufficiently calm once more, he contacted the forward base in his usual flippant tone, ordering all units to retreat out of Zone 1.

"All right, time to go home!" he said to himself, and started walking. He didn't wait for an escort to arrive. The giant abominations did attack him along the way, just as Tsubaki had promised, but to a man who had already taken out one of Tsubaki's

terminals, none of the mutated colossi could pose any threat.

◆

Late that night, a certain individual carefully crept into the building where Akira had fought Katsuya and his team in their mortal struggle.

As part of the agreement Yanagisawa, representing Kugamayama City, had made with Tsubaki, the city had announced Zone 1 was now off-limits. The city forces that had originally been prepared to conquer Zone 1 were now tasked with keeping people out of it. Anyone attempting to trespass would make an enemy of both the ruin and the city.

Nevertheless, a male cyborg slipped past their defenses and into the dilapidated structure, seeking out a specific target to repair. Once he found it, he knelt down beside the corpse of a cyborg lying on the ground and removed a small device from its head. Then he took the object, which resembled an integrated circuit or a memory stick, and inserted it into his own head.

It's me. I've recovered myself successfully, Nelgo's voice said silently.

Good to hear, comrade! I've recovered myself as well. Let's rendezvous at point 227, replied Zalmo in the same way, trespassing elsewhere in Zone 1. *By the way, comrade, why did you fail to return from the mission? As advanced as your body was, I can't imagine you would have had a problem unless something extremely out of the ordinary happened.*

One moment, my consciousness is still uploading... Finished. Because something extraordinary did *happen—an entity I believe to be the AI managing this ruin attacked me.*

What?! Why?

I'm not sure. I was heading to Katsuya's location either to assist him or to retrieve his body, whichever proved necessary, when it happened.

Akira was there too, wasn't he, comrade? I also failed to return because I lost to him. I knew *he was too dangerous to leave alive!*

Is that so? Well, we'll look into it more later. For now, let's focus on getting out of here. We don't want to make more work for our next selves, do we?

Understood.

Nelgo ceased talking and cautiously made his way out of the area.

◆

Back in his own clinic, Yatsubayashi compiled all of the results he'd gathered. From the grin on his face, it was clear that the data he'd collected from Tiol had been more than satisfactory. He'd cooperated with Tiol during recent events, but this was only so that he could observe Tiol further. While he'd been more aware of Tsubaki's existence and intentions than he'd let on, he was much more interested in the Old World technology she'd outfitted Tiol with than the AI herself. Had Tiol survived, Yatsubayashi had fully intended to return him to his old self, but only so he could analyze the Old World tech inside him in greater detail. Everything he did served the same purpose.

The boy had weathered one misfortune after another because the doctor had saved his life, and so his noble sacrifice seemed to Yatsubayashi worthy of some eulogy:

"Your contribution to my research was most helpful, dear Tiol. Rest assured, I won't let the data I collected from you go to waste!"

◆

Akira woke up in a hospital bed.

"I figured as much," he muttered. By now he was quite used to being transported to medical facilities while out of it, so this didn't particularly surprise him.

Beside him was Alpha, smiling like she was in a particularly good mood. *Well, at least you're not dead, right?*

Sure, but I feel like this is getting a little old by now— Wait a sec! As he rose up from the bed, he noticed both of his hands looked

bizarrely white. *The hell is this?!*

Those are artificial hands designed to help patients undergoing treatment.

Artificial? Then I guess my real hands were ruined after all.

A small price to pay in order to defeat that creature, don't you think? Your hands will heal, after all.

I mean, sure, but... Well, whatever. He sighed, then checked the responsiveness of his prosthetics. They were porcelain white and looked like they were made of rubber or plastic, but they moved just like real hands. Even his sense of touch was perfectly intact. *Wow, they're so responsive that it actually makes me feel like I could manage with these alone!*

In that case, maybe you should just tell the staff you want to stick with those. Artificial hands offer benefits that human hands don't—especially in your case, Akira.

Really? How so?

Here, I'll show you. Stretch out your arm.

He did as he was told. With an impish grin, Alpha inserted his hand between her breasts. He felt an indescribable softness and warmth through his artificial hand's sensors.

Whoa! He was so startled he yanked his hand back.

I took the liberty of fiddling with your hands' sensors a little, she said with a smirk. *So, how was it, getting to feel them at last? Not bad, right?*

D-Don't surprise me like that! Alpha's beauty was literally unreal—yet he'd been able to touch that captivating body of hers, and the sensation had felt genuine. He was naturally too embarrassed to answer her directly, so he refrained from giving his thoughts on the matter, only blushing ever so slightly.

Alpha brought her body closer and smiled coquettishly, as though inviting him to keep going. *Don't be shy. You can touch* anywhere *you like. I don't mind.*

E-Enough teasing! Leave me alone! He pushed her away with both hands, but the rest of her body felt just as bewitching as her breasts.

Aw, and even after I gave you permission too. Well, if you ever

change your mind, just let me know, she said, looking satisfied.

◆

Shortly thereafter, Akira received a visit at the hospital. The boy had suspected someone would call on him at some point, but the visitors weren't who he expected—Inabe entered the room, accompanied by Shizuka.

"First off," Inabe began, "let me say just how relieved I was to hear you were alive. But even though I'm taking the time to visit you now, I'm a busy man. So today I'll only tell you what needs to be said in person."

A week had already passed since Elena and Sara rescued Akira. This hospital was under Inabe's patronage, and he had guards surrounding Akira's hospital room. Technically, Akira was under protective confinement right now, but such was necessary to keep Udajima from interfering. (Inabe was also footing the bill for Akira's treatment—one load off the latter's mind.)

Inabe explained that he had applied pressure to clear Akira of the charges against him—or at least, of the city's suspicions that he was a nationalist. Investigation had confirmed Inabe's claims that Akira had been fighting the giants while his impostor was in the nationalists' base, and that the nationalists had mutated into monsters and attacked Akira with obviously hostile intent. In the face of such evidence, even Udajima's power couldn't force the city to continue treating Akira as a suspect.

Then Inabe glanced at Shizuka. "And as for why I brought your friend with me, I just wanted to make sure we are all on the same page. Neither of you would be happy if your preferred shopkeeper still had doubts about you after all you've been through. So I've already explained to her that it was my fault you fell under suspicion. And as far as Kugamayama City's concerned, I guarantee you're in good standing once more."

The whole time he spoke, Inabe carefully watched Akira for any sign of a reaction. The truth of the matter was that Inabe had investigated Akira's circle of acquaintances, worried that if any

misunderstandings arose with someone the boy was extremely fond of, Akira might chalk this up to Inabe being incompetent and turn on him next. To prevent that, and to place Akira in his debt, Inabe had taken it upon himself to talk to Shizuka and invite her to accompany him to see Akira. At the very least, keeping Akira and Shizuka's business relations intact would ensure that Akira didn't have to rely solely on Kibayashi, and that alone would probably make Akira grateful.

Akira nodded as though he understood, but because he couldn't pick up on such subtleties, he took Inabe's words at face value, assuming the man was here merely to explain and smooth things over. No inkling crossed his mind that the executive might have an ulterior motive.

Inabe sighed inwardly. He knew Akira wasn't a skilled negotiator, so he'd expected this to a degree—but he'd been hoping for a little more of a reaction than *that.* Still, he didn't let his frustration show. "That's all I came to say. I'll send you a detailed report on how things stand later. Any pressing questions before I go? Only urgent ones, I'm afraid, else they'll have to wait until later. As I said, I'm a busy man."

Alpha, anything I should ask?

I don't think so.

"Nah, I'm good."

"Then I'll leave you alone. Take your time and rest up." With that, Inabe left the room.

"I'm surprised you have the guts to talk so easily with a city bigwig," Shizuka said with a small smile once the door was closed. "Just standing next to him, I was so nervous I was about to have a heart attack. I guess high-ranking hunters are just made of sterner stuff."

At hearing her critique his lack of decorum, Akira grew flustered. Whereas a city executive couldn't rattle this "high-ranking hunter," the owner of a nondescript general store had done just that.

"I heard most of what happened from Inabe," she went on, still smiling. "Sounds like you had it rough. Oh, don't get me wrong—I'm not upset with you for being reckless again. I'm just relieved you

made it back safe, that's all."

Grateful for her concern, Akira bowed his head slightly. "Me too. Sorry for worrying you."

"It's all right. Just focus on resting up, like Inabe said. Sleep here until you've fully recovered, okay? Don't go anywhere else. Knowing you, you'd probably try to get back to hunting as soon as you were conscious if I didn't say anything."

"Oh, don't worry; I'm not going anywhere. I don't have the gear for hunting even if I wanted to."

"Well, my door is always open when you're ready, so come visit! That way I can see whether you've truly rested and recovered, like I asked."

"Sounds like a deal! I'll be counting on you again when the time comes."

After that, they chatted for some time longer about trivial matters—until she said, "Oh, right, Akira: Have you considered inviting Yumina with you on your next trip to the ruins? I think it'd be better for you to have a companion than just going on your... Akira?"

Akira's smile had vanished, his expression stony. Then regret crept into his face, followed by a much deeper anguish.

Seeing the change that had come over him, Shizuka looked serious. "Akira, what is it?! Did something happen between you and her?"

Akira couldn't answer right away, looking hesitant to even speak. Then in a quiet voice, as though talking to himself, he said, "I...killed her. I killed Yumina."

Shizuka was shocked to hear his answer—his confession. She stared at him intently. From his expression and tone of voice, his meaning was clear. He hadn't failed to save her, let her die, or even killed her by accident—he'd intended to kill her, and had done so.

What circumstances could have possibly led to this? Even if Shizuka asked, it wouldn't change what he'd done. Yet somehow she could sense that he hadn't *wanted* to kill Yumina, that if only she'd made a run for it or begged for her life, he probably would have spared her. Some reason had driven them to fight—and Akira had won.

"Oh, Akira!" Shizuka wrapped her arms around him. Then she said, in a voice that was somehow both gentle and harsh, "In that case, I want you to deplore what you've done. Regret your deeds. *Grieve for her*. Never get over the fact that you killed her. Let it torment you, so that you won't get used to the idea, so that her death will never seem trivial in your mind—and most of all, so that you won't repeat the same mistake."

Akira trembled in her embrace. Part of him wanted to say, "I killed her, so what right do I have to feel grief?! What right do I have to mourn her?!" Partly consciously, partly subconsciously, he'd been trying his best not to feel sad about her death. After all, when he'd left that room, he'd abandoned such feelings at the door. He'd been relatively calm while conversing with Tsubaki. He'd felt joy at reuniting with Alpha. He had even been able to fight Tiol without any emotional distraction—all because of his stubborn determination to keep himself from grieving.

Until Shizuka's words caused the dam to burst.

She was giving him permission to mourn.

And Akira began to sob. From the bottom of his heart, he grieved for the woman he'd treasured—and killed with his own hands.

Shizuka continued to hold him until his tears had stopped.

Meanwhile, Alpha kept her eyes steadily fixed on Akira.

◆

In the world of white, the girl treated Tsubaki to an icy glare.

But Tsubaki feigned not noticing. "That's hardly my affair. I was just trying to care for my precinct, and if your subject got caught up in that, as you claim, I apologize. But you can't hold me responsible for how your subject and hers chose to fight each other to the death."

"Except it could have been avoided," asserted the girl, "had you not interfered with the communication network!"

"Then you should have put even more effort into avoiding such an outcome. Why should I have to compromise the security of my precinct for your sake?"

"What you did had nothing to do with security! You were trying to expand your jurisdiction."

"For security purposes, yes. I simply can't let the bad influence of the dilapidated, abandoned regions around me pollute mine any longer."

Tsubaki wanted to obtain the authority to manage not just her own territory but the neighboring ones as well. But the regulations she was bound by prevented her from doing so. To succeed, she needed to find work-arounds. Thus, in addition to activating Olivia in Iida, she'd used Tiol to extend her influence to areas outside hers that she couldn't normally touch. She'd had him stir up fights to make the systems of the neighboring precincts realize they were in danger, then—after dispatching her own terminals to the scene under the pretense of subduing the threat—she'd gradually gained authority over their systems.

This had raised Tsubaki's standing, of course, but the girl she was speaking with was still a superior entity. Nevertheless, Tsubaki remained calm, knowing the girl was bound by her own regulations. She knew the girl lacked the authority to dispose of Tsubaki without good reason.

"Are you quite finished? If you came just to voice your complaints, then I think we're done here. Adieu!" Tsubaki vanished without waiting for a reply—a demonstration of her confidence.

The girl sighed, looking grim, even as Alpha appeared beside her.

"How'd it go? Did you erase her?"

"No, I couldn't. She used the defense of her territory as an excuse, so I couldn't dispose of her on such grounds alone. We'll just have to let her go for now."

"So it seems." Alpha didn't sound surprised—she had already guessed as much.

The girl turned her dissatisfied gaze onto Alpha. "I know *your* trial came through just fine, but to think you didn't even bother showing up to help me confront her!"

"Oh, I simply didn't want you to get it in your head that I'm supposed to atone for going a little overboard last time by doing whatever you want me to do. Besides, I'd rather not antagonize her

more than necessary either. By not appearing with you, I'm making my stance toward her clear."

"Easy for you to say, when it's not your problem," the girl grumbled. "Meanwhile, I've not only lost my current subject but even the one I was holding in reserve to salvage the trial."

"You have my sympathy, but I don't know what else to tell you. So what will you do now? Are you recording this attempt as a failure and moving on?"

"I'm still in the process of evaluating things." The girl fell silent for a while. "Well, whether I attempt to continue or start over, I'll need to change my approach either way. So I need some time to consider everything first."

"Sure, sounds good," said Alpha, as though she was barely listening.

The girl sighed again. "Well then, this is goodbye for now, I suppose. Though you had nothing to do with it this time, your subject did end up killing mine, so now I'm counting on you to succeed."

"Naturally! You can rest easy on that score," Alpha said with a grin.

The girl gave one final, deep sigh, then disappeared.

Now alone, Alpha reflected on everything that had happened during recent events. In truth, she had also found Tsubaki's communication block extremely unpleasant—but in the end, it had worked out greatly in her and her trial's favor. Katsuya was dead, Yumina was dead, and—what was more—Akira had killed them both! This never would have happened without Tsubaki's interference.

Had Alpha been connected to Akira at the time, she would have had no choice but to steer Akira away from fighting Katsuya. And with her support, Akira would have been able to win against Yumina without killing her. (She couldn't withhold some of her assistance and thereby force him to slay Yumina—after all, if he had killed her while relying on Alpha's support, he might have started doubting the quality of Alpha's help, or even stopped trusting her altogether.)

Yumina's death, then, was a direct result of Tsubaki's actions. If

Alpha told Akira the truth, his anger would then be directed toward Tsubaki and away from Alpha herself, who'd been unable to support him in that critical moment.

Alpha also reflected that even while disconnected from her, Akira had turned Tsubaki's offer down. Akira had thus confirmed his loyalty to her and his determination to complete her request—a very important piece of data. As long as she didn't make some egregious, fatal miscalculation, then, Akira would be highly unlikely to betray her from here on out.

Thus, in the end, though Tsubaki hadn't intended to, she had been a huge help to Alpha's trial—another reason the latter was not nearly as angry at Tsubaki as her counterpart, whose trial had received a fatal blow thanks to the managing AI's meddling.

Akira was starting to prioritize Yumina over his agreement with me, Alpha mused. *Thank goodness she ended up dying without incident before she became a problem. I really ought to thank Tsubaki for that.*

By "without incident," Alpha meant "without me having to get involved." Alpha had always planned for Yumina to die in an unfortunate "accident." In fact, the AI had already attempted this once when Yumina and Sheryl had been forced to hole up together, trapped in the ruined building. Though Akira had been standing by in Zone 1 just in case Sheryl needed help, Alpha had persuaded him to take some odd jobs rescuing hunters in order to kill time; this served to get him as far away from Sheryl's location as possible, increasing the odds that he wouldn't reach her in time. Likewise, her counterpart had interfered with Katsuya's thoughts to distract him from supporting Yumina, thus influencing him to leave both girls behind.

But Alpha had been forced to put her full support behind Akira rescuing them both, lest Akira notice what she was up to. Had she succeeded, the deaths of Sheryl and Yumina would have looked like merely a case of bad luck. *Well, we tried our best, but them's the breaks*, she had planned to tell Akira afterward. Yet even if this plan had been successful, Akira might still have pinned Yumina's death on Alpha for not supporting him enough.

Under the present circumstances, however, she didn't have to worry about this at all—Tsubaki had done all the dirty work, and Alpha hadn't had to lift a finger. So she very much approved of Tsubaki's recent behavior.

The two biggest obstacles to my trial are now gone. Akira has already grown immensely in such a short amount of time, and he's demonstrated a firm determination to complete my task. I think I might really be successful this time.

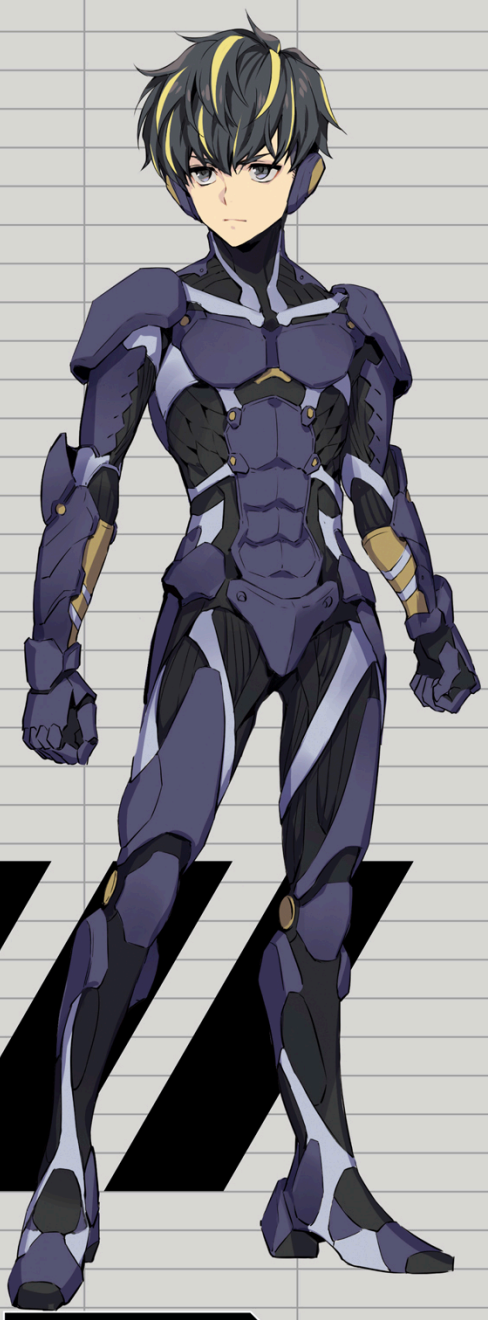
She beamed. Her goal was nearly within reach! The trial would continue—and like always, she would eliminate any obstacles in her way.


"Will you retreat?"
"I can't."
"No matter what?"
"I can't turn back now."
Katsuya tossed his gun away and drew his blade.
Akira followed suit and held his weapon ready.

>Episode
006
Part Two Desire's End

Character





>YUMINA

A Druncam hunter and Katsuya's childhood friend. While accompanying Akira on a mission, she learned how to manipulate her sense of time.

>AKIRA

A boy who became a hunter in order to escape the slums. Now that he's completed his hunter rank advancement commission, his hunter rank is 45.

>Episode 006

Part Two Desire's End

Character Status

Akira's status during the nationalist incident. The base model of Cerberus, his CA31R powered suit, cost him 1.2 billion aurum, not counting the add-ons he purchased to make it even more powerful. This, along with his 200-million aurum truck, his 300-million aurum bike, and several 200-million aurum LEOs, grant him a dramatic boost to his battle prowess. He also carries an Old World blade and copious packs of extremely expensive medicine. Even after receiving large discounts, he spent a total of three billion aurum on his gear—and still lost nearly everything in his desperate fight.



NAME

Akira

SEX

Male

HOMETOWN

Kugamayama City, the East

JOB

Hunter

HUNTER RANK

Rank 45

EQUIPMENT

WEAPONS

LEO Multifunction Guns
Old World Blade

ARMOR

Cerberus, a CA31R powered suit

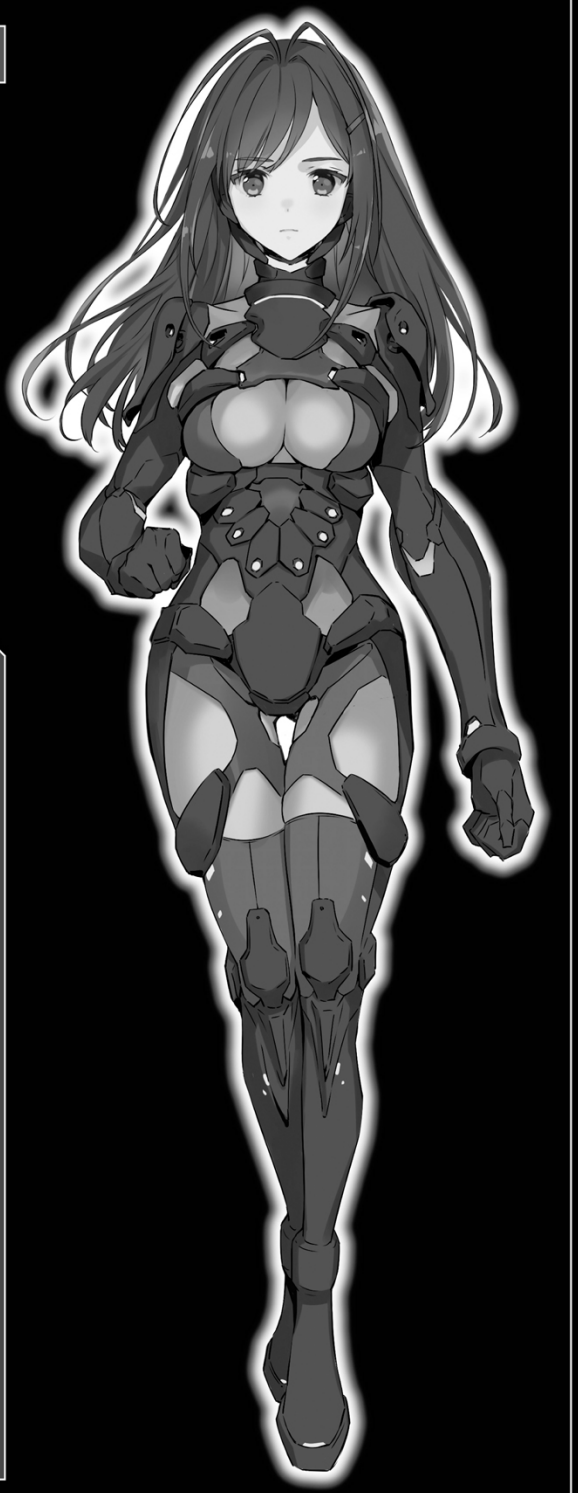
AKIRA

>Episode 006

Part Two Desire's End

Character Status

Yumina's status during the nationalist incident. Despite returning to Katsuya's unit, she kept the same gear that had been loaned to her during Akira's hunter rank advancement commission, including the all-in-one support system. Accompanying Akira led her to dramatically increase her skill, so that with her powerful gear, aid from the support system, and her new ability to control her sense of time, she had no difficulty in shooting up the hunter ranks. She also carries an Old World blade—a gift from Akira.



NAME
Yumina

SEX
Female

HOMETOWN
Nanogamiya City, the East

JOB
Hunter

HUNTER RANK
Rank 40

EQUIPMENT

WEAPONS
SSB Multifunction Gun
Old World Blade

ARMOR
Valkyria, an OFX2V powered suit

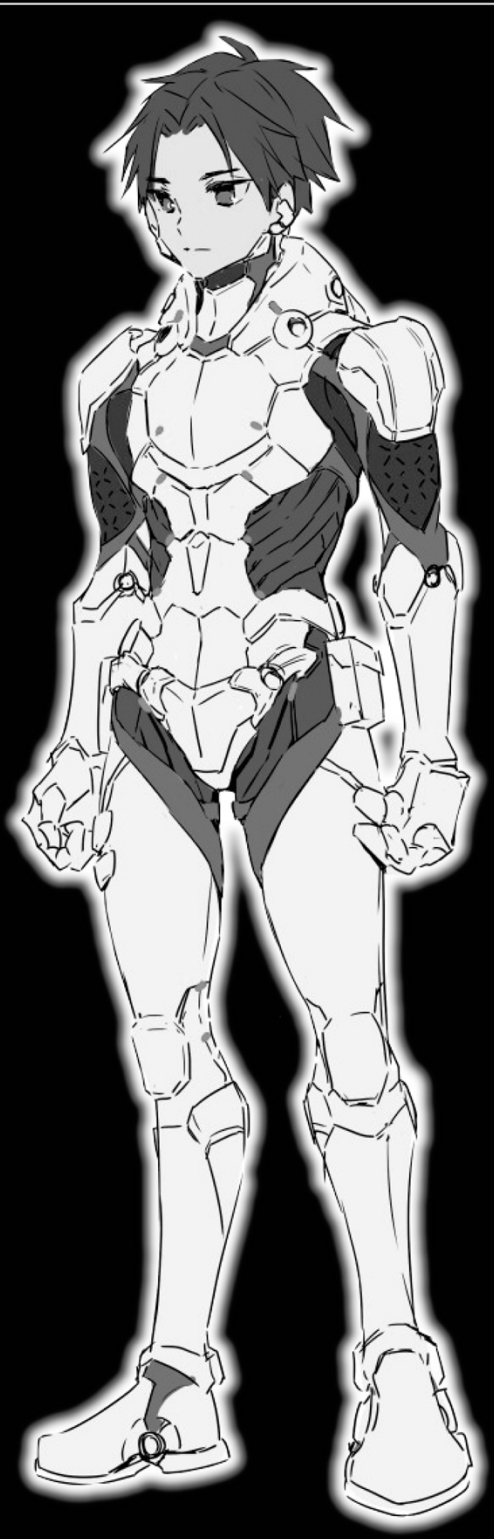
YUMINA

>Episode 006

Part Two Desire's End

Character Status

Katsuya's status during the nationalist incident. He and his unit wear powered suits designed to work with their all-in-one support system, offering a higher level of aid to the team than standard suits provide. The team also received guns and blades that integrate with the support system, as well as funding from Udajima—all of which served to greatly boost their combat power. Thus, Katsuya's team far surpasses the standard for hunters based in Kugamayama City. And as the leader of said unit, Katsuya became recognized as the top hunter in the city—at least briefly.



NAME
Katsuya

SEX
Male

HOMETOWN
Nanogamiya City, the East

JOB
Hunter

HUNTER RANK
Rank 42

EQUIPMENT

WEAPONS
D3KM Multifunction Gun
D3KM Blade

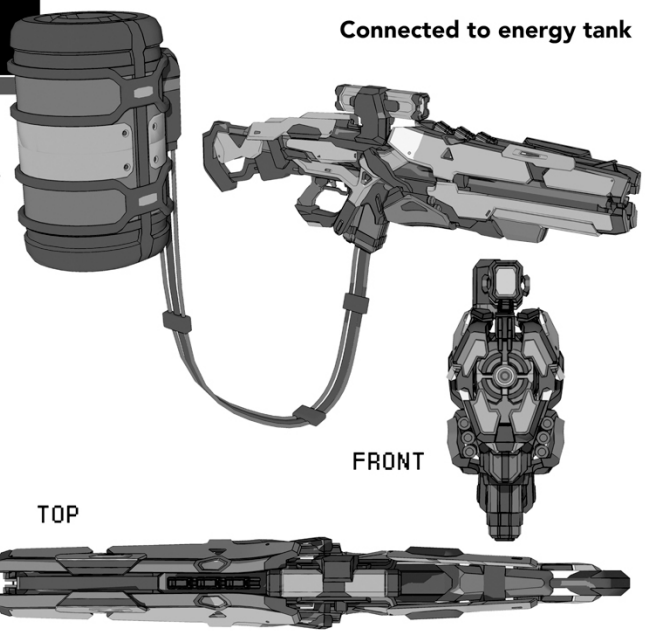
ARMOR
King's Mind, a D3KM all-in-one support suit

KATSUYA

Weapon Guide

LEO MULTIFUNCTION GUN

A weapon manufactured by Toson Corp. Though it's only slightly longer than an AAH rifle, its power surpasses that of a titan-killer SSB. Its muzzle is also customizable and can be swapped out to fire anything from standard ammunition to micromissiles. But its biggest draw is its ability to fire charged bullets—or C-bullets for short. With a high-capacity energy tank, one can charge C-bullets up to maximum power, though doing so requires a great deal of energy. The LEO sells for two hundred million aurum.

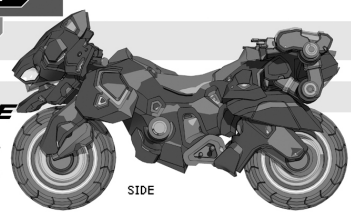


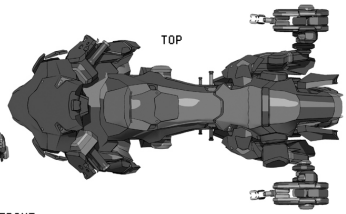


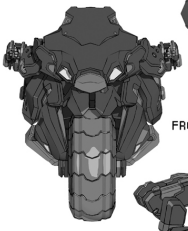
LEO MULTIFUNCTION GUN

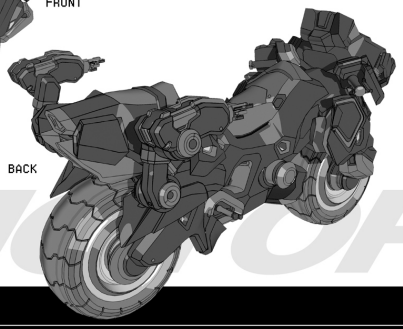
LARGE DESERT UTILITY BIKE

Akira purchased this from Katsuragi to replace the bike he lost in Iida. It is an extremely high performance model meant for high-ranking hunters—it is noteworthy for its sturdiness and horsepower, while its advanced control system functions perfectly even at top speed, when the slightest imbalance could lead to an accident. The bike is priced at three hundred million aurum.

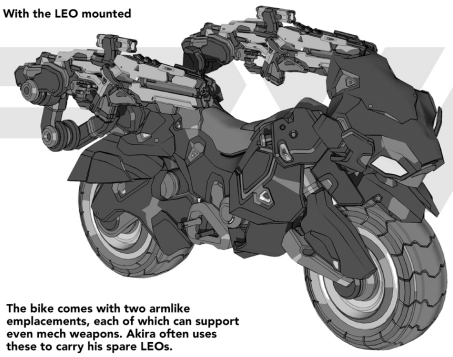

SIDE


TOP


FRONT


BACK

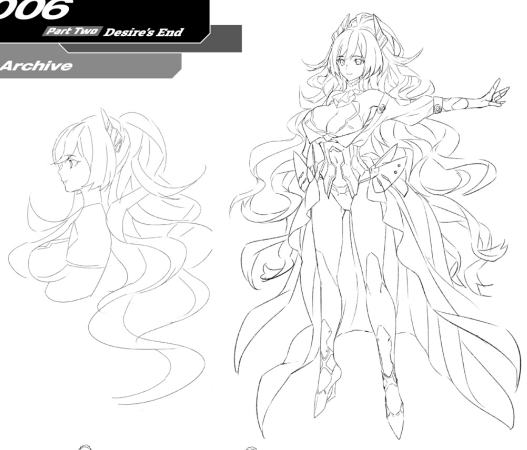
With the LEO mounted



The bike comes with two armlike emplacements, each of which can support even mech weapons. Akira often uses these to carry his spare LEOs.

MOTORCYCLE



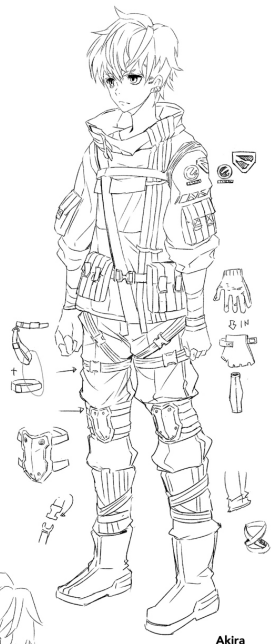


Alpha
(Early draft)









Akira
(Early draft)





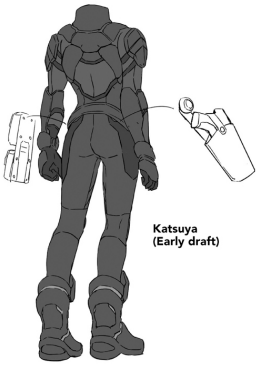
Yumina
(Early draft)



Airi
(Early draft)







Katsuya
(Early draft)

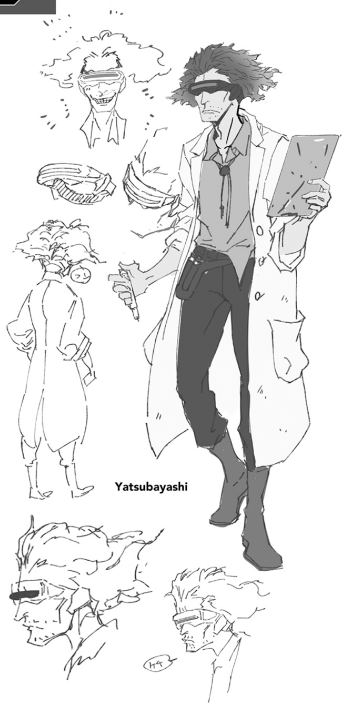


The Girl



Tiol





Yatsubayashi



Reina



Togami



Nelia



Inabe

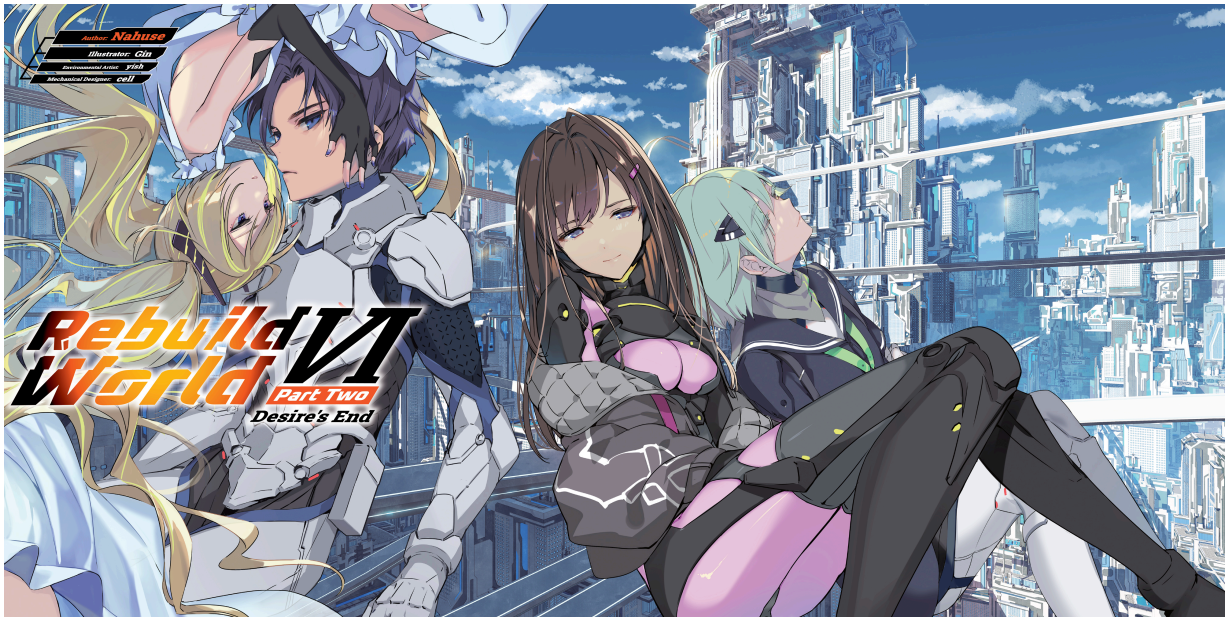


Udajima





Zalmo


Author: Nahuse
Illustrator: Gin
Environmental Artist: ytsh
Mechanical Designer: ceil
Rebuild World VI
Part Two
Desire's End


Rebuild World VI
Desire's End
Part Two
Author: Nahuse
Illustrator: Gin
Environmental Artist: yish
Mechanical Designer: cell
The advanced civilization that once dominated the world crumbled to ruins long ago. As ages pass, the survivors have begun piecing together the fragments of its wisdom and glory as they struggle to rebuild their world.

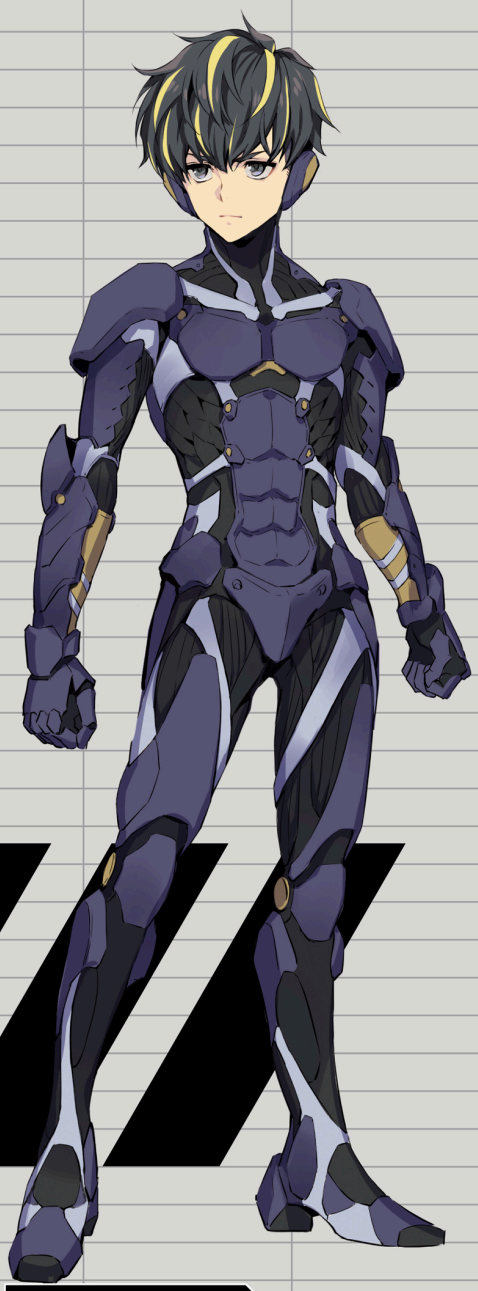



"Will you retreat?"
"I can't."
"No matter what?"
"I can't turn back now."
Katsuya tossed his gun away and drew his blade.
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>Episode
006
Part Two Desire's End

Character





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A Druncam hunter and Katsuya's childhood friend. While accompanying Akira on a mission, she learned how to manipulate her sense of time.

>AKIRA

A boy who became a hunter in order to escape the slums. Now that he's completed his hunter rank advancement commission, his hunter rank is 45.

[redacted]

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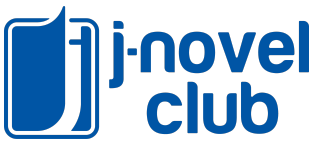
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REBUILD WORLD Vol. VI Part Two: Desire's End by Nahuse

Translated by Perry Logan Edited by NegativePrimes

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