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"Well, take a seat. This stuff came recommended. Try it out."

Lover of Inflatable **Dolphins** Umidori Kuroyoru







VOLUME 1

KAZUMA KAMACHI ILLUSTRATION BY: KIYOTAKA HAIMURA



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A Certain Magical Index NT

VOLUME 1

KAZUMA KAMACHI

Translation by Alice Prowse Cover art by Kiyotaka Haimura

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SHINYAKU TOARU MAJUTSU NO INDEX Vol.1

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Edited by Dengeki Bunko

First published in Japan in 2011 by KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo.

English translation rights arranged with KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo, through Tuttle-Mori Agency, Inc., Tokyo.

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First Yen On Edition: December 2023

Edited by Yen On Editorial: Maya Deutsch, Ivan Liang Designed by Yen Press Design: Andy Swist Yen On is an imprint of Yen Press, LLC.

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Names: Kamachi, Kazuma, author. | Haimura, Kiyotaka, 1973-illustrator. | Prowse, Alice, translator.

Title: A certain magical index new testament / Kazuma Kamachi; illustration by Kiyotaka Haimura; translation by Alice Prowse.

Other titles: Toaru majutsu no index NT. English Description: First Yen On edition. | New York : Yen On, 2023.

Identifiers: LCCN 2023042206 | ISBN 9781975380656 (v. 1; trade paperback) | ISBN 9781975388355 (v. 2; trade paperback) | ISBN 9781975388379 (v. 3; trade paperback) | ISBN 9781975388393 (v. 4; trade paperback) | ISBN 9781975388416 (v. 5; trade paperback) | ISBN 9781975388430 (v. 6; trade paperback) Subjects: LCGFT: Light novels.

Classification: LCC PZ7.1.K215 Cem 2023 | DDC [Fic]—dc23

LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2023042206

ISBNs: 978-1-97538065-6 (paperback) 978-1-9753-8066-3 (ebook)

E3-20231122-JV-NF-ORI

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PROLOGUE

<u>The Ones Who Became Main Characters Through Some</u> <u>Mistake</u>

War?

"Qwenthur!! It's here! One of those huge bastards! An Object! Those monstrous weapons actually exist! What now?! Antitank missiles aren't even gonna scratch that thing!"

"There's only one we can do, Havia. Figure something out!!"

"Right. Right, right!! Why does it sound like you want to *fight* that thing? Do you have eyes?! I can't think of anything more reckless!! That behemoth is over fifty meters long! And it's got more than a hundred emplacements on it! Plus, it could definitely take a nuke or two and keep on rolling. It doesn't even have to shoot at us! It could just run around and squash entire armies!!"

"You know what its main weapon is? That ginormous substabilized plasma cannon. It creates a vacuum inside the barrel that has to be protected with electric power lines, or else the heat will cause the entire Object to explode... There's gotta be a way to interfere with the insides of that cannon!!"

"Whaaat? I just thought of something amazing. Holy shit! I've got a three-thousand-IQ plan!"

"What is it, Havia?"

"Only the best—the best possible plan!! It's almost guaranteed to get us both out of here in one piece!!"

"Enough of the hype! Just lay it on me!"

"We find a deserted corner of the battlefield and play dead."

"You will be dead after I throw you under that beast!!!!!!"		

""

Shiage Hamazura's hands trembled at the events transpiring on the giant screen before they went back into the popcorn bucket for another scoop.

He'd made the wrong choice. This movie was idiotic. He definitely shouldn't have brought his girlfriend here to watch it with him.

"Well, what do you expect from a Kinuhata recommendation?"

That remark came from his girlfriend, sitting in the seat next to him. Her name was Rikou Takitsubo. And even today, even during their outing, even at this movie theater, she was wearing her good old pink tracksuit. Hamazura wondered if she wore it to weddings and funerals, too. She was the type who wore clothes solely based on their comfort level, which meant he never stopped wishing that, at some point, she would try on something lewder, like a swimsuit or bunny-girl outfit.

Takitsubo seemed to have lost most of her interest in the movie, too. "What are we doing after this, Hamazura?" she asked.

"Unfortunately, once we get some grub, it'll be time. You know, for our meeting with Mugino and Kinuhata. We've gotta do that thing we've been talking about and get it over with."

Still, though, thought Hamazura, recalling the true war he'd been through, so different from the cheap combat scene on the screen right now.

"...We really survived World War III, huh?"

You never could tell who would catapult into the spotlight.

CHAPTER 1

A Peaceful Academy City Without Him City.

1

Academy City.

Built on previously uncultivated land in western Tokyo, the city spanned approximately one third of the area of the Tokyo Metropolis and was surrounded by high walls. It boasted a population of about 2.3 million, 80 percent of whom were students. Here in the pinnacle of academia, you could find every field of scientific and technological research under the sun. But the city served another purpose: It fostered espers—those with supernatural abilities—through an artificial, scientific process.

Here, the students themselves were "developed." Their multifarious abilities were classified into six ranks based on their worth, strength, and versatility: Levels Zero through Five, from worst to best.

Shiage Hamazura was a Level Zero.

Technically, he'd heard he was able to use some sort of ability, just on an invisible level—but practically, that didn't make any difference. His whatever-type ability only existed on paper, and he wasn't very familiar with the words on that paper to begin with.

But it was too soon to let that disappoint him.

For Shiage now had a very rare kind of experience: He'd waded through the absolute worst of the fighting during World War III. And as if that weren't already enough, he'd defeated the fourth-ranked Level Five in the city without anyone else's help. By his estimation, successfully navigating a global conflict to

save the girl he loved put him just a little bit outside the realm of a normal high school kid.

He'd protected a settlement on the verge of being wiped out by the military in Russia, where the bulk of the fighting was taking place, driving off the many assassins dispatched from Academy City and living to tell the tale.

He had won his daily life back—he, the postapocalyptic emperor—and now...

"Hamazuraaaaaa!! How long is it gonna take us to get some goddamn drinks?!"

And now Shiage Hamazura, several drink glasses in his hands, gave a frightened start as a girl's voice assaulted him from across the diner.

It's... It's the same! Not a damn thing has changed! I went through all that, and my life is still exactly how it's always been!!

The postapocalyptic emperor—now relegated to the guy responsible for getting everyone drinks from the beverage station—gave a wail of lament in his heart. But in the end, this was just how the world worked. War veteran or not, grunts stayed grunts forever.

The name of the girl antagonizing him so he would hurry up with the drinks was named Shizuri Mugino. There was a lot to say when it came to her—certainly too much to get into right now—but she was the city's fourth-ranked Level Five. Her slender build and wavy brown hair were her trademarks, but she also wore a very special kind of makeup on about a third of her face and had a prosthetic eye.

Two other girls were sitting at the table with her. One was Saiai Kinuhata, a short middle school student in a one-piece knit dress who wore her hair in a bob. Her clothes exposed her thighs an awful lot, which was definitely the idea. She claimed to be researching how to cross her legs so perfectly that you'd think you could just about see between them but never quite could.

The other was Rikou Takitsubo, who had just been watching a movie with Hamazura before this. Her black hair fell to her shoulders, and if he had to settle on anything that stood out about her, it was the pink tracksuit she wore year-round.

Kinuhata was checking a message board on her cell phone, but the stiff, formal nature of the topic in question—the status of restoration efforts in Russia, where the bulk of the war had taken place, along with the how the people dispatched from Academy City were doing—appeared to have bored her. She half threw the phone onto the table and turned her attention to the big stack of fries in front of her instead. She began popping them into her mouth with one hand, using the other to poke at Mugino's special makeup.

"...You, like, totally can't see it at all, even from up close," she commented. "Not the scars, and not even the eye band. I always figured special makeup would have to be, like, edited out in photographs and stuff before you couldn't tell the difference anymore."

"But it won't sweat, and the hair follicles on it won't ever change," replied Mugino. "Plus, my skin color won't change based on temperature. *And* it won't get goose bumps. So if I hang around for a while, people will eventually notice something's up, even in normal conditions. It's one of those uncanny-valley things—my face can be as clean and neat as you want, but it'll still seem weird somehow... Why are you poking it anyway?"

"Well, y'know. We live in an age where people just use CG to add moles and scars and wings and horns. But now you've got, like, this totally analog makeup. As a movie lover, I guess it really gets my blood pumping or something! And what always gets my blood going is chasing down some good serial killer splatter films!!"

...I'd prefer to run away...

Unfortunately, if Hamazura made the girls wait any longer, he'd wind up as a splatter-film victim, no special makeup required. So he brought the girls their drinks.

"Damn, Hamazura, that took forever," grumbled Mugino. "Huh? What the hell? Go back and put ice in them like you were supposed to! Look, your stupid hands made them warm!! Don't you know anything about quality control? Normally, you'd have to completely replace these!!"

"Come on, give the guy a break," said Kinuhata. "This is Hamazura we're talking about. Besides, it'll take even longer for him to do it over. We gotta be

the adults here and be understanding, yeah?"

"Gee, thanks." Hamazura slumped as he looked over to the one girl who wasn't trying to verbally eviscerate him. "If mine are that bad, then get the dumb drinks yourselves. My princess here isn't complaining at all, you know—that's my kinda woman. Right, Takitsubo? Takitsubo?"

His plea to his girlfriend fell on deaf ears. In fact, she wasn't moving at all, even though her eyes were wide-open.

"...Snnnoooreee..."

"H-how are you asleep?!" he exclaimed. "I didn't think our date was that exhausting!"

"I mean, it's you we're talking about, Hamazura," Kinuhata pointed out. "I'm actually more surprised she wasn't bored out of her mind the whole time."

"You were the one who recommended that awful movie! It was the worst thing I think I've ever seen!!"

"...The worst? I think you mean the *best*. Were you even paying attention during the climax? When all the characters gathered in front of that giant Indian elephant and started dancing?"

"That was the part I understood the least..." Evidently, Kinuhata was too much of a bad-movie maniac to make an effort to understand his troubles.

She took a little sip of the drink he'd brought her, then gave him a look that couldn't possibly have been any more dissatisfied. "...I hate to, like, take the words out of Mugino's mouth, but this *is* warm. Like, warmer than we can tolerate. It kinda makes me wanna slap you."

Mugino grabbed the salmon meunière she'd brought back for herself, which was served on a plate that resembled a frying pan, then made her voice *really* sugary and baby-like for some reason. "Oh, well then. What do you say to hitting widdle Hamazura with this to get him to go back and twy again?"

"Don't point that sizzling thing at me!!" cried out Hamazura reflexively. "And even if it's already cooled off, it would *still* hurt like hell!! Why do you feel the need to scare the shit out of me anyway?!"

Kinuhata let out a breath. "You can't do that," she said. "That would just be a reward for Hamazura. He'd totally imagine us wearing nothing but an apron, so he'd, like, love it."

"What kind of household is this?! It's terrifying!! And hey, stop looking so creeped out just because I said 'household'!! That's actually the only situation I could possibly even imagine where it makes sense for you to wear aprons!!"

Kinuhata plugged her ears in the seat across from him, a look of disgust on her face. But when she did, her elbow hit the B-movie pamphlet she'd spread out on the table in front of her. It fell to her lap, then slid down to the floor.

"Hamazuraaaaaaaaaaaa!!"

"What?! How is that my fault?! ...Fine, okay, I'll pick it up!! Shit. Don't get so worked up that you start flinging those stupid Level Four powers all over the restaurant!!"

Mr. Errand Runner went under the table, complaining all the while. He found the thin pamphlet in question right away. It said Countryman N's Zombie Escape Mission on it. Was that the actual title of the movie, or was it just a horrible translation? Either way, it disheartened him even more, so for a moment, he looked elsewhere.

And then his eyes fell on...

...Saiai Kinuhata's legs, along with the lovely strip of cloth covering her nether regions, which were both exposed by her super-short knit dress.

What if?

If he were fulfilled in his job and his personal life, if he were hitting all the life milestones he'd planned, if he were a slick dude with sick skills in abrupt ad-lib situations...? Maybe then, he could have given her thigh a quick little brush, then laughed it off like a joke.

But Hamazura was way too Hamazura for that.

In fact, he was so surprised at the sight that he jumped.

"Kinu- Agh?!"

Thud! His head slammed into the table.

The two casualties were Shizuri Mugino, who was vacantly poking at her drink with her elbow on the table, and Rikou Takitsubo, sleeping with her eyes wideopen across from Mugino.

To be more specific, the contents of Mugino's beverage flew out of her glass, spilling all over Takitsubo. The latter's already opened eyes began to come into focus.

"...Hamazura...?"

"You don't even try to figure out what's going on or pretend to be half asleep—you just immediately blame me for anything that's happened. The sheer leaps of logic you'd need to do that. And *all* of you are guilty of this. How'd I end up in this group?"

As Hamazura grabbed the pamphlet and crawled out from under the table, he then laid eyes on a shocking sight.

"Come on...," Takitsubo murmured, covered from the head to foot in self-serve beverage, before she started to remove her tracksuit.

In the process, she revealed two mounds boldly protruding from her thin blouse underneath.

"...I knew they were huge."

"...No, no, I've, like, totally got her beat in the figure department overall. For sure."

"...Oh, shit. I was right. I was right."

"Huh?" Takitsubo looked back at the others, the only one who still looked confused. Without much in the way of emotion in her voice, she asked, "Is it time now?"

"Well...yes. We've had our snack, so let's, like, get down to business, yeah?"

"Mm," replied Mugino. She was rather glum, and her response was uncharacteristically short.

Hamazura got back into his seat. "Do we know the location?" he asked.

"Yeah, I totally looked into it," replied Kinuhata. "Though, I mean, District 10

is literally the only place it could be anyway."

"Then let's head over," said Mugino brusquely.

Wanting to dig a little deeper, Hamazura asked, "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine."

They had all originally belonged to a little group of people called Item, but they weren't at full strength. One person was missing—someone who had been here in the past.

As if to bring that missing piece into focus, Mugino opened her mouth to speak.

"... Then to Frenda's grave we go. Let's get this over with."

2

As soon as they reunited, she punched him in the face as hard as she could.

And then she hugged him as tightly as she could.

The strongest Level Five in Academy City, Accelerator, had just returned home from the worst of the fighting in World War III to a reception of extreme contrasts.

The person who had hit and hugged him was a teacher in a tracksuit named Aiho Yomikawa. Accelerator was currently freeloading in her apartment.

He had peculiar, unpigmented white hair. His red eyes were as dreadful as any wild animal's. A crutch with a sleek design supported his slender body—though none would consider him delicate or frail. After all, he was a Level Five. A weapon, thoroughly trained and raised by means of the very latest scientific advancements.

Even in Academy City, there weren't many who were capable of treating Accelerator like another human being, whether that meant punching him or hugging him. But the few peculiar folks who could seemed to all live in this apartment.

People like...

"Gyaaahhh!! Whyyy?! Why are you attacking Misaka with lasers that come from six directions?! Asks Misaka asks Misaka, shaking with fright at the terrifying combo!!"

Last Order, a girl who looked like she was around ten, shouted strangely as she clutched a game pad.

People like...

"Heh-heh! The lasers are just for spacing—Misaka's *real* attack is this huge laser beam!!"

Misaka Worst, a twisted, scheming girl who had the exact same face as Last Order, albeit aged up to a high schooler.

People like...

"...As far as I know, she wasn't one of the samples in the production plan...was she...?"

Kikyou Yoshikawa, a researcher currently watching Misaka Worst with a dubious look on her face.

Incidentally, Misaka Worst still had a broken arm, so she had placed her game pad on the floor to hit it like a keyboard with all five fingers of her uninjured hand. And she was still wiping the floor with Last Order, who actually *had* the ability to use both hands (not to mention the fact that she was avoiding pressing L or R to give Last Order a handicap). She was delivering an unrivaled performance—and showing off a pink and white ao dai that Accelerator didn't know why she was wearing.

"Arrrgh! Now that it's come down to this, Misaka will directly input commands into you using the network made from all the Misakas' brain waves! says Misaka says Misaka, wanting to use a cheat technique, but for some reason, there's no response!"

"Heh-heh. This Misaka is from the Third Season, so she's loaded with mechanisms to reject commands like that."

The two girls sometimes had a very unique way of talking to each other.

"Hey, where'd you get that Vietnamese dress anyway? asks Misaka asks

Misaka."

Misaka Worst looked confused for a moment. "Oh, right. Since I reject commands, this Misaka isn't constantly sharing her memories with the Misaka network."

"I gave it to her." When Misaka Worst smugly refused to actually answer the question, Yoshikawa the researcher explained instead. "I won it in a raffle, but it didn't fit me."

That made sense; why else would Misaka Worst be wearing such a vibrant outfit when she always mocked people for wearing bright colors like pink and white?

But that wasn't what Last Order got hung up on. "...Another adult bragging about their breasts, says Misaka says Misaka, putting up her guard."

"That's *not* what I mean," clarified Yoshikawa. "It doesn't fit me in terms of height or waist measurement, either...and besides, if you're just talking about the bust, she's more well-endowed than I am."

Last Order took her eyes off the video game and quietly looked up at the ao dai Misaka Worst had on.

And then she said, "There is hope, says Misaka says Misaka, clenching her hands into fists."

"Unfortunately, Misaka is from the Third Season. Her growth accelerants are different!" bragged Misaka Worst.

Clack-clack-clack-clack!! went the buttons as Last Order furiously mashed her controller. However, that did little to prevent her from being trounced on-screen.

Yomikawa frowned slightly as she watched the two girls engaging in their strange conversation. She turned to Accelerator, who was lying on the couch, and asked him outright, "So who's the high school girl? The kid's big sister?"

"Nope," said Misaka Worst before Accelerator could answer. As they waited through the results screen of the fighting game, she turned to Yomikawa and closed one eye as if making fun of her somehow. "If Misaka had to say, this Misaka is actually the kid's little sister."

"?"

3

The Parameter List.

This was the data that would protect Shiage Hamazura and others like him who had fought Academy City's underworld head-on. A lifeline, stored on a microchip a quarter of the size of a movie ticket. It could greatly damage the city depending on how it was used, but at the same time, Hamazura didn't think it would be that simple.

In addition to the twenty-to thirty-year gap between Academy City's technology level and that of the rest of the world, there was plenty of research that wasn't publicized internally. There had to be a hypersensitive system in place when it came to the handling of information.

And Hamazura didn't plan on personally making use of it anyway. He wasn't trying to overthrow the city—he was trying to live peacefully inside it.

If safety was all he'd wanted, he could have just left altogether. But he still wasn't prepared for that. For certain reasons, Rikou Takitsubo, the girl more important to him than his own life, needed medical help—and it needed to come from Academy City.

Now then.

Academy City had many installations and facilities that other areas of the world lacked. Wind turbine generators dotted the city, autonomous security and cleaning robots scuttled to and fro, and advanced food-production facilities were a frequent sight. That said, there was one thing that was rarely found in Academy City.

It had far, far fewer cemeteries than anywhere else in the world.

A whole 80 percent of its residents were students who lived apart from their families in dormitories. If one of them died inside city limits, then—after thoroughly incinerating them to the point where their genetic material couldn't

be analyzed—the authorities would usually send the bones back to the parents. That meant there was no real demand for cemeteries here.

The only graveyard in the city was located in School District 10, and it looked like a parking garage with an elevator. Visitors went into one of several booths, which were separated out by partitions that resembled shooting ranges, then they would input a personal identification number; the system would then automatically retrieve a compact grave containing the bone-filled urn using a lift or elevator.

People who came to pay their respects could leave an offering, like flowers, as long as it fit within the water-resistant, thick paper tray provided. But the system would scan whatever was presented for microorganisms, and if the amount exceeded a certain value, it would automatically flush the offerings out a dust chute.

As described before, it was very rare for the bodies of students to be kept here. Most often, their remains would wind up in the School District 10 cemetery because nobody came forward to take them. Examples of people left behind included criminals, Child Errors who'd been intentionally cast out of their families like coin-locker babies, those who had completely erased any trace of their legal identities to fully inhabit the underworld here, and many others.

"...Mugino's taking a while," said Hamazura.

They were sitting on a bench near the dreary entrance to the cemetery building. The space must have been set aside for smokers; the unused box-shaped ashtray nearby made the whole place feel even more desolate.

Mugino had gone inside alone. She was the one who had personally killed Frenda.

She probably had a lot to talk about. Nobody else wanted to hear any of it or sneak a peek at her face while she was doing it, either.

Staring idly into the sky, Hamazura said, "What kind of stuff did Frenda like again?"

"Mackerel," answered Takitsubo, who was sitting next to him.

Kinuhata sighed. "She ate, like, a *ton* of canned goods, huh? Weird, since I'm pretty sure she had plenty of money."

It still felt a little odd to be talking about someone in the past tense. Were they supposed to hope it eventually wouldn't feel strange anymore? Or hope it stayed this way?

Hamazura was still too inexperienced to know which.

4

The video game ended in a landslide victory for Misaka Worst, and Last Order grumbled, whined, and let go of her controller, flopping her seemingly ten-year-old body down onto the floor. Then she pointed to a specific location on her opponent's body.

"...Those boobs of yours were throwing off Misaka's focus, says Misaka says Misaka, analyzing her defeat."

"Oh, really? Making fun of someone's body out of frustration, are we? Well, it seems the command tower definitely belongs with the rest of the Misakas. How evil, how wicked you all are deep down! \(\frac{1}{2}\)"

Last Order shrugged off Misaka Worst's ridicule and turned to Kikyou Yoshikawa, former cloning researcher. "Please explain to Misaka what she should eat to get that big, says Misaka says Misaka, requesting a release of information."

"You both eat the same food. Aiho makes it for you, remember?"

By "Aiho," she meant Aiho Yomikawa, gym teacher and owner of the apartment. The woman wore a very unflattering green tracksuit year-round, but...as far as Last Order could tell, she was an absolute knockout. She didn't think she'd ever seen someone with a bigger chest.

"It isn't fair...says Misaka says Misaka, lamenting the lack of explanation provided by nutritional science."

"Well, if we all eat the same things, and Misaka Worst turned out like that, then I think there's a chance for you, too. Don't you?"

"...???!!!"

"You don't need to rush things. You aren't old enough to have breasts right now, remember? As time passes and that gap closes, you'll grow and develop into the beauty you're meant to be."

Yoshikawa's words were like a ray of hope for Last Order.

But then it happened—something fell out of the ex-researcher's pocket.

It was a strange-looking personal-care device. It was equipped with a mechanism that was probably meant to coil around a certain part of the female body with a belt, and it looked designed to interact a *lot* with that specific part.

So...

...in blunter terms, it was, most likely, a breast-enlargement machine.

"........."

The optimistic expression vanished from Last Order's face as she witnessed firsthand just how underhanded adults could be. Her lips trembled before she eventually spoke.

"...You said Misaka would *naturally* grow, right? asks Misaka asks Misaka, seeking confirmation."

"H...hoh-hoh. Actually, a college friend of mine brought this to me and wanted to know if it was a product of psuedoscience, and since I'm the expert __"

"Misaka will never be fooled by an adult's lies again!! says Misaka says Misaka, reaching out for the machine in question!!"

"No, Last Order, don't!! Using this device will make your chest explode if you aren't a woman with a mature body!!"

"Misaka just said she wouldn't be fooled by lies like that, says Misaka says Misaka, brushing off your words of caution, adding that why would a woman with a mature body even need a device like this in the first place?!"

Having nothing better to do, Misaka Worst glanced at Accelerator on the

couch. "I guess even biologists can fall for some obvious mail-order scams, too, huh? ... Also, aren't you going to stop them?"

"Ugh...," muttered Number One, sounding sincerely fed up with it all and turning over.

In his stead, Aiho Yomikawa, the enormous-chested gym teacher and owner of the apartment, stepped between Kikyou Yoshikawa (who was doing some teasing) and Last Order (who was being teased).

"All right, all right already," she said, plucking the breast-enlarging machine out of their hands. "Hey, isn't this that thing you were complaining didn't work, Kikyou? You have a bad habit of collecting weird devices that claim to be body-altering. Learn your lesson already. Remember that diet machine? And the belt that was supposed to make your face smaller?"

"Misaka's ray of hope has been stolen by the last person in the world who would ever need it!! says Misaka says Misaka, shuddering with fear!!"

"You can't, Aiho! If someone already batting a thousand gets even more assistance from a machine, the laws of the universe will break down!!"

But the situation deteriorated even more than expected.

"...Huh?" said Yomikawa. "Why's this thing smoking all the sudden? I didn't do anything to it."

"Maybe your crazy high breast power is flowing back into it!! says Misaka says Misaka, trembling at the unknown phenomenon!!"

"That's completely unscientific...but wait?!?!?! Wait, no, that's... It can't be! But maybe Aiho... Just maybe...!!" The insanity Yoshikawa was witnessing completely overwhelmed rational thought.

Out of all the girls and women in the room, Misaka Worst was the only one unconcerned by the machine.

Accelerator, still lying on the couch, asked her, "You're not interested?"

"A little, actually. But only if it could give you huge tits."

School District 10, in front of Academy City's cemetery.

As Hamazura, Takitsubo, and Kinuhata made small talk, the automatic door to the cemetery opened. They all turned to watch Mugino coming out.

Her expression was the same as always—no tearstains or puffy red eyes.

But *something* must have happened in there. Something she didn't want them to know about—something she'd go to any length to hide.

"You done?" asked Hamazura.

"Yeah," said Mugino bluntly. "I'm done."

It was possible *nothing* was done. But Mugino made sure to insist otherwise, almost like she was drawing a line in the sand.

By the way—and you'll have to excuse the explanation in the middle of their very heart-to-heart conversation—School District 10 had the cheapest real estate in all of Academy City and was notorious for not being very safe. Because it contained the city's only cemetery, quite a few establishments that couldn't get building permits elsewhere ended up finding their way here.

This was to say that poor old Shiage Hamazura, who had brought three adolescent girls with him (or so it would have appeared, though the reverse was true), was the perfect target for any delinquents who happened to be skulking in the area.

As Hamazura and the others were trying to figure out if the bus or train would get them home faster, five men showed up and surrounded them. If this were a sentai show, every one of them would have been classified as the "Yellow Ranger." They all glared at the lone male of the group, Hamazura, trying to look very intimidating and wrench away control of their discussion.

"Hey, hey, wait a sec, little rich boy," one said. "We're on a part-time gig right now. You wanna help us out? Basically, we punch trash and get paid for how well we do it."

"Oh, and we'll beat the shit out of you even if you do just hand over your wallet," another added. "And if you try to run. And if you beg for your life. You get our drift?"

Ah, crap..., thought Hamazura. This looks kind of bad. Though the young men's words made it obvious there was so little in their skulls that it was a miracle that they knew how to breathe, Hamazura was no superhero. He shuddered. The second one who'd spoken seemed particularly dangerous. He looked like a pro-wrestler type, given his stance and the way he'd dropped his hips. But in this part of town, there was no referee nor soft mat to catch his falls. Hamazura knew from experience that people who used throwing, grappling, and locking techniques could be even more dangerous than amateurs armed with guns or knives.

That said...

...Hamazura was actually relieved at that, too. If that dude was relying on hand-to-hand combat techniques, then the gang was probably a lot like him—guys who had lost their way because they were Level Zeroes. As long as none of them were a rule-breaker, like some gravity-manipulating wrestler whose throws were ten times more powerful than normal, this group would be a far cry from Academy City's most feared individuals.

And while Takitsubo might not be, Mugino and Kinuhata were a couple of the city's most feared individuals.

Mugino was the fourth-ranked Level Five, while Kinuhata was a Level Four capable of holding her own in a shoot-out. That meant these punks were practically waltzing into a street fight with a tank or a bomber. It didn't matter if they were the best rule-breaking heel wrestlers in the business or judo masters who threw man-eating bears at them—if the two groups went head-to-head, they would stand no chance against the likes of Mugino and Kinuhata.

Which was why...

"...Hey, you might not want to do that." Hamazura gave the thugs some advice out of a sincere sense of pity. He'd unconsciously slipped into his "postapocalyptic emperor" mindset. "Listen up, runts. I'm saying this out of the kindness of my heart. I want you to remember every word. If you don't, you might not walk away from this." He paused. "Some people in this world shouldn't be messed with. And you're this close to making a serious mistake. Just one wrong move here, and you'll meet your maker. If you know what's

good for you, then turn around and march right back to wherever you came from."

However...

...for some reason, Mugino and Kinuhata then exchanged strange-looking glances.

"Eeeek. Help us, Hamazura. We're scaaared," they both exclaimed at the same time.

He had no idea why they'd done that. The two of them came up to either side of him and put their arms through his. That also confused him.



And knowing what he did about what the two girls were *actually* like, chills immediately ran down his spine.

But the five delinquents, as well as Rikou Takitsubo, seemed to take the whole thing at face value. The girl in the tracksuit started to get especially unruly. She went up behind Hamazura and wrapped her arms around his neck, hugging him, as though asking him to hoist her up onto his back.

"...You don't get to take him," she said. "Hamazura belongs to me."

At that moment, Hamazura heard the sound of something very important *snap*—in those five delinquents' heads.

"H-hey," managed one of them as they all moved their lips to no avail. "Hey, hey, hey!! The hell is this?! Who do you think you are?! Some kind of millionaire? Well?!"

His voice came out sounding like a seal's, maybe a fur seal's—one out for pure murder anyway. He stormed right up to Hamazura and attempted to grab his collar.

But...

...Mugino, who actually *did* have Hamazura in a subtle armlock now, twisted herself slightly. To escape the pain rushing up his elbow, Hamazura had to turn with her like some kind of revolving door.

That threw off the delinquent's aim.

Instead of Hamazura's neck, the man ended up jamming his outspread fingers into his shoulder.

"Nghaaaaahhhh!! That goddamn hurt, you bastard!!"

"Eeeek. Hamazura is so coooool."

As if that wasn't enough, Mugino, her encouragement now sounding even dumber, twisted Hamazura's arm again, then kicked him in the waist to send him hurtling right into the other delinquents. Meanwhile, Kinuhata peeled Takitsubo cleanly off his back.

"Wha- Wha...?"

Hamazura's eyes were still spinning with bewilderment; he couldn't make sense of what was going on. But apparently, the delinquents had already made up their minds.

"No more screwing around, asshoooooooooooooooole!!"

Shiage Hamazura had only one choice.

Run.

So he kicked up some dirt from a flower bed on the sidewalk to blind the prowrestler guy, then took the opportunity to punch through their blockade.

6

After Yomikawa confiscated the smoking breast-enlargement machine, Yoshikawa went to her own room and closed the door to program her DVR to record a show. The living room TV was already on the selection screen for a drama Yomikawa wanted to record; Yoshikawa had grumbled that she wished they had infinite tuners as she left.

Voices were pouring out of the TV at the moment. And both the reporter and the people responsible for putting the program together seemed like they hadn't so much as smelled the front lines before.

"...World War III started and ended in just twelve days, but we're still getting many eyewitness reports of occult activity. Experts are calling this Third War Sickness, and just like British Halloween, it appears to be a form of mass hysteria caused by wartime stress. Many are now voicing the opinion that people are owed serious and swift compensation..."

Accelerator didn't have anything to do, either. But as he lay there on the couch, he felt like something was...off.

He looked down and saw Last Order snuggled up with him on the already cramped sofa.

"...What are you doing?"

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"Misaka is taking a nap, too, says Misaka says Misaka simply."

"Hey—"

"...Zzz."
```

Before the city's number-one esper could complain, Last Order just fell asleep on the spot. Accelerator clicked his tongue in annoyance, but then a different voice spoke to him—it was Misaka Worst, sitting on the armrest at the end of the couch.

"You finally got peace back," she said. "How does it feel?"

"...What are you getting at?"

"Nothing, really," she said, her statement clearly implying something.

Once, there had been a great darkness in Academy City. And it had taken the form of humans who possessed great strength but found it very difficult to live due to various circumstances. Sometimes, their acquaintances would use them as a shield, and other times, they'd be forced into certain jobs in exchange for the necessary documentation and status to live a normal life.

Accelerator had been one of those people.

But that cycle had already been broken. Accelerator had destroyed it himself at the end of World War III.

Motoharu Tsuchimikado.

Awaki Musujime.

Mitsuki Unabara...though that was most likely a false name.

As Accelerator lapsed into thought, the commentator's voice continued, clearly already drunk on peace.

"...Setting aside whether any actual occult phenomenon occurred, giant golden rings and what appear to be huge ribs have been left behind in several cities around the world. Though, 'golden' isn't quite accurate. The United Nations plans to dispose of them in the anoxic region of the Pacific Ocean, aiming to kill two birds with one stone by getting rid of the objects and supplying oxygen to the altered ocean current. They hope this will help restore

several fisheries. But as they have done no investigations into the matter, I personally believe they have a different objective in mind..."

Once, a band of people known as the Group had lurked within that darkness. Accelerator didn't know exactly what they were up to at the moment, but he assumed they were confronting their respective environments of peace and quiet in this shit-heap of a city.

But something was lacking.

Something was missing.

After the war, Accelerator had cut ties with the darkness. Consequently, he couldn't examine any of the data he'd need from the information network strung all throughout Academy City's underworld. Interception was still an option, but he didn't want to have anything to do with the darkness.

So for better or worse, Accelerator no longer had any way to know what had become of others.

Yes—he couldn't find out if anyone who had taken part in the war had gone missing.

There was no way to know whether the person who had stood at the heart of the fighting had returned home.

"...Zero human casualties are being reported on Academy City's side after the war, and while that is joyful news on its own, it once again exposed the city's monopoly on technology as well as its military disadvantages. Academy City has released a public statement on the matter, saying that..."

The news channel would be of no assistance to Accelerator—not with the sloppiness of their reporting.

But in that case, what was he supposed to trust?

7

There was once a project to create military clones based on the somatic cells of Mikoto Misaka, the city's third-ranked Level Five. That project failed. The people running it hadn't been able to bring out the abilities they needed from

the clones, so they repurposed the cloning technology in a separate experiment, which produced a large quantity of specimens.

Those specimens were the Sisters.

Last Order served as the command tower for the remaining Sisters—who currently numbered almost ten thousand—while Misaka Worst was an irregular specimen born of the later "Third Season," the name for a third clonemanufacturing project.

The electrical signals from those ten thousand brains formed a nexus known as the Misaka network. While it was an aggregation of the Sisters' intracerebral data, the network itself also behaved with a single *intent* all its own.

Last Order was essentially created as a kind of "keyboard" of sorts, which would allow someone on the outside to access the network, while Misaka Worst was meant to extract thoughts and emotions from the system itself—mainly the malicious ones.

And so...

"What? Shopping?" asked Accelerator suspiciously as he lay on the couch.

Aiho Yomikawa, the tracksuit-wearing teacher, nodded. "I don't care if you're back from the battlefield or whatever, but you're home now, so it's time to contribute to society a little."

"Slave driver."

"Oh?" she said casually, feigning ignorance. "Maybe it's just me, but I think being a part of society is toughest when you're useless and unneeded."

"Ugh." Accelerator rose from the couch. "Quit spewing that awful psychology-textbook crap at me. Goddamn teachers..."

"Nah, I'd never make it as a school counselor. If someone causes a problem, my first response is usually corporal punishment. So yeah."

"What do you need?"

"Food. Everything on this leaflet that I circled in red."

"...You want me to go grocery shopping. With a marked-up flyer."

"That's right. Put in some effort, and I just know you'll get used to it."

Giving in to Yomikawa's "encouragement," Accelerator reluctantly used his crutch to get to his feet.

As he did, Last Order, having been completely wiped out in a spaceship game (she'd woken up from her nap, declared she'd get revenge, and lost to Misaka Worst again—badly) peered over at him. "Misaka too! Misaka too!! says Misaka says Misaka, worried about you going all by yourself!!"

"Pipe down, brat!!" he grumbled. "Don't make this weird domesticated Accelerator fantasy any more real than it has to be!!"

Misaka Worst looked awfully fidgety for some reason as Last Order kept on saying, "Misaka too! Misaka too!"

In truth, she'd been having a second battle alongside the one in the video game. A *real* battle.

As mentioned before, Misaka Worst drew out a lot of thoughts and emotions from the will of the Misaka network. Mostly the malicious ones. And *malicious* certainly didn't stop at just anger or hatred.

There was also envy, for example.

Jealousy that Yomikawa had spent so long talking to Accelerator. The desire to go shopping with him, too. Thoughts like those would spread among all the information-sharing Sisters, and when they caused a feedback loop with the network's will, Misaka Worst would be the one to feel most of the effects.

Normally, Misaka Worst wasn't supposed to receive any commands from Last Order. But that didn't mean there weren't any exceptions.

Which meant...

Fidget fidget fidget fidget fidget fidget fidget itchy itchy itchy itchy fidget fidget

of the vortex of emotions raging in her mind at the moment. And unfortunately, it was just too much for her.

After all, she'd been created to extract all the malice.

Something in her head almost audibly snapped, and Misaka Worst shot to her feet. She knocked Last Order away to get her to stop clinging to Accelerator's pants. And then she said...

"M-Misaka... Misaka will gladly go shopping with you aaaaaahhhhhh!!"

A few minutes after Yomikawa smiled and handed her a wallet, Misaka Worst found herself sitting on the floor, facing the wall with her knees drawn up.



Accelerator asked her a very simple question: "What is your deal?"

"...Misaka doesn't know anymore..."

8

Hamazura ran like hell to escape the delinquents.

While it depended on whom the persuers were and what the exact situation was, the trick to fleeing on foot was to alternate between large roads and small ones. Repeating that process would largely prevent the use of cars or bikes.

When it came to dealing with peacekeepers like Anti-Skill, it was better to head toward more deserted places, whereas with law-ignoring delinquents, sticking to more populated areas was ideal. Sometimes the gazes of passersby and exercising plain common sense would be enough to end most chases.

With all that in mind, the thing that needed to be avoided no matter what was long, direct routes. It was critical to keep turning little corners over and over to increase the likelihood of losing them completely.

While this was an effective strategy for throwing off pursuants, it came with an important caveat.

...Shit! I don't know District 10's streets!! I really hope I'm heading north right now!!

You could easily lose your sense of direction after turning a few unfamiliar corners. It was more than possible to *think* you had run far away when you'd actually done a long U-turn, and the next thing you knew, you were surrounded again.

To prevent this from happening, you could first pick a direction to flee in, turning tight corners while making sure to keep going in the same general direction.

This was all well and good in theory, but if delinquents suddenly surrounded you and you were running for your life, it was harder to put into practice.

"Haah!! Haah!! ...C-crap. Those two... They'd better remember this. One hundred spanks for each of them when this is over. As for Takitsubo... Yeah, she

probably feels amazing stripped down, judging from before..."

Hamazura's thighs hurt from running at a full sprint for so long, and his lungs were beginning to malfunction. Finally, he stopped and looked around.

His pursuers were nowhere in sight. Checking a nearby map sign, he realized he was in District 7 now. He'd crossed over at some point.

For a moment, and honestly just for a moment, Hamazura thought of the others. But he quickly banished the worries from his mind. Every one of those delinquents had been chasing him, and even if they'd gone for the girls, they wouldn't stand a chance against a Level Five and a Level Four.

Maybe I should text them to tell them I'm safe, he thought admirably. Wait, no. If they know I'm out of harm's way, they won't waste any time getting me involved in the next ridiculous situation. I'll just play dead for a little longer—

Thump. He bumped into someone's shoulder.

Upon closer inspection, that someone was a girl with short brown hair. She was probably in middle school.

"Uh. Sorry," he said out of reflex.

She didn't answer. The girl walked away unsteadily, disappearing into the crowd.

...What was up with her? That was a Tokiwadai uniform, wasn't it...? he thought, looking in the direction she'd gone for a few moments. Seems like something's going on there... Well, it's got nothing to do with me.

Thinking in circles wouldn't get him anywhere. No longer needing his phone, Hamazura put it back in his pocket and glanced around, looking for a place to get a nice, cold drink.

And then someone spoke up from right next to him.

"Oh, hey, Hamazura. What's wrong?"

Still catching his breath from the run, he turned around. *That* was a face he remembered.

"Hanzou?"

INTERLUDE ONE

Academy City was host to a large group called Skill-Out.

It was composed of the boys and girls who had dropped out of school after being marked as Level Zeroes during the city-mandated supernatural-ability development that was part of their standard education.

But just like the terms *mafia* or *motorcycle gang*, the name *Skill-Out* didn't refer to a single organization. It was more like a category. There were several groups linked together in a complicated web under the Skill-Out umbrella, some of whom opposed each other, while others cooperated. Someone who didn't know any better would scoff at them for having the nerve to go around causing trouble for people despite being totally useless in school.

And that impression wasn't wrong.

Whatever their histories, whatever their circumstances, the members of Skill-Out did things that flew in the face of social mores. Chalking all their actions up to wanting somewhere to belong was too much to ask.

The many varieties of Skill-Outs had different ways of choosing leaders, different numbers of leaders, and different leadership styles.

In the past, a certain young man had reigned as the leader of one of these groups.

His name was Ritoku Komaba.

And by this time in November, he was already dead.

CHAPTER 2

What Happens Next, and the Choices We Should Make Dream.

1

Hamazura and Hanzou stepped into a District 7 restaurant whose only redeeming quality was how cheap it was. Taking a table in the corner, Hanzou stuck to ordering food seasoned in such a way that it had to be paired with beer to be any good.

Back in his Skill-Out days, Hamazura would come to this place a lot with Komaba and Hanzou.

A flat-screen TV hung in a corner of the restaurant. Hamazura idly watched the talk show on it; it was discussing how the reorganization of the Roman Orthodox Church was going, and how Peter logdis had succeeded Matthew Reese as pope.

"Not getting anything, Hamazura?" asked Hanzou.

"I actually just went to another place," he answered, deciding to order a few salted yakitori skewers anyway. "...Japanese food is still all you eat, huh? And you don't care one bit about tradition."

"You think so?"

"Yeah. You're the sort of guy who would walk into a *yakiniku* place and order boiled fish."

Once his food was brought over, Hanzou focused on eating for a little while. He must not have had lunch yet. Hamazura picked apart the fried chicken on his skewers, carefully dividing the skin and eating the pieces one at a time.

He then looked at Hanzou, who was really chowing down. "What's up with you? Skipped breakfast?"

"I've just been busy lately. Haven't had anything to eat. Not enough hours in the day, you know? Jelly and beef jerky is all I've been eating. Can't tell you how long it's been since I sat down for a meal."

"?"

"What about you? Haven't heard from you lately. Where have you been? And what've you been up to?"

"I'm back from the battlefield—a postapocalyptic emperor."

Now it was Hanzou's turn to give him a strange look.

They proceeded to exchange bits of information, though Hamazura didn't know if they were just rumors or firsthand eyewitness accounts. Like how a customer, enraged at some greedy gambling place for the programming of its slot machines, had flipped out and drove a dump truck into the establishment. Or how ATM security had gotten so strict that it was easier to get cash by going around breaking vending machines.

"Really? Hamazura, you got a girl?"

"I guess... I'm pretty anxious about it, though, if I'm being honest." Hamazura poked some of the disassembled bird skin with his skewer. "I mean, all I've ever done is attack, right? I don't know how to defend or protect. I don't want this to be a three-month fling. So I was thinking maybe I should start thinking about the future."

"What are you going to do for money?"

"...I was wondering if I could use my lockpicking techniques. Not for stealing cars. But, like, you know how roadside assistance comes around when you lock your keys in the car? Someone's gotta be the one to open the door. If I can put all my burglary techniques to better use, maybe it'll help me protect a thing or two."

Hamazura laughed awkwardly, taking out a small reference manual—it looked like it was from an online course—and putting it on the table.

"But it probably won't be *that* easy to learn skills that I can actually use. I tried reading one of those gray-hat hacker mags calling itself honest security, but when it comes to electronic locks and stuff, I don't even know where to start."

"...Well, maybe you should try to figure out what you're actually interested in doing. You know, like arts versus sciences or whatever. People tend to be good at one or the other. Same as with everything else. If you can get that sorted out, everything else might suddenly fall into place. Even if it doesn't, it should still stop you from wasting effort. And then it's just a matter of doing things little by little, picking stuff up as you go."

"Maybe you're right."

"Hey, you used an engine from some heavy machinery to jack an ATM in two minutes flat that one time. I think going for lock-and-key stuff is a pretty good choice."

Just then, Hanzou's cell phone went off. He reached into his pocket and took his phone out; one look at the screen, and he put it away again. Then he picked up the check and stood.

Hamazura looked at him askance. "What's up?"

"A chance to make some money." Hanzou gave him a stiff smile. "Well, I guess in your words, this job would be attacking. Not defending. Wouldn't do you much good at all now."

"Gotcha."

"But I've gotta hurry, so I'll see you later, Hamazura."

"Hey, wait. I'll pay for my stuff."

"I'm off to make some money, remember? It's my treat."

After saying everything he wanted to say, Hanzou turned and went over to the register.

Hamazura felt a little forlorn at not being able to join in on what Hanzou had mentioned, but then...

"...Huh? There's nobody at the register. Now's the perfect time to dash!!"

"Hey!! Don't skip out on the check and leave me here alone, asshole!!" cried Hamazura, feeling a highly concentrated sauce drown his bland emotions.

7

A shopping trip to the neighborhood grocery store to pick up things for dinner.

u ,

"...."

A pop song that was so out of fashion that it made you wonder why the heck someone ever chose to listen to it was playing from the store speakers. Accelerator and Misaka Worst stood there frozen in the aisles as it played in their ears.

They felt out of place. Really out of place—it was like they'd gone to a baseball stadium to see a game but had somehow ended up smack-dab in the middle of the third-base stands, surrounded by the opposing team's fans.

"What is this...? Are they trying to show us firsthand how evil and twisted we are? Is that why they're putting us in ordinary civilian situations?" wondered Misaka Worst aloud as she pushed the clattering shopping cart.

Accelerator sounded even more disgusted with the whole thing than her. "... No, they just want us to get used to seeing peace."

It may have sounded like a dumb viewpoint to have, but in reality, nothing was more important for people who'd recently come home from war. As long as they couldn't adapt to leading an uneventful lifestyle, they would remain people who only knew how to live on the battlefield, undermining the very peace they'd fought for.

Both Accelerator and Misaka Worst had spent their pasts right at the center of the vortex created by other people's malice—in a place where blood was shed as a matter of course. A place where circumventing the rules was a prerequisite to survival, even if it meant crawling hands and knees through mud.

Those countless experiences had made them strong, in a way, but they were now the ones most liable to shatter the peace.

Monsters.

Objects of horror.

People who could only find value in themselves by killing others.

If they wanted to avoid ending up like that, they would have to get used to being in these fish-out-of-water situations. These experiences would have to become their new normal.

...However.

"Yeah, yeah. Thanks, honors kid," grumbled Misaka Worst.

"And you can shut the hell up."

"Anyway, who cares about that flyer with all the sales on it or whatever? We can just steal it all. Then it's free."

"...Are you asking me to beat the shit out of you?"

"Come on, think about it. They're so concerned about not letting people carry baked goods out the store, but they've probably never considered someone eating them all *in* the store and just shoving the empty bags back on the shelves."

"You really are wicked to the core."

"In fact, Misaka can barely believe the whole process of paying the amount on the price tag to acquire goods. Isn't business all about making things as cheap and accessible as possible?"

"Then nobody would pay for anything. Doesn't exactly count as *business* then."

"Exactly. Should we pretend to get food poisoning from the free samples?"

"If you do that, I'll kill you and eat you myself," muttered Accelerator, a little confused.

...Why am I the one appealing to common sense? That felt extremely out of place. On the other hand, though, it made him think.

Sure, maybe talking about common sense was out of the ordinary for him.

But saying that it didn't apply to him? That wasn't actually something to brag about, was it?

3

After leaving the District 7 restaurant, Hamazura felt his cell phone buzz in his pocket. He took it out and checked the screen; Rikou Takitsubo was calling. But when he answered and put the phone to his ear, a couple of different voices came through.

"Hamazuraaa! You're, like, taking freaking forever! You're just an errand guy, remember?! How far did you even run?!"

"Ugh, whatever. I was feeling a good thrashing with those morons to pass the time, but then you dragged them away. Your escape is taking so long that the sun'll be down whenever you decide to show up. We'll come find you instead."

"O-oh. In that case, right now, I'm—"

"Oh, good idea," interrupted Mugino for some reason before continuing, "I'm kinda bored, so I figure we can make a game out of finding you."

"?"

"Me, Kinuhata, and Takitsubo. The first to find Hamazura gets to give the last to find him an order... As for what that should be, hmm..."

"We might as well, like, make it a bunny-suit punishment or something."

"What?!?!?!"

"...You seem really excited over something totally stupid, Hamazura. Why does Takitsubo want to cling to your arm anyway?"

"...It's okay. That's not where his strengths lie..."

Huh?! Did they just completely reject the whole bunny-suit thing?! Hamazura started to tremble, feeling panic creeping into his mind. But he couldn't ask for details. He promised himself he'd talk to her one-on-one later.

"Sweet. In that case, like, we're totally starting the search right now. One,

two, go!"

Blip. They hung up. Hamazura stared at the phone's small display.

Maybe he couldn't walk the same path as Hanzou. Maybe he couldn't ever go back to Skill-Out, either. Even after getting through World War III, he was still a third-rate punk who could only turn tail whenever the neighborhood delinquents got the jump on him.

Despite that, he'd forged bonds with other people: Mugino, Kinuhata, and Takitsubo. They'd lost a companion named Frenda, but he and the others had once again banded together as Item.

There were people who would come looking for him if he disappeared. It wasn't much, but deep down, it was something that could keep him going.

He'd been reminded of it once again.

...I really can't keep running away forever, can I?

The battles in this peaceful world wouldn't be won or lost in street brawls. They wouldn't involve tearing things away from others. Everything rested on whether or not he could become someone who was able to protect those he cared about *without* doing things like that.

He let that thought sink in, but then—

...Wait. Those three said they'd come looking for me, so what am I supposed to do in the meantime?

Would it be okay if he moved? Or was he supposed to stay in one place? The girls had barely explained the rules before starting the game.

He ended up standing around ineffectually, unable to commit to staying put or getting a move on, and generally looking stupid. He was an object called Hamazura.

"Ohhh?"

And then a voice addressed Hamazura the object. It belonged to a girl.

He turned around to find... He wasn't sure how to describe her. She was wearing a yukata, except it was extremely short. A miniyukata? Her hair was

brown, her makeup was thick, and she was covered in accessories. It was like she'd dressed herself exactly how some clueless old guy assumed city-dwelling high schoolers looked.

Hamazura also happened to be acquainted with her. He didn't know her last name, but her first name was Kuruwa.

She came over to him, the chains coiled around her shoulders, waist, and legs jingling. "Is that you, Sir Hamazura? What are you up to out here?"

"I'm a landmark. The Statue of the Postapocalyptic Emperor."

"?"

Hamazura gave the girl a thin smile, not explaining that he had to stand still as part of his friends' game. "I could ask you the same, Kuruwa. Looking for Hanzou again?"

As far as he knew, this Kuruwa girl was an unfortunate sort who was obsessed with ninjas. He got the feeling she was always chasing Hanzou around whenever she got the chance.

Lately, though, Hamazura couldn't help but notice that she'd been talking more politely. Maybe she'd had a change of heart? He didn't know if the two things were related.

"Oh, no, of course not," she said. "Lord Hanzou seemed rather busy at the moment, so I'm acting independently."

"You are?"

"Yes, I am. Actually, if I was still seriously searching for him, I would have already used every trick up my sleeve to extract every drop of information you have on him—including my feminine charms."

"Feminine...charms...?"

He was pretty sure Kuruwa had said that to please him. But Hamazura could only stutter in response, because the *last* time she'd used her feminine charms on him, he'd been hit with a surprise attack.

And he knew that whenever she said stuff like that, danger was close at hand. Hamazura steeled himself.

Not seeming to register his cautious expression much, Kuruwa pouted and reached for the sash at her waist. "You don't seem like you believe me. I could give you a peek right now, if you want."

"No! Stop! Don't take it off!! If you use your charms on me for literally no reason, you'll only plunge us into an infinite hell of eroticism!!"

Sensing *something* from the quivering, terrified man, Kuruwa removed her hand from her obi.

Then she said this: "I want to be with Lord Hanzou more than anything, but burdening him is the last thing I want to do."

"Oh, right. He told me he had something to do. And that he's been so busy that he's barely had time to eat."

"When did you last see him?"

"Just a little while ago, right over at that restaurant. He ordered nothing but home-cooked Japanese commoner food, as always."

"Well, he *is* the type to walk into a Chinese restaurant and ask for a plain vegetable stir-fry."

"Yeah, and he would walk into a yakiniku place and order boiled fish."

The two of them laughed at their shared image of Hanzou.

"Which means...did he talk to you about what he was up to, Sir Hamazura?"

"A little. Said it was a deal to make some money."

"Hmm. Then it's probably not what I'm involved with right now."

"What are you involved with right now?"

"Well, it's more like I'm sticking my neck in some business Lord Hanzou is involved with. I'm surprised he can handle other things while it's still going on, actually."

"?"

"But since you've already heard about it, it must be the type of thing he's okay with mentioning."

"What is it?"

"Oh, you know. All that stuff about..."

4

Accelerator and Misaka Worst tossed item after item into the shopping cart, following along the marks on the leaflet.

"Furikake, nori boiled in soy sauce, whitebait, mentaiko, umeboshi..."

"Misaka's never eaten much except synthesized stuff, so maybe she shouldn't be saying this, but aren't we getting a few *too* many rice toppings?"

"They're probably trying to cut corners. Just be thankful this isn't a big parade of frozen meals."

"Even frozen meals would be a luxury for Misaka, but all right."

And then Misaka Worst grew quiet.

Accelerator had paused, having picked up something that wasn't in the instructions on the flyer. It was a bottle of *furikake* that seemed to be having a tie-in with some mascot or other; the cap on top had a little doll affixed to it.

Misaka Worst would normally be more than willing to bust out laughing if she found out Accelerator was into that stuff, but she wasn't in the mood for it today.

Still, it was enough to berate him for.

"A baby chicken mascot? That's so cliché... Is that a souvenir for your daughter, Last Order? What a caring father."

"Regardless of where she came from, her interests are pretty simple," spat Accelerator, waggling the bottle a little. "...You're part of the Misaka network, too, so you're affected by its aggregate desires. Shouldn't your interests be similar?"

"Listen here. The network may mess with Misaka, but it's only the dark, twisted parts inside it that get to her. Don't treat Misaka like Last Order. She's a simpleton with innocent tastes."

"…"

"Besides, Misaka was designed to take advantage of you by trampling all over that, remember? Misaka thought you were painfully aware of that after what happened on that Russian snowfield. Besides, that's just a worthless mascot character, and..."

Accelerator silently shook the bottle of *furikake* again, drawing Misaka Worst's eyes over to it. The girl in the ao dai then looked back in the opposite direction, but eventually, her gaze was drawn to it again.

"You haven't been able to take your eyes off this baby chicken mascot."

"Agh!!" groaned Misaka Worst, uncharacteristically upset. "...M-Misaka can't believe you'd purposely consider this Misaka to be in the same category as Last Order in pursuit of some weird role-play where Misaka's body and mind end up disconnected..."

"You know, going by the numbering scheme, you're technically the little sister."

5

Once Accelerator and Misaka Worst were finished shopping, they left the supermarket—with an extra bottle of *furikake* that hadn't been marked on the leaflet.

"Misaka has to say, she'd never expected any of this. That was an encounter with the unknown from start to finish. Peaceful days are more exhausting than she thought."

"…"

Accelerator couldn't easily laugh off her words.

Was this right?

He was completely tired out just from going shopping. Could he really fit into this world?

It would be easy to push this sort of tepid, peace-drunk attitude to the side, saying it didn't suit him. In fact, somewhere in his unconscious mind, he felt like

he'd always romanticized that sort of response as being "cool."

But what would happen if he did that? Was there supposed to be some alternative that shone even more brightly?

If he wanted to become a monster who could only derive worth from killing people, he could choose that path. But his destination lay elsewhere. The more he pushed it away, the more his desires would slip from his grasp.

Could he really do this?

...I wonder what the hell happened to that guy? he thought, recalling a certain Level Zero. Accelerator had reigned over Academy City as the strongest, but that boy had probably been mired even deeper in the fighting. Accelerator knew he had to have a home of his own. Had he made it back? Did this all feel strange to him, too?

If he'd been constantly alternating between extreme battlefields and daily life, then wouldn't he have it way worse than someone like Accelerator, who had just stewed in the darkness the whole time?

Accelerator let himself stand there, exhaustion soaking into him, but after a few moments, Misaka Worst tugged on his sleeve. He looked over, suspicion on his face. "What?"

"Let's grab some food with the leftover change. Misaka's heard that's a basic way to be evil."

"...You seem to have a pretty broad definition of 'evil."

Well, she did gather all the ill will and malice from the whole Misaka network, so in a roundabout way, maybe Last Order's own desires were a part of her.

Giving in to Misaka Worst's whims, they bought some ice cream at a stand made from a converted boxcar.

"Shall Misaka let her tongue play lasciviously along it for you?"

"Who would enjoy that? You?"

"Guess you're right. Misaka would let you touch her boobs or her ass if it dealt fatal damage to your and Last Order's relationship. But it seems like that won't do much right now."

"I'm not listening," said Accelerator, fed up with the conversation.

Ice cream in hand, he glanced over at the crowd, then paused.

He noticed a silver-haired nun wearing a white habit. Her face was thick with exhaustion and anxiety. It was like the life had drained from her charming features.

She's...

Accelerator remembered her face. But she looked quite a bit different from the last time he'd seen her.

A few seconds later, she disappeared into the crowd.

Lost her, eh. Well, I'm sure it's not important enough to go crazy looking for her—and she could easily be put on the wrong path if she gets involved with me.

The mean-looking girl sitting next to the city's top dog didn't seem to have noticed.

"Ugh, Misaka just can't get used to this," said Misaka Worst candidly, licking her vanilla ice cream. "The two of us sitting here in the sunlight side by side, doing nothing but lick, lick, lick, lick. For real, it's insane. This isn't normal. Don't you feel anxious that nothing is happening? Don't you wonder if it's all a precursor to something big?"

"Got your hopes up so far you're anxious about it?"

"Misaka doesn't know. Maybe. Maybe not. Misaka doubts there's any human who could really understand her mind. When psychologists do their tests on themselves, they probably overestimate how well they do. If anyone could get a full grasp on how Misaka thinks, they'd be insane, too." She grinned. "What about you?"

"Not interested," answered Accelerator offhandedly. "Everything I thought I needed, I ripped away from that war. I have everything I need now. And if someone tells me I've gotta do stuff I'm not used to in order to keep things that way, I'll do it."

"Ultimately, Misaka thinks the central issue is *what*, exactly, we're not used to."

"Eh?"

"Is it the peace itself? Or is it having to mold ourselves to the expectations of others? You know, fit ourselves inside their boxes?"

"...You think like a little brat."

"Misaka actually doesn't think it's that stupid. We both know from experience how inconvenient it is to be inside someone else's box like that. And we've torn away everything we needed. Doesn't that mean our very natures aren't even *compatible* with fitting other peoples' expectations?"

"You just need to change your perspective." Accelerator was unperturbed. "There's someone out there who thinks we could *never* do that—that beasts like us can only live in seas of blood. Showing them that we can live like this if we want to is just another way of rebelling against those people, ain't it?"

"Oh, Misaka sees. Misaka likes that better." Once Misaka Worst was finished licking her vanilla ice cream all over, she crunched down on her now-purposeless cone. "...You smell that? There's a bad odor. Near us, too."

"?"

"A nostalgic scent, you might say."

"...."

Accelerator narrowed his eyes a little upon hearing that. He took another look around. What he saw was a calm, peaceful city.

That explained the uncanny sensation he was picking up. All the colors and shapes fit perfectly, but they were clearly *off*. It was a very odd feeling that he couldn't explain, almost like he was watching aliens wearing human skin.

One thing stood out to him as particularly strange.

"That sightseeing bus," he said.

"A vehicle disguised as one anyway. Probably an undercover vehicle, yeah?" Misaka Worst grinned. "Academy City's still the same as ever, huh? Oh, wait. But that's weird! Didn't *somebody* put a stop to underground organizations coercing people into doing dirty jobs? Misaka thought they did."

"…"

"We have two choices." Misaka Worst held up her index finger and middle finger, waving them in front of Accelerator. "Eliminate the bus to keep the peace, knowing it will be dangerous. Or overlook the threat to peace, avoiding the danger and staying safe."

"More like *one* choice," spat Accelerator. "We destroy it now. They've broken the contract. Little scraps of darkness are hanging on. I'll teach them discretion... I don't like sticking my neck in where I'm not wanted, but if this involves the darkness, it's a different story."

Misaka Worst whistled. "Well, now that the darkness is on the prowl, someone's gonna get hurt. It's a threat to life and limb, yeah? Number One is such a good boy who cares about the community."

"...Don't act like you know everything about me. What about you?"

"I'm taking the more dangerous route, obviously. It'll be more fun."

6

Shiage Hamazura pressed his back against the wall of the building, then slid down to the ground. Kuruwa had already left.

His conversation with her flashed through his head.

You haven't heard? Lord Hanzou is currently providing shelter to a little girl.

In truth, Hamazura wasn't in a position to fully enjoy his life in Academy City without consequences. The only reason he'd broken out of the city and gotten mixed up in World War III to begin with because they'd decided he knew too much about the city's darkness and couldn't be trusted to act the way they expected. He'd been on the run.

During the war, he'd obtained a certain piece of data. It was called the Parameter List, and it could certainly shake things up in Academy City.

Nonetheless, it wasn't all-powerful. There was some semblance of equilibrium for the moment, but if the scales tipped too far, the city—always two steps ahead of him—would find a way to get rid of him.

I don't know the details, but apparently, the city's higher-ups are gunning for her. He insists that she'd be killed within thirty minutes if she walked around the streets.

And the scales were *already* severely unstable. If they took another hit, they'd swing way over to one side.

To prevent that from happening, he'd have to stay under the radar for now. He needed time—time to see whether or not it was really worth placing his life on one side of the scales. Would he get involved with this problem or not? Or would he abandon Hanzou? That would mean giving up on the girl, too.

What was her name again?

He knew what the rational decision was. If he prioritized safety, that would be his only choice.

He'd sworn he'd protect Rikou Takitsubo. He wanted to keep her as safe as possible. The last thing he wanted was for her to get sucked back into the darkness of Academy City.

Abandoning them, then, was the right choice.

It was correct. He knew it.

But still...

I think it was...Frem...? Frem...aye? Oh, right. Fremea Seivelun. She's around ten, with fluffy blond hair. I believe she got along well with Sir Komaba.

As Hamazura sat hunched over in the alleway, he gritted his teeth.

Ritoku Komaba had once been Skill-Out's leader. He'd fought Academy City's darkness for the sake of many Level Zeroes—and paid for it with his life. This Fremea girl was, so to speak, the very person he'd risked his life to protect until the very end. And Hanzou must have been sheltering her to honor Komaba's wishes. Fremea herself was a completely harmless Level Zero with no ties to Skill-Out. That powerlessness may have been exactly why Komaba wanted to protect her, in fact.

And that wasn't all. Shiage Hamazura knew the last name Seivelun.

He hadn't known that was the surname of the girl who'd always been with

Komaba until now. In fact, even Komaba—the person she was closest to—had just called her Import based on his first impression of her.

But there was no deceiving anyone at this point. Now that he knew her name, he'd have to face the facts.

"...Frenda Seivelun," Hamazura mumbled.

He paused, then added something.

"So she's her little sister ...?!"

Shizuri Mugino, Saiai Kinuhata, Rikou Takitsubo. They'd fought together once as Item along with one other person—Frenda. They didn't know how she'd come into contact with Academy City's dark side or what had brought her to Item. They'd even toyed with the idea that she simply loved the thrill of the fight.

But...

...what if her sister had been the reason all along? Was abandoning Fremea still the right decision, then?

Even now, his friend Hanzou was fighting against Academy City's darkness. Giving up on them would be tantamount to turning his back on both deceased parties—Frenda and Komaba.

Was abandoning them still the right decision?

... Yeah, he thought before speaking out loud to reaffirm his intentions. "It's the right one..." His voice got louder and louder. "It can't be wrong. It can't be wrong to keep Takitsubo and the rest of Item out of harm's way!! I clawed and scraped through dirt and mud during that awful war. And I finally got what I was looking for!! I'm not throwing it away now. I have it! And I'll protect it, no matter what!!"

He cradled his head in his hands, still sitting curled up in the alley.

Yes.

Logically, the best way to protect Takitsubo would be to abandon Hanzou and Fremea. That choice presented the least risk. It protected the people most precious to him.

So Hamazura had to make that choice.

At least, if he really wanted to protect what was precious to him.

He needed to be cold. Unfeeling. He had to deftly evade the problem hurtling at him.

So choose.

Choose!

Now!

Hamazura swore, then scratched his head madly.

"How the hell could I ever abandon them?!"

Putting his hand on the wall, he stood up again. Then he turned toward where the alley went deeper and strode in that direction, into the shadows that symbolized the city's darkness.

All to save a friend whose life was in danger.

All to respect the wishes of two dead people.

He didn't contact Takitsubo and the others. This was *his* problem. As long as the balance was fragile, he couldn't afford to get them involved in this. It would be reckless.

But he'd come back to them.

And so Shiage Hamazura plunged himself into the darkness.

INTERLUDE TWO

Ritoku Komaba.

Though the tall, muscular young man tended to scare away everyone he met, deep down, he didn't like fighting. After he'd become leader of Skill-Out, where the Level Zeroes who had dropped out of their school's ability development programs eventually wound up, the organization began to steadily acquire a moral code.

They avoided unnecessary violence, never ganged up on the weak, and secretly protected those in the shadows who, for one reason or another, couldn't go to Anti-Skill, Judgment, or anyone else for help.

...Well, the organization hadn't turned into anything quite *that* noble and bright. Skill-Out still used the fact that its members had been alienated from Academy City to justify all kinds of misdeeds. And many of their actions had nothing to do with wanting a "place to belong" or anything of the sort.

Nevertheless, a line they wouldn't cross had started to form.

Though anyone who had actually been hurt by them would doubt their ears to hear it, Skill-Out had actually started to develop a moral compass.

And that was when things had gone down.

Something had happened that changed their fates.

Perhaps someone had finally pushed the big snowball resting atop the hill.

Something that wouldn't allow for gradual change, for progressive growth.

The cause had been very simple.

A very powerful esper had started going around attacking one Level Zero after



CHAPTER 3

A Subtle Blank, and Signs of Future Connections Girl.

1

"Over here."

Hanzou beckoned, and the girl of about ten followed. They were headed toward the entrance to the underground mall.

A male delinquent and a doll-like girl—they were a pairing as strange as coffee and sushi.

Fremea Seivelun.

Her appearance was certainly unique. Her fluffy top was mostly white and pink, and it was decked out with a copious amount of frills and lace. Beneath that, her outfit was more tasteful; a miniskirt plus thick wine-red tights covered her lower body. She came across as an idol—not the real-life kind, but one that might appear in a video game.

It seemed like she hadn't picked out her getup on her own; someone had chosen it for her. That in itself went to show how charming she was. With slender limbs, soft blond hair, fair skin, and clear blue eyes, she looked every bit the perfect doll, which enhanced her overall image. In plainer terms, it seemed like everything she wore would be the new trend a day later.

Ordinarily, her appearance would have been a benefit, no questions asked. But not now. Her outfit stood out like a sore thumb. This was only detrimental for someone on the run.

And Hanzou knew that. After all, he was a natural at blending in with the

crowd, even in a delinquent group like Skill-Out. The reason he was taking the extremely conspicuous girl to the underground mall was very simple.

Their pursuer had sniffed them out.

...Hanzou always maintained a number of hideouts. It was actually something of a hobby of his. He would set up a new one whenever he had free time. As long as he could get some shut-eye there, the safe houses could be anything—from cardboard-box houses to high-class apartment complexes. He had them scattered throughout the city. He'd look for internet cafés that regularly had vacancies because they were useful for gathering information, and he'd get motorcycles and cars on the cheap—and in secret—not to mention forge several identities. The more options, the better. You could get in trouble for lacking what you needed, but not the other way around.

At least, that was what he had always thought.

I screwed the pooch this time, he decided honestly. They figured out when I do regular maintenance on my hideouts and used that to tail me. Damn it! What was the point in having so many if this was going to happen anyway?!

Luxurious apartments and cardboard boxes alike got dinged up over time, so he visited these hideouts regularly. At some point during that process, their hunter had found them.

Hanzou didn't know how much they knew about him, but it was best to assume every single one of his many hideouts were off the table now. They weren't running through the underground mall now to reach a safehouse. And Fremea, of course, probably didn't have a clear destination in mind.

Hanzou was holding his phone; he'd heavily modified it to pick up more than just cell phone signals.

For example...

...the radios belonging to that group of teachers trained in peacekeeping operations who constantly patrolled every inch of the city—Anti-Skill.

They're in the middle of checking this place out as precautionary measure for the planned transport of a major criminal. If we charge in here, too, any shady characters will be forced to back off!! Perhaps his plan had been naive, though. This would have been enough to frighten off his pursuer—*if* he was being chased by a city-dwelling delinquent. And by forcing them to change their route, he should have had a pretty good chance at shaking them.

Unfortunately...

Wha-bam!!

All of a sudden, the ceiling of the underground mall caved in, and his pursuer swiftly descended.

Someone who didn't care one bit about Anti-Skill.

Clouds of dust and smoke were hurled into the air. The hunter had landed about three hundred meters away from Hanzou and Fremea—and it wasn't shaped like a human.

What...what is that...?

The silhouette inside the dust looked like the top half of a human pasted to the top part of a giant insect. And it was *huge*. It almost reached the ceiling of the mall at full standing height.

The thing's movements were so smooth that it seemed biological, but a moment later, Hanzou revised his thinking.

It was a powered suit.

And an eight-legged one, at that. It didn't have a head, just a body with lenses and sensors attached. The waist portion looked like it could rotate three hundred sixty degrees. Hanzou had no clue how human beings were supposed to map their four-limbed motion to its eight legs, but considering the whole thing was over five meters long, the pilot must have been very well protected inside it.

But the craziest part of the suit was its arms. They were mismatched—the left was twice the size of a human's, and the right over four times. And both of them were shaped like tubes from the elbows down. Something had been affixed to each of the wrist joints as well, like bayonets.



Its left arm sported a machine gun. And as for its right...

"A smoothbore cannon?!"

That was the kind of weapon you'd find on a tank.

As Hanzou shouted, light flashed at the muzzle. He didn't even have time to shove Fremea out of the way.

The shell struck the wall not far away from them, causing a massive shock wave. The discharge sent out a *whump!!!!!!* that took a moment for Hanzou's ears to process. The shock wave alone should have knocked out his hearing entirely, but that burst was so loud, he somehow heard it anyway.

But he had no time to complain about every single injury. He was hurled several meters away before slamming into the floor.

He blacked out.

And three seconds later, he regained consciousness.

The reason for his recovery was clear to him.

...My AED shield. It automatically sent a shock to my chest in response to my brain signals. Guess it works...

"Gah... Geh...!! F-Frem...Fremea...!!"

Though he was too rattled in the brain to stand, he could still make out the scene, albeit hazily. Students were nearby—a lot of them—and they were all screaming as they started to run for the exit. The shrill cries and thumping of feet made Hanzou's head pound with pain.

Anti-Skill was baffled for a few seconds. Then they leaped into action. They fired two or three pistol rounds at the eight-legged powered suit, but after seeing that do nothing, they quickly changed tactics, opting to swiftly evacuate the students to keep the casualties to a minimum.

Hanzou had to hand it to Anti-Skill for not getting mowed down like grunts, but he doubted he could count on them to protect him or Fremea. If the spider mech decided to commit to an all-out assault, it *would* mow Anti-Skill down; the only thing the officers could do was escort the civilians to safety.

Where are you, Fremea?! Damn it!

Crawling along the floor, Hanzou kept searching for the girl. Most of the wall had collapsed, and the shock wave had shattered pillars and glass panes alike. Just then, in the middle of the debris, he saw a small shadow lying on the floor.

It was her. She was about ten meters away.

He couldn't tell if she was fine from where he was. But she still seemed to have all her limbs, at least. Which was a miracle, considering the guy in the suit had fired a smoothbore cannon right at her.

Whump!! Whump!! came the following cannon blasts; the spider mech was now shooting at Anti-Skill to try and ward them off.

Hanzou observed the suit. With every shot, it ejected a spent disk—the bottom piece of the shell—from a spot near the elbow, before loading a new shell into place with its shorter left arm. It seemed to be taking them out of a knapsack-like compartment on its back.

It wasn't firing directly at the Anti-Skill officers, but at the floor in front of them. Was the pursuer trying to be merciful? Or were they trying to hit everyone at once with a rain of debris, since it was too much trouble to aim anti-armor rounds at each and every individual target?

The officers' bulletproof vests and other body armor would shield them from incidental shrapnel, but they wouldn't afford them protection from blast waves. One after another, the formidable Anti-Skill officers were knocked out. It was almost like each one was being tazed after a bucket of salt water had been dumped on them.

The spider mech's right elbow ejected another metallic disklike object with a burst of scorching hot gas—the bottom part of the shell, now useless after firing.

"Urgh..."

With the sound of that shot, Fremea—who had been knocked down by the earlier shock wave—groaned. She hadn't regained consciousness on her own; the impact had probably jostled her awake.

Strength was finally returning to Hanzou's limbs. A bunch of shrapnel hit the wall and the ceiling before it struck its target... The shells must be APFS...uh, something or other. Too many letters to remember. The kind that punches through armor with sheer force instead of explosives. Plus, they have a multilayered structure. Once the shell penetrates the armor, it causes spalling and overpressure on the inside.

Normally, these types of rounds weren't meant to be fired directly at people—they were designed to be used against tanks or armored vehicles to kill their occupants. The confined, sturdy interiors of tanks made made them death traps when shrapnel and shock waves were introduced. Maybe that was why it had failed to finish Hanzou and the others off in this spacious mall.

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"...Fre...mea. Can you stand? Fremea?!"
"...."
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Though the girl stirred, she didn't reply to him. Hanzou ran over to her in a crouch.

The powered suit responded. It crawled closer to him on its eight legs, its right-arm cannon pointed at them. Clearly, the pilot was intending to kill.

Hanzou slid across shards of building materials on the floor to Fremea, then scooped her up and disappeared around a corner.

Then the shot came.

Metallic death hurtled at them faster than sound, crashing into a wall between Hanzou and the powered suit.

But that wasn't the end of it. Having struck the surface of the wall, the kinetic energy continued, traveling through it and emanating outward from the opposite side. The entire building shuddered.

And then as if over a giant speaker, a *whhhuuummmppp!!!!!!* roared in both their ears.

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"Brft — Geh... Hah?!"
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Unable to withstand the shock, the wall crumpled and buckled under the force of the blast, sending millimeter-long fragments flying that plunged into

Hanzou's skin. He wasn't one to brag, but the way he'd positioned himself around Fremea to protect her from the debris was probably one of his top five best plays of all time.

A...a nonlethal air-stun cannon that shoots adhesives...?! That was the first question on Hanzou's mind, almost before even realizing he'd survived. He switched ammunition? That thing can swap between different types of shells?!

Modern smoothbore cannons could apparently fire both artillery shells and anti-air missiles. It was possible this powered suit even had guided weaponry.

Well, speaking of modern..., he thought, slowly getting to his feet and making sure the girl in his arms was safe. Academy City smoothbore cannons can hit a target five kilometers away with over ninety-five percent accuracy, even while moving and even during continuous fire. It doesn't matter how small the target is. At that distance, there's no way he'd ever fail to kill us...

Naturally, their pursuer had no reason to pull his punches. And that powered suit had to be every bit as capable as an ordinary tank was.

Which meant something else was going on. Something that would make it fail —twice—to kill unarmed humans three hundred meters away, under ideal conditions in an enclosed underground mall.

...Underground mall...

"Oh, I get it."

Hanzou brought his head up. He's using radio waves for precision aiming. That would work on an open battlefield, but this structure is complex, so his signal must be getting scrambled. He can't correct his aim the way he wants to.

Hanzou assumed urban combat would present similar difficulties for this model. It had probably been altered for use in World War III, since the open countryside of Russia had few obstacles to speak of. Now the hunter was using it for this mission instead.

Which also meant...

If I can somehow interfere with the signal even more or hit this guy's targeting system's receiver with powerful EM waves, it might neutralize the cannon

completely...

Was this a chance to turn things around, or was he getting greedy and putting himself at even greater risk?

The suit's eight legs clacked and clanked as it clambered over. Hearing that, Hanzou decided to try and get out of here for now. A car might not be able to shake it off—not if that suit was military hardware. But maybe he could take advantage of its size somehow.

More importantly, the bigger threat is if he turns and sprays that left-arm machine gun at us. That thing's more than capable of gunning down human targets.

Whatever the case, they'd gain nothing by letting it get close to them. Standard procedure would be to take a narrow, cramped escape route, but that smoothbore cannon would more than likely just blow through them regardless. That path wouldn't guarantee their safety.

A way out..., thought Hanzou as he slowly got to his feet, Fremea in his arms. We need a way out. A weird one. One that will pull the wool over his eyes...

While he understood that on a logical level, no solutions came to mind. Instead, all he could think of were the exits he'd prepared ahead of time. His brain was urging him to just get moving for now. Telling him that was most important. And that would bring him down the most predictable path.

And then...

...Hanzou's knees suddenly gave out.

Unable to support Fremea's small ten-year-old frame, he fell to his knees. He managed to keep himself from completely collapsing, but at this rate, he wouldn't be able to *walk* straight, much less escape a powered suit made for war.

The reason for that was simple. While the two cannon shots hadn't killed Hanzou or Fremea, they'd still done damage. The shock waves had knocked the wind out of him and thrown off his sense of balance.

Shit... Hanzou tried to take in a breath, which was when he finally realized

how stiff his jaw was. How did I not realize I was injured? My stupid body could've given me a sign a little sooner!

The exit stairs were only a few dozen meters away, but they seemed so much farther than that. They'd never make it out like this. Not going as slow as a caterpillar. Not when a powered suit was hot on their tails. Considering the pilot was more than happy to attack Anti-Skill, fleeing into a populated area wouldn't be enough to make them give up.

The pursuer was trying to make absolutely sure he killed Fremea.

The creaking of the spider mech reached his ears. A massive shadow slid in from around the corner, crushing some building debris as it came. The way its face peeked around at them was weirdly human, sending an even greater chill down Hanzou's spine.

Naturally, no words were exchanged between the two parties. The powered suit simply took aim at Hanzou and Fremea with its left arm. Not the right arm with its smoothbore cannon, but the left arm, which held a machine gun expressly for gunning down human targets.

Gah...!!

In all honesty, there was no need for Hanzou to go this far. Ritoku Komaba had wanted to protect this girl. But that had just been sentimentality speaking. Nothing had forced Hanzou to do this. Normally, his sense of logic would have told him to eliminate any disadvantageous conditions to ensure his own survival.

And yet...

Despite knowing how meaningless it would be against the machine gun's barrel, which was over 18mm across, Hanzou immediately put himself between the suit and Fremea. Why had he done that? What was he hoping to accomplish? He didn't even have time to consider.

Because a moment later, the powered suit's machine gun opened fire.

With accuracy.

And without mercy.

But one thing was strange: The gun wasn't aimed at them.

Grr-wrrrrr!!

It was aimed at a four-door sedan that was speeding down the underground-mall staircase toward them.

An 18mm bore was even larger than the stuff used for antitank rifle rounds. This powered suit could fire fifty rounds in ten seconds. A family sedan against that? The outcome wasn't even worth a second thought.

Once the car came down the stairs and its front wheels hit the floor of the underground mall, its hood immediately crumpled. The engine compartment shattered, and the oil ignited.

It exploded all at once.

The car hadn't even reached Hanzou, much less the powered suit. Heat, smoke, and wind hit his skin.

Shit! What moron did that?! I didn't ask for someone to suicide into the damn thing...!!

But the metallic frame—now all that was left of the vehicle—kept on shooting forward thanks to the momentum it had built up. Its wheels kept on turning, their tires gone.

The spider mech silently readied its right-hand smoothbore. At the speed it was going, the car wouldn't damage the powered suit, even if it slammed directly into the mech. The greater concern was the possibility of explosives inside the vehicle.

The pilot fired without hesitation.

With a brilliant flash of light, the shell soared over Hanzou's and Fremea's heads at the wrecked vehicle behind them, causing it to explode a second time. This time, the car went no farther—the frame itself had blown up hard enough to rip itself to pieces.

Hanzou, already crouching on the floor, was knocked down again by the blast wind.

The destruction was horrible. He felt the urge to cover his eyes. He shuddered

to even imagine what had happened to the driver.

However...

...What...what?

He could make out what used to be the driver's seat in the wreckage of the volcanically erupting car—and there was nobody in it. Hanzou wondered if they'd been torn apart by the cannon fire, but that wasn't it, either. It was...

It's...it's unmanned...? But how?

The flames burned even brighter, their heat licking at Hanzou's cheeks. He looked away despite himself.

And maybe that was why he'd realized it.

Because as it happened, Hanzou had been made to face not the exit, but the powered suit.

And then...

...another person came up from right behind the suit.

Shiage Hamazura.

A young man wearing Anti-Skill gear had sneacked up behind it.

Now, normally...

...no matter how quiet Hamazura was, the spider mech had three-hundred-sixty-degree vision. It would have known exactly how many entities were in the vicinity and where they were—whether vehicle or human. These days, it wouldn't be strange to see radio-controlled cars not more than a few dozen centimeters long, equipped with rocket launchers roaming the battlefield. The spider mech would have been designed to accurately detect these lunchbox-sized land mines even if they were hidden in tall grass—it could *never* have overlooked some high school amateur walking up to it.

But one part of the situation was exceptional.

For just a moment, all those perfect sensors were not functioning perfectly.

And that moment was...

Right after it fires...when it's still recovering from the recoil and the shock wave...?!

Hence the purpose of the empty car—it was to give Hamazura a chance to get right up to the powered suit.

And Hamazura was now cradling an item in his arms, one he must have grabbed from a downed Anti-Skill officer in the underground mall. Its name was...

...HsLH-02.

A linear ram that applied electromagnetic force to break down steel doors.

At first glance, the weapon looked like a bazooka. But the interior housed a flat-tipped piston. Hamazura first swung it back like a pendulum, then slammed the tip of the barrel into the powered suit.

It didn't need a trigger. The proximity of the impact to the muzzle caused the huge twenty-kilogram stake to drive into its target at a subsonic speed.

Metal collided with metal with a whhheeeeerrrrmmmmm!!!!!!

Hamazura had aimed for one of the suit's legs—the one about to touch the floor so that the suit could put the rest of its weight on it. The side-swiping attack had kicked the leg out from under the suit, completely destroying its balance.

The spider's right half plummeted, and yet it managed to keep itself upright.

So he hit it again.

His linear ram delivered a brutal blow to the smoothbore cannon near the suit's elbow, which would normally have been too high up for him to reach. There was an awful sound, like something inside the machine getting twisted up. Then that enormous, threatening cannon swayed like a fishing pole.

But that was all. The cannon hadn't ripped off—it wasn't even warped in the middle.

No good?! Hanzou gritted his teeth. That linear ram was for bashing, not piercing. The piston had a flat end, since it was designed to deliver a massive impact to a door to break it inward. It was fine for that purpose—but unsuited

for punching through armor.

The suit overcame the instability in its right arm and pointed its cannon at Hamazura.

But then as if suddenly realizing something, it stopped moving.

The issue was its right elbow—the spot where Hamazura's linear ram had struck it. That had to be where the powered suit loaded new shells into the cannon. It was normally protected by a sliding-door mechanism, but now that mechanism was just ever so slightly bent out of shape.

And if that sliding door couldn't move, it would no longer open, no matter how minor the warping was. If the powered suit couldn't load the shells, then it couldn't fire the cannon. Even if it already had a shell in the barrel, any issues with the chamber's seal could send the whole mech up in smoke.

The powered suit's shoulder moved up and down irregularly. It almost seemed enraged.

But Hamazura wasn't just going to sit around.

As the spider mech brought its left-arm machine gun around, he hurled a box into the air with one hand—a box-shaped ashtray—then slammed the linear ram into the bottom of it.

The ashtray, which was very heavy to prevent theft, crumpled under the sheer force, launching out at a ferocious speed. It slammed directly into the powered suit's left wrist directly, knocking its machine gun off target.

Whap-pap-pap!! came the short burst of fire as the bullets sprayed a wall that was nowhere near Hamazura.

With the few moments that bought him, he deftly swung the linear ram twenty-kilogram piston right at the barrel. This time, he did so in a scooping motion, from down to up, thrusting the hammer's tip into the air.

The electromagnetic uppercut landed a clean hit on the sensors dotting the spider mech's underbelly. Notably, it destroyed the most important sensor on the entire suit—the radar receiver.

But that was all he could do.

One of the eight legs swung up at Hamazura's linear ram. That was enough to knock it clean out of his hands and send it flying into the ceiling, where it got stuck.

Using precise, electronically controlled motions to steady itself, the suit moved its useless right arm again. While the smoothbore cannon on it had been neutralized, the arm itself was still a very big chunk of composite armor that it could swing around with mechanical force.

Hamazura bent inward at the gut; the strike was more like a strange clothesline than a fist. It sent him careening across the floor, bouncing several times.

"Hamazura!!"

"Egh...ugh... Run... Run, Hanzou... We can use this chance to get away...!!"

After he rolled over to Hanzou, Hamazura still managed to get himself back on his feet, then grabbed Hanzou's unmoving arm and started moving. He noticed that Fremea was about to slip out of his arms.

"Hama...zura," Hanzou said. "Take her. Take Fremea!"

"No, you dumbass! You're coming with us!!"

Braving the hot winds, the pair dashed past the obliterated vehicle and up the stairs toward the exit.

The spider mech moved its left arm.

Its 18mm machine gun.

But without its precise radio-wave targeting, it had to rely on its backup infrared cameras—which were messed up because of the heat emanating from the still-burning wrecked car. Even its optical sensors weren't able to correct its aim because of all the dark smoke.

In the end, it was mostly luck that had saved them.

Hamazura, Hanzou, and Fremea burst out of the stairwell back to the surface.

After checking the status of its right arm, the eight-legged powered suit started off toward the stairwell to go after the escapees.

But then a message came in.

"That's enough, Silvercross."

"You sure?"

"We've achieved the mission objective."

"Wait a minute. I thought we only needed the two of them." In contrast to the person giving orders, the pilot of the spider mech sounded doubtful. "Fremea Seivelun and Shiage Hamazura. We don't need the third one. He's protecting them. If we let him live much longer, we might make it harder for ourselves down the line."

"No, you've done enough. I doubt they'll part ways again at this point." The woman over the radio gave a nasal laugh, her breath coming through the mic. "Must be tough being cannon fodder."

"You're telling me. A canister shot would have ended them in one go."

"Or maybe that model was simply unsuited for this task. It was made for open-field combat on the Russian plains. The wide-range radio-wave sensors aren't as precise in complex urban environments. And it must have been difficult not to kill them with all the firepower at your disposal."

"The important part was the impact of the cannon. And when it comes to impact, this model—the Enemy Blaster—is ideal. I put a lot of consideration into which would be most appropriate for the time and place, you know." The powered suit pilot gave up on trying to restore the mech's right arm. "I'll come back now. But how are things on the *other* end? This operation won't get off the ground without them."

"No need to worry on that front."

As the powered suit's operator listened, he contacted the support personnel standing by aboveground. The mech was a bit too conspicuous for a nice stroll

on the town. They would use a special vehicle disguised as a big tourist bus to blend into the cityscape.

However...

"Come in. Chameleon, what's wrong? Come in... Shit. What's going on?"

"I told you. No need to worry. They've begun taking action."

Then in a scornful tone, the woman over the radio added:

"Must really be hard, being cannon fodder."

"What do you think?" asked Misaka Worst quietly.

A pillar of dark smoke was rising from an entrance to the underground mall, about two hundred meters away. But her eyes weren't on the obvious site of the incident— No, they were on the interior of the large bus in front of her.

More precisely, it was a spy vehicle from the underworld. They'd taken it out within moments, and now Accelerator and Misaka Worst were observing the disabled vehicle.

At a glance, it looked like a sightseeing bus with dark tints on the windows. In actuality, though, it was mostly empty inside, probably spacious enough to transport an entire tank—whose weight it was equipped to handle, considering the engine and suspension in the thing.

Some men in work clothes lay scattered inside surrounded by unique tools, several types of rifle ammunition, armor plating, and a huge battery pack, all still safe. This vehicle had clearly contained something large; there were clasps on the floor, walls, and ceiling so that whatever it was wouldn't fall over from a bump in the road. Judging by those tools and clasps...

"A powered suit," muttered Accelerator to himself.

Naturally, it didn't belong to Anti-Skill. They wouldn't need to hide it.

His eyes moved between the men he'd defeated and the black smoke billowing a short distance away. Eventually, he clicked his tongue.

"...Looks like this is gonna get annoying," he said. "Again."

"Urgh...," came a groan.

One of the men lying inside the undercover vehicle had made the noise. Not because he possessed superb stamina, of course, but because Accelerator had left him with just enough.

"I thought the darkness had been broken up?" asked Accelerator. "All the hostages and other bargaining chips should have been let go at the end of the war. I was the one who set it up that way. So who the hell are you people?"

"...We're the Freshmen."

"Fh?"

"You'll find out soon enough," said the man as his arms and legs went limp. His eyes were still open, but he was clearly unconscious.

Misaka Worst cackled. "Scar on the head. Looks like a chip—which someone just used to knock him out. To prevent torture, Misaka would guess. Misaka bets that if we, you know, shake him really hard, he'll wake up. Want to?"

"No, leave him."

"Time for a little oil-based magic, then."

Misaka Worst seemed to be attempting to make the unconscious man into a version of Hoichi the Earless that *really* wouldn't be allowed on broadcast television, but Accelerator didn't bother continuing the conversation.

He looked at the walls of the vehicle. Several maps were hung up on them, with buildings and roads marked in different fluorescent colors. From what it looked like, they'd been marking out someone's area of activity.

Accelerator peeled a photo off the wall next to the map. Printed on very expensive photography paper was a picture of a girl who looked about ten years old with blond hair and blue eyes. Her name was written in the same marker next to the face.

Fremea Seivelun.

3

Hamazura, Hanzou, and Fremea ducked into alleyway after alleyway. The idea was to throw off the powered suit, but eventually, they came to a stop. They

didn't have much of a reason for that, though, other than their stamina simply running out. All three of them were out of breath.

"Hamazura...," Hanzou said to his friend in a low voice. Hamazura was clearly exhausted but still trying to maintain a smile; Hanzou grabbed his collar and shoved him up against a building. "Shit, man!! What were you doing back there?! Why the hell did you get involved with this?!"

Hanzou was gritting his teeth. He wasn't angry at Hamazura—he was angry at himself for letting his friend get mixed up in such dangerous business. Like he was regretting even eating at the restaurant after they'd bumped into each other earlier.

"...You were trying to get something that was always out of reach for the members of Skill-Out, right?" Hanzou calmed his voice somewhat, but then it exploded again. "You've got a girl! I thought you were thinking about the future now! Putting yourself back on the straight and narrow! What about all the stuff about studying road service?! Why are you here messing with the darkness again?! You... You might have just ruined your chances of fulfilling your dreams!! Do you get that, Hamazura?!"

"...I don't know, man..." Hamazura's eyes, however, had no clear intent behind them. He just weakly shook his head. "I didn't want to get involved in any of this stuff again, either."

He wasn't trying to look cool. His words were unclear, uncertain. And that actually showed how honest he was being.

"But I just couldn't let it go."

"…"

"When I realized you were getting mixed up in some dangerous stuff, and Fremea Seivelun being involved...I couldn't get Komaba off my mind, and... And I've got a history with the last name *Seivelun*, too..."

He was speaking in fragments, as though he hadn't figured all this out himself yet. Eventually, he gave up on trying to make his motivations crystal clear and repeated the most important thing once more.

"...I just couldn't let it be..."

Hanzou swore, then let go of Hamazura's collar.

Hamazura slid down the wall to the ground, then looked up at him and asked a question. "What now?"

"We have to assume none of my hideouts are usable anymore. We might be able to manage if I get in touch with Kuruwa, but we'll still need a safe place to wait for her... Hamazura, do you have anywhere to lay low? Doesn't need to be for long."

"...A hideout? You're asking some random delinquent about a..." Hamazura trailed off, seeming to think of something. "Actually, I do."

"Where?" asked Hanzou.

Shiage Hamazura had ties with another organization besides the famous delinquent one.

Item.

They weren't serving as the city's pawns anymore, but they still had a connection or two from back then.

And Item's hideout had been...

"The private salon in District 3. Costs a pretty penny, but we should be able to use the place."

4

Accelerator and Misaka Worst hadn't turned up any more information from combing the vehicle—including anything about the powered suit or what organization was behind all this. Their search finished, the two of them left the bus and discussed matters.

Misaka Worst, waggling the picture they'd swiped from the vehicle, said, "Definitely looks like they were trying to attack this kid. Not that it has anything to do with us."

"…"

She's...

Accelerator recognized the girl in the photograph.

Actually, she'd been in a picture on the phone belonging to Ritoku Komaba, whom Accelerator had eliminated as a threat to Academy City's peace. Komaba had turned against the city to protect a lot of Level Zeroes from violence. And this girl was one of the people he'd wanted to safeguard, right up to the very end.

"But who the hell would bring out a military powered suit to kill one little kid?" mused Misaka Worst. "Sure, ability development sometimes makes people in this city a lot more dangerous than they look, but you'd expect there to be a report on her ability and how to deal with it *somewhere* in the bus. They're taking so many precautions for a Level Zero... Hmm? What's up, Number One?"

"Go home." Accelerator handed his shopping bag to her, then glanced at the marked-up maps he'd brought out of the undercover vehicle. "I'll try following up."

"Whoa, whoa!" Misaka Worst shook her head, sighing in exasperation. She thrust the photo of Fremea Seivelun in his face. "This Level Zero isn't Last Order, you know."

"Yeah? So what?" he spat. "I don't have any reason to protect her. But I don't have one to abandon her, either."

"Your whole expression just changed! You lech!! She's tiny, so you want to keep her safe!! Even though you broke *this* Misaka's arm without batting an eyelid!!"

"...Something about the darkness in this city is changing, but I can't get a good read on how. That shithead called himself one of the Freshmen, and that name bothers me, too. They could always decide to come after us, so I need to look into them. I didn't realize you were so dumb that you needed me to explain every little thing..."

"Still, if they've got a powered suit, the 'darkness' or whatever must be pretty big. Makes you wonder why they've got their eyes on this Fremea kid."

"Hell if I know. Some digging around will turn up the answer."

Accelerator moved to leave right then and there, using his sleek-looking crutch to walk.

Misaka Worst organized the contents of the shopping bags, emptying out one of them. Then she came up behind Accelerator and put the bag over his head to stop him. "Now, just hold on a minute."

"Grphhh!!"

"You'll have to excuse Misaka for making you look like a burglar with pantyhose on his head, but—"

"!!!!"

Accelerator flicked the switch on the electrode choker he wore around his neck. Normally, he was weak and needed a crutch to get around, but once this switch was flipped, he could use the most powerful ability in all of Academy City. A terrible, wicked power that let him manipulate any force vector he wanted, which he now used to rip the bag off his head.

"...You wanna know what it's like to be a vinyl bag yourself...?"

"Huh. When you go past good and evil, you get an *amazing* smile on your face."

"Just tell me what you want."

"Misaka wants to know why you think you have a duty to go that far," asked Misaka Worst, smirking. "Like Misaka said, Fremea Seivelun is *not* Last Order."

"Are you stupid or something?" spat Accelerator. "My goal is to assess the threat level those guys pose and where it's directed. I don't give a shit what happens to this kid. Though, if I need her to eliminate the threat, I'll use her."

"Ha-ha. You're such a good person."

"What are you doing, then?"

"Ohhh? Misaka loves going ten times more evil. What if Misaka said she'd cooperate with the enemy on purpose? What would you do?"

"Spank you about a hundred times, maybe."

For some reason, she put a hand to her mouth and wriggled her hips.

"... What if Misaka said she was okay with doing that in public?"

Accelerator ignored her and started walking off, searching for a refrigerated coin locker to stow their groceries in. Misaka Worst hurried after him.

5

Private salons were a unique facet of the service industry in Academy City. They were similar to karaoke booths, except they had way more amenities. Guests rented the rooms by the hour, and they could use the space for hanging out, throwing parties, or whatever else they wanted.

Students made up 80 percent of Academy City's population, and most of them lived in supervised dormitories. They were always under the watchful eyes of adults, whether during class or after school, which was a source of stress.

Private salons were like secret bases anyone could buy for a price. They weren't all good, though, because they did run the very real risk of becoming a hotbed for criminal activity. Still, the fact that renting out free spaces was a viable business was a telling reflection of the city's social psychology.

Hamazura and the others had fled into one of those rooms. This one took up an entire floor of a high-rise building.

"…"

He looked down at his cell phone screen. Takitsubo's, Kinuhata's, and Mugino's numbers were in his contacts. The girls would be a much more reliable fighting force against their unknown enemy than the Level Zeroes currently in the room. Of course, they wouldn't know about the situation, since they were playing a citywide game of find-the-Hamazura. While it would ruin their fun, he could just tell them where he was and bring them here.

But...

...No, I can't get them involved in this.

After clenching his teeth for a few moments, he turned off his phone.

If Fremea Seivelun was the late Frenda's younger sister, then maybe this did

concern Item. But that wasn't justification enough to drag them into the darkness. He wanted them to stay out of it for his own sake.

Hanzou, who didn't know about any of that, spoke up. "If you need to make a call, use a burner SIM," he said. "I've got a few. Want one?"

"Nah, I'm fine." Hamazura shook his head, glancing over at Fremea, who had the giant TV remote control in her hand. He continued softly, "More importantly, what's going on? The underworld's clearly gunning for her. But why? All this just for one girl? It seems way too dangerous."

"Honestly, I don't know, either," replied Hanzou, voice hard. "It's not like she's worth killing. Her school's System Scan marked her as a Level Zero, so I doubt her DNA data has any real value. And she wouldn't ever have had a chance to fall into the true darkness here. The most she has is a connection with me and Komaba."

"…"

"So the only real possibilities are that it has to do with Skill-Out or with its old leader."

"I feel weird saying this, but they know Skill-Out is just a bunch of delinquents, right?"

A short distance away, Fremea was channel surfing on the TV. She didn't seem interested in any of the programming, though. The variety news shows were all talking about boring stuff—about how despite Academy City's belligerent attitude being a major factor in the outbreak of World War III, they'd contributed massive funding to postwar-reconstruction efforts once the fighting ended, so now most nations were more or less satisfied.

"The city higher-ups...," mused Hamazura. "The ones who're in control of the government here. What could they possibly want so badly that they'd kill to get it?"

"Well, you know how it was. Komaba was leading Skill-Out in an attempt to cause a large-scale uprising against theauthorities. I was pretty deeply involved in the planning stages. Of course, it didn't turn out well."

One of the TV commentators was going on about a conspiracy theory; he

claimed that the city was subtly manipulating the amount each nation was contributing to the restoration efforts in a ploy to recast global spheres of influence. But that didn't seem to pique Fremea's interest, either. She kept on scrolling through the channels, the sound from them washing away such theories.

"Maybe Komaba had a plan B, too," suggested Hanzou. "A scheme to exploit a different weakness of the city than the one we were trying to take advantage of at the time."

"That would mean..."

"Yeah. The higher-ups would want to deal with it. Fremea was under Komaba's protection. Maybe he gave her some kind of hint just in case things went south."

"But you saw how quickly the main plan got totally crushed. If plan B was so good, why didn't he start with that?"

"I think it's more that the city wants to shore up where it was vulnerable, not crush our plans."

Is that what could link all this back to Ritoku Komaba? Hamazura wondered.

But he knew of one other connection Fremea Seivelun happened to have.

Frenda.

And by extension, Item, the group to which she had belonged.

Item was a conglomeration of very rare individuals: a Level Four effective in real combat, one of only seven Level Fives in the city, and a girl who could potentially become the eighth. Academy City had originally formed this small, elite underworld group to annihilate rebellious factions within its jursidiction.

If Fremea was Frenda's sister, then it was possible Fremea had acquired something related to Item through her.

Or...

Frenda was one of Item's members...but I don't know what she was up to at every hour of the day. Maybe she had a side gig or was part of another project...?

He had too little information to go on right now. How big was the group that was after Fremea? Why were they after her? How serious were they about taking her out? If the two of them could figure out the group's goal, it would go a long way in helping build a survival plan...

"...I have no ideas about Fremea," said Hamazura. "But the darkness has a powered suit ready to go after her. We need to figure out that part. While on the run, if need be."

"We can launch a counterattack once we're safe," said Hanzou, heading to the door.

"Where are you going?"

"To contact Kuruwa. This place isn't exactly safe, either—it's a relay point. We're better off using her network to get to a safe hideout."

"You sure you should call her?"

"I've got empty SIMs, remember? I'll switch my phone's out for one. Even if they're actively watching for activity coming from my number, they'll never be able to listen in or trace it back to an antenna base." Hanzou grabbed the doorknob. As he opened it, he turned back. "Hamazura?"

"Yeah?"

"It's a good thing you came. You saved our asses. I don't like it, but I'll admit it."

Before Hamazura could reply, Hanzou left the room.

Feeling weirdly awkward, Hamazura shifted his gaze. Eventually, though, his eyes met with Fremea's. Komaba had given his life to protect this girl.

The sister of Frenda, who had once been an official member of Item.

"Hello again," the girl said.

While Komaba was still alive, Hamazura and Hanzou had spoken to her a couple of times. They hadn't known her name back then, though.

"You remember me?" Hamazura asked.

"Mm-hmm. You're with Koma a lot anyway."

Her way of remembering things put a little smile on his face. He couldn't remember Komaba in anything but the past tense anymore. But he couldn't let her know about the pain that came with the passage of time. "Yeah, that's right. I'm Shiage Hamazura."

"I'm Fremea. Fremea Seivelun."

I wish I'd known her last name sooner, thought Hamazura, but he didn't say it. "Looks like things are getting crazy. Are you all right? No injuries?"

"I'm okay. My ears hurt for a while, but now they're basically fine. Nya."

...Where in Japan did she pick up 'nya'? he wondered. She hadn't talked like that the other times he'd seen her. Though he was curious about this, there was no point in pressing the issue. The fact that she could speak Japanese at all was a stroke of luck.

"What should we do now anyway?" she asked.

"Hanzou's calling up a friend, so there's nothing to worry about."

"What about Koma?" She looked up at him with her blue eyes. "I haven't seen him. He won't pick up the phone. I tried going to where he usually is, but he wasn't there, either. Do you know where he might be?"

Hamazura tried his hardest not to let his breath catch. He didn't know if he succeeded. "He's, well. You know."

He could fake a smile. But her blue eyes were so much clearer than any lie detector.

"He's not the smartest guy, y'know?" he said. "I mean, I'm pretty dumb, too. But he's been making up for classes he missed. He's gotta finish those up, or else he'll be held back a year. Could you give him a little time?"

"...Okay," she said, looking down slightly. She was clearly sad, but only to the degree when someone couldn't keep a promise to hang out over the weekend. "I get it. Thanks."

Fremea plopped down onto the couch, which was far too big for her.

"Hmm," she said.

"My tummy wants to growl, but it won't." She put her palm to her stomach for some reason as she leaned back on the couch.

Hamazura frowned a little. "...Do you want something to eat?" he asked.

She gave him a slight nod.

Like karaoke booths, private salons had an internal phone system guests could use to order food. Plus, there was already a refrigerator stationed in the large room. Since he didn't know what Fremea liked, he ordered something random off the menu. As he was speaking into the wall-mounted phone, Hanzou came back.

"Kuruwa will be here soon... What are you doing, Hamazura?"

"Ordering food."

"Didn't you just eat?"

"It's for Fremea."

"Oh. Get me some Satsuma age, then, would you?"

The order came after about ten minutes. It was light fare, without any staples—just some french fries, veggie sticks, and the like.

"...The Satsuma age really stands out, huh," mentioned Hamazura.

"Oh, be quiet. I'm gonna take it all anyway." Hanzou moved the fish cakes from the large plate to his smaller plate.

But Fremea was acting strange. She'd put some egg foo young on her plate—the Japanese kind, with crab meat in it—but after seeing the small green peas in it, she pushed her plate toward Hamazura and said, "Green peas."

"Wh-what? Why are you supply-dropping all the peas on me?"

Shh-shh-shh-shh came the sound as Fremea deftly eliminated all her green peas.

Hamazura, for his part, just asked, "Oh. You don't like peas?"

"Nya-mmmm."

"Now I'm worried about you trying to charm me at your age. Best you learn now that the world isn't always that easy. Here, have them back."

"Hrrrgyaaaaaaahhhhhh?!" screamed Fremea, receiving twice as many as she'd picked off.

After that, Hanzou sprinkled salt on the big plate of french fries and got into a tug-of-war with Hamazura about them, and they argued over whether mayonnaise or dressing went better with the veggie sticks. The bleak atmosphere had mostly dissipated. Though it hadn't been long since the spider mech had attacked them, Fremea didn't show any signs of mental distress, either.

Of course, the circumstances being what they were, they might not have had time to process everything yet.

6

Meanwhile, several people were growing concerned about Hamazura's movements: Shizuri Mugino and the rest of Item. They had split up to look all over the city for him, but each of them had sniffed out that shady, yet somehow alluring, scent of the darkness.

Take Mugino, for example.

She was leaning against a building wall to gather information. More precisely, she'd connected a long, thin cable coming from her false eye—which was part of the eyeband—and plugged it into the nearby building's surveillance camera. Naturally, the building itself was of no interest to her. The camera was just a way in. She had hacked into the security company's network and was now fishing through their video archives to look for any sign of Hamazura.

Her brain was directly connected to her mechanical eye, which gave her an additional advantage—she could receive information and data directly *from* the machine interface.

Obviously, the information would need to be translated into something the human mind could perceive and understand, and using the false eye's systems meant this would mostly depend on the video data. The setup wasn't perfect,

but it could accomplish things impossible for an interface designed to be manipulated by ten fingers.

As Mugino continued her high-speed search through videos at a spot behind her brow, she used her free hand to mess with her cell phone. She was on a group call, where several people could connect at the same time.

"A powered suit is running amok in the District 7 underground mall," she said. "After a few hours, the city will smooth over all the video evidence and rumor mills to make it like it never happened, won't they?"

"It would be, like, way faster to just intercept Anti-Skill's radio signals, but whatever," said Kinuhata. "Initially, they were after a boy and a girl. Then one more boy joined them. The three shook off pursuit and fled aboveground. Can you, like, make out their faces on the cameras?"

"The first two aren't Hamazura. As for the third...I'm not sure. The smoke is going to the ceiling, so I can only see shadows of people," said Mugino. "But... the other boy—isn't that someone Hamazura talks to sometimes? And that little girl... It feels like I've seen her before..."

"Oh, wow. Despite what you say, you've been totally looking into his personal relationships, haven't you? A woman who cares that much is scary indeed."

"...I know you're nearby, Kinuhata. Want me to smash you with a real thick one?"

"I, like, don't have any interest in the thickness or the size, so no thanks. Anyway, we should totally keep up the search. Hee-hee-hee. It'll be interesting to see which method gets us there first—going off surveillance cameras or radio info."

"Eh? Sounds like you're counting out Takitsubo. She'll be the bunny, then?" asked Mugino straightforwardly.

Rikou Takitsubo, the bunny-type girl who hadn't said a word until now, then spoke up in a shaky voice.

"...Signal from north-northeast... I'm getting a premonition that Hamazura is flirting with another girl...!!"

"No, no, Mugino. Our super-imprecise channeler is, like, the one we should fear the most. Let's both do our best not to have to embarrass ourselves by dressing up like a bunny in front of that idiot."

7

"Where is she? She's late," said Hanzou, reclining on the couch of the private salon.

Hamazura and Fremea were examining the spacious room's furnishings. A few card games and board games sat on the shelves, and there was a game console hooked up to the big-screen TV. You could also use it to browse the internet.

The TV even had cable service and over three hundred channels to choose from. But with so many options, Hanzou was finding it pretty tough to locate a specific one he wanted to watch. He gave up halfway through this endeavor; now left alone, the TV was showing a news broadcast on the end of World War III. Something about surplus weapons being moved to District 2 and District 23 since the fighting was over.

Quickly giving up on the TV altogether, Hanzou had just taken a seat on the couch and started flipping through a road-service reference book, when he felt a tug on his clothes. He turned and saw Fremea, who seemed pretty bored.

At her request, the two of them started looking around for a game they could all play together. The salon had several party items meant for large groups, which was part of what made these establishments so unique.

It was probably irresponsible to turn to hobbies and time-killing games at a moment like this, but it did help them cope. Otherwise, they would go crazy if they just waited around doing nothing—and then what would be the point of all this? Their win condition was safely getting back to their old lives, not sharing the same fate as that unknown spider mech.

"Anyway, Hamazura, I want to play this." Fremea reached for a video game on a shelf, but it was too high for her to reach.

"This one?"

"No. Not something that boring anyway."

"What about this one?"

"To the right. More to the right—no, wait, the left. That's it."

Hamazura groped around on the shelf as Fremea gave him instructions, but then he felt something heavy on his back. The small girl had started climbing him like a ladder.

"This one," she said, plucking a game from the shelf.

"...Huh? Wait, uh...that one is kind of..."

"I want to play Blood and Destruction."

"That title has *controversy* written all over it! Come on, just look at it—the screenshot on the back is half covered in blood!!"

It looked like a gory shooter where the player controlled stern-looking dudes, whose designs were *definitely* geared toward foreign markets, in battles against zombies. As Hamazura read more of the description, he realized the protagonist apparently ate like a horse. The big caption text read, Chase DOWN THE HEROES OF JUSTICE!!

Hamazura chose his next words carefully. "H-hey, doesn't this fluffy pet game look neat?"

"Blood and Destruction."

"Oh, and this one where you take a walk with a mermaid?"

"Blood and Destruction."

"Or this one with fields—"

"I wanna play *Blood and Destruction*!!" Fremea grabbed the bloodred packaging and hid it behind her, staring up at Hamazura.

Hamazura froze for a moment. "...Sorry, not happening. But it does look interesting. Let me take a pic and send it to someone."

"Roooggarrr!!"

While the two of them horsed around, Hanzou got up from the couch.

"...Kuruwa's definitely taking too long," he said. "I'm gonna try contacting her

one more time."

While Fremea stared at her cell phone screen, Hamazura sent Hanzou a discreet gesture saying, We can't stay here much longer, either.

"I know," said Hanzou, letting out a short breath. "I know."

8

The driver's seat inside the giant dump truck was over two stories high.

While the back of the vehicle was large enough to hold a modest pool and was now loaded up with black rocks, that was all actually a disguise plastered on top of a hollow, domed space.

And housed inside this space was a repair facility—one for a powered suit.

Hydraulic springs creaked within, making a kreeeesh-kreeeesh noise.

No matter what the pilot did inside a powered suit, it always produced mechanical sounds like those. It was kind of like clothing fabric rubbing together; rumor had it that the noise could make people go insane if they didn't get used to it.

"Silvercross."

"I'm all set. But why be so roundabout?"

"There's still too many links right now. We need to cut a few more branches off."

"Then...Kuroyoru?"

"Yeah, I'll be out there, too."

"If we want to limit the number of links, shouldn't you wipe out everyone related to Item instead?"

"It'll be smoother and quicker to deal with things one at a time. And you just screwed things up, didn't you? We don't want the branches growing in different directions on us."

"I only messed up because you told me to withdraw."

"Even if I hadn't, you were pretty far from perfect marks."

"Don't forget what the pruning shears are for."

"I haven't. The fundamental rule of pruning is to pick the biggest, strongest branches. In that sense, that branch is the thickest and easiest to control."

"What was it you said? Bloodshed and danger are the water in which trees grow?"

"Let's go over the schedule again. I'll head for Shiage Hamazura. You run support with the bees. We're not bothering with Accelerator yet—best to keep risks to a minimum. They're starting to act now, too. As long as we clear away the obstacles, they'll link up to each other like magnets."

"But are you sure? I still think it would be safer to ambush Item and wipe them out first. If we get Hamazura involved during our attack on Fremea Seivelun, they could come crawling out of the woodwork."

"If they do, then great. Saves us the trouble."

"Kuroyoru!"

"Silvercross, which are you worried about? Shizuri Mugino? Or Saiai Kinuhata?"

"Project Dark May."

"Hmph. Kinuhata, then. It'll be fine. Your worries are unfounded."

There was a hint of contempt in the voice of the girl on the other end of the radio, like always.

"After all, I've always had more pure offensive capabilities than her—right from the start of that project." The girl's voice was flat. "I'm beyond the realm of espers now."

"Are you?"

"Yes. And I have to ask, but have you somehow gotten even more boring? I know you're running support, but a two-legged mech? That's not very you."

"Like I said before, I prefer to pick my tools based on the time and place." The powered suit responded, its hydraulic springs going *kreeesh-kreeesh*. "I've

gotten results, haven't I? It'll be the same this time. It's not about which one is best. The Enemy Blaster is good for certain things, and the Bee Launcher is good for others."

"Then let's proceed according to plan."

"Right."

"Fremea Seivelun, huh?" said the voice on the other end in scorn—before giving praise. "That kid is just what we needed."

INTERLUDE THREE

It was primarily Skill-Out's fault that Level Zero were targeted so frequently in attacks. They made the first move and provoked espers.

It wasn't as if it started as brawls on the streets, though. The first flashes of conflict were just mild exchanges of insults. One side just happened to be the obviously ill-mannered Skill-Out, so they stood out a great deal.

But when the espers started retaliating, Skill-Out weren't the only ones affected. Any Level Zero walking around the city could rub someone the wrong way and wind up in trouble. The true victims hadn't been the armed members of Skill-Out—it had been truly innocent Level Zeroes.

The espers didn't discriminate. They'd go after grade-schoolers and university kids alike. And their methods were often grisly. Consequently, the scope of the violence expanded almost overnight.

Nothing was more fun than violence that carried no risk.

Calls for righteous vengeance on the internet met with a flood of joking responses. As things escalated, many powerful espers expressed their intentions to "formally" participate. They didn't care who was involved and who wasn't. They just wanted to go wild, beat people up, and vent their stress without risking anything and without feeling guilty afterward. That was the only reason so many people began ambushing others.

And in the midst of all this, a notice appeared on a bulletin board:

Found a school of idiots. Everyone there's a Level Zero. Things are more dangerous here because schools like them exist. Stamp out the root of evil! Requesting help to take out the trash.

The post had been referring to an elementary school—one just like any other. None of the students going there had any relation to Skill-Out whatsoever.

But that logic did nothing to stop the attackers. After all, they were only doing this because a Level Zero had made fun of them once, and they couldn't let it go. Even the people holding the weapons didn't know whom they were targeting.

Ritoku Komaba deeply disliked fighting.

However...

...it was for that reason...

...that he began to feel like it was on his organization to take responsibility.

CHAPTER 4

The Right to Become a Good Person, and the Right to Reject It Black.

1

"They're late...," grumbled Aiho Yomikawa in her apartment, which was far too luxurious for a schoolteacher's salary. "They were just going shopping at the nearby supermarket. What's taking them so long?"

"Maybe it's good they're goofing off a little," pointed out Kikyou Yoshikawa, former researcher, as she lay on the soft couch watching a rebroadcast of a TV drama. "They're kids."

"I mean, I guess so, but..."

"Mmmrrr!" Unlike the two listless adults, Last Order was rather put off by all this. She kept going between the TV and the window to the veranda in spurts. "...Misaka has a bad feeling about this, says Misaka says Misaka, thinking deeply."

"?"

"The new Misaka has had a jam-packed schedule lately, and Misaka still doesn't know what that person is doing and where he is... Ah! Wait, did she steal Misaka's spotlight?! cries Misaka cries Misaka, all shocked and stuff!!"

"What do you think, Kikyou?" asked Yomikawa.

"You can never underestimate a brain undergoing puberty, Aiho," Yoshikawa replied. "Overactive imaginations can leap from one thing to the next pretty fast."

"But this Misaka hasn't inherited that pitiful characteristic of the original! says

Misaka says Misaka, springing into action!! The key to victory always lies in taking on the challenge!!"

Yomikawa heard a metallic slam! "...Huh?"

By the time she realized it was the sound of the door closing, the tiny girl was gone.

The two adults went to the entrance, saw that the smallest pair of shoes was missing, and then frantically burst out of the apartment to search for her.

2

"That's weird." Hanzou looked down at his cell phone, irritated. "I can't get in touch with Kuruwa. No matter how many times or ways I try."

"Wait, but doesn't that mean—?"

"They probably figured out I'm sheltering Fremea. Now they're rounding up anyone likely to help me."

"We should go look for her."

"How?" Hanzou asked in reply. "By just running around? That wouldn't give us good odds of finding her. And... And we don't even know if she's still alive, so ___"

"Exactly!" interrupted Hamazura. "So we *really* need to find her. Just because you lost contact with her doesn't necessarily mean it's too late. She might be right on the edge as we speak. Maybe she's in too much of a rush to answer the phone. Either way, we should move. The longer we wait around, the more likely she is to die."

Hamazura began pacing slowly around the private salon, thinking. Where would they start? "Any ideas where she might have gone? Places she visits a lot?"

"If she is in danger, she'd avoid her usual haunts."

"Do we have any means of locating her...? GPS, surveillance cameras, security robots—whatever might help. Is there a system we can use?"

"Kuruwa usually takes routes that aren't surveilled."

"That's it!" Hamazura unfolded a map on the table. "There are fewer routes that *aren't* being monitored. Especially when you factor in security bots. Hanzou, use a marker to draw those routes on this map. We've got a better chance looking along them than searching the whole city."

"Sure, there's a few holes, but it's called a network for a reason. It's not gonna be that easy..."

"The security bots all have specific patrol routes. After a while, they'll cover what the others miss. The last time I saw Kuruwa, she was in District 7. Let's mark off the safe areas in District 7 and around it, then eliminate anywhere the bots would be patrolling at this time of day."

"All right. I get it, all right?"

Fremea looked at the two of them with concern, but there wasn't time to mind her.

"What should I do?" asked Hamazura as he watched the line fill up with colored partitions.

"Nothing." Hanzou shook his head. "You stay here. Fremea's safety is our top priority."

"You can't cover all that ground alone!"

"And I can't leave her by herself! We can't expose all of us to danger! It's out of the question!"

The two of them glared at each other for a while. Hamazura was the first to look away.

"Shit," he spat, looking around the room. "...And this place won't be good for much longer, either."

"I'm heading out," said Hanzou. "Take care of Fremea while I'm gone. This building has three exits. If it comes down to it, Hamazura, you should take her and run."

"I promise." Hamazura nodded. "Make sure to bring Kuruwa back."

After a quick tag-out palm slap, Hanzou left the private salon. When the door closed, Hamazura felt like the silence was melting into the air.

And then there were two, he thought, probably jinxing the entire thing.

3

Umidori Kuroyoru was extremely conspicuous.

She was around twelve, with black hair that reached her shoulder blades, save for a single tuft of hair near her ears that she'd dyed blond. She had a white coat on, but her arms weren't in the sleeves; she wore only the hood, pulled up over her head. Underneath were punk-style clothes featuring black leather and studs that constricted her petite frame.

Most would have expected to find someone who looked like her on a stage, not randomly walking around the city. And the inflatable dolphin she carried under her arm added an entirely different sort of surrealness to her getup.

She didn't bother sneaking around. Instead, she walked straight into the private-salon building through the front entrance. Taking the escalator to the second floor, she headed right for the counter—which looked like the desk in a hotel lobby—and spoke to the young part-timer working there.

"I'm looking for two people," she said. "Shiage Hamazura and Fremea Seivelun. I know they're using this establishment right now. I'd like to know what floor and what room they're in."

"Ma'am, I can't...," said the young man, putting on a businesslike smile at first. But he saw that her expression was entirely unchanged, and he went over the protocol for these situations in his head. He'd play it by the book. "This establishment takes its guests' confidentiality seriously. I'm sorry, but I can't divulge any information related to who is using what rooms."

This was one of the most basic rules of customer service. Besides, the point of private salons was to give their customers a reprieve from being under the otherwise-constant gazes of adults. Giving client information to everyone who came in looking for it went against the salons' very purpose.

But then Kuroyoru smiled a little. "No, it's okay," she said. "They might be

using false names, so I just wanted to ask to make sure."

"I, um. I see." The part-timer wasn't quite sure whether to confirm or deny that one.

Kuroyoru continued, saying to herself, "And getting the answer or not here doesn't change what I have to do anyway."

"?"

The young man's question never found a voice.

A moment later, something zoomed past his face, then crashed into the wall behind him—right into the anachronistic public phone installed in case of emergencies.

It had traveled at a blinding speed, the force behind it tearing the phone apart —and left a dent in the wall, dozens of centimeters wide. If that had hit someone, they would have died.

The young man squealed in panic, but he'd already realized the girl hadn't thrown it herself. The other guests didn't make a fuss—they weren't able to. The girl was so obviously dangerous and abnormal that no one dared move.

Something strange was floating in the air right behind her—a ring-shaped machine about seventy centimeters across. On the inside of the ring was a propeller shaped like a shower visor for little kids, providing the machine with lift and propulsion. And all around the outside of the ring were chain-like blades. The portions that protruded from it could catch onto objects, then build up centrifugal force before releasing them at the perfect time to wreak optimal destruction.

As if to explain that mechanism, the blades of the machine hooked onto a metal trash can and began whipping it around and around. Within just a few seconds, it was going so fast that it was leaving afterimages.

But the young man didn't have time to scream.

Suddenly, he heard an awful screeching, like cogs squealing against one another, come from the thick walls behind him. *Gree-gree-gree-gree-gree!!!* No, that wasn't quite right—it was more like several chain-saw blades were tearing

through the wall from the outside.

Breaking it down.

Not cutting it, but demolishing it to get inside.

"Wha ... wha ...?!"

He couldn't even turn around; multiple chain saws were already just a few millimeters away from his neck. Four lethal disks, one in each direction. Now he couldn't even sink to his knees. One sneeze, and his head would go flying.

"Don't kill him," said Kuroyoru, sounding peeved. "Not yet anyway." She seemed to be talking to whoever was controlling the machines rather than the machines themselves.

I suppose it's best to keep it easy to understand, she thought, kicking away a metallic magazine rack that was as tall as she was. It fell apart, the metal parts scattering; she grabbed one shaped like a club, then used it to lightly tap the killer disks that were almost touching the young man's neck.

The part-timer squealed pathetically again, but the disks didn't move in the slightest. Somehow, they were being held in place there so precisely that a casual observer would have assumed they were bolted onto a platform. Kuroyoru's metal club was sliced through diagonally in a shower of sparks and a cacophony of screeching metal. She prodded the young man's brow with its sharpened, uneven tip.

"You don't seem to understand, so let me explain. This isn't one of those torture scenes from TV or movies. I don't *need* to get that information from you."

The man, sweating all over in tension and terror, heard a series of screaming and stomping noises from above—on the floor above them. This wasn't the only place where chaos was erupting. Killer disks flew through the air, slicing through walls and windows. The assailants would have no problem getting to the upper levels.

"It doesn't matter whether you squeal or not. I'll get my answer either way," said Kuroyoru slowly. "So? I'd be glad to kill you for nothing, if you want."

That got him to reveal the room number. He even lent her the master key used by maintenance workers.

Decent results, if she had to say so herself. The girl discarded the metal club, leaving the counter in a good mood. Then she tossed the inflatable dolphin under her arm into the air; by some mechanism, possibly magic tape, it landed on the back of her coat and stuck there.

"Now then!" she said, opening her now free hands a little. "Time to get serious about the job, I guess."

With a boom, two colorless, translucent spears erupted from her palms.

Weapons born of something only students of this city were given: an ability.

4

Shizuri Mugino stood on the side of the road, unsure of what to do.

She'd run out of clues in her competition with the other members of Item to find Hamazura first and avoid being humiliated by their bet, so that was part of it. But there was another, more direct reason she was baffled.

She had no idea why, but a little girl who looked about ten was clinging to the hem of her coat. She had short brown hair, and her face exuded energy.

...I feel like I've seen her before... Where was it? I know it was in one of the reports...

"What do you want?" Mugino demanded.

"Please stop that *bee-bee-bee* for a moment, requests Misaka requests Misaka. The waves are already faint, so if you do that, it makes it harder for Misaka to find him, explains Misaka explains Misaka."

"...?" Mugino furrowed her brow. But not because she didn't understand what the girl was talking about.

...How did she know about my false eye and hand?

"That bee-bee-bee! No more bee-bee-bee!"

Annoyed at the girl tugging on her coat, Mugino switched off her false eye for

the time being. Her field of vision narrowed somewhat, and her depth perception took a hit, but it wasn't bad enough to get in the way of going about her day.

The mysterious little girl slightly swung her head left and right, the stray strands of hair on the top of her head swaying in the wind.

"Okay, Misaka has him! says Misaka says Misaka, finding her target's position. Ugh, it's real tough scanning for someone without a regular network account, says Misaka says Misaka, trying to sound like a proper command tower."

Does she have a search ability like Takitsubo? wondered Mugino. But the situation wasn't yet urgent, so she didn't ask the girl to search for Hamazura, too.

"...That's one crazy coat you have there," Mugino remarked instead. "Whoa, what is this? The fur is so thick."

"Heh-heh-heh! It was made in the Elizalina Alliance of Independent Nations, brags Misaka brags Misaka. But yours looks warm, too. Misaka wonders if it's made of super-lightweight cold-resistant fibers, the kind made of tiny tubes filled with air, says Misaka says Misaka in a very knowledgeable way and stuff."

She swung the hem of her coat and skirt up and down together with a rustle, flapping them like wings.

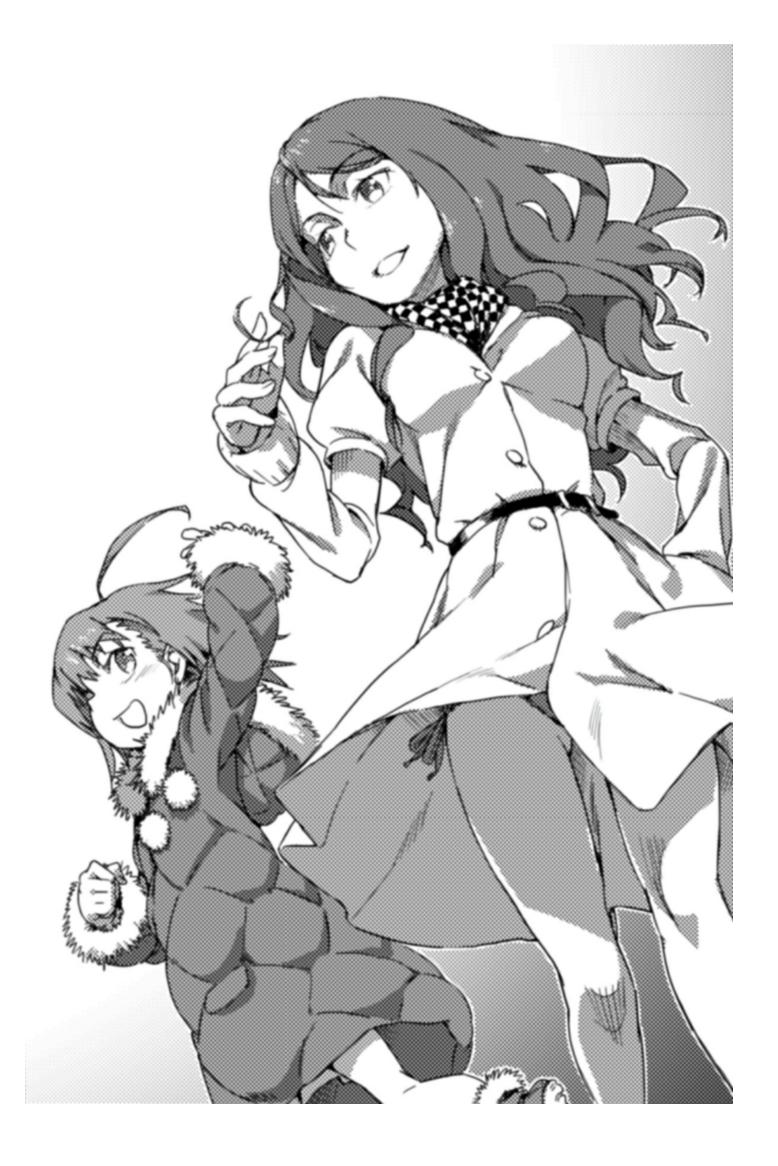
And then she noticed something. "But your underwear seems pretty cold, says Misaka says Misaka in surprise."

"That's how it's made," Mugino replied. "It takes a lot of work being the token sexy one of the group, you know."

After their random conversation, the two of them parted ways—each to look for someone.

Anyone who knew Number Four's past would have probably been shocked by this exchange, but this was just another indication of how Shizuri Mugino's personality was shifting. It happened a few minutes after Hanzou left the room.

Something in Hamazura's mind was very subtly prodding at him—an unpleasant sensation. After thinking over it for a moment, he realized what it was. Although the room was soundproofed relatively well, he could hear people making a commotion outside. Not just from one direction, either. He felt like the noise was coming from all over the place.



"Hamazura?" asked Fremea uneasily.

"It'll be fine," he asserted baselessly.

The people in his cell phone contacts—Takitsubo and the others—popped into his head, but then he squashed his desire to be rescued. He couldn't get them mixed up in this issue on a whim precisely because it was serious.

"Hanzou went to find some reliable helpers," he continued. "Once he gets back, we'll be okay. No problem."

Hanzou would find Kuruwa and bring her here just fine. The girl had a lot of hideouts that Hamazura didn't know about, so they wouldn't have to worry about being pursued. While it wasn't clear yet what they needed to do to make it out of this, reaching a safe place would be crucial for either laying low for an extended period or staging a counterattack. So as long as they could meet up with Kuruwa, the situation would take a turn for the better.

At least, that was what he thought.

Just then, a terrible screeching noise assaulted his eardrums.

Gree-gree-gree-gree-gree!!!!!! It sounded like huge cogwheels scraping against the walls, and he could hear it from right outside the door to their private salon.

Was there a machine making noise out in the hallway? No—the door itself was vibrating.

"Wh-what's that?! Seriously, what could that...?!" cried Fremea.

"Get back!!" Hamazura shouted without wasting a moment, getting in front of Fremea. But he couldn't think of anything else he could actually do. He didn't even have a handle on what was going on.

And so the situation played out to their opponent's advantage.

With a loud ba-gammm, the door fell inward. It didn't open—it fell.

By the time Hamazura realized the two hinges and the dead bolt near the knob had all been cleanly sliced through, *something* had already burst into the room.

A noise like bee wings amplified thousands of times shook the air around him, joined by cogs and chains running together. It was coming from several disklike machines.

They were each about seventy meters across, and on the inside of their metallic outer frames sat two propellers, one above and one below, which reminded him of bathing visors for little kids. The propellers provided both lift and propulsion, and they were attached to a hollow core. He wondered if you could pass a post through them to store more than one.

They must have been unmanned reconnaissance crafts remotely controlled by AI. That by itself wasn't harmful. The issue was the outer frame itself. Surrounding the circular frame were the sources of those cog-and-chain-like noises—chain saws.

When Hamazura saw the model name printed on the outer frame's upper surface, he could only imagine it being used for awful things.

EDGE_BEE.

"Damn it!"

Three of these machines had flown into the room. Rather than shooting forward like bullets, they froze in midair, then slowly began circling around the area to surround Hamazura and Fremea. They moved like a group of hornets that had found a target.

Despite how prevalent cleaning and security robots were in Academy City, residents didn't often get a chance to see machines *this* dangerous. There was only one person he could think of who would have access to them.

"Our pursuer...? But how did they know we were here?" murmured Hamazura.

Then everything clicked. Because Hanzou left to go after Kuruwa...? They used the surveillance cameras and video feeds from the robots to backtrack his route!! That means Kuruwa was just bait. They didn't need to catch her and harm her. They only had to cut her off from contacting us!!

Of course, that was no simple task. They'd have needed complete view permissions on the city's surveillance and communications networks, then

follow their target and disable a single, specific cell phone. They'd probably covered any spots the network couldn't reach with more of these drones.

Just as he'd suspected, this pursuer must have had some kind of connection to Academy City's government, along with free use over their systems.

"Wh-what should we do?" Fremea asked.

"Run away. What else? These toys are dangerous. We shouldn't be playing around with them."

He and Fremea were up against lethal weapons. Those machines could fly wherever they wanted and cut down any doors or walls that got in the way with their chain saws. He wasn't stupid enough to think he could destroy them all. And standing around would just lead to them getting hurt.

...An exit, thought Hamazura, looking around. We need to get out of this room somehow!!

There was only a single door to the private salon, but one of the Edge Bees was hovering right next to it. They wouldn't be able to get near it.

And maybe they couldn't avoid a fight at this point—not now, when their attackers had already pounced. But if they had to fight, they didn't need to win. They just needed to get away.

We're up against unmanned recon drones that use contrarotating propellers to stay upright and get lift. Which means their weakness is...

"Listen, Fremea," he said. "When I give the signal, run for the exit as fast as you can."

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"But—"
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"Don't worry."

Vweeeeee!! The Edge Bees' chain saws continued to whirl, producing an eerie noise. Hamazura kept the machine near the entrance in the corner of his eye, glancing over at a floor lamp.

"I'll draw that one away," he said. "Once that disk leaves the exit, run straight out of here. Understand?"

Fremea gave a little nod.

Slowly, Hamazura drew up to the table. Then as he reached for a plastic glass, he shouted, "Now!!" and hurled the glass at the Edge Bee stationed at the exit.

It didn't hit the machine, instead crashing into the wall nearby. But the three Edge Bees reacted, immediately moving in...

...to cut him off.

"Run!!"

"But...what about you?!"

"Don't worry about me! I'll catch up!!"

Hamazura grabbed the floor lamp with both hands. Spurred by his shout, Fremea dashed toward the entrance.

Seeing her start running, Hamazura turned back to the lethal weapons coming at him, then flung the lamp at one of them as hard as he could.

This time, he landed a hit. But that was all. His mechanical foe didn't go down. In fact, the lamp had ended up stuck to one of its whirling chain saws.

"Wha-?"

As he stared in shock, the floor lamp whipped around and around, gaining centrifugal force. And then as a counterstrike, the Edge Bee fired the blunt object straight at him.

Bwooom!! It flew as fast as an arrow.

Hamazura bent as far as he could manage, just barely avoiding it. The lamp struck the wall and stuck inside it like a javelin.

They can change the blades to switch between grabbing and slicing?! Now that he thought about it, the machines hadn't cut the door down. It had been less like a normal saw with dozens of sharp points on it and more like fingers scraping at it over and over again.

Hamazura snatched up a decorative parasol nearby, but he didn't want to just toss it carelessly like last time.

And the three Edge Bees didn't wait for him. The lethal disks all lunged for

him, like they wanted to eliminate him now that he'd become aggressive.

Keeping himself from flinching, Hamazura just barely managed to leap forward.

The Edge Bees were traveling fast—unimaginably fast for machines that had just been hovering a moment ago. They weren't going as quick as the lamp they'd hurled, but they were still faster than a thrown rock.

Anything that struck at that speed would already warrant an ambulance ride. And these had special chain saws attached. A direct hit from one would tear through Hamazura's flesh and possibly even rip him in half.

And crucially, the Edge Bees had cut off the door on their way in. The real issue wasn't how sharp their blades were. It was how they'd taken time to cut through it.

Which meant...

They never lose their balance in midair, even if they run into a wall or dig into it with their chain-saw blades. Probably thanks to intense balance control, maybe using gyros or image analysis. Or ultrasonic waves.

Hamazura doubted he could bring down a machine like that if he flung his parasol at them. In fact, they could probably evade it pretty easily. Plus, if he was careless, they could throw it back at him.

However...

...at the end of the day, they still had a weakness: They hovered by using contrarotating propellers.

And that was because...

No matter how high-spec the machine, it'll fall if its propellers stop!!

"Hamazura!! Watch out!!"

Fremea screamed from the entrance.

With a *gvvvrnnn*, the Edge Bees charged Hamazura from three directions simultaneously.

Just before their rapidly spinning blades reached him, he ducked as low as he

could go. That wouldn't be enough to get out of harm's way—not against machines of this caliber.

But then before the Edge Bees could correct their courses, he stabbed the folded-up parasol up into one of the from below.

The parasol jammed into the machine's two sets of propellers, each rotating a different way.

The metal parasol handle broke with an awful *grrrk-grrrrk!!* But the Edge Bee didn't make it out unscathed, either. Orange sparks flew, and crucially, with the machine's propellers jammed, it stopped moving. This had probably damaged the internal motors and gears, too.

Unable to reverse course, the Edge Bee plummeted to the floor, then bounced into one of the other drones attacking Hamazura from another direction. And while its propellers had stopped, its chain saws were still more than functional. Their two blades clashed against each other, flinging the machine around the room like a billiard ball.

Hamazura used the chance to slip away, running toward the exit where Fremea was waiting.

The last drone tried to go after him, but then he dug his fingers under the fallen door and lifted it up. Then he swung down hard at the incoming mech.

The door fell, and the force wasn't coming just from his arm strength.

As mentioned, the Edge Bee's contrarotating propellers provided it lift and propulsion. But the machine wouldn't be able to fly anymore if an artificial "wind" came down from above and disrupted the flow of air around it.

Which could happen if, for instance, someone covered the propeller with a large board...

With a *ka-bam*, the last drone fell to the floor. Hamazura jumped onto the door atop the Edge Bee, landing on it as hard as he could. Then he jumped a few more times for good measure, using all his weight to crush the precision machine.

Military weaponry was designed to be durable. But if Hamazura could bend

those delicate propellers even slightly, it wouldn't be able to generate lift anymore. Then his victory would be assured.

"Okay, great—"

"Hurry!! Hamazura, we have to run!!" Fremea shouted.

Hamazura burst out of the room and met up with her.

But then...

...grrrrack-grack-grack-grack came the roaring of chain saws.

He looked back into the room and saw an Edge Bee—the one whose engine he'd wrecked with the parasol, sending it bouncing to a corner of the room—rise again. It put the side of its disk to the floor. And it maintained perfect balance.

And then...

...the Edge Bee zoomed straight at Hamazura, using its chain saws as a tire.

Oh, shit!! Whatever's controlling its balance is really something else!!

He'd taken a step back out of fright and bumped into the wall of the hallway behind him. His shoes lost their grip on impact, and he fell to the floor on his rear.

That was when yet another threat appeared.

Zzzmmm!!

Something sliced straight through the wall he was up against.

A spear about three meters in length that looked like it was made of compressed air appeared from the other side at a sharp angle. After splitting through the wall, it smashed into the approaching Edge Bee and destroyed it—along with the floor.

But Hamazura wasn't happy about this turn of events. He'd been lucky he was sitting down. If he'd been standing up during that attack, he'd be on the floor in several pieces right now.

"Hamazura, no!! The wall's coming apart!!"

"Whaaaaaa-?!"

Panicking, he rolled to the side just as the damaged wall collapsed into the hallway.

A single figure emerged from the dust.

The residual force of the translucent spears that came from both their hands had completely blown away the debris.

The newcomer clicked their tongue. "You're supposed to work with me here, Silvercross. What a waste of money."

There stood a girl who looked about twelve. But the moment Hamazura laid eyes on her, he sensed something like sludge from within her. A palpable air of practiced lethality and chaos. She smelled like the darkness, a stench you could never cover up. A different kind from Hamazura and Hanzou, too. This girl was gifted.

Breathing heavily, Hamazura slowly got to his feet. He'd seen those clear spears before—the ones that had shot forth from her hands, still ripping up the wall and floor. "That ability is..."

"Oh? It's Bomber Lance—spears made of nitrogen. Might you have a friend with a similar ability?"

Whoosh. The girl smiled thinly, giving a light swing of a spear to tear up the walls around her.

"It's basically the same as the smoothbore-cannon rounds Silvercross and his Enemy Blaster were using. APFSDS. They use incredibly high pressure to punch through objects. That help any, hmmm?"

Her words were almost devoid of tension and strain—and even hostility and malice, to be honest. But that didn't change the fact that her javelins possessed overwhelming destructive potential.

"Anyway, this is no time to be impressed with me, is it? Silvercross has thirty Edge Bees buzzing around as we speak. Or are you the type who would gladly become a chunk of meat to save that kid?"

"?! Fremea, use the north emergency exit! Run!!"

"...Hmm," said the Bomber Lance girl, seeming uninterested as she turned, spotting the short, blond figure hiding behind a pillar. "Thanks for cluing me in. Since you both got out of the room, I assumed you'd be farther from each other right now."

...It's exactly like how they left Hanzou alone to find out where we were...!!

"Just go, Fremea!!"

Hamazura had no illusions about his opponent being a regular twelve-year-old girl.

He jumped straight up.

Then he grabbed the edge of the shutter meant for fire prevention with both hands, as though he was doing a slam dunk. He let his weight do the work, falling to the floor with the shutter in tow.

Straight at the girl's head, like a guillotine.

She casually turned around.

Boom!!!!!! The metal shutter blasted apart like a sponge stuffed with gunpowder.

Bomber Lance.

She had merely pointed her palm overhead. That was all she'd needed to do to destroy the thick, blunt object. Though the spear had missed Hamazura, it had sent metal shards shooting into his body, sending him flying.

"Ghahhh!!"

This won't work!! he thought. I can't fight her without an actual weapon!!

"Hamazura!!" Fremea cried, looking like she was going to run over to him.

"Get out of here, Fremea!! Hurry!!" he screamed at her.

She flinched. Though she hesitated in the middle of the hallway for a moment, she eventually turned and ran off toward the emergency stairwell.

The Bomber Lance girl watched her, then simply said, "Silvercross?"

"Ugh!!" Hamazura immediately tried to jump her, but before he could, she

swung her arm a few times.

That was all it took to break the hallway floor into huge chunks, which proceeded to fall to the story below. The path in front of Hamazura had been reduced to a cliff.

That didn't seem necessary. With that much power at her disposal, she could have killed him just by aiming at him. Then she could have focused on chasing down Fremea.

The girl was clearly toying with him.

"Guess I'll follow her. And if I still can't find her, then we use Operation Scream... Suffering is much more fun than outright murder."

Hamazura swore, then turned his back to her. He'd have to take a detour to meet back up with Fremea now. And more importantly, if he wanted to stand up against the Edge Bees and the Bomber Lance girl, he'd need a better weapon.

6

No matter the school district, no matter the city—there were always empty spaces.

While District 3 bristled with buildings, a powered suit stood in one of its empty lots, left behind after the structure there had been dismantled. Decrepit buildings cost more to maintain, but the owner likely wanted to keep the plot open in the hopes of profiting from land-price fluctuations.

Silvercross was wearing a different powered suit this time. It had a huge sensor dome for a head, but he thought it was much less intimidating in appearance than the other suit, since it had two arms and legs.

That said, the suit did have twelve iron beams protruding from its back. Slotted onto some of these beams were a collection of Edge Bees. Since each beam could hold ten, its total carrying capacity was over a hundred. About half of the drones were away at the moment.

The beams served as both nests for the Edge Bees and high-precision

antennae. This suit specialized in reconnaissance and information gathering. Even at this very moment, Silvercross was not only receiving visual feeds from multiple Edge Bees, but also intercepting the radio waves used by cleaning and security robots; he'd hooked into the communication network via a cable that went from the mech's armor and led underground to receive information directly from the robot infrastructure.

It was obvious what this was all for.

"All right. That should have blocked off her escape route."

Silvercross's plan was to capture Fremea Seivelun from inside the private salon. But if he stationed Edge Bees around the building and hacked into the nearby crime-prevention cameras, he'd be able to completely eliminate even the smallest possibility of her slipping away.

Judging by how big the building was and how many guests it had, he expected the place to be in disarray. But even through the commotion, he wouldn't miss his target's face.

Will Kuroyoru snatch her up first? Or will the opportunity—and the credit—fall to me? One way or another, this is the end of the line for Fremea Seivelun.

He considered the possibility that Item would intervene based on Shiage Hamazura's presence in the facility, but if that happened, it would be time for him to use his own power—which was incredibly strong and incredibly easy to understand.

The Bee Launcher is an information-gathering mech. I should change into a powered suit that's made for combat.

The owner wouldn't care. In Silvercross's opinion, you weren't supposed to choose a weapon and stick with it. You had to choose the ideal one for the situation to maximize their effectiveness. As far as he was concerned, no single weapon was superior to all others, which was why he never overestimated an individual weapon's capabilities.

Actually, if the target moves in the meantime, I'll lose sight of her again. She should be my first priority. Which means...

After Silvercross thought that far, the powered suit vibrated slightly.

Bwrrr.

Thanks to the suit's information-gathering capabilities, his many Edge Bees scattered across the city had located a threat. It dawned on him that the powered suit was pointlessly accelerating his own thoughts. If he started to panic, he wouldn't be able to stop.

Not good.

That threat was someone his power—that brute-force, to-the-point strength he excelled in most—would have no effect on.

A threat that should have been Umidori Kuroyoru's job to handle.

Item is nothing compared to this. I can't think of a worse matchup!!

7

Shiage Hamazura bolted down the southern emergency stairwell.

He and Fremea were still separated. To save her, he would need a weapon.

This private salon served rich kids of upper-class parents—not people who had backgrounds similar to his. Consequently, they offered a few rather odd services here.

An indoor shooting range, for example.

Obviously, they wouldn't have handguns or hunting rifles that used live rounds. But they would have plenty of things that didn't violate Academy City regulations: projectile weapons like crossbows, longbows, blowpipes, and rubber-bullet bolt-action rifles.

Following the map of the building on a sign, Hamazura flew out of the stairwell and onto another floor. This area didn't have doors at regular intervals like a hotel or karaoke place would. Instead, it was wide-open, its corridors placed in a cross shape, creating four large rooms dedicated to different activities, like bowling or shooting.

But getting to the range wouldn't be that easy—an Edge Bee was in the hallway right in front of it.

Normally, most people would think getting into the range as soon as possible was the best idea. The natural thought process was grab an effective weapon, then counterattack.

But Hamazura's mind was already past capacity. A massive shudder ran through him, and then he began trembling.

The shaking was partly a consequence of him dropping his facade—the facade of needing to prioritize the clearly powerless Fremea over his own safety.

The fear of impending death. The all-too-real image of ragged chain saws tearing through flesh and bone. They sapped the strength from his arms and legs and scrambled his ability to make decisions.

No matter how much experience Hamazura had, no matter how quick-witted he was, no matter what he'd seen on the front lines in World War III...he was still a high school kid in Academy City, Japan. He was no soldier. He hadn't been honed for years as a professional killer. Without that crucial foundation, he was guaranteed to feel dread when he came face to face with a serious crisis.

Why...? he thought candidly, his legs barely holding him upright. Why? Why the hell am I always getting into these situations?! The war is over. Who needs these weapons anymore?! How insane do you have to be to point one of these at an unarmed civilian?!

But the Edge Bee wouldn't wait for him. It shot straight at him, aiming to slice through his abdomen.

Hamazura didn't think before grabbing a nearby fire extinguisher.

He swung it lengthwise, striking the chain-saw blades directly. The extinguisher exploded on impact. Because its gas was rushing out of a place it was never designed to accommodate, what shot out was not only white particles but also metallic shards, which rocketed into the ceiling.

Nevertheless, the extinguisher had knocked the Edge Bee back quite a bit.

Maybe the machine's power had worked against it, and its chain saws had gotten caught on the thrown fire extinguisher while they were still in slicing mode, pushing the Edge Bee away. Alternatively, perhaps it maintained its balance via video feed, and the visual obstruction of the extinguisher's contents had thrown off its sense of direction.

The Edge Bee tried to reright itself in midair, only to collide with the wall before it could accomplish this. More specifically, a decorative flagpole sticking out of the wall diagonally had rammed straight through the machine's contrarotating propellers—the wings it used to move. They bent out of shape, and then he heard a splitting sound from inside the machine.

Hamazura watched the Edge Bee, hanging there on the pole like a hat, and gulped.

Did I get it...?

Then it happened. With an electronic *beep*, a light-emitting diode near its camera changed color.

"Damn it!!"

Going pale, Hamazura whipped open the door to the shooting range and dove inside.

The explosion came just a moment later.

Boom!!!!!! The noise rattled his eardrums. The blast didn't only give off a wave of heat, either. A sharp pain ran up Hamazura's arm. Something had torn through his clothes and gotten lodged in it—a three-pronged object, each spike shaped like a J, like something used as a fishing lure.

The Edge Bee had contained both explosives and hundreds of these lures. It made sense to have spikes or metal balls inside to increase the lethality of the blast—but fishing lures? That was downright nasty. After all, lures were specifically made to be difficult to remove. The three prongs dug into skin at an upward angle, so they were nearly impossible to dislodge.

"Hrrrrghhh!!"

Biting down on a handkerchief so he wouldn't bite his tongue instead, Hamazura ripped out the lure with his thumb and index finger. Mind-breaking agony shot through his whole arm. A greasy sweat broke out on his face.

This is actually absurd...

Using the handkerchief to bind the wound as best he could, he wobbled over to the shooting-range counter. All kinds of projectile weapons were hanging behind it. Normally, an employee would be watching them, but because of the attack, nobody was there now.

These guys are real nasty—and different from the darkness I've experienced. They're not trying to conserve their energy and bide their time while waiting for an advantage. They just want to see us suffer...

He climbed over the counter and looked across the weapons. If he could have, he'd have taken as many of them as he could to protect himself. But they were all large—each of them over a meter. Maybe getting enough power while staying within regulations demanded a certain size, or maybe they stocked a lot of big kinds due to customer demand or popularity. Either way, at most, he'd be able to take one.

He wanted the most powerful weapon he could get. Something even an amateur like him could use. After thinking about it for a few moments, he made his choice.

...An electric-driven blowpipe.

A blowpipe was an implement for blowing out darts or other projectiles. This one, about a hundred and ten centimeters long, had been modified for sporting events. It was made of a synthetic resin also used in things like knives and aircraft.

Normally, blowpipes weren't lethal. While they did use sharp, needle-tipped ammunition, those projectiles could only travel as fast as human lungs could propel them. Certain indigenous peoples used them to fell large beasts, but they would tip their darts in poison to secure the kill—the force of the projectile itself wasn't lethal.

But this one was electric-driven. The internal sensor would detect a missile

going through the pipe and use an air compressor to boost its speed. It would have been a fine weapon by just letting the machine part do the work, but it required the user to blow regardless—undoubtedly a measure to skirt Academy City's regulations. The dart would be pushed by an air force that was stronger by several times, if not several dozen times than human breath alone. That gave it enough punch to pierce a sheet of plywood a few centimeters thick. Plus, thanks to the laser pointer attached near the tip, it would be easy enough aim.

Hamazura grabbed a box of projectiles for the blowgun—they were stabilized with fins, much like dart flights.

The weapon itself didn't stop him from shaking. The resolve to pick it up, rather, gave him strength once more.

...This doesn't mean I have a surefire chance of taking the Edge Bees down. And I don't even know if it'll so much as graze that Bomber Lance esper. But it's so, so much better that I have it. At the very least, it'll let me get Fremea out of here!

Just then, he heard a noise.

Immediately ducking behind the counter, he opened a spot about forty centimeters behind the end of the pipe and loaded a dart. But then he stopped. The source of the sound wasn't an Edge Bee, nor was it that unknown esper.

It was a middle-aged man.

His suit was worn, and the knot in his necktie was crooked. He was sweating profusely, likely out of tension and terror; his face was dripping, and his button-down shirt was soaked through.

"...You don't look like you work here," remarked Hamazura, standing up from behind the counter. "Are you a guest?"

While 80 percent of Academy City's population was students, the other 20 percent was adults. He didn't know whether adults would want to rent out a secret base like this, but there was technically nothing preventing them from using private salons.

Hamazura grabbed a longbow from behind the counter, then tossed it to the man. "You'd better get out of here if you want to stay alive. Those drones can

saw through walls and doors. They're tearing the whole place apart. They might not be after you, but if you stay here, you'll get caught in the cross fire. Plus, they're stuffed with explosives. You should escape if you're able."

"....." With sluggish motions, the man reached for the longbow. It was less that he was affirming his will to fight and more that he was grabbing something that happened to be flying at him. Frankly speaking, Hamazura couldn't sense any real intent behind the action.

The man slowly shifted his gaze from the longbow to Hamazura. "...Wh-what are you going to do?"

"Get out of here, obviously. This is nuts. Killer drones are swarming the place. And there's an esper who's even more powerful fooling around—she has spears that can cut through steel beams. If I stick around, I'll die. So I'm gonna make a break for it. Even if it's cowardly of me."

Hamazura began to take the blowpipe darts out of the box and tuck them into his belt. His hands were trembling in panic, but he didn't have time to calm himself down.

"But first, I've gotta save a girl. Her name's Fremea. I don't know if I could ever beat monsters like that, but I've gotta get her to safety at least."

"Why?" The man tilted his head in a childlike display of confusion. "Anti-Skill will show up before long. You said the drones are searching all the rooms in the building. Do you know how many there are? Hundreds! If we just wait here, those things will keep wasting time. And while they do, help will come!! The best way to keep our heads on our shoulders is staying put!! Anything else is careless. We need to hide!!"

"Maybe you're right."

If Anti-Skill was strong enough to resolve this mess.

If the enemy didn't have dozens of flying cameras and the ability to use them efficiently.

If their foes didn't get angry and blow things up, instead of just giving up if they didn't get what they wanted.

"But maybe you're wrong," Hamazura continued. "And like I said, I've gotta get Fremea out of this salon. She's only, like, ten, man. Her life is in way more danger than ours. And she might die even if I help her. I can't leave her. That'll just get her killed that much quicker. I have to distract them as much as I can."

"...But why...?" asked the man again.

Hamazura didn't force him. "Sorry. I'm not trying to get you to come with me. It's your life. You have the right to choose. But if you want somewhere to hide, don't do it here. I already tried. I scrapped one of the Edge Bees right before getting here. A replacement might come around to look. At least get to another room."

"No. No, that's not it." The man shook his head several times. That was when Hamazura realized something other than terror was causing his trembling. "How can you think about others in a situation like this...?"

At first, it was a delirious mumbling, but his voice steadily grew louder.

"I came here looking for my daughter. She ran away from home. For some reason, she didn't ask Anti-Skill or Judgment for help. She's trying to solve a dangerous problem all by herself. She started using the private salon as a secret base so she wouldn't get her family involved. And I only learned those things by snooping around on my own. I was prepared to do anything. To bring her back home before she got mixed up into something she couldn't get out of. Getting here was such a struggle."

From the way the man was speaking, it seemed like he would start coughing up blood any moment.

"But real danger is something else. Experiencing it in real life broke me. I can't think of anyone but myself. It doesn't matter what's happening. It doesn't matter that you gave me a bow. I can't bring myself to even consider using it to help my daughter! No matter what I have, all I can think of is how to save myself!! ... How does someone... get to be like you? I'm serious. How the hell do I think of others when staring death in the face?!"

The man was utterly terrified of losing his life. His thoughts had warped, twisted in such a way as to spare him the terror. The broken man trembled quietly, wallowing in the depths of despair.

"...What are you talking about?"

However...

... Shiage Hamazura's face held no contempt. No scorn.

"You found a wife, made a real family, and worked your ass off to protect them. If your daughter has enough money to use a private salon that frequently, then you must put in a crapton of work for your family, right? You didn't build what you have just because everyone else was doing it, because it was what you were 'supposed' to do or something. When your daughter disappeared, when your family was on the verge of falling apart, you came here to protect them, even if it meant breaking your own rules."

Hamazura wasn't trying to comfort him. They weren't trite words, neatly packaged in a way that wouldn't hurt the man.

"Everyone has things I don't," he said. "No matter how much I struggle, I never get them. But I still desperately want to. That's my end goal."

A yearning. Its purity meant Hamazura could lay his heart bare.

"Stick your chest out, hero. You're the kind of person I look up to."

The man hung his head for a time, not saying anything. Ruminating on those words.

Eventually, he stopped shaking. The once-broken man then looked up.

"...I'll go, too," he said. "Staying here won't make the situation better."

"Are you sure?! I mean—"

"You want to get that girl Fremea out of here. I'm the same way. I want to rescue my daughter."

"You saw how chaotic it was out there. Do you know where she is?"

"She's a lot like me in some ways. I'm sure she's sheltering in place. I know her room number. I plan to go that far, at least."

"I see...," murmured Hamazura, reaffirming his grip on the electric-driven blowpipe. "Then I'll distract the Edge Bees as much as I can. If you know where you're going, it's easy. You just have to run like hell."

"Distract them... Did you even hear a word I said?! You may have a weapon, but that doesn't make you invincible. There's so many of them! If they come at you all at once—"

"This is my fault," interrupted Hamazura. "The commotion, those Edge Bees, that weird esper busting down walls—I brought that whole mess here. I'm not strong enough to make everything right. I can only do what I can. But please let me do that much. Even if I can only do what I can, let me do that!!"

Not willing to hear any further warnings, Hamazura burst out of the indoorshooting range-doorway into the hallway.

Just as the Bomber Lance girl broke through another wall across from him.

"Oh, would you *please* just meet up with Fremea?" she said. "Lead me to her, will you?"

"...!!"

"Or would you prefer to do it the other way around? If I can make you scream loud enough that everyone in the building could hear it, would she come to you? Or would she get scared and run away?"

Her words didn't faze him. What else had he gotten a weapon for?

He brought the electric-driven blowpipe up with both hands, pointing the laser right in the middle of the girl's body. Then he blew into the pipe as hard as he could. The electric-powered compressor multiplied the force of his breath dozens of times.

Whaaaaap!!!!!! came a dull noise.

It wasn't anything close to a gunshot. Like a bow and arrow, the sound of the blowpipe's projectile striking the target was far louder. But it also wasn't the sound of esper flesh tearing apart. Nor was it her ability blocking it. She'd just twisted her body slightly; the dart-shaped arrow had stabbed into the wall behind her.

The girl still had a look of pure confidence on her face. But Hamazura had gained something. She'd dodged his shot—she hadn't deflected it. That must have meant she would have gotten hurt if he had hit her. She'd dodged because

she thought she couldn't block. The esper girl could, at most, create nitrogen spears. She couldn't shield herself with impenetrable walls.

In other words...

I can win! I just have to land a hit!!

Hamazura opened the part about forty centimeters from the blowpipe's exit, then plucked a dart-shaped arrow from his pants belt to fire a second time.

That was when the Bomber Lance girl moved.

Roooooar!! A spear formed at each of her hands, tearing with almost comical ease through the walls on either side of her...as they closed in on Hamazura terrifyingly fast.

Shit! Do I have time?!

Before the girl could get up close, Hamazura finished loading the blowpipe and shut the lid. But as he brought it up in both hands, she was already within killing range. Purposely erasing one of her spears, she covered one end of the blowpipe with her palm.

"Want me to fire it the other way?"

"?!" He immediately let go of the weapon and twisted his neck far to the side.

A moment later came the new nitrogen spear, which pierced straight through the blowpipe. *Booooom!!* The rush of hot air was accompanied by a minor graze on the cheek from the spear as the blowpipe ruptured. The sharp resin pieces dug slightly into Hamazura's skin.

Then the impact threw him wide. As he fell to the floor, he took another arrow from his belt. He'd wanted to make a direct counterattack, but the girl sent her foot flying at him before he could even wind up.

"Gah?!"

She kicked him between his wrist and elbow, pinning his arm to the floor. And then she pointed her palm right at Hamazura's chest—a palm that could create lethal spears.

"Fremea Seivelun," she said casually. "Just like I planned. Time to test

whether your screaming will call her here."

But then something else happened.

"Kuroyoru."

A voice came from inside her clothes, even though she didn't seem to have a cell phone of any sort.

"We have a problem. Break off and get outside. I'll take over inside the facility."

"Item backup?"

"No. Something worse. An impossible matchup with my brute force. And this was something you were always meant to handle."

"I see." Saying all she wanted to say, the girl removed her foot from Hamazura's arm. "Good timing. Everything was going so quickly that I was starting to lag behind."

"Ugh..."

Hamazura put a hand to the wall and managed to get to his feet, trying to block the girl's way.

But then she did something unexpected. After slicing through a nearby wall with her spear, she jumped inside, then threw herself at a thick window to smash through it. Glass shattered, and her small body went flying out the high floor of the building.

But she didn't fall. She'd spread her hands out horizontally; now nitrogen spears were erupting from them, holding her in place in midair. It wasn't just pure force—she was manipulating the air with her spears, creating a whirling current behind her.

"You mentioned Item, didn't you?" demanded Hamazura of the hovering girl, dragging his injured body over. "Answer me. It's not just Fremea. Are you planning on doing something to them too?"

"Oh, don't rush. You'll find out soon. Whether you want to or not."

Leaving him with that, the girl cut her spear-jets and let herself plunge

straight down, back toward the ground. Naturally, falling wasn't her goal—it was landing. She would probably turn her jets back on near the ground.

"Damn it..."

After thinking for a moment, Hamazura turned and went for the emergency staircase.

The Bomber Lance girl seemed to have retreated for the moment, but the Edge Bees were still swarming the building.

8

Umidori Kuroyoru landed.

As the private salon's occupants flooded out of the building to flee the chaos within, they bumped into those who had instead gathered to watch what was happening. A sizable crowd had formed out front.

While a member of the underworld, she felt no concern about the commotion. Her face overflowed with confidence. Even a student playing a game on their cell phone while waiting for their friends there would have looked a little more concerned.

She clicked her tongue. "Come on, Silvercross. Where is this backup you mentioned?"

A quick look around revealed nothing obvious. Only her provisional male subordinates, who were always keeping an eye on her movements and adjusting their positions to better protect her.

Kuroyoru headed to the open café next door and took a seat outside. Placing her inflatable dolphin on one of the remaining three seats of the table, she ordered the black tea that was recommended.

Once her order was ready, she brought the teacup to her lips.

...Someone, somewhere, is probably racking their brain over this. I guess flashier is better—if I want to link up their routes anyway.

Naturally, the city's denizens were watching the swarm of flying Edge Bees and the attack on the private salon. Nobody stepped in to try and stop the

violence, though. They may have thought it was strange, or weird, but with the situation evolving by the second, they just couldn't keep up.

This was the difference between their world and this one—the underworld. Besides, the darkness only functioned *because* it was more powerful than this surface facade.

Anyway, I just have to stall these reinforcements long enough for Silvercross's Edge Bees to track down Fremea...but I don't know where the troublemakers are. Isn't that the most important part?

But then it happened. She heard the *cla-click* of a footstep.

A wicked grin appeared on Umidori Kuroyoru's lips. She could smell it. The scent of insanity. Of someone trying to blend in with the passersby and clearly failing. In plain terms, it was the kind of smell unique to someone who had been steeped in the darkness.

"Oh?" said Kuroyoru as a piece of paper slid down onto the table.

Next to the apparently popular blend of black tea was a photograph—of Fremea Seivelun.

"...Well, well. Just like the report said. Though, your first entrance to the stage wasn't supposed to be so early," she said with a smirk to the person across the table.

A Level Five.

"Seriously. Number Four would have been easier to handle, too."

Yes.

Across from her stood Number One: Accelerator.

Accelerator tossed the photograph of Fremea Seivelun onto the table, then gauged the girl's reaction.

He'd made it this close thanks to several nuggets of information, such as the marked-up map. But the explosion and the swarm of drones had been what really gave everything away. In all honesty, if he hadn't come through this way, he'd have gone to either the building or to where the drones had originated anyway.

Heading to the open café instead had been pure coincidence.

It had been so very easy to understand. After all, the scent of darkness coming off several people nearby—the girl's underlings, trying to blend into the scenery—had been almost palpable.

"Well, take a seat," said the girl with a thin smile, a dangerous light coming into her eyes. "This stuff came recommended. It's called... Uhhh, actually, the name was too long, so I didn't read it. Anyway, try it out. I can guarantee it's not great, though."

Accelerator sat down across from her, then picked a completely different brand of tea from the menu.

That ended up being pretty bad, too. "...No matter what you pick, you lose," he muttered.

"That's life."

"Who are you?"

"Did you really think I'd just introduce myself?"

"You're Umidori Kuroyoru."

"...Ugh. You just wanted confirmation, didn't you?"

She glanced around; a few of the underlings she remembered stationing nearby were missing. They were so unimportant that she didn't even remember their names or faces, but apparently, they'd been dragged into the shadows.

In their place, a girl with an arm cast wearing an ao dai looked over and gave a little wave. The only thing she could see in her smile was contempt.

What a simple method, she thought. But I have to hand it to them— I didn't notice until he talked.

She gave up. "You're right... Cut off a few of their fingers, did you?"

"Nah. Threw them into an automated raw-garbage disposer in some alley or other and asked them some questions in exchange for not turning them into fertilizer."

"Wait, that's all it took to get them to talk? I ought to chop off a few of their

fingers myself."

"Not that I got much," added Accelerator, cutting her off. "They seemed pretty clueless. I only got your name, Silvercross's, and the word *Freshmen*... That term sounded fairly important, considering their nonsensical pride in it. They coughed up your names but didn't tell me any more about that."

"...Guess I'll have to chop off *all* their fingers, then. And their legs," she replied, pouting while saying some very frightening things. She picked up an inflatable dolphin from another seat and started to stroke it—maybe she used it to cope with stress. "Anyway, what do you want?"

"I should be asking you that," he spat. "The darkness should be gone. I got rid of it. I forcibly dismantled the entire framework underpinning the city's underworld. That was how the conversation went at the end of that shitty world war. Everyone being manipulated for the higher-ups' ends should have been set free. And yet here you are, clearly still working in the shadows. Why?"

At the end of World War III, he'd told the messenger from the higher-ups this: Don't ever give orders using that kid or the Sisters as a shield. And freeze the Third Season. Killing 'em, making 'em, doesn't matter. Never toy with their lives for your own convenience ever again.

And this: Release everyone in the same circumstances I was in, too. I won't allow you to use anything as a shield to push dirty jobs on people in the underworld. If I catch you doing it even once, I will not hesitate to turn against you. I will crush you as many times, as many dozens of times as I need to, as long as you keep up these atrocities.

"Yeah." Kuroyoru brought the cup to her lips, took in its scent, took it in again and again, then crooked her head to the side, still not sure of the difference. "We got a message about that. It sent everything back to the drawing board—all those hostages and conditions serving as chains on people. They kinda seemed happy, in fact. I didn't get the sense that you really terrorized the higher-ups—more like they were giving you a reward for carrying out your role in the war... That debt of yours got canceled because of your accomplishments, didn't it?"

"You know, there's something I always wanted to say to you if I ever happened to meet you. I'd actually forgotten about it until just now. But seeing your face reminded me. So here goes. No holding back."

The cup still in her hands, Kuroyoru closed her eyes for a moment.

Then she opened them.

And said this:

"...If you think everyone in the world can be friends, you're dead wrong."

A moment later.

Boom!!!!!! An explosion split the table cleanly in two.

Accelerator shook his head a little. The cup he'd brought up to his lips had split in half just like the table, its contents sent flying into the air.

Though he was Academy City's most powerful esper, his only flaw was that he couldn't use his powers until he flipped the switch on his electrode choker. The explosion had happened so suddenly that he couldn't respond in time.

So when the first cup of tea came flying at him, he avoided the liquid.

But he didn't need to for the second.



As he used his empty hand to flick the switch at his neck, the cheaply colored black tea collided with his body—and all of it bounced right back off. There wasn't a single millimeter of skin that had been burned. And Kuroyoru's follow-up attack met the same fate.

Reflection.

Kuroyoru flew out of her seat, moving back, twisting as hard as she could to just barely avoid her own projectile. The cup in her hand had been split in half. Tossing the handle onto the road, she grasped her inflatable dolphin.

As the cup, the table, and the seat across from her all fell apart, Accelerator alone continued to sit, relaxed. "...The way you talk— No, your calculation patterns..."

"My, did you figure it out? Guess it wasn't that hard. After all, you've got a portion of these patterns implanted in your brain to make you stronger."

"Project Dark May, eh?"

Accelerator snorted. That was one of the inhumane projects going on behind the scenes in Academy City. By dissecting the city's strongest Level Fives' thought patterns and forcefully embedding part of them into others, they'd hoped to dramatically boost a person's abilities in exchange for destabilizing their personality.

"You had a little part of it shoved into your brain. But I'm Number One—I'm where it came from. Are you really so stupid that you need to try to fight me to realize which of us is stronger?"

"Keep talking, kid."

"This is a trigger." Accelerator tapped the armrest of his chair. "If I get up, you're dead. Or maybe you want to try *forcing* me to get up."

"I may not have much chance in a straight fight. That's why we were leaving you for later," said Kuroyoru, adding, "However...our win condition isn't to take you on fair and square."

"…"

"Your power—it's great for destroying things. Not so great for protecting

things, though, is it? Well, I'm the same way!!" shouted Kuroyoru, picking her dolphin up under her arm and swiping her empty hand horizontally.

Straight toward the onlookers who had suddenly begun to gather.

Waving her palm, which held immense destructive power, at unarmed civilians.

In the same moment, Accelerator leaped out of his chair. Her attack resembled the wind. He jumped between Kuroyoru and the onlookers, immediately scattering the projectiles—which were like spears or arrows.

"That was the trigger."

His words were shocking, like a bullet.

"And you pulled it. You chose this fate."

Umidori Kuroyoru grinned. Around her, the fragments of the table and road she'd blasted still hovered slightly as they fell. Pointing to the photograph, also cut in half, she made a proposition. "There she is."

"There who is?"

"Fremea Seivelun."

The brow of Academy City's most powerful monster twitched.

"Time to play a little game, Number One."

""

"The kid's nearby. Here's the game. We see if I can cut her head off, just like the picture."

And then...

9

Shiage Hamazura dashed out of the private-salon building. Inside, all hell had broken loose—a swarm of Edge Bees that would drive themselves through windows and doors if he ever gave them the chance. But he'd managed to slip away from it all.

As long as he could keep himself from flinching at the chain saws around the machines' outer ring, he had several ways to deal with them. He could throw a spray can into their propellers, slam a fire extinguisher into their camera lenses, or hurl a Molotov cocktail at their batteries.

The Edge Bees could accelerate objects thrown at them using centrifugal force and hurl them back with incredible force. But Hamazura could deal with them if he threw something at an extreme angle or used something they couldn't catch without breaking.

He was lucky that their self-destruct feature was only connected to them losing all functionality. If they had been able to trigger it at will based on the situation, he wouldn't have even been able to get close to them.

Where's Fremea?! Is she outside already? Or is she still in there?!

Pushing his way through the onlookers gathering to watch the excitement, Hamazura turned every which way for the girl. But as he did, he realized that something felt off. Out of place.

Something was wrong.

Something didn't make sense.

Luck had clearly been the factor that had gotten him out of the building, which was swarming with Edge Bees. Naturally, he'd been hoping for that very outcome. That was why he'd been fighting so desperately.

But...

It's going too well..., he thought, being honest with himself.

No matter how varied the experience he had and how much of it he had, Hamazura was still just a random street punk at heart. He couldn't use any abilities to get through situations like these. Those lethal weapons—a swarm of machines designed for killing that had been released to do just that—would never have *let* him get away like this.

If he had only confronted one or two of those machines, then sure, he could have chalked it up to a miracle. But he'd run into over ten of the things. And far more than that were all over the building.

How had he survived? Pure coincidence?

He felt like someone else had planned for him to escape.

"Fremea!! Where are you?!"

But he didn't have the time to dwell on this.

Hamazura had only managed to get away from the swarm of Edge Bees. He hadn't wiped them out. And they were nothing more than unmanned drones. If his intuition was right, whoever was controlling them—his *real* enemy—would be far more difficult to deal with than the esper girl and the powered suit from before.

Then it happened: While looking around, he heard a familiar voice.

"...Over here, Hamazura... Here...!!"

"Fremea!!"

Hamazura whipped around to look, but there were too many rubberneckers. Plus, Fremea was fairly short. She could be completely buried.

He couldn't find her.

He had no way of reaching her.

Impatience swelled within him as the huge throng of people undermined his efforts to locate her.

And...

...while he looked around, confused, the next disaster struck.

Ba-bammm!!

The massive shadow of a powered suit appeared, scattering the cars parked on the road.

The object itself was utterly incongruous with the cityscape. He had nothing to base this on, but Hamazura thought it smelled the same as the spider mech that had gone on a rampage in the underground mall.

Two arms. Two legs. While its design was more docile compared with the eight-legged mech equipped with the smoothbore cannon, this one was

significantly larger. It definitely didn't seem like the pilot's arms and legs would be able to reach those limbs. There was probably a cockpit in the torso. A whole bunch of thin beams protruded from its back, with several familiar Edge Bees skewered on them.

The onlookers stared slack-jawed at the mech. Despite understanding that Academy City had produced weapons of that kind, it was an uncommon sight for residents of the city.

The powered suit pilot, on the other hand, didn't hesitate. It didn't matter who was watching. The giant mech charged onward, heedless of the pedestrians between it and its target.

In other words, toward Fremea Seivelun—to crush her.

Countless screams ripped through the air.

Ignoring the people falling over one another trying to get out of the way, the powered suit plunged straight ahead on its path.

Hamazura was paralyzed, partly because he didn't know exactly where Fremea was. But more than that, it was the cold, negative emotions of the powered suit pilot—overwhelming, and completely different from the Edge Bees—that were stopping him. It was as though they had pierced his skin and pinned him in place.

He could feel the pilot's raw intent to kill him. That was something a mere machine couldn't produce.

As Hamazura stood there, frozen on the spot, the powered suit flipped over a parked car. It spun three times in midair, then plummeted toward the ground.

He stared at it in shock. There she was. Fremea Seivelun. She must have been knocked over by the other onlookers during their frantic escape. She was lying face down on the road.

A stroller sat nearby, abandoned. Had the parents panicked and run away, or had the stream of onlookers cut them off from it? A child was still in there, though—one so young that Hamazura couldn't tell their gender or age.

Finally, he tore himself from his terrified paralysis, launching into a desperate sprint toward Fremea.

But he was too late.

He screamed for her to run. Fremea looked between the car hurtling at her and the stroller. That hesitation reduced her already slim chances of survival to zero.

The car fell.

The baby in the stroller must have had no idea what was happening. The car continued to spin around, and as its side mirrors deflected the sunlight irregularly, the baby reached its little hands out for it.

A moment later, there was a massive crunch.

Whoooomp!!

That was the sound of Accelerator delivering a flying kick that could manipulate any vector—momentum, heat, electric charge—and knocking the car clear away.

Though Accelerator had rushed in at an incredible speed, he stopped dead in the air for a moment. His kinetic energy, however, blasted away the car, sending it careening off in a direction devoid of onlookers. He'd diverted its momentum like a billiard ball.

Accelerator floated down near Fremea, seeming almost weightless.

Perhaps finally realizing the danger from that noise, the baby in the stroller began to bawl. He didn't turn back to look at it, though.

The powered suit.

Umidori Kuroyoru.

As he confirmed the location of the two direct threats, Accelerator muttered something under his breath—as if to praise Fremea for hesitating to run away at the very end.

...This isn't supposed to be my job, he said to himself. Where's that shitty Level Zero when you need him?

And then to both himself and the girl, the monster said this:

"Stupid kid. You're not cut out to be a hero."

In that moment, Shiage Hamazura was dumbstruck.

Why had Academy City's strongest Level Five shown up here?

Level Zeroes like Hamazura and Fremea lived in almost completely different worlds than the Level Fives, who reigned as the supreme beneficiaries of ability development. It was absolute nonsense to Hamazura; no Level Five would ever want to help a Level Zero unless the situation really demanded it.

He was thankful for the rescue, of course. His problem was well beyond anything a bunch of Level Zeroes could resolve by putting their heads together.

He'd met Accelerator before, in some of the most intensely combat-plagued regions of World War III—in Russia and in the Elizalina Alliance of Independent Nations. If he could borrow someone with the power to singlehandedly overwhelm not only the Russian military but even the cutting-edge weaponry the city had fielded, he could rest easy.

However...

...Hamazura also couldn't help but feel a creeping suspicion—just like he had when reflecting on how "lucky" he'd been to evade the Edge Bee swarm.

...Can I really use him?

Though Accelerator had once protected Takitsubo from terrorists, Hamazura didn't have a great impression of him, and for good reason, too.

But right now, he didn't have the luxury of choice.

...I'll take anything as long as it gets us out of this crisis. That bastard may have killed Komaba, but that means he's got a reason to fight for Fremea, too!!

In that moment, the powered suit heard the joyous tones of its colleague over the radio.

"It's here, it's here, it's heeeere!! Silvercross!! We have contact. It's just one more push. Secure the link here and now!!"

"He may know what we're up to."

"Doesn't matter. That's why we've kept Fremea Seivelun on the brink of death! There's no changing the flow anymore. Not at this point. Even if they try to resist it!! You know what to use—it'll let you link them up for sure. It's checkmate, Silvercross!!"

He clicked his tongue in annoyance, and the sound echoed in his powered suit. He'd always been someone who could pick the right suit for the time and place.

"Shit. I already told you, the Bee Launcher isn't made for combat!!"

Despite his complaint, he moved the powered suit forward, scattering the guardrails and fire hydrants in its way like a heavy construction vehicle.

At that same moment, Kuroyoru was observing Silvercross's giant powered suit charge ahead from a short distance away. Though the powered suit had been made to order, it wouldn't be able to eliminate Academy City's Number One.

...But that's no problem, she thought.

Grrreeeeeeshhhhhh!! burst the noise of crushing metal.

The powered suit reached out to grab Fremea from the ground using steel fingers sturdier than the scoop on an excavator, but it quickly crumpled into itself when Accelerator hit it with his ability.

The impact encroached like roots, smashing the broken arm even more, sending cracks through the outer shell, and putting a huge load on many of the suit's vital movement mechanisms.

Normally, that would have ended things. But not so in this case.

...Raw force won't be the deciding factor here!!

Because Silvercross Alpha was wearing a very thick powered suit.

Which meant...

Pkkk-shhhh!!

All of a sudden, the front side of the currently collapsing powered suit opened up.

To expel its contents—Silvercross.

And inside was something else inhuman: a tiny powered suit with curved armor reminiscent of an armadillo.

It must have been stabilizing itself using some sort of device or sensors—it shot out of the larger model and into the air at a rapid spin. Then it passed right over Fremea, who was still lying prone on the ground.

No, that wasn't it. The armadillo had grabbed the back of her neck.

Through the radio, Kuroyoru yelled, "Silvercross!! Get her out of here! Then it'll be our win!!"

Accelerator, who thought the pair would stop at mere destruction, hesitated for a fraction of a second over how to respond.

Their next move came immediately. The nearby crowd parted in a flurry of screams. The high-mobility powered suit dashed through the opening. Equipped with a giant propeller on the back, the suit had four legs that could reach speeds of eight hundred kph by sliding across the ground. The tips of its legs could also secrete a type of fluid called Slipoil to let it slide, but the stuff was highly volatile, so it wouldn't leave a trace.

Silvercross's personal model could even run on autopilot, albeit with simplified movements.

The thick hatch on the front of the suit opened up.

Silvercross, with Fremea in his arms, did a half flip through the air again and landed perfectly inside the four-legged mech. The hatch then closed back up like the door to a vault.

He'd changed machines, keeping true to his philosophy of picking his suit based on the time and place.

In other words...

...he'd examined the situation and chosen the model that would get him out of there the fastest.

Vrooom!! The mech's rear propellers whirred even faster, creating a gust of wind.

Before Accelerator could grab hold of its armor, the powered suit instantly sped off. He curled his fingers around empty air.

Before he knew it, they were already shooting through the streets like a cannonball.

Kuroyoru Umidori concealed herself within the crowds, then spoke through her radio to him.

"That's it. We've won."

The only sound left was the wails of the abandoned baby.

Though a noise like that would stimulate anyone's primal instincts, it would never resound in the darkness.

10

Time was up.

Having watched the entire sequence of events, Shiage Hamazura grabbed a bent metal pipe for self-defense—which had probably fallen out of the powered suit that was destroyed—and ran toward Accelerator.

He'd use every bit of combat power at his disposal. Though he'd refused to get Takitsubo, Mugino, or Kinuhata involved, he didn't feel the same sense of responsibility when it came to the city's Number One.

Now that Fremea Seivelun had been kidnapped, it was a race against time. And Accelerator had killed Komaba, who'd wanted to protect the girl.

Which meant Accelerator did have a reason to rescue her.

After disappearing into the crowd on the street, Umidori Kuroyoru chuckled to herself.

Fremea Seivelun is worthless on her own, she thought. She's just a Level Zero. And ordinarily, she never would have gotten mixed up with this city's darkness.

"Hey! Number One!!" shouted Hamazura, but Accelerator didn't even turn around.

Hamazura didn't know if his bent pipe would be of any use against someone

even more overpowered than Mugino, but he readied it regardless.

"There's no time. Help me out. It'll be more efficient to go after Fremea together. If even a tiny part of you wants to save her, then help me out!! And if you don't know who she is, I'll tell you right now. Once you're up to speed, you'll realize you're part of this. She's..."

"....." Accelerator swept his hand.

As soon as it touched Hamazura's pipe, the object inverted. *Grrrkeeee!!* came the metal screech.

The pipe was instantly ripped from his hand, and Hamazura slammed into the ground. Accelerator flicked a switch on his choker, then approached him.

To ensure Hamazura was neutralized. To prevent him from fighting anymore by dislocating both of his arms at least.

There was no rule saying the enemy of your enemy had to be your friend.

To begin with, it took far less motivation and perseverance to save someone on a whim than it did to come along for the whole ride.

Her white coat swaying from side to side as it hung from her head, Kuroyoru mentally reviewed the progress of the mission in her head again.

...What makes Fremea valuable are the people she's related to. She has a connection to Accelerator, who killed Ritoku Komaba—and through Frenda, she also has a connection to Hamazura and Item, most importantly Mugino.

...That was...pretty naive, I guess...

Still pinned to the ground, Hamazura gritted his teeth.

Accelerator reached for his neck.

If the esper kept going and squeezed his carotid artery, Hamazura would black out instantly. He couldn't imagine how much worse the situation would get in the meantime—how much time he'd waste—now that Fremea had already been carried away.

Hamazura needed to turn this around at any cost.

...And it doesn't matter how. I just need something to get Accelerator away

from me...!!

Hamazura moved his right hand and felt something hard. It had run into something lying on the ground. A gun. One of the Anti-Skill officers had probably dropped it in the chaos.

But that wouldn't be enough.

This monster could wreck huge powered suits with one hand. He doubted shooting a 9mm bullet at him would do much of anything.

Kuroyoru took out her phone and went over the complicated exchange her higher-ups were having.

Yes. Shiage Hamazura and Accelerator. The most crucial part of this plan was creating a major connection—a link—between them.

But then it happened.

Hamazura sensed something amiss in Accelerator's eye. The esper wasn't looking down at him. While Hamazura was pretty insignificant, Accelerator would have still needed to keep his eyes on Hamazura while trying to finish him off.

Remaining on the ground, Hamazura followed Accelerator's gaze. Someone was over there in the throng of people.

A small girl.

Unbeknownst to him, she went by Last Order.

...Can I...use this...?

He felt the weight of the gun in his hand again.

Yes, Number One was a monster. But the ability to defend oneself was entirely separate from the ability to defend others. If that girl was someone Accelerator knew, then Hamazura could use her to threaten him.

Even through the crowds of onlookers, Hamazura had a clear shot at her. She was about twelve meters away—close enough that he could count on hitting her as long as he took his time to aim. He could use that to negotiate with the monster.

...What's the move here?

He'd never be able to stand up to a titan like Accelerator unless he got creative. And every second counted if he wanted to rescue Fremea.

...What's the move...?

His right hand twitched.

But before he could actually do anything, Accelerator countered.

Whump!! A dull pain shot from his right wrist to his elbow.

Accelerator had used his full weight to pin Hamazura's arm to the ground.

The higher-ups now viewed the situation as a threat—just as much of a threat as they'd planned. Kuroyoru was satisfied with that.

Of course they do. At the end of World War III, Hamazura and Accelerator each carried out negotiations with the city's elite. That's what made the higher-ups hesitant, despite how dangerous those two are. Despite how much of an eyesore they are. Those negotiations have blocked the elite from trying anything.

"Gah...ah...?!"

After making sure Hamazura had let go of the gun, Accelerator reached his other hand up to the electrode switch.

"...The instant I flip this, all the blood in your body will start flowing backward. You'll be dead," he stated in a cold voice. "But first, answer me this."

"Answer what?"

"Why did you hesitate? You had plenty of time to pull the trigger...leaving aside whether or not it would have hit her anyway."

If Hamazura had followed through, Accelerator would have brutally murdered him in retribution, of course. And it wouldn't have been a matter of whether or not he managed to land the shot—he'd have been dead as soon as his trigger finger moved by even a hairbreadth.

Hamazura didn't bother looking for the gun, which he knew was out of his reach. Instead, he stared Accelerator in the eye.

"...No reason."

"What?"

"You're the one I want, not her. She's a bystander. No reason to get her involved."

"What do I have to do with this?"

"Ritoku Komaba."

Accelerator's brow twitched a little.

Hamazura ignored this and continued, "You killed him. But there was something he wanted to protect, right until the end—that girl, Fremea." He paused. "You should know why he was fighting against the darkness in the city. It's the same reason he fought you: to protect Level Zeroes who just want to live their lives. But just knowing isn't enough. If you have even a drop of sympathy for what he was trying to do, then you have to save Fremea."

A message showed up on Kuroyoru's cell phone. And she expected Silvercross's powered suit had just received the same one.

That gives us the chance to shake the balance up.

Accelerator clicked his tongue. Then he got off Hamazura and stood up, before eventually muttering something.

Not something directed at anyone in the past.

But something directed at those scheming in the present.

"...Do it for Komaba? Not for myself? Shit. So that's their game."

Kuroyoru scanned the message. It contained the decision of Academy City leadership.

Shiage Hamazura and Accelerator were manageable while separated. The city could still negotiate with them. That's why the elite figured it would be okay to let them loose, even for just a little while. But if the rebels conspired together? If they teamed up to become one massive problem for the city? Then negotiation would be well off the table. The higher-ups would need to crush the both of them to sleep well at night, no matter the risks.

And so their objective escalated from the nonlethal "observation" to the very lethal "eliminate."

"Wha...what...?" Hamazura asked dubiously.

Accelerator didn't give him a real answer. The fact was that things were now in motion, and they couldn't be stopped.

For the moment, they were dancing to someone else's tune—to the whims of Umidori Kuroyoru and the rest of the Freshmen.

Permission to attack.

While the process left something to be desired, the elite now recognized how serious a threat they posed to the city.

Accelerator's and Shiage Hamazura's respective factions are to be dismantled ASAP, including their personnel, funds, and assets.

Use lethal force if necessary.

...It was a simple message—exactly what Kuroyoru had hoped to extract from the most powerful individuals in the city.

Hamazura is an idiot, but Accelerator must have figured it out, right? I bet he did! But you can't stop him now, dumbasses!! Because he knows now. He can tell that Fremea's gonna be killed at this rate, and he won't care if he walks into a trap!! Now all you can do is get directly involved. That's why you really piss me off, you sappy Alumni!!

Kuroyoru didn't care that she was in a crowd. She burst out laughing anyway. The people around her all turned to look at her.

She ignored them. "This is my introduction to you as representative of the Freshmen," she said under her breath. "I really hope you have fun, Alumni."

In that case.

Accelerator sent a text to Misaka Worst informing her that he'd figured out

what the enemy was after. And that since it was possible that they would target the others, like Yomikawa and Yoshikawa, she was to take Last Order back to their apartment, then protect all those *good people* no matter what.

Once he saw the message had sent, he muttered something:

"...All right. You're on. And storming the front gate was always how that kid did things, wasn't it?"

11

Carjacking again. How many times did this make it?

Hamazura had left the private-salon building; now he was in the parking garage, where he'd unlocked a two-door sports car parked there. It had been tricky getting the engine to start, but he was experienced in this sort of thing—in the types of skills that couldn't be used in upstanding society.

"Get in!!" Hamazura shouted from behind the wheel.

Accelerator climbed into the passenger's seat in annoyance. Hamazura quickly pulled out of the parking spot.

"...I never would have guessed that they weren't targetting Fremea," said Hamazura, mulling over the revelation Number One had told him on their way to steal a car. "Seriously, trying to link the two of us up to cross a threshold and create a significant threat to the city...?"

"They were aiming to rile the city up real good," spat Accelerator. "I doubt the bigwigs were actively pursuing this outcome. I mean, they all had a chance to get out of the darkness—but they were so thirsty for battle that they dove right back in."

"It's insane... How can they want to be in a place like that?"

"The issue here isn't that they're wack jobs. It's that their definition of dangerous elements now probably includes a whole bunch of people not related to us. If the higher-ups were to approve a joining of those connections, they might even attack people I know back at the apartment. And the people you know, obviously."

"...Takitsubo, Mugino, Kinuhata. You're saying they could be dragged back into this?"

"Our only choice is all-out war now. Compromise is off the table. If we don't know how far this could spread, then we'd better give them a thorough beating before anyone else is hurt."

Hamazura took out his phone as he continued going at full speed down the twisted, sloping road. If their assumptions were correct, then Hanzou and Kuruwa would both be safe. Or Kuruwa—whom they'd lost contact with before the Edge Bees attacked—would be, at least. There was no confirmed link between her and Hamazura, so they didn't have an excuse to kill her.

No—they were going straight for Hamazura and Accelerator.

Their enemies.

The Freshmen.

"Hanzou, where the hell are you right now?!" Hamazura shouted as soon as the call went through, all the while bursting out of the parking garage.

"I managed to find Kuruwa. Which is weird? She wasn't captured or attacked or anything. The phone company cut off her service, that's all. Hamazura, is this —?"

"They took Fremea," he interrupted, ignoring Hanzou's question since he knew that time was of the essence. He started driving in the direction the four-legged powered suit had disappeared, but there was nothing to let him know he was on the right track. "I think they went east from the District 3 salon! But I don't know their exact destination. Where are you? Can you get around them from there?!"

"What am I looking for?"

"That same asshole in a powered suit. His current one has four legs and a huge propeller on the back. But I doubt it'll be able to get into a hideout like that. They'll load it into a truck or bus or something."

"So a real big vehicle, not a standard one... In that case, I might still be able to track them down."

"What?"

"I'm saying there's a way."

The moment he heard about Fremea being captured, Hanzou let out a heavy sigh. Now he knew why Kuruwa's cell phone service had gotten suspended so suddenly.

Meanwhile, Kuruwa—the other idiot taken advantage of by the enemy—was covering her face with hands, whimpering.

"...I... I can't believe I was tricked into revealing a little girl's location... I'm still a descendant of the shinobi who survived into the modern day, you know..."

"This world is full of people lying to one another about everything. Even actual ninjas were tricked all the time."

"They were not!! Ninjas were all brilliant at, you know, genius-brain moves! They could pull the wool over anyone—even ronin, or *yojimbo*, or the most well-defended evil ministers! They were an elite force composed of a select few, and it's really important they come across that way!!"

"Ninja wasn't even an actual occupation by the time the evil ministers in the Edo period came around," said Hanzou offhandedly, reaching behind his back.

From the inside of his jacket, he brought out a thick sheet of paper, about thirty centimeters to a side. It had a waterproof coating, like the spoons that came with hundred-yen yogurt cups, and it was marked with dotted lines for folding.

Crisp noises filled the air as he reshaped it into a complicated paper plane. Then he took several motors, each the size of his pinky nail, and attached them to specific points on the plane before adding small flaps and a rudder. Finally, he used double-sided tape to attach a camera and a transmitter to the bottom surface, and his creation was complete.

It was an MAV—a micro air vehicle.

"When you can pick up stuff like this in discount shops, it's no wonder ninjas went out of style," he muttered to himself in a deprecating way before launching the device into the air using only the strength of his right arm.

The remote-control ninja hero took to the skies to rescue Fremea.

"Hamazura, I just sent up a camera I can control wirelessly. I'll send the live feed to your phone. If the powered suit needs to be loaded onto a big vehicle, they'll stand out, especially if we spot it from above."

"One of your toy planes?" Hamazura, still behind the wheel, set his phone to speaker mode and tossed it to Accelerator in the passenger's seat. He was still putting the pedal to the metal—he needed *both* hands on the wheel for this. "How fast is it?" he asked.

"A hundred fifty kph. If they're tuned like an F1 car, they'll outrun it, but we don't need to follow the roads. Doesn't matter where they are—we can take the shortest path to 'em."

"Found it...," said Accelerator, staring at the phone screen in his lap. "Five kilometers in front of us. The suit's right alongside a big dump truck. The truck's empty, by the way. The iron ore in the back is fake; it's probably got a big repair station inside. There's a tunnel up ahead. I think the truck's designed to pick up the suit, even at the speed their going."

A somewhat dubious silence followed as Hanzou heard the sudden interruption, but he quickly continued. He knew now wasn't the time. "Not good. MAVs watch from the air. A toy's weak radio waves won't reach that far —I won't be able to keep control of it. If you're going in, do it fast. Otherwise, we'll lose the target for good."

Hamazura fired a glance at Accelerator. "...I know I'm the one who roped you into this, but what about that kid?"

"Which kid are we talking about? Children are the only people who associate with me these days. I lose track."

"Uhhh..." Hamazura recalled the features of the girl who'd been on the scene earlier. "About ten, short brown hair, seemed happy-go-lucky or just kinda dumb, to be hones— *Grwbfffhhh?!*"

He groaned as Accelerator grabbed his nose and gave it a light twist. "...She'll be fine. I brought someone along—she'll handle things there."

"A...are you her dad or something...? You do realize I'm driving right now,

right?"

Accelerator clicked his tongue and removed his fingers. "A tunnel, eh..."

"You're number one in the city. Can't you just snap your fingers and fix all this?"

"....." Accelerator hesitated to reveal his secrets, but the delinquent leader Komaba had fought against him *knowing* his weakness. Deciding it was already public information anyway, he lightly rubbed his electrode choker. "If I felt like it, I could play tag with a jet. But radio waves can make it hard to control my abilities. A tunnel isn't the best battlefield. And the more of my power I use, the bigger things backfire if it goes wrong."

...I got a glimpse of his powers in Russia, thought Hamazura, but how far can he actually take them? Accelerator was clearly good enough to kick even Shizuri Mugino down to number four. Whatever his abilities were, they had to be insane.

But that was beside the point. "Then you're saying we can't use your power?"

"...No. Just that the conditions here are terrible."

"Same difference." Tires almost spinning out, Hamazura merged onto a wide bypass. "Charging in with this two-door is still our only option!"

Rubber squealed on the road as the sports car accelerated again. He weaved between all the family vehicles languidly obeying the speed limit, plunging farther and farther ahead until they spotted their objective: a big dump truck, and the four-legged powered suit.

"We're going in," said Accelerator as the targets slipped inside the cave of reinforced concrete.

Leaving a few seconds, Hamazura charged straight in after them. Their vision filled with orange lights.

Then Accelerator gave a weary sort of shudder. He seemed to be trying to resist something, but as Hamazura started to look over, he held out a hand to stop him. "...It may be empty inside, but that thing is still over ten times our weight."

"Yeah, and we'd go flying if we tried to ram it," Hamazura agreed.

"Do you know how to attack it?"

"Not something I like to brag about, but yeah, I do."

Ka-clunk. The bed of the dump truck opened up. Not the iron ore it was supposedly carrying, or the platform that seemed to be supporting that load—no, this turned all that on its head. A crack appeared in an unnatural place in the vehicle, and then the whole thing just opened up. It was probably taken inspiration from trick art or something. The truck and the powered suit matched each other's exact speed, and the loading process began.

As one of the mech's four legs connected to the truck's interior, Hamazura pulled the sports car way ahead to make his attack. Accelerator was right—with the truck weighing ten times the flimsy two-door, there wasn't much point driving straight into it. The car would literally bounce off the truck, and that would be that.

However...

...no matter how big it was, the dump truck was still connected to the ground in four places. They still derived power from their spinning wheels. And more importantly, they were made to move *forward*. Naturally, force applied from different directions would yield different results. Even now, for example, the truck was a steel weapon going almost two hundred kph, but the four-legged powered suit, going the same speed, had gently gotten its leg on board just fine.

This, then, was the question.

What would happen if Hamazura brought the car right up to the corner of the truck's rear bumper and rammed it?

Greee-greeeshhh-greshhhhhhh-gkeeeeeee!!

The tires screamed as the dump truck, as stable as a roller coaster car held up by rails, suddenly swerved way outside its lane.

Hamazura hadn't just rammed the car into the truck with all the horsepower he could muster. In fact, he'd matched the speed of the truck as best he could, then gently brought the metal chassis against it before finally hitting the gas and *pushing* it.

This was a technique Anti-Skill used to force runaway vehicles to a stop. The reason Hamazura was familiar with it was simple:

"They did it to me about a million times! Especially that one officer with the huge boobs and the tracksuit!!"

Hamazura didn't need an extreme amount of force to pull off this manuever, since trucks had a ton of kinetic energy to begin with. The driver would lose control of their vehicle if the heading was forcibly altered even slightly.

If they had been somewhere else, this maneuver could have caused collateral damage. But inside this tunnel, the only things on either side of the truck were thick concrete walls.

Sparks flew.

The truck scraped against the wall as it swerved out of control. That jostled the four-legged powered suit quite a bit, too, so it had no choice but to get back on the road.

"Now!!" exclaimed Hamazura. The huge powered suit was moving alongside them, right outside the window—it was close enough to touch. "The glove compartment, Number One!! Find something to write with—like with a map or something! A marker! Break it and hit the thing with the ink!! If we can gunk up its lenses, it won't be able to keep going!!"

"...Doesn't seem like he's giving us the chance," Accelerator pointed out.

Hamazura looked ahead again; he couldn't believe what his eyes. The truck, which had been scraping against the wall, was attempting to counterattack by slamming its wheels against them.

A wall of steel approached them.

Prepared for the car to lose its balance, Hamazura slammed on the brakes. The gigantic mass of the dump truck passed in front of them, striking the front bumper of their car and sending them flying. Fortunately, that didn't total the car itself. They'd just barely survived.

However...

...the car wasn't the only thing that had lost its balance. Jostled by its own weight, the dump truck *actually* spun out of control this time. It swerved at an angle across the straight tunnel. Hamazura didn't even need to look at the driver to know that they were trying to use S-shaped movements to frantically straighten the vehicle's course.

Unfortunately, its front wheels were already in the air.

Finally, the truck yielded to its weight completely and fell over on its side. It was like a wall had come down in the middle of the tunnel. Hamazura may have hit the brakes, but between a car that was still upright and a dump truck whose side was scraping the ground, it was pretty clear who would decelerate faster.

They were going to collide.

Hamazura quickly cut the wheel, hoping for a softer collision along the car's side. Naturally, that thrust the passenger's side right at the truck. Accelerator put a hand to the switch on his electrode, attempting to push the vectors in Hamazura's direction, despite knowing his powers could go out of control.

"Shit!!" he cursed. "You trying to flatten me, too, shithead?!"

"No, I wouldn't... This'll delay the powered suit—"

Hamazura sucked in his breath. There was a gap between the overturned truck and the ceiling. A regular car would never be able to pass through it. But right before his eyes, the powered suit jumped over it like a hurdle.

"No...way...," murmured Hamazura.

A moment later, the car crashed into the dump truck. While his braking had brought their speed a little more in-line with the other vehicle's, Hamazura hadn't been able to completely cancel out the impact. Despite the car colliding with the truck from the side, the steering wheel exploded into a cloud of airbags. This completely blocked his vision *and* prevented him from using his hands.

The two vehicles continued to slide forward until they emerged from the tunnel.

After several dozen more meters, they finally came to a halt. Hamazura, punching the automatically deflating airbags so they'd get out of his way sooner, shouted at Accelerator, "After them, Number One!!"

""

"We're out of the tunnel. There isn't any interference now. You're up!!"

The door to the passenger's seat was pressed against the side door, unable to be opened. But the monster didn't even give that a second thought. He touched the switch on his neck.

Ba-gaaaammm!! Academy City's number one esper tore off the roof of the vehicle chasing after the powered suit.

12

"Yes. Uh-huh. Yes, that's right. Apparently, there was an accident near the tunnel exit. Huh? Oh, yes, it's fine. No problems on our end here. We're just stuck in the tunnel, since we can't go back, either."

A mechanic in his forties or fifties spoke into a phone, frowning at the orange glow and the smell of exhaust as he leaned back against the side of a semitrailer. The name *Michihiko Jousawa* was embroidered in small letters on his chest pocket.

The truck behind him didn't have a big container on the trailer. Instead, it carried a box-shaped steel frame; you could see the freight from the outside.

"It'll take a while to bring the cargo in. Then again, it's a three-lane road. People have been driving between everything on motorcycles. And if I could actually get permission to use the cargo, I could... No? I figured not. Never mind."

While the delay meant he would certainly be late, Jousawa wasn't too mad about it. In fact, he almost *welcomed* it.

After hanging up the phone, he grabbed a radio hanging from his belt. The person driving the semi was on the other end. "Got the okay for arrival. They told me we'd have to take a different transport route, though."

"Why do they even care?" scoffed the driver over the radio. "They'll never use it again. Or even once, actually. They'll seal the thing up and throw it in a warehouse forever. Maybe someone'll drag it out for some offshoot research and take it apart to see how it works, then put it back in. Like some kind of insect specimen. I don't see a reason we need to rush this—we could be six months late, and they wouldn't care."

As he listened, Jousawa glanced over at the bed of the truck. At what was on it: a chassis, very firmly held in place by an array of metal clasps and reinforced rubber cords. "Isn't it basically a good thing if they didn't need it, though?" he said into the radio.

"Well, sure, if you're talking about war."

The HsSSV-01 Dragon Rider.

This new form of vehicle was never officially introduced to the public due to the abrupt end of the war. These days, the media often reported on weaponry that hadn't been used in the war getting transferred to big warehouses in District 2 and District 23.

"But there must have been other ways to use it," the driver went on. "Wasn't the Dragon Rider originally supposed to be a new patrol bike for Anti-Skill? The city requisitioned them for World War III, customized the hell out of them, only to leave them to rot. Bam, into the back of a warehouse they go for the rest of time. You didn't develop the thing just to see this happen."

Though they had no way of knowing, if Silvercross's collection was the fruit of underworld technology, then their Dragon Rider was a model crammed full of all the tech regular society boasted, made to be used by servants of justice.

"Does that frustrate you?" asked Jousawa. "I know you drive other things, but you're still a driver."

"I should ask the same of you. You're the one who made it."

The big bike on the box-framework trailer bed could reach a top speed of one thousand fifty kph. Not only did it have a jet engine in its chassis, but it also had linear motors inside the wheels, each of which was completely guarded by circular armor plating. The bike also had a pair of arms that extended from a

spot near the front wheels out and away from it; these arms served as boosters, both for extra propulsion and as a steering override.

"Well..."

The cutting-edge bike had a host of features to keep itself moving on the ground, too: gyroscopes to help it stay upright, a fully electronic suspension system for shock absorption, and rear support wings to ensure the machine stayed on the ground and remained aerodynamic.

"You're right. I wouldn't want it to be used for war. It's just..."

After all, the original design spec handed to them had asked for something that could freely race over the Russian wastes at a thousand kph at minimum and travel up seventy-degree inclines at three hundred kph at the minimum. The development team's number one problem had been keeping it on the ground when it would otherwise fly off into the sky without any warning.

"I don't really care how—I just want it to help someone. At least once."

The driver fell silent for a moment at that. Eventually, he asked the mechanic, "You're not referring to the reason for the rerouting, are you?"

"I know you're mad about this, too," Jousawa complained.

"Well, the darkness is on the move again—the same that confiscated this bike, then never used it."

"Kidnapped a kid, did they?"

"And now they want us to get out of the way so we're not mixed up in it, eh? The nerve."

Jousawa had heard a little about it on the phone earlier, but the driver must have been in contact with an officer or government official of some kind via the car radio.

"No point bitching about it," he answered in a self-deprecating tone. "I'm a weapons mechanic, and you're the one driving the weapon. Our role is to get the Dragon Rider a good foothold—not to be heroes gallantly speeding onto the scene with it."

And then it happened.

Jousawa heard a *slam*. Something seemed to have hit the outside of the trailer bed. He looked over and found a person—a boy who appeared about high school age, one hand on the metal frame.

A victim of the accident? Maybe he was aggravated at having to wait around in this tunnel.

The answer, however, was different. The boy began to climb up the box framework, and out of nowhere, said this to him:

"This should work. Let me borrow it for a bit, would you?"

"Huh?"

"The motorcycle."

Whoa, hang on, thought Jousawa.

Meanwhile, the high school—aged kid squatted by a few of the reinforced rubber cords holding the Dragon Rider to the box frame. He seemed to be looking at the bike's keyhole.

Jousawa had been a little guarded at first, but upon seeing the boy's amateurish behavior, he relaxed. "Don't bother," he told him. "It'll take a little more than a lockpick to get the engine run—"

"Oh? Got it. There we go," said the boy.

"Hey!! No!! What the hell was the security team doing?!"

"I'm actually studying up on road service."

"This is so far beyond that!!"

They'd chosen an extremely elaborate analog lock on purpose to prevent any electronic hacking, but now that decision had come back to bite them. That wasn't something a normal high school kid could pull off.

The boy hopped onto the Dragon Rider, which was still held to the frame by the rubber cords. "Like I said, I need to borrow this motorcycle for a bit. I'd rather not explain the details if I don't have to. But if you help me, you'll be helping save a life. That much I can guarantee."

"What, trying to get a woman in labor to a hospital for a delivery?" joked

Jousawa.

But the answer that came back was far more earnest. "...It's even more important than that."

"I see." Jousawa pointed at the rubber. "The Dragon Rider's clasps and belts can't be undone without equipment. It takes two grown men and special tools to just have a chance. But you, a high school kid? I could give you the tools, and you wouldn't even know how to use them."

"....." The boy grabbed one of the rubber cords, said something to himself, stammered, fell into thought, and eventually opened his mouth to speak again. "Do you know about the four-legged powered suit that came through this tunnel earlier?"

"No? This is a bypass. The tunnel's three kilometers long, no stops. You can't see anyone too far ahead of you."

"Well, it kidnapped a girl," the schoolboy said quickly.

Jousawa's brow twitched. That sounded eerily similar to the justification for the reroute he'd been given.

"She's about ten. They want to send a message. They're trying to kill her as brutally as possible to get us as *mad* as possible. But they didn't kill her on the spot. They probably want us to feel humiliated, like we'd let her slip through our fingers, and take their sweet time murdering her."

"What?" But Jousawa hadn't heard that much—that murder was in the cards.

"They might stuff her in a vinyl bag and send her back to us, or live stream it. Not really sure. Don't want to think about it. Anyway, I have to get back on the chase before we totally lose them."

Jousawa heard a static buzz from his radio. It was an emergency request for confirmation. If he didn't answer it, the driver would determine there was something wrong and spring into action—armed with a sawn-off shotgun.

But Jousawa prevented this by answering, "Hold on."

The person on the other end of the radio didn't reply. Instead, the high school boy turned to him. "What?"

"Tell me her name," said Jousawa.

"Why?"

"Hurry up!! I'll decide when I hear it!!"

"Fremea! Fremea Seivelun! About ten, wavy blond hair, blue eyes! Is that enough? Need anything else?! Like how she's fascinated by violent gory games or how she hates green peas?!"

The boy's shouts almost came off as deranged.

"Please! Lend me this so I can save her!! I know you might not be keeping up, but those people are *actually* gonna kill her before long!! She was smiling earlier today, too! But if we don't hurry, she'll be cold and never open her eyes again...!!"

However, Jousawa grinned.

Information about the darkness wasn't easily obtainable. But this kid knew the name *Fremea Seivelun*, so he must be aware of a whole mountain of intel even Jousawa didn't have.

If anyone was seriously involved in the matter, it was this high schooler. Unlike mechanics and drivers, who would have to jump through a lot of hoops first, this kid could prevent tragedy from striking—as long as he had the Dragon Rider.

That thought helped Jousawa make up his mind. "Well, wait," he said. "You won't be able to use it like that."

"You know we don't have time to get the paperwork in order!"

"I'm talking about something simpler. You just wouldn't be able to handle that dark horse."

"...We don't have time for pro sports training, either!"

"That's not what I'm saying. Wouldn't matter if you were a world-famous racer with ten titles under your belt—humans don't have the grip strength or endurance to ride it." Almost casually, he pointed to another machine sitting on the trailer bed. "You need a specific powered suit to even have a chance."

The HsSSV-01 Dragon Rider had been developed as a brand-new type of powered suit. Its design abandoned the requirement to make it look humanoid. In other words, it wasn't a motorcycle for powered suits to ride, but rather a powered suit that included a motorcycle.

It had been designed with the following objectives in mind: extreme mobility in all kinds of weather and in every kind of environment, the ability to deploy groups of them swiftly, and the power to silence enemy forces.

It could hit speeds of over a thousand kph even off road, and like dirt bikes made for tricks, it could handle the occasional seventy-degree, three-hundred-meter slopes *and* shoot over rivers over twenty meters wide.

The powered suit boosted the wearer's muscle strength while maintaining their balance with a complete electronic control system. Even at the absurd speeds it could reach, its specs allowed the wearer to use Gatling guns and smoothbores *in one hand*. If it had been deployed, it would have been a landmark achievement in the history of combat vehicles.

"Not too shabby, eh?" commented Jousawa offhandedly as Shiage Hamazura got changed behind a wooden box affixed to a corner of the trailer bed. "We call it a powered suit, but it's really for giving the wearer what they need to control the Dragon Rider—muscle strength, endurance, improved oxygen intake, and all that. The suit itself doesn't make you invincible. It's shaped essentially like a human body, so it should have the same center of balance, and it doesn't weigh too much, either. Though, you can equip all the extra modules you want, depending on what you're using it for."

Hamazura opened and closed his hands to see how it felt.

On the whole, it was extremely thin. Unlike the current models of powered suit, which were akin to a larger version of a knight's armor set, this was more of a riding suit with a full-face helmet. It was mostly gray, save for the black pieces that protected the vitals.

It certainly seemed to be based on a human in terms of size, too, because it fit snugly around every part of his body, from the tips of his fingertips to the ends of his toes.

"...It actually feels a little weird how well it seems to fit."

Hamazura's voice came out muffled, since his face was completely behind his helmet. Which didn't have a transparent visor, incidentally. The electronic instruments on the inside of the visor would provide him with all the visual stimuli, and other sensory information, he needed.

Despite that, though, everything was perfect about the arrangement—in fact, Hamazura almost felt like his senses were even *more* vivid now. So much that he worried a little about people wearing it for too long and not being able to readjust to normal vision.

"Well, it can't break the sound barrier, but it still moves at high speed offroad," Jousawa pointed out. "How many more Gs do you think you'll be feeling compared to sitting in a jet fighter? It has to come standard with that whole lot of gear—otherwise, you wouldn't be able to move the thing much at all."

"...You're kidding."

"Don't worry. Theoretically, it's built to keep you alive and well even if you trip over something at full speed."

The driver, watching their exchange, sighed. "Are you sure about that?"

"Hey, you helped unlock the Dragon Rider for him, too, didn't you?" Jousawa retorted.

"I think this 'save the girl' situation is messing with your brain," said the driver.

"If we can save a life in exchange for a letter of apology and a pay cut, it'll all be worth it."

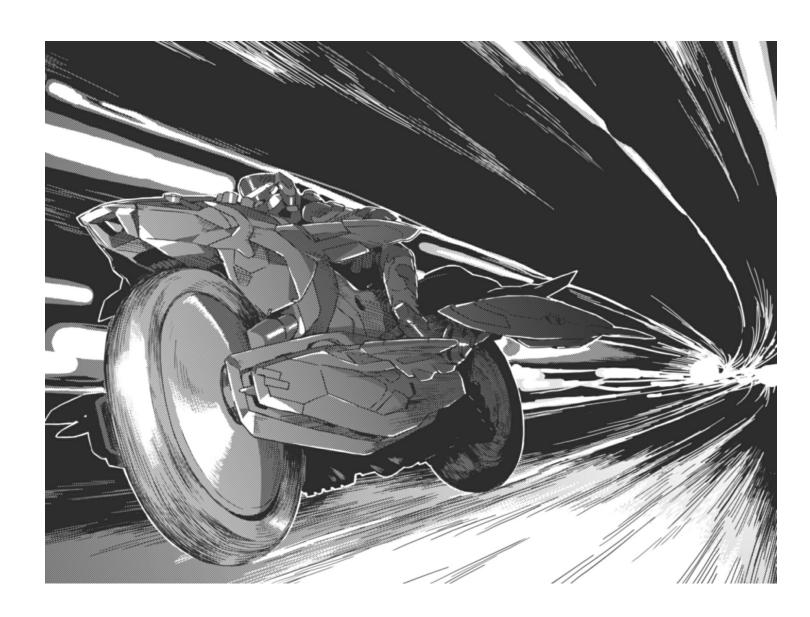
"…"

Ignoring the driver as he fell silent, Jousawa turned back to Hamazura, suited up in the Dragon Rider. "Promise me something."

"I'll try my best not to damage it," said Hamazura, "but I don't know if it'll come back unharmed."

"If you're going to ride it, then use it to its full potential. It's okay if that means it ends up a heap of scrap metal. Other than that..." Jousawa's

expression suddenly grew serious as he said that. A chill seemed to settle around them, as though he had revealed another layer of himself. "Make *sure* you save that girl."



"... Would've done it anyway."

Hamazura carefully descended the ramp from the semitrailer's bed on the Dragon Riger until it hit the tunnel road.

Everything after that happened very fast.

By the time they heard the *whooooooom!!!!!!* the Dragon Rider was already starting to weave between all the vehicles in the traffic jam.

As Jousawa watched the flames spurting from the jet engine grow smaller, he laughed out loud.

He'd wanted that machine to help someone, just once.

And he didn't care how.

"...Oh, honey," he said jokingly, pretending to be an old person. "Our baby has finally left the nest to rescue someone."

"The results are everything. That kid'll need to do more than just ride away."

13

If Shiage Hamazura had to be honest...

...he wasn't actually controlling the Dragon Rider as easily as he'd expected to. Far from it, in fact. The moment he accelerated, his vision twisted and warped.

"Ghh...ahhh...?!"

He lost track of what was in front of him and what was behind him. He was going so fast that his sense of sight was lagging—and by the time he'd figured out where he was, he found himself right in front of a gently curving tunnel wall.

His vision blurred. He stopped hearing noise. He felt the back of his throat dry up.

But...

"Wha... Huh...?"

...as he panicked, he realized he hadn't collided with the wall.

His body—his arms, his fingers—they were all moving automatically. This monster bike was smoothly and precisely following the curve of the road, all the while slicing through the air at its insane speed.

...What is...this...?

Instead of relief at not being dead, he felt an indescribable sense of unease.

...This is going way too smoothly. I'm not even that experienced with bikes to begin with. Are my movements being externally adjusted automatically...?!

The powered suit he wore was just a means of boosting human motion with motors and hydraulic springs. They were supposed to follow the user's movements, but naturally, they could do the opposite.

It was guiding him—supporting his movements.

And by doing so, it allowed Hamazura's body to function at peak form. Which seemed handy. At first anyway.

Ahhhhhh?! I-it's like someone else is grabbing me and moving me around!! I can't stay calm like this!!

A separation of body and mind. And a fear of the clash born when the results of his actions were so much better than how he *thought* he was moving. The brilliant moves were starting to distract him from the fact that he felt like he was locked in a humanoid coffin.

"Shit, I feel so sick!! First, those weapons in Russia, and now this!! Why do the freakiest machines always end up falling into my lap?!"

Jousawa had taught him how to ride this monster of a machine with words. Now the monster was teaching him by artificially forcing itself into his brain.

The Dragon Rider didn't have very complicated controls. They felt more akin to a scooter than a big motorcycle. All he had to do was move his fingers on the fully armor-enclosed handlebars. There were no gears to switch or clutches to

release. There was only the throttle and the brakes—acceleration and deceleration. In fact, you could control the whole thing from either one of the handlebars, so you could even take off a hand if you wanted. He didn't have to touch any of the propulsion mechanisms—the jet engine, the support boosters, the linear motors. They all automatically adjusted themselves based on his current speed level.

But you also couldn't master it just by grabbing the handlebars for the first time. The monster *couldn't* be that simple.

The central jet engine and the tapered point at the front that reduced air resistance both allowed the Dragon Rider to move quickly, but the machine was both enormous and weighed a ton. Normally, you'd struggle to even get it moving without falling, to say nothing of having to weave between cars in a gridlocked tunnel like this. Even a riding instructor would have trouble getting a vehicle this big around them all.

And yet...

...the Dragon Rider *still* managed to slip between the stopped cars. Hamazura glanced at the speed display and gasped. He was already going over four hundred kph. Regular cars didn't even have speedometers that went that high.

It wasn't that he was a skilled driver, of course. In fact, he wondered if pro stunt-car drivers could manage this. Was it even possible?

...Now that I think about it, powered suits are tools for boosting human functions.

But they didn't *just* use a few little machines to make your arms and legs stronger.

Because this was Academy City.

The motors and hydraulic springs externally assisting were one thing, but it probably went even further. In any other situation, this kind of speed would have driven him to hysterics. The fear would blank out his mind, and he'd have no idea what to do next.

But that wasn't happening. It was *eerie*. Hamazura would send commands to the powered suit, and the bike would calculate the ideal motions to accomplish

what the rider wanted. He was awfully calm as he continuously fed it his intent, and the machine adjusted its calculations in response.

Something else was helping him. Something internal.

The suit had a mechanism of some sort—one that linked man and machine using electrical stimulation, brain heat distribution, and all sorts of other stuff. His five senses swam through a whirlpool of information. His vision was especially blurred. Almost everything around him had stretched out to a bunch of laser beams, like something straight out of a shoot-'em-up game.

Despite how overwhelming the display was, though, he was able to draw from it what he needed.

He wasn't seeing things in slow motion; he was just receiving information from the flow of scenery. The objects hadn't stopped dead. They simply flowed along. The whole thing started to feel natural—overwriting his consciousness until eventually he'd be a person who really *did* feel like it was natural.

It had altered his perception.

Maybe it was like language. Someone who didn't know the alphabet would just see letters as a bunch of random squiggles. But once you had them memorized, the information they contained would automatically blossom in your mind whenever you saw them.

His senses were being revised and adjusted—both from within and without. His thoughts moved at a fevered pitch, maybe even faster than they had when he'd gripped his desk and studied madly. And his frenzied thoughts were letting him pull off crazy stunts, the kind where he would have wiped out if he'd miscalculated by even a centimeter.

The Dragon Rider exited the tunnel. Hamazura let loose on the throttle.

The impact was immediate. The previously folded support booster arms, protruding from the front area and fanning out behind him to either side, instantly opened up. The sounds of several bursting noises overlaid on top of one another as shock waves scattered, and the machine dedicated every possible joule of energy from the internal combustion engine to propel him forward.

He saw the speedometer hit the nine-hundred-kph line. *This* was the Dragon Rider's true form.

Such speeds made it difficult to breathe or keep your eyes open unassisted. The heat of friction would probably burn you, too. In this state, you could crash into an obstacle a quarter of a kilometer away in a single second. Hamazura knew the cars around him were going pretty fast, too, but it was like they were stopped dead—no, like they were charging straight at him.

But the suit's corrections were brute-forcing his way through.

Hamazura still didn't feel that terror—not enough to prevent his body and mind from working. His thoughts kept on moving forward, just like the machine.

He could see the entire road, down to the empty cans and pebbles lying on it, and he dodged around all of them with the simplest movements possible. He ignored several traffic lights in a row, bursting through the intersections. He and the Dragon Rider moved only forward.

However...

...while he could sense the external interference from the motors and hydraulic springs, he was also keenly aware that something messing was with him internally. Though it was working in tandem with him at the moment, he suspected that the longer he used it, the more he'd lose sight of himself.

...My phone.

He'd brought several things along for the ride in the pockets of the military vest he wore over the powered suit. His cell phone was one of them. Puzzling over whether taking one hand away would be okay, he thought, I have to look at the data from Hanzou's MAV. Otherwise, I won't be able to find—

Before he could finish that thought, though, something changed. A little window popped up in his field of view, provided to him through a video feed. And to nobody's surprise, it showed stuff from his cell phone.

How the hell does that even work?! I haven't pressed a single button!!

Academy City—made military hardware never failed to impress. The idea that these machines could somehow peek inside the user's brain was delusional, but

at this rate, people might just have to stop laughing at the idea and start accepting it as the new reality soon.

Unfortunately, the data from his cell phone showed an empty bird's-eye view—Hanzou had lost the target. Something moved slightly in the corner of the screen, but Hamazura couldn't make out what it was. It would probably be easier to look for nearby buildings or signboards. Some kind of landmark.

Looks like his MAV won't help much anymore...

That went to show how far away the kidnapper had gotten. If he let them get any farther, he really wouldn't have any guarantee of Fremea's safety.

No, he thought.

"Hold on," Hamazura muttered, looking up slightly from his joyride. The sky filled his vision. It was hard to find something two hundred meters away on the streets like this, but not necessarily from the air. Up there, he wouldn't have any obstacles, nothing blocking the horizon. He'd be able to see pretty far.

Even if he couldn't spot the four-legged powered suit that had kidnapped Fremea, he *could* try looking for the thing chasing them to guide the way. That said, the MAV was a few kilometers away—maybe even more than ten. He'd never be able to find it. Sure, the powered suit was boosting all his senses, but locating that paper plane would be like searching for a needle in a haystack.

Instead, he went after something else.

After all, Academy City's strongest Level Five *had* said he could catch up to a jet if he wanted to.

14

Silvercross Alpha was on the run.

The mission was supposed to be over already. They'd linked their targets, Accelerator and Shiage Hamazura, through Fremea Seivelun; they both wanted to protect her. Now that the higher-ups had determined the risk their faction posed had grown to a point they couldn't ignore, the Freshmen's goal was essentially accomplished. All they had to do now was take Fremea and dress her

up with a fitting death. The city wouldn't be able to ignore this new faction once it turned on their higher-ups and its underworld. It would give them a motive for revenge.

But it didn't actually matter if they decided to rebel. This was more like bringing a fuse to a heap of gunpowder they'd finished piling up. Whether or not it exploded, they just had to set the bomb. As a result, the Alumni—Hamazura and Accelerator—would be destroyed.

That was the plan.

Was being the operative word.

So why was he *still* unable to get to a safe zone?

The four-legged powered suit's design ignored the humanoid form. Eyes didn't need to be in front—not *only* in front. This model was covered in lenses, and one of them had spotted what was following him.

Number One.

The strongest person in all Academy City.

A white shadow—the one they called Accelerator.

This is outrageous. Silvercross sucked in a breath as he glanced at the speedometer. He was going seven hundred fifty kph. That was about as fast as any land-based vehicle could achieve. But this monster was tailing him.

He's as fast as a plane. "That demon!!" he cried. "I knew he could keep up with my Highway Cheetah, but this is absurd!!"

He looked high into the sky—about twenty meters up. His pursuer had attached four tornadoes to his back and was literally slicing through the air as he shot toward him.

"Silvercross?"

"I can't. The Highway Cheetah isn't fast enough to shake him. I can think of a few spy vehicles, but we'd need to get out of sight before loading it in!!"

This powered suit was no car. It could fold or unfold its legs based on the terrain and plow through the narrowest of paths on the roughest stretches of

ground.

But none of that would help shaking his pursuer off his tail.

After all, Accelerator was only human-sized. Sure, the four-legged suit could work its way through all kinds of little gaps, but there was almost nothing he'd be able to get through that a person couldn't.

"If he takes her back, we'll lose everything. Should I kill her now?"

"Don't assume you'll fail. Why doubt yourself now of all times?" Kuroyoru's voice was calm, as though none of this had anything to do with her. And that was probably true. "If Accelerator had that kind of power, why didn't he use it right away? He climbed into a stolen car with Hamazura after he attacked that dump truck earlier. Think about why, Silvercross. He wouldn't waste time. Not in this situation. There must be a reason."

"...I see." Cradled in a thick powered suit, and nestled within a smaller, armadillo-like one, Silvercross grinned a little. "Radio interference... The tunnel!!"

Now that he was aware, the rest would be easy.

Silvercross launched the four-legged powered suit off the road and down onto a subway line running parallel to it. It was dug into the ground like a river, surrounded by concrete to cut down on the noise. Obviously, it went underground, beneath the road...into a crisscrossing web of lines and tunnels.

The lenses of his mech caught Accelerator mouthing a curse.

A moment later, thick concrete covered the sky. He'd gotten into the tunnel.

Naturally, this tunnel wouldn't cut Accelerator off entirely. Otherwise, someone would have killed the kid a long time ago. There was only a possibility of radio interference. And Silvercross didn't know how much it would weaken Accelerator's ability anyway.

But now they were in a seven hundred kph-plus chase through tunnels surrounded by concrete. If Accelerator lost control of his ability even for a couple seconds, it would spell his doom. He'd scrape against the wall and turn into mincemeat.

He wouldn't follow Silvercross now.

If he wanted to chase from above, destroying the sections of the city on the surface and tearing the ground up, he probably could. But Silvercross doubted he would. Perhaps it would be in the cards if the kid was a complete villain. Right now, though, he couldn't bring himself to do it—as disappointing as that was to think about.

Simply speaking, he wouldn't be able to sacrifice others for his own ends—even if that half-assed mindset put the girl he was trying to protect in mortal danger.

"Kuroyoru, I got away. This tunnel is shared by a few different subway lines to cut down on the construction process. This should be enough of a blinder to prevent anyone from tracing us from above."

"Number One relies on the electrode battery on his neck to use his ability. I don't know exactly how long it lasts, but he probably won't run it at full power without a clear goal in mind. He'll stop to think. While he's doing that, you can put more distance between him and finally throw him off." Kuroyoru paused. "And we have them to worry about, too. We can't waste time at this stage."

"Got it. The mission should go smoo—"

Silvercross broke off midsentence. Something wasn't right.

He could feel something overpowering behind him.

It was dark in here. Unlike tunnels made for cars, subway tunnels didn't need to be lit very well, save for sections that curved sharply. The little fluorescent lights hanging at regular intervals didn't help much, either. Impenetrable darkness stretched in front of him and behind him.

But his four-legged suit didn't care about that. The lenses on it squeaked and turned, gathering information even in near-total darkness.

And then after Silvercross looked at the video feed in the window—adjusted so he could see—his face stiffened.

"What...is that ...?"

That wasn't Accelerator.

Something massive—a strange motorcycle he'd never seen before—was coming after him. Several boosters on it lit up all at once, as though it had detected Silvercross.

It pushed away the darkness, the sound of bursting explosions continuing all the while.

This wasn't the city's number one esper. But there was only one other person who could possibly be trying to chase him and protect Fremea Seivelun.

"But how ... ?!"

15

The roar of the engine cloaked Hamazura like a blanket.

The subway tunnel had only been maintained so that construction workers could barely manage to walk on it. The ground was the same—they'd simply thought about how to lay down the tracks most efficiently and just filled the rest in with dented and bumpy concrete tiling.

Normally, riding several hundred kilometers over that would be tantamount to suicide.

But that didn't matter.

Hamazura twisted the throttle with no hesitation, unleashing every means of propulsion the bike had available: its jet engine, its support boosters, and its linear motors.

I can do this... The Dragon Rider is fast enough to leave that guy in the dust!

The issue was how he'd pin down the *very* thickly armored powered suit and rescue Fremea from it. If only he could break those propeller wings.

"If you want firepower, you can use the support boosters," came the mechanic's voice as if he'd heard Hamazura's thoughts. "It will jettison fuel to reduce damage when something goes wrong. Use it to your advantage, and you can generate a huge thirty-five hundred Celsius explosion—though you've only got the two tries."

"Hang on," said Hamazura. "That sounds really tricky. I—"

"I'm sure you've realized it by now. You're jacked into the powered suit's information-control mechanism—so you can take whatever knowledge or techniques you need from it."

Hamazura shivered, suddenly realizing that he *knew* how to eject the rocket fuel in an emergency. It didn't feel like he'd just memorized a huge book—it felt more like how you ride a unicycle. Essentially, the "experience" he would have otherwise accumulated little by little by trying again and again was being intensively overwritten.

If everyone could study for school or learn road-service tricks like this, life would be so much easier. At the same time, though, this phenomenon *terrified* him. You'd never know what could be added in there while you weren't looking. Learning the old-fashioned way was still the best option.

But I don't have time to think about it, he realized, jettisoning the doubts from his mind and focusing on the goal in front of him. I have my ticket to saving Fremea. That's all I need!!

The support boosters could act like arms, greatly changing their angles based on the situation. Nevertheless, they were basically made for producing thrust, so they could only go from directly back up to perpendicular with the bike. They weren't made to face forward.

Which means that I have to at least get right next to him. Otherwise, the booster explosion won't catch him!

And then something happened—the four-legged powered suit ahead of him began to move differently. The rear right leg suddenly kicked off the ground.

Like a horse.

A horse that had just kicked a broken piece of lighting on the ground straight at him.

"...!!"

More precisely, it was an approximately thirty-kilogram hunk of metal. He didn't know how durable the Dragon Rider was, but he couldn't risk the extra load throwing off his balance.

With some tight control over the handlebars, Hamazura dodged the impromptu projectile, then weaved behind a row of pillars lining the subway so he could get over to the side. In pure speed, the Dragon Rider won. Without any obstacles, it would be easy to get right up alongside the other mech.

That's what he'd thought anyway, until he realized something was wrong.

Something right in front of him.

In the darkness right ahead of him, on the subway line opposite to the one he'd just jumped to, he saw a bright light.

The subway...?!

A chill ran down his spine.

A moment later, the enormous object shot straight for the Dragon Rider.

A torrent of wind. A thundering eruption. The vibrations of impact.

All the things that happened whenever a massive object raced through the tunnel happened now. The train driver had probably noticed the two of them; the brakes screeched in a discordant chorus of metal wheel on rail, but it was too late. With a flood of sparks, the train barreled forward another three hundred meters.

Silvercross's four-legged powered suit passed by it with ease.

The mech wasn't a normal vehicle, and he imagined anyone watching could have seen his joy at throwing off his pursuer emanating from it.

And then...

...a moment after that long passenger-filled wall passed, a giant bike appeared on the other side of it.

The HsSSV-01 Dragon Rider.

Hamazura had squeezed the thing into the little gap between the subway cars and the wall. In fact, the bike might not have even been touching the wall at all. And he'd accomplished that at top speed.

As already mentioned, the Dragon Rider had his four-legged suit beat in terms of pure speed. Especially after Silvercross had mistakenly thought he'd thrown

him off. But now there was nothing stopping it.

"Damn...!"

Silvercross made a choice. He was going to ram into the approaching Dragon Rider.

Taking advantage of their weight difference, he attempted to knock his pursuer to the side.

But Hamazura was faster.

It was the difference between someone who'd acted on the spur of the moment and someone already prepared to act.

One of the booster-supporting arms swung way up, directly to the bike's side, and a ton of rocket fuel spurted from the booster's side. It twisted into the raging winds and dissipated before reacting to the minor orange sparks flying from the booster's tip.

Less than 0.1 second elapsed from ejection to ignition.

And then it blew.

The impact was like an invisible wall made of every possible sound compressed down into a thin plane.

The left support booster, caught in its own explosion, tore free of the Dragon Rider. The monster bike, its electronically controlled balance always perfect, then performed an unnatural side skid.

The four-legged powered suit didn't make it through unscathed. It had taken the brunt of the fuel explosion. While the blast hadn't knocked out its rear propeller fans, it *did* send the entire mech bouncing a few meters to the side, where it crashed into the tunnel wall. Bright-orange sparks flew everywhere as he tried to keep pushing forward.

But something was wrong. The super-high temperature, the shock wave... The damage wasn't something Silvercross could afford to ignore. He could tell that the suit's two right legs were behaving strangely. While he could still slide them over the ground, they could no longer move with the terrain to soften impacts. If he kept on going like this, the utter lack of suspension would steadily destroy

one internal function after another.

"I see."

Suddenly, Hamazura heard an unfamiliar male voice in his ears. It was coming from the radio.

"I was wondering how you were pressing me this hard. Seems the answer was simple. That's not a motorcycle for riding in a powered suit—they're part of a single package. The powered suit is actually there to enhance the bike. It's a specific design idea that exceeds any humanoid model's joints... I never thought I'd run into a model in the same series as this one."

Was that why they could talk to each other like this? Still in control of the bike, Hamazura said softly but clearly, "Give Fremea back."

"And if I say no?"

"I'll blow you up a second time."

He'd lost a support booster, and the Dragon Rider was starting to lose its balance. But the four-legged powered suit was worse off and losing speed. There was no chance he could escape like this.

Meanwhile, Silvercross smiled a little. "I'm the one with the all-important hostage. You do understand I have my win condition right here, don't you?"

But Hamazura responded clearly. "You can't touch her," he declared. "Because that's a powered suit, not some car or tank. I don't know what the distribution is like, but you're directly linked to it. The slightest effort will move it. If someone does something unexpected inside, the rest of the suit will have to deal with the feedback. If you really wanted to harm her, you'd have to stop the powered suit and get out first. You're probably racking your brain right now, trying to find a way to prevent her movements from affecting the rest of your setup. Am I wrong?"

The logic was Hamazura's, but the basis underpinning of it wasn't. It was the machine's. He hadn't consciously thought, *Okay*, *let's do this*. The machine had scanned a deeper part of his mind, run a search on an offline database, and jammed the necessary data straight into his awareness. The feeling of it all coming into him and the absolute confidence he had that he was correct made

him shudder, but now wasn't the time to worry about that

"Perhaps," answered Silvercross shortly.

Still, he doubted the man would simply hand Fremea over. He'd have something else up his sleeve. Hamazura sharpened his senses, taking note of his surroundings. He didn't know what mechanism was doing that for him, but he imagined the machine was correcting and amplifying his senses even further.

"This certainly isn't the ideal situation. It's inconvenient. In which case, I should prioritize my own safety—even if it means changing the plan a bit." He paused. "We have them to deal with, too. We can't afford to exhaust ourselves here."

However...

"Anyway, here it is in simple terms. I will run away—no matter what I have to do. Luckily, this Life Armor has the endurance to make that happen."

A moment later.

The front hatch of the four-legged mech opened, and a smaller, armadillo-like powered suit burst out into the tunnel—leaving Fremea behind while maintaining a blazing clip of over five hundred kph.

"You... You bastard...!!" Hamazura shouted. But by then, the armadillo had curled itself up and zoomed behind him, absorbing the impacts as it went.

And then the still-moving four-legged mech's thick front hatch closed again. Without a pilot, it could get into a fatal accident at any moment.

"Are you sure you have time to worry about me? Out of respect for her wishes, I disconnected our improvised chip. But that's not a two-armed, two-legged suit. She won't be able to control it properly."

Essentially, the man had woken Fremea up to strike terror into her heart. The radio transmission continued with a chuckle.

"I'm worried about letting go of the link between you and Accelerator, but if the girl meets a decisive end here, it will all become certain. We may have had to rearrange the steps, but now you Alumni will be targets of the city."

"Damn it!!"

Worrying about that armadillo wouldn't get him anywhere. Hamazura had to open the mech's front hatch and rescue Fremea. *Now.*

Then the mechanic's voice came in through the radio. Was he being monitored somehow? "Your model's arms are meant for riding control. They won't be strong enough to force-open the hatch."

"Then what the hell do I do?! Sit here and see her off?!"

"You whittle it down." The mechanic's words were short and to the point. They were even clearer than the computer amplifying his knowledge and experience. "That suit is up against the tunnel wall, right? Push it so it's at an angle, then touch the edge of the front hatch to it instead and keep it there. If it looks like it'll come away from the wall, don't let it—kick it if you have to. Even if the hatch's bolts are made of tungsten alloy, you'll be able to whittle them away in about seven kilometers."

"...!!"

Hamazura adjusted the Dragon Rider's throttle again, matching his speed per the instructions. The powered suit that Silvercross had abandoned was designed to slide, so without its pilot, it was easy to tip the thing over and keep it that way as they went forward.

The suit stayed up against the tunnel wall. There was an awful metallic screeching, with ribbonlike sparks flying away from it. But something was wrong with the four legs giving it balance. They'd started to jostle up and down unnaturally.

They can't deal with the uneven terrain anymore? he thought.

Grr-kkk!! The powered suit leaned way over. Without a pilot, it didn't take much of a push for it to start heading away from the wall.

Still straddling the Dragon Rider, Hamazura slammed his foot into the thing's chassis as hard as he could, pushing it with his sole to get the thing back up against the concrete.

Grrk, gggraaa, greeegrkkkkkk!!!!!! The terrible screeching continued all the while.

This would work.

Without any real basis—well, aside from the knowledge being externally fed to him—Hamazura was sure that the front hatch's bolts would be whittled down enough very soon. Then he could rescue Fremea from inside it.

But something strange happened.

One of the quadruped's legs that had been caught in the earlier supportbooster explosion suddenly went limp, like a shoulder popping out of its socket. It was a combination of that explosion and the fact that it had been shaking around so much during its journey across the wall; its internal components must have taken a lot of damage.

It quickly lost its balance until Hamazura couldn't hold it up alone.

To avoid them both going down, he pulled the Dragon Rider a very short distance away for just a moment—which was when the joints in both the right-side legs broke and began to drag along the ground. Still not letting the tips of its legs touch anything, the quadruped nevertheless continued to barrel forward, showering sparks all over the road.

Its decrease in speed was a good thing—in a vacuum. Now that the ends of its legs were off the ground, it would start to slow down. While that might not bring the quadruped to a full stop, as long as it got to a point where hitting a wall wouldn't damage it much, Fremea would be safe.

Unfortunately...

You've gotta be kidding me!!

Hamazura watched as that oh-so-sturdy front hatch suddenly wobbled unnaturally. All the shaking that was wearing down the armor told him, quite unambiguously, that the thick bolts were about to break.

The hatch was about to open. Fremea would be launched out.

Though mech had finally started to decelerate, it was still going a few hundred kph. At those speeds, someone coming out of the mech would be flattened like a daikon radish.

"That...isn't...gonna happen!!" Hamazura screamed, pushing the Dragon Rider

to full throttle again. To save Fremea, he'd need to get on the quadruped.

He brought the bike up to the shaking front right leg. Reaching out and grabbing its armor plating, he slowly rose from his seat.

If he jumped over, he'd lose the Dragon Rider.

A moment's hesitation. But then he made up his mind. Grasping the quadruped's leg with both hands, he flung both of his feet off the bike and clung to the fast-moving powered suit.

Without a rider, the bike toppled over, then got caught between the quadruped's busted rear right leg and the ground. A dizzying array of sparks erupted from the point of contact.

Hamazura moved along the armor from his position at the front right leg—and to the front of the quadruped, the only place connecting it to the inside.

Please let there be enough time...

He grabbed the handle on the hatch. In ordinary circumstances, it would have never opened. But now the thick bolts holding it in place were on the verge of falling apart.

"Open up, goddamn it!!"

Pouring every ounce of his strength into his suit, he eventually heard something break inside the quadruped.

The hatch swung wide-open.

Fremea was about to shoot out from inside and fall to the ground. But Hamazura had positioned himself in front of the hatch, so he caught her small body with one hand.

They'd only been apart for about half an hour. But Hamazura felt such relief at their reunion that his whole body relaxed.

"Huh...?! Wh-what?! Actually, what...?!"

Of course, the girl couldn't see his face. She was treating him like a criminal or something.

...But I stopped Fremea from falling. Now I just have to stick to the quadruped

until it stops...

And then yet another new problem reared its ugly head.

Dark smoke began to spurt from the engine turning the propellers, which gave the quadruped its thrust. Had the explosion gotten to it? Or had the subsequent vibrations done that to it? Or did it have a self-destruct mechanism?

Whatever the case, the pair couldn't stand around and wait for it to slow down now that there was a chance they could both get blown up.

"Damn it..."

But the quadruped was *still* going three or four hundred kph. Hamazura might be able to survive a jump with the Dragon Rider's special suit, but Fremea wouldn't. She'd be flattened as soon as they hit the ground.

"What the hell am I supposed to do now?!"

16

Accelerator landed at the entrance to the subway tunnel.

Until just a few minutes ago, his feet had been far from the ground. He'd been flying—using four tornadoes from his back to propel him at insane speeds.

But he couldn't use his ability inside a tunnel where radio waves couldn't easily enter.

He'd lost a few minutes. A very long time, considering how fast that powered suit was going.

If he's in a tunnel, he'll have to come out eventually. But there's too many exits. So many lines use this tunnel. He could go to the other end of the city if he wanted.

Accelerator could ignore the usual routes and plot the shortest course to his target thanks to his ability to fly at high speeds, so he could theoretically fly to every single one of the subway exits. But that would drain his battery. And given the situation Frenda was in, his ability was the strongest card in their hand. If he played it just to solve the problem he was facing now, there was a real chance

she could end up on the wrong side of life and death at the very end.

After thinking for a moment, he took out his cell phone and called Misaka Worst. "How's the kid?"

"That's your first question, Pops? Misaka got her back to the apartment. The owner—Yomikawa or whatever her name was—is really grilling her with questions right now."

Yomikawa was part of Anti-Skill, the city's peacekeeping force, and was known for acting outside regulations. Maybe she'd found out about a part of the problem on her own, despite the darkness's information control.

"Find the Freshmen anywhere?"

"Yeah. Two groups of four. But they didn't seem like the main force—they're probably just lookouts. Misaka would guess they were waiting around to kidnap the kid and wage a psychological battle with you if you tried too hard to mess up their plans. Misaka sent 'em packing, though."

"Set up some cameras and sensors nearby and plan a few escape routes, then stand by. If we're careless about moving to a hideout, they might catch us on the way, and if Yomikawa figures it out, she'll cause issues. If those two groups are still alive, threaten 'em with a knife. Make them regularly report back that nothing's wrong."

"That all you wanted? Already handled it. Got them tied up in the shadows with a radio and remote trap right next to their mouths. Say what you want about Misaka, but she's the type who likes getting her summer homework done early."

Ignoring the quip, Accelerator continued, "...Do a search on every last piece of info you can get on the Shared Subway Tunnel 3. And don't let the others find out. The powered suit that kidnapped Fremea should still be in there. I want to know what exit it'll come out of."

"That's a tall order. How far can Misaka go? Like, can she knock 'em unconscious if she needs?"

"Whoa, don't let your silence do all the talking, Pops. All right, Misaka understands. She'll be a good little girl and pull the wool over their eyes without using violence," Misaka Worst continued, her voice clearly betraying the smirk she had on her face. "Still, you sure you want to just wait around at the exit for them to come out? You know how brutal the darkness we live in can be, don't you? Isn't it possible they might have a bloody finale inside the tunnel?"

"Nobody can respond to every single possible situation perfectly. Anyway, if I dive in there without any leads, I'll probably fail," he said. "And another powered suit and motorcycle flew into the tunnel, too. If that's who I think it is, he'll make sure that shithead doesn't have time to lay a hand on her."

"Oh? It's not like you to rely on someone else," said Misaka Worst sardonically. "But in that case, it might be better to just ask him about what's going on in there."

"Do you really think I'd trade numbers with him?"

"Maybe not, but that just means Misaka has to get his number another way."

"Don't get too distracted. He's in a tunnel—we might not get through anyway. Always have more than one source of information."

"You're free to bark out orders, but you're gonna try and get information, too, of course. Right?"

Reserved until the end, Accelerator hung up.

Combat wasn't all about letting loose with your weapons. It started by getting an accurate read on the fight.

17

Wrapped up in the powered suit that resembled an armadillo, Silvercross Alpha confirmed the sound of an explosion far off in the darkness of the tunnel. He chuckled, then left the tunnel through a maintenance workers' exit rather than a station. His suit was a military secret, so it had countermeasures against the enemy capturing it when badly damaged. Not only could it use a powerful acid to melt all its crucial features and circuitry, but it could also ignite its fuel supply and self-destruct.

On top of that, the armadillo could monitor the quadruped's damage levels. While it wasn't as insane as that motorcycle, with its jet engine and rocket boosters, his quadruped didn't run on simple gasoline, either. The armadillo's display alerted him that all the fuel had caught fire.

The quadruped would likely be damaged beyond repair. A scant few circuits were still functioning, and he already saw icons that indicated they were destroying themselves ahead of capture.

It's over, thought Silvercross frankly. The only thing that bothers me is whether Shiage Hamazura died with the girl. If they both bite the dust, that might lower Accelerator's threat level. They might not see the need to deal with him immediately... Safest to instigate Mugino and Kinuhata in that case and link them to Accelerator instead.

Silvercross reached over to open a channel to Umidori Kuroyoru and report his results. But then he stopped.

He'd just noticed something.

That quadruped, which had exploded into a useless pile of scrap, had caught something in its camera lens. That made Silvercross a witness, distant though he was.

He saw a figure standing amid the flames.

One holding a small girl in its arms.

"Shiage...Hamazura...!!"

Silvercross had failed to realize something.

Hamazura had gotten one of his feet onto the Dragon Rider, which was busy spraying sparks from its spot between the ground and the quadruped's busted rear right leg. Then he'd *lifted* the quadruped's leg a few centimeters into the air, putting himself into almost a surf as he carried Fremea away from it.

The whole thing defied belief.

How? How did he survive...? And is that Fremea with him? She didn't have any armor protecting her, did she?!

To get more information on the figures in the flames, Silvercross didn't go

through the damaged, useless quadruped—instead, he used a cable to hook his armadillo into the subway's security network and tried to deduce what had happened from the surveillance cameras.

That, however, was the wrong choice.

"There you are."

The voice seemed to stab into him.

Eyes were pointed straight at him.

The image on the monitor, the sound over the speaker—they pierced Silvercross straight through.

...Did he find me from the shared powered suit comms gear? No, that's not it —he... He...!!

There was a cable coming out of a spot near Hamazura's arm—as the boy looked straight at the surveillance camera Silvercross had just jacked into. He'd dramatically stood in front of the camera, laying his trap and waiting to see what Silvercross would do.

Naturally, this was far beyond what some delinquent off the streets *should* be able to manage.

But Silvercross knew something else. He was aware of a certain mechanism that could mold the boy's lacking knowledge and skills to a point where they became concrete experience. Silvercross placed a hand near the armadillo's spine.

...Mental support from the powered suit. The same as mine!!

It was only a temporary thing. Once you got out of the suit, you'd lose it. But as long as you had it on, all that knowledge and skill it supplied became free for the wearer to use.

The flame-wreathed figure moved.

Had he gone through the tunnel via a station, or had he used a maintenance exit like Silvercross had...? He saw another person. It wasn't Accelerator. It was the other delinquent—the one they'd used to track down Hamazura and Fremea when they'd been hiding in the private salon.

Hamazura handed Fremea to him. She was alive. And now that someone else had her, their mission was a failure.

But he didn't have time to care at the moment—because Silvercross had to consider his top priority above all else.

Survival.

The positions had been reversed right under his nose; now Silvercross had to devote his every thought to making it out alive.

"...You know what my next move is, don't you?"

With those words, Hamazura destroyed the maintenance camera, leaving only static noise. The audio feed ended right then and there as well.

And in that moment, the hunter became the hunted.

18

Rikou Takitsubo, wearing her pink tracksuit like always, stood in front of a vending machine on the side of the road in a daze.

In her hands was not just any old can of juice, but an iced tea endorsed by a famous café...apparently. But by default, it came with a metric ton of milk, sugar, and honey in it, so it had been sapped of distinct flavor. It was as sweet as strawberry milk.

...My feet hurt. I'm tired of walking...

Takitsubo was here for a very simple reason.

The three members of Item were still searching for Hamazura, none of them wanting to risk humiliation by bunny suit for losing. But unlike Mugino and Kinuhata, Takitsubo didn't have any particular way of searching for him. And given her disposition—she could sense other people's AIM diffusion fields—she actually relied on her gut instinct more than she realized.

Using this power fully required a powder called Crystals, which came with severe side effects. But even without them, she could vaguely sense the weak forces espers unconsciously emitted. Still, they were just that—hunches. Since she couldn't discern who each of the powers belonged to, it wasn't really useful

for her.

So even if some invisible power *was* leading her on, it only amounted to a hazy, uncertain gut feeling in her mind.

...Takitsubo *had* made it through the darkness of the city with all her limbs intact, though, so maybe it was something worth researching, but still...

"Hmm..."

She lazily looked up. I'm getting a signal from the northeast... I think that's him.

And then she heard her cellphone ring. As she trudged down the road, she fished it out from her pocket.

The caller was Saiai Kinuhata.

"Heya! Did you, like, find Hamazura yet?"

"Mm-mm."

"Mugino's apparently having a super-hard time getting video data because of stuff related to security-company jurisdictions or something. That means I'm definitely in first place."

"Did you figure out where he is?"

"I may have."

Then she lowered her voice.

"...It's just that I found some really bad stuff right near him."

19

Elsewhere...

Silvercross Alpha had once gotten his face burned as a punishment.

That was when he fully realized how little the rambling about what was inside being most important actually mattered in your everyday life.

After that, he'd spent all his time trying to get his old face back. For every batch of jobs he completed, he'd be implanted with one weird Academy City

technology after another. Little by little, his scrambled mess of a face began to be repaired, like a round clay ball steadily gaining new features.

But only after recovering his attractive facial features in their entirety did he realize something.

No matter how much technology or money went into getting a face entirely remade, that initial humiliation of having his face burned had still warped his personality into something ugly. Something horrid. Something twisted.

And so Silvercross didn't have a very good body image.

No matter how much he dressed himself up, it wouldn't change how ugly he was on the inside, so he had no attachment to his physical form.

That mindset was reflected in how he switched powered suits so often. He had zero attachment to his own appearance, features, or the impression any of that made on others.

The only way to operate a four-legged powered suit was to become a four-legged creature.

The only way to operate an eight-legged powered suit was to become an eight-legged creature.

While wedging a program between you and the suit could simplify the controls, *this* attitude was what it meant to truly operate such a thing. In fact, getting too used to a program to smooth things out only created more problems.

Obviously, bipedal movement wouldn't help in the slightest when you had to operate an eight-legged suit with only two human legs. And when someone truly got used to that eight-legged way of moving, it was all too easy to forget how to walk with your real two legs; signals from your brain to your muscles would be messed up.

And that was just the legs. Expand that issue to the entire body, and there was no telling how severe it could get.

What shape was his body? How was he supposed to move it?

Everyone knew these things. They were set in stone. But Silvercross could

figure it all out in his head. He could force his own mind to bend to nonhumanoid powered suits—to overcome the reasons they were never mass-produced.

However...

Having abandoned his physical body to such an extent, he now realized something.

The man standing there amid the roaring flames, carrying Fremea Seivelun.

The sight of him. The way he stood there.

Silvercross doubted he could ever stand like the man was doing now—no matter what sort of powered suit he climbed into.

Chasing Silvercross was easy.

He'd lost the motorcycle part of the Dragon Rider, but Hamazura could still move around much more easily inside the powered suit than otherwise. He ran down the tunnels. While moving his limbs nonetheless drained his stamina, having the ability to run at speeds exceeding that of a car was a plus.

Searching for Silvercross was easy.

Borrowing the data from the powered suit, he'd strung out an electronic network and caught Silvercross in it. The man wasn't far. Hamazura could catch up in a matter of moments on his mechanically enhanced legs.

Predicting Silvercross's movements was easy.

At this point, Silvercross had two options. One was to flee back to his friends as fast as he could, then get into a stronger powered suit. But that wouldn't work. The biggest weakness when it came to powered suits was that window of vulnerability while embarking or disembarking. If he didn't know when Hamazura would catch up, he probably wouldn't try to get to his mobile base.

So he really only had *one* option: give up on the idea of switching suits, stay in his armadillo, and secure Fremea as soon as possible. It spoke for itself—the idea of toying with Fremea's life to get Hamazura and Accelerator to back off. And he'd seen the moment Hamazura, clad in his powered suit, had given Fremea to Hanzou, who was totally unarmed. Silvercross *also* knew that

Hamazura had parted ways with the two of them so that he could chase him down.

Silvercross would definitely think this was his last chance.

If he could manage to slip by Hamazura, attack the defenseless Hanzou, and kidnap Fremea, he'd turn the tables yet again.

Therefore...

Setting up an ambush for Silvercross was easy.

Silvercross would have to use the tunnel again if he wanted to get to Fremea as quickly as he could. But since he wanted to evade Hamazura, he wouldn't take the shortest route there. He'd take a detour but still plot the shortest course from there.

Which put him on the back foot.

All Hamazura needed to do was trace *that* route, then wait around for the man in the armadillo suit to arrive.

Ga-baaammm!!!!!!

Hamazura leaped out of the shadows with his leg out, delivering a veritable cannonball of a flying kick to the armadillo's back.

It split.

As the roar echoed, the armadillo's body slammed into the ground, then bounced five or six times after that. After collding with the slow curve in the wall, it finally stopped before slowly getting up.

The ambush had worked. But Hamazura wasn't calm.

...My timing was perfect. I put all my weight behind my kick, and Silvercross was completely unguarded. So how is he still moving?! There's sturdy, and then there's this guy!

Without hesitation, the armadillo sprang off the wall using its four legs, which could travel at over five hundred kph—keeping its normal capabilities intact. It seemed like it had been specifically designed to keep the pilot safe. And its armor hadn't felt entirely *solid*, either. Maybe it had some kind of mechanism

that had electronically absorbed a lot of the impact.

The Dragon Rider's riding suit was derived from the large-model Anti-Skill patrol bikes that featured all the best tech from the overworld.

But this member of Silvercross's collection had all the best tech from the underworld.

One of them had to fall.

Each of them stared down the other. The riding suit and the armadillo exchanged no words.

They'd both already stepped forward before that could happen.

Their fists crossed with a kreeeeeeshhhhhh!!

It wasn't like human bodies colliding—and not just because they were a pair of armored powered suits. Hamazura had used his right hand to parry Silvercross's punch, forcing it off course by hitting it with the exterior of his lower arm, right between the wrist and elbow.

Then he countered with a left uppercut, which the armadillo took on the shoulder to minimize the damage.

Of course, Shiage Hamazura wasn't capable of any of this. And neither was Silvercross, if he had to guess. The computers embedded in their suits were constantly searching for knowledge and skills to bolster their pilot.

And take advantage of it they did—they were delivering punches with more force than an average shotgun blast, predicting the opponent's next move, calculating trajectories, parrying, and immediately proceeding to their next tricks. It was all so fast that they were taking three actions or more in a single second.

Hamazura's fists had the force of a rifle, thanks to the motors and hydraulic springs amplifying the kinetic force and aim of his moves.

Silvercross was piloting something more than a simple movement enhancer, too—he was *being used* by the human-shaped weapon. It could provide optimal destructive force at any given moment.

Whck-whck-whck-whck-whaaack-whck-whaaack!! Sparks flew as the

chorus of hard metal continued.

...I won't get anywhere in an armored slugfest. His suit's designed to stay operational no matter what happens. Trying to brute-force my way in is just a waste of time, thought the delinquent piloting a powered suit that made his fists strong enough to punch holes in car doors.

But that thing isn't a tank or an armored vehicle. It's just going along with his body's movements, adding kinetic energy to them. So there must be a weakness I can exploit in order to stop him.

And Hamazura knew what that weakness was.

Not the hard, outer powered suit—but the soft human inside it.

Intentionally taking a punch from the armadillo, which seemed to be focused on trying to hit his face to break his sensors, Hamazura wrapped his arms around it, holding it in place.

A powered suit's arms weren't like regular mechanical arms. There was an actual human arm inside it.

Which meant one thing.

If he used his body weight to bend the arm at its shoulder and elbow simultaneously, it would destroy the human within.

Hamazura didn't know much about grappling techniques, of course. He had no idea how to break a wary opponent's joints without pinning them first—especially not while they were still standing.

All that knowledge it came from the machine.

It felt like pushing a trolley while looking farther down the rails.

His limbs moved with blinding speed, and with the calmness of a complete stranger, he crushed his opponent's arm.

"Shit, judo guys and pro wrestlers are terrifying. Definitely not the type of punk I want to go head-to-head with in a street fight!! Not like they have

referees for those!!"

Since it was mechanical, the powered suit could adjust the articulation for any joint however it wanted. Maybe it could even prevent itself from breaking when bent inward from the other side.

But the person inside wouldn't bend quite so easily.

And since the powered suit moved in tandem with the pilot's motions, its range of movement would be restricted if its pilot was injured.

I don't need to break all his limbs, Hamazura thought. One leg, and he won't be able to move...!

That was when he heard a strange creaking.

The armadillo's right arm, which should have been broken, began to shake in an unnatural way—almost as if switching to a different mode.

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"It's not oveeeeeeeeeeee!!"
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"17"

Silvercross put his left hand on his broken right arm, which Hamazura was still holding on to, and *tore it off*. Then with Hamazura off-balance, he delivered a powerful kick right to his gut.

Hamazura slammed back-first into the concrete wall, sending thin cracks through it.

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"Gahah?!"
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And then came another blow.

And a third.

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"Urgh...!!!!!"
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It knocked the wind out of Hamazura, despite his powered suit. Gasping for breath, he released the armadillo's right arm.

This was insane.

Yes, those attacks were strong enough to harm Hamazura. But the pilot had to be in far more pain after tearing off his own broken arm. It was a wonder the

guy hadn't bitten his tongue off in shock.

Flinging his blurry gaze in front of him again, he noticed something strange about the armadillo. Its armor was starting to fall apart—slowly, as if sloughing off thick mud.

"...You assumed that destroying the inside would shut down the suit. But you couldn't have been more wrong."

With the viscosity of black oil and the elasticity of a rubber band, the suit reached out and coiled around the arm on the ground. And then it took the severed arm and shoved it back into the socket, reconnecting it. The arm itself didn't even look like armor anymore. It was more like a glossy, dented, black appendage now.

It's just like the shell of a crab, Hamazura thought. It used the outer shell to reattach its torn-off arm!

The man's voice became calmer and clearer—an attractive voice with a tone like a little ringing bell. "Any powered suit that exceeds a certain level necessarily takes on cyborg characteristics. The difference is simple. Either it supports a human from the outside or from the inside."

With watery squelching noises, Silvercross's "outer shell" began to morph. Inside it was a long-haired young man with a handsome face. And the shell began to rearrange itself around him into a dirty mantle that rested on his shoulders.

The powered suit had morphed into something that was completely different from its original robotic form, which had been covered in thick armor. Now it was more like something external, bolstering only the artificial muscles as it covered half of Silvercross's body.

Hamazura could see the fibers of hydraulic springs squirming. And across its almost seductive bumps and dents was a word emblazoned in red—its model name: Emergency.

"Destroying the body within the suit is futile. It will be reinforced by the outer shell in whatever state it's in. Naturally, this includes the bones in my limbs as well as my muscles—but it will even bypass blood stoppages from arterial injury and damage or loss internal-organ function, letting me continue the fight. And..."

There was a creaking noise like cogs grinding together; several long, slender, and strangely shaped arms, each ending in a sharp point, extended from the man's mantle-covered right half.

"...it affects my brain, too."

Hamazura felt a chill run down his spine. The computer was compensating for the pilot's knowledge and technique.

"...This was originally something we were keeping in reserve to fight *them*. So obviously, it needs to go outside the bounds of sanity."

Hamazura didn't know how much the bypass system was compensating for Silvercross's injuries, but there was little doubt the machine was unmatched when it came to unarmed battles to the death. Even a lead bullet to the forehead wouldn't end things at this point.

"So there you have it. Why not have some fun, then? ...I'll show you how terrifying it is to be *more than human*."

Silvercross's tactical approach had already begun a long time ago—before changing his powered suit's form, before the armadillo's right arm was broken, before the hand-to-hand shotgun-force combat.

It had begun the moment he'd been ambushed with that flying kick.

It came down to a difference in experience. Silvercross Alpha had piloted a very wide variety of powered suits over many years. He had gained an intuitive sense of what was needed in powered suit battles and what he had to do to crush his enemies.

The necessary components.

The most crucial point.

It didn't have anything to do with external features like armor or joints. Nor did it involve power sources, like batteries or motors. There was something more fundamental that needed to be grasped first before connecting all those puzzle pieces on the surface.

And that was...

The computer reinforces and corrects your knowledge and skills.

Even the strongest punches meant nothing if they didn't hit. Even the sturdiest armor meant nothing if attacks could get in through its gaps.

Neither of us are professionals at combat or martial arts. The computer picks the optimal attack patterns while adjusting to our experience level...which means if you can reverse engineer the reinforcement programming, you can counter every move with one-hundred-percent accuracy.

That was why Silvercross had turned his cameras to high-speed mode and begun analyzing right when the battle had started. He was having the computer run simulations while he'd clashed with Hamazura.

And now he had results.

Infinite possibilities, narrowed down to just a few options.

Naturally, Shiage Hamazura possessed a countless number of free attack patterns. But that initial movement, that starting motion—there were only *five* of them. He could stamp out the possibilities before the tenth of a second it took for them to explode in number. If he could set up an environment in which he could immediately counter all five starting patterns, his victory would be assured.

That was why he'd changed his powered suit's form. Those seven deformed arms, each with a sharpened end, were primed to deliver precision strikes through the armor to reach Hamazura's lungs and heart in response to whatever move he made while destroying the computer in his powered suit's back at the same time.

Hamazura didn't realize any of this.

And that was why Silvercross took that last forward—to deliver the finishing blow.

The boy had no idea his actions would only end with him being impaled by those razor sharp arms.

... The evils of pursuing of power, he thought.

The coffin called possibility.

A dead-end future.

Your death is guaranteed. Now face it, Level Zero!!

A dull noise rumbled through the air.

The sound of something digging through the gaps in a powered suit's joints and obliterating the human within it.

In that moment.

The seven sharpened arms were accurately aware of all five of the possible starting motions. They would parry any action Hamazura could take and ram through his heart while destroying the computer behind him, delivering a death so absolute that even a mechanical bypass couldn't stop it.

And despite all that.

They'd missed.

The seven arms had missed their target.

Those five starting motions Hamazura had a choice between—this wasn't one of them. Hamazura was performing a totally unknown attack. And suddenly, his fist was flying at Silvercross Alpha at a terrible speed.

Wha...? Silvercross gasped—then realized it a moment later. Hamazura cut off his computer at the last moment to prevent me from predicting his attack.

"...?!"

Silvercross immediately swung his seven arms back around, but he was too late.

His weapon's configuration meant it could only demonstrate its full power within the scope he personally specified. But this attack had come from *outside* that scope—so it couldn't effectively intercept.

Several of his sharpened arms scored light grazes on Hamazura's powered suit. But that was all it could do. It couldn't stop him—and so next came a punch powerful enough to bore into a car door. His arm hooked around from the side, then landed a blow squarely in his abdomen.

And completely busted through his bundle of weaknesses: the battery and computer.

There was a screeching noise. Then Silvercross came to a complete stop.

In that moment, his cutting-edge weapon had become a set of *very* expensive shackles.

"...Y-you...," he managed, stuck in a forward-leaning position, unable to move his arms or legs. "You mean to say you foresaw how I would predict your patterns...?"

"What the hell are you talking about?" spat Hamazura in response, clueless about what Silvercross was referring to. "I just realized something, that's all. That I had to finish things with you personally."

20

Silvercross Alpha was defeated.

Despite still being conscious, his control computer had been destroyed, so his joints were all locked in place—meaning he couldn't even take off his own powered suit. He was motionless, covered by a half-wrecked model.

Once Hamazura confirmed this, he finally leaned back against the tunnel wall and let out a sigh of relief. It had only been ten, twenty minutes. But it had felt like years. Belatedly, he realized he'd broken out into a full-body sweat, which was meant to warn him of the threat to his life.

"Hamazura!!" Hanzou came running up to him through the dark tunnel. "You all right?"

"Somehow," he replied, lightly clenching a fist, then releasing his fingers. "But he really screwed up the suit. Can't get any extra kinetic energy now. Anyway, that was based on having neural assistance in the first place. It'd probably smash up my whole skeleton if I tried to use it now that the model's mostly destroyed...so now this thing really is just a riding suit."

He was still able to move, though, unlike Silvercross. Maybe he should count his blessings. And even without the kinetic-energy boost, the suit still gave him

an increase in durability over his normal clothes.

For now, he took off his helmet to get a direct breath of fresh air. "Where's Fremea?"

"Nearby. She seems to think you're one of those transforming heroes or something."

"Hey, if hiding my face means I can do anything I want, maybe I should become one."

Scrrrrtch.

Hamazura and Hanzou turned to face the darkness. They'd heard something faint from deeper in the subway tunnel—and not something out of the natural world. It almost sounded like a thick spring creaking.

Putting his helmet back on, Hamazura switched to night vision mode. Then he caught his breath. "Those bastards..."

"What? Hamazura, what do you see?"

Metal.

Squirming legs.

Inorganic lenses.

"Powered suits," he replied.

"But you just beat him!"

"They've got more. Way more. Over ten more... Silvercross wasn't the only one!!"

Then he heard someone mutter, "I see how it is." It was Silvercross, still sealed within his broken powered suit. He sounded self-deprecating. "Looks like that brat took it upon herself to mobilize my whole collection from my hangar."

Hamazura was the first to take a step away, since he was actually able to see the threats. Hanzou couldn't, but the terror was more than he could imagine, so he backed way up. Then as if they were a pair of springs, they both started running. All those feelings of relief and liberation, gone like the wind.

"Let's meet up with Fremea!" Hamazura shouted. "You said she's nearby,

right?!"

"Left her with Kuruwa. She's got a hideout nearby—let's head that way! But we can't take on all those powered suits. What now?!"

"What now?" he repeated.

His powered suit was useless at this point. The enemy seemed to have unlimited combat strength, fielding one threat after another. He couldn't see the end of it. How far did they have to run? Could they run that far? Was getting out of here even the right choice?

He was on the run again now. But this time, he had his eyes set firmly forward.

"We'll have to be smarter than them," he said. "It's the only way to save her!!"

INTERLUDE FOUR

This was the plan: temporarily cause a communications blackout in the city to ensure that nobody could make any reports to Anti-Skill or Judgment, then attack the dangerous espers on their list—their targets—in one big group to disable them.

And the plan had been going well. While Skill-Out wasn't one big organization, the smaller groups they'd gotten in contact with had mostly agreed with them. Manpower, money, and supplies—Komaba and the kids who followed him knew for sure that they had enough for this plan to succeed, and they were overjoyed about it.

But Komaba had another notion in mind.

Maybe things wouldn't be that simple.

No matter how many people they got together to gang up on someone, there was no guarantee they could defeat a powerful esper. And more importantly, the fight had already grown beyond Level Zeroes and stronger espers. A higher power in Academy City, the force massive enough to maintain the city's status quo, would act to oppose their plan.

They needed another trick up their sleeve.

They needed some way to stop Level Zeroes from being attacked whether the plan succeeded *or* failed—a situation that would lead to such an outcome no matter what.

But he had no idea where to find a trick like that.

And before he could, things got out of hand.

The city had dispatched the most vicious killer they could in order to squash Skill-Out's plan. His name was Accelerator—the city's strongest Level Five. Someone who continued to protect the city in his own way, but from a completely different angle than Skill-Out.

But Komaba was finally able to smile when he fought against him.

Because he knew he'd just found that final trick.

The final piece of the puzzle that would stop the attacks against Level Zeroes, regardless of how their plan turned out.

I've won.

During that final battle, he'd inwardly said those two words to the city itself—while thanking his lucky stars to have met someone to whom he could entrust his will.

CHAPTER 5

Even If I Can't Be a Hero Knight(s).

1

Umidori Kuroyoru stood on the roof of a department store.

Her ability allowed her to move about the city without using the roads on the ground. She couldn't be flying *all* the time, like an airplane, but her access to building roofs meant she could take huge shortcuts.

She was on her way to the workplace.

Her Freshmen cronies had tracked Hamazura and Fremea to an abandoned building. She'd stopped on a rooftop halfway there to let herself focus on the cell phone in her hand.

Still letting the hood of her coat hang from her head, she gripped her phone. She'd placed her inflatable dolphin on the floor and was squishing it with her little foot.

"Yeah. That's right. Everything in his collection. I saw his vitals—he's useless to us now. The longer we preserve his collection, the more money it drains. Get them all out there and put an end to this."

The person on the other end was someone under Silvercross's command; he was generally in charge of maintaining his powered suits.

"If you want them to be on autopilot," he said, "they'll act in very predictable ways. The enemy could outwit them."

"As long as they don't have the firepower to punch through armor, it doesn't matter. Quantity over quality works here...and there's one in particular that

would be a waste not to use to wrap things up."

"Five Over..."

"A good example of how standards of science and technology are constantly evolving and improving. It's perfect for us. Just deploy them already. Silvercross should have just sent them all out to begin with instead of clinging to his weird preferences."

"But that model wouldn't..."

"Oh, right. It's the only one without a fully automatic AI, isn't it? One of those stupid quirks that powered suits have. It uses the pilot's brain as the core processor, buffs it to hell, then surrounds them with driving computers." Kuroyoru thought for a moment. "Guess we don't have a choice."

"Should we forget about Five Over, then?"

"No, just the opposite. Silvercross is half dead, but we can still stuff him in there. That way, it'll have a processor. All that model needs is his synaptic network."

Her words were cold—frigid enough to freeze any arguments dead in their tracks.

"I, uh, just want to be sure about this. Most of these models will be on autopilot, and even after we put Silvercross in Five Over, it'll be mostly acting based on its programming, since he's unconscious and all. And the ones on autopilot will act in very simple ways. Not only that, but they also won't be capable of subtle adjustments to output, complex tactical movements, any of that stuff. What that means is..."

"That you can't guarantee Fremea Seivelun's life, eh?" Kuroyoru snorted. "It doesn't matter if we kill her at this point. We've already established a link between Shiage Hamazura and Accelerator, so the higher-ups see them as a single force. The girl has played her part. We can kill them all and face no repercussions; finish this quickly so we can focus on *them* instead."

She ended the call and put the phone back in her coat pocket, taking a chocolate bar back out in its place—the one advertised as being a breakfast replacement in a single bar.

All right. We may be able to kill Hamazura and Fremea, but the real obstacle is still Accelerator, she thought, taking a bite out of the layered mix of chocolate, cookie, honey, and cream. They say he could even reflect a nuclear bomb, but all he's really doing is manipulating vectors. People have used that against him before, like pulling back their fist before hitting him to make him reflect it back into itself...and with part of his thought patterns in my brain thanks to Project Dark May, I should have the advantage. The perfect time to strike is already in my head.

After thinking that far, she suddenly scowled. "Ugh, gross...and sweet as all hell," she said to herself. "Sure, brains need sugar to function, blah-blah. But they can't fool me. They were so obsessed with making a health product that they almost didn't bother with the taste."

Then suddenly, Kuroyoru directed her voice elsewhere. "I've been striking out every time lately. Want to try one? Then again, it sucks when something doesn't show up when you want it to, whether it's food—or someone you're waiting for."

She grinned, then turned around.

"Isn't that right, Saiai Kinuhata?"

After hearing that, Kinuhata moved forward wordlessly.

She was unarmed, but she'd always been someone who trusted her bare fists the most in combat. Her slender arms possessed the strength to hoist cars clean off the road.

"Man," she said. "I've been, like, running all over the city looking for Hamazura, and now *another* troublemaker is butting in. You know exactly why I'm here, don't you?"

"I could have asked for better timing," replied Kuroyoru, "but I'm glad you came. You've proven how thick the link is. If Accelerator and Shiage Hamazura are pulling you and Item along with them, then everything is perfect. One big organization unto itself. Big enough for the higher-ups to concern themselves with—and ever so diligently try to eliminate."





"Look, I don't give a single crap what you're up to. I just—"

"Hey, listen to me?" interrupted Kuroyoru, adding a note of scorn to her voice. "This is my stage, where I get to feel as good as I want and give a speech for as long as I want. You don't exactly have the privilege to argue, either, if I'm being honest. Understand that? The privilege. I know it's a hard word to wrap your little head around, so I wouldn't blame you if you didn't."

"The Freshmen...," Kinuhata muttered. "Look who's so happy about putting herself back in a new box."

"Like I said, I don't want to have a conversation with you. Anyway. Where was I? Happy? Not at all. I just went back to where I came from, that's all. This is where I belong. That's why I destroy. That's why I kill."

Kuroyoru wasn't worked up. And there was nothing in particular to chain her down.

"That said, though, the higher-ups did reorganize us. They must really have a problem on their hands. Why else would they be on the move? Oh, and I'm not talking about Shiage Hamazura or Accelerator, you know. I'm talking about a threat from the outside—the ones using a different rule set from us. That's why the higher-ups can't control them. So they put us back together. Except for you, Kinuhata. You didn't heed the call, so I doubt you'd understand."

"Gee, look at you—the kid with the awful grades. You sure learned how to bark since I saw you last."

"Oh? What's that? Are you talking about Project Dark May? Hmm?"

Kuroyoru grinned, then kicked her dolphin into the air with her heel. By some mechanism, it landed right on her back and stuck to her clean white coat. And then...

"You forget that I'm the one who got the closest in offensive power. I had too much of it, remember? Killed all the scientists, and shut the whole project down. They just wanted loyal dogs who did whatever they told them to. Maybe I was the opposite of a star pupil in their eyes. You catch my drift, Miss Honors Student?"

Her tone changed massively at the end.

Boooooom!!!!!!

A pair of Bomber Lances burst out of her outstretched hands. Each was about three meters long.

Seeing that, Kinuhata closed her eyes for a moment, then opened them again. "What the heck are you even talking about? All you can do is make those things spout from your hands. You really think you can beat me?"

Her tone changed as well.

And then as if pulled along in Kuroyoru's wake, the violent power hidden within her manifested.

Unlike Kuroyoru's power, Kinuhata's wasn't some flashy physical phenomenon. But the nitrogen all around her was now under her control. This was her Nitrogen Armor, which could block anything up to rifle rounds no matter what direction they came at her.

The two girls had something in common.

Project Dark May.

A plan to increase an esper's capabilities by implanting them with part of the mental processing of the strongest Level Five esper in Academy City. It had involved twisting and breaking the subjects' personalities to suit the needs of others. In a way, it *had* given them power.

But while the people in Project Dark May had ended up with powers that were similar in type, there were plenty of differences.

Number One's mental processing was considered the ideal model. Depending on what parts of his mind they omitted and what parts they embedded, the details of their abilities had diverged.

One had become more offensive.

The other, more defensive.

Both were Level Four espers with the ability to manipulate the nitrogen in the air, but that specific difference demarcated their individual powers.

And thus—

Or perhaps, they never cared to lick each other's wounds, even before the mental alterations.

The two of them, having survived those nightmarish experiments, never hesitated to try and resolve things through talking *or* wielding violence.

So when they came across an obstacle, they demolished it.

Beyond recognition.

Grrrkkkk-eeeee!!

Compressed nitrogen was pulled from the air with a shriek as Kinuhata and Kuroyoru clashed head-on, launching their attacks.

But Kuroyoru had the edge in offense. She held spears composed of nitrogen in both of her hands. She weaved them through the gaps in Kinuhata's arms and thrust straight for her chest and the middle of her gut. The highly directional attack could theoretically pierce a tank from front to back.

But instead of being hit, Kinuhata just grunted a little, then forced a smile. "I'm, like, really good when it comes to defending."

The Bomber Lances bounced away horizontally.

Kinuhata also brought out her fists, which had been protected by clumps of nitrogen. She unleashed a storm of successive blows.

"Kinuhataaaaa!!"

On one side, spears. On the other, fists. Looking at just that, Kuroyoru had the obvious advantage. Kinuhata's ability gave her durability, but it also only extended a few centimeters from her fists.

Meanwhile, Kuroyoru's spears were three meters long. While Kinuhata could essentially rival a Gatling gun with punches while in a pure infighting situation, those spears were like a barrage of small cruise missiles.

Kuroyoru's full-powered strikes weren't meant to pierce—they were meant to blast, and a continuous rain of the spears could reduce geography to piles of rubble. From a design standpoint, Kuroyoru's offensive capabilities were

unrivaled.

However...

"Oh, how sad for you." Kinuhata chuckled, continuing her onslaught of punches that could turn a car to scrap metal in ten seconds. "You lost the moment you, like, didn't kill me with your first attack. My defenses are automatic, and they're all around me. If you can't get through my armor, it doesn't matter how many spears you swing around. No matter what you try, no matter what angle you come in from, you'll never reach my tender eyeballs... You pierce your targets with so much nitrogen, and you could probably rip through steel plates like wet paper. But you're at a mega disadvantage against my walls—since they're composed of nitrogen, too."

On the other hand...

"You may be totally crazy at offense, but you don't even bother to *think* about defense, Kuroyoru. Your whole ability is concentrated in your hands. I could hit you wherever the heck I wanted, and you'd just break. No point even *asking* who has the advantage here... I don't care if my attacks lag behind. I'll get you eventually."

She knew that. But she didn't stop—even when it should have been safe to, since there was no way Kuroyoru's attacks would mortally wound her.

Saiai Kinuhata mercilessly pulverized the enemy before her.

"Hya-ha-ha!" laughed Kuroyoru. "You're just like I remember, Kinuhata!"

"Like you've changed any."

"Oh, I have." Kuroyoru only had any power in her arms—but she grinned scornfully anyway. "I've changed. And changed. And changed! In fact, I'm surprised at you. You've been stuck in place this whole time, huh? You had your chance. You must have had plenty of chances to change. So why haven't you? Why can't you break out of that fundamental idea that espers are supposed to use their abilities to fight?"

"…"

[&]quot;You really think an esper's only secret is their ability? What they're capable

of, what sort of attacks they have, what their weaknesses are? And that knowing that is all you need to beat them? Pretty old-fashioned of you, I'd say. The times have changed. I'll say it again, Kinuhata—you could have changed. If you'd wanted to. Like me!"

At that moment, Kinuhata braced, expecting Kuroyoru to use a weapon other than her ability, like a gun or grenade.

In a way, she was right. But in another way, she wasn't.

Here's how it played out.

The inflatable dolphin attached to Kuroyoru's white coat exploded.

Arms emerged from it. A whole torrent of them.

They drew themselves along her body, attaching themselves one after the next to her upper-right side.

Though the arms had hands, they were as small as an infant's, and they had a twisted sort of balance to them. But the limbs themselves were each at least a meter long, with a texture close to vinyl or other petroleum products. Perhaps a solid mannequin that could move smoothly, without relying on ball joints, was the closest comparison. The arms were the color of human skin but had an artificial sheen, were hard but moved fluidly—they were a list of contradictions, yet fully realized.

The limbs, warped like pipes, numbered in the dozens. As if by Kuroyoru's will, their little palms were all pointed at Kinuhata at the same time.

They were not biological, of course.

And that was when Kinuhata remembered something.

Umidori Kuroyoru had the power to *freely create nitrogen spears from her palms*.

Whhhummmmpaaaahhhhhh!!!!!! came a blast loud enough to produce a shock wave.

Countless Bomber Lances appeared, then joined together at a single point. Kinuhata reflexively crossed her arms in front of her face before the translucent spear and its insane level of destructive potential—then it knocked her several

meters back.

She saw her knit sleeve tear. The spear had just barely pierced her Nitrogen Armor.

"Prosthetic arms? A powered suit? No, that's totally not it. It's...!"

"Any cyborg that surpasses a certain level becomes indistinguishable from a powered suit, my dear Kinuhata. And vice versa."

Grccch-gcheee-ghckkk-gchkkk. Dozens of slender arms squirmed around Kuroyoru. They weren't totally hollow; they seemed to have several short bones inside them. It was revolting—like arms with compound fractures contorting themselves in strange ways.

"Then again, they haven't found a way to create a human with just metalworking yet. In the end, they always have to borrow the strength of biological creatures. After all, if you use cells and bacteria, the parts you make can be way more precise. Just imagine how hard it would be to bake bread without yeast."

"Creating...a human? A machine...that would boost your power...?!"

"We've just entered a new generation. Cyborgs themselves were apparently being researched very actively by a certain Kihara brand—but this is one step further than that."

A scornful laugh.

This kind of technology did exist. But it hadn't made it into the public eye—for a very clear reason.

It was just too twisted.

Society would change so rapidly if they implemented it that even the utterly amoral higher-ups of the city had hesitated to use it.

"Is it really that surprising, though?" mused Kuroyoru. "The hints have been all over. Accelerator gets past his brain injury by using an external network to perform his ability calculations for him. Then there's that girl Awaki Musujime, who keeps herself mentally stable with a low-frequency medical device... You don't need to obsess over the human body. We've had temporary versions of

tech that can shift an esper's control over their power outside their body. This is the opposite. I'm not getting power from outside. All I did was take artificial pieces into the part inside me that creates the power."

Umidori Kuroyoru's esper ability was creating spears of nitrogen from her hands. A human only had two arms, so she could only make two spears at once.

So all she'd needed to do was get more arms.

Add another ten or twenty on, focus the spears into a single entity, and she would have power unlike any she'd wielded before.

"And that's not all."

A feeling of unease came over Kinuhata. No mere machine could cause this—this sense of *presence* that only humans possessed.

"I can add as many enhancements to my body as I want. I don't have to restrict myself to being only the person you see in front of you."

Something came crawling over the four sides of the roof of the building. Arms. All of them. The same as the ones attached to Kuroyoru. They moved like a huge waterfall composed of slithering snakes. Hundreds of them. Thousands. The mechanical arms were both parts of her body, and gun turrets for creating more Bomber Lances.

"The hidden arms in the dolphin are the masters, connected to me—and I use them as antennae, too. Normally, the preprogrammed slaves detect signals from the masters to serve as my body. You know enough about tech to know what masters and slaves are, I hope!"

Kuroyoru laughed, almost keeping it to herself, but not quite.

"So? What's your move, Kinuhata?"

"...!!"

"Your defenses stem from Accelerator's reflection. My offenses stem from his vector control. My spears may only have a three-meter range, but if their vectors collide, they'll just get bigger and bigger until I have a lance of unparalleled power—as I'm quite sure you know."

Whether or not Kuroyoru had any chance of winning, she'd certainly shaken

things up.

And she didn't waste any time going on the offensive, either.

Kinuhata had no time to think. As thousands of spears fired at once, the composition of the entire atmosphere around the building changed dramatically. Those air masses, having been molded into twisted spears, stabbed right at her gut.

She couldn't get out of this with a single punch. She didn't even have the room to take a single step forward.

A javelin large enough to span the entire length of the building slammed into her.

Whhhpppp-ammmmm!! The boom sounded like a palm striking a tatami mat.

Kinuhata flew several hundred meters away, crashing into a water tank on another building. The water gushed out and sprayed everywhere, as though substituting for an explosion.

Kuroyoru tried to check the status of the destroyed water tank but couldn't. "Ugh. When did my eyes get so bad? ...Maybe I'd better replace those, too. Anyway, I can't see well from here, but I'm gonna guess she's just barely alive."

Whrsh-whrsh-whrsh-whrsh. All those arms followed as she headed to the edge of the building to jump across to the next.

"Here's the deal, Kinuhata. I'm trying to use the link between Accelerator and Shiage Hamazura to kill everyone. Did you really think I'd even attempt something like this if I hadn't changed at all?"

Kuroyoru's voice was devoid of any feelings for Kinuhata. She was talking to herself—an act purely to satisfy herself.

"Sure, I'd never hold a candle to a Level Five like Mugino normally. But with tools? Everything is different. Because even a martial arts champion can't beat a fighter jet."

Silvercross Alpha's powered suits.

Umidori Kuroyoru's sabotage.

Though they approached the idea from directly opposing angles, at their core, they reached exactly the same conclusion. That was why they'd joined forces, agreeing to work together to satisfy their mutual interests.

"Well then. I think things are looking up! I guess I should go after Accelerator now; I'll leave Hamazura's group to Silvercross's little collection."

And yet even with one half gone, she remained unchanged—just like when she'd mowed down the defensive side of the equation named Saiai Kinuhata.

That was why she was a villain.

She had gained the trust of the higher-ups on one point and one point alone: that she'd never waver.

"What a pain. I'll crush Hamazura with everything I've got first, then take my time cooking up a nice Accelerator deluxe meal."

In a way, she was *much* more troublesome than Silvercross.

In a way, she fit the profile of a monster who belonged in Academy City even more than he did.

And now she would press the enemy even further.

2

Hamazura used a maintenance entrance to leave the underground subway tunnel and return to the surface, then found himself in District 19. His pursuit of Silvercross had led him completely out of District 3.

This school district was an example of failed redevelopment. All the buildings nearby were conspicuously filthy, and many shops had their shutters closed. There was a rumor about it, though. Some said the city had purposely left one district run-down to use as a test bed for older technology, believing that maybe doing new research on old tech no longer in the markets, like vacuum tubes and steam engines, could somehow link back to the development of cutting-edge tech.

Guided by Kuruwa, the group of four fled into a hideout inside an abandoned building on one of the desolate streets. It must have been a department store

at one point. Several out-of-order escalators crisscrossed up the large atrium in the middle. While the products themselves had been removed, certain things had been left in place, such as mannequins, which were now covered in dust.

"Too many entrances...," murmured Hanzou in irritation. "We won't be able to barricade them all. Not with the time we have."

"I was counting all the exits as a good thing," countered Kuruwa, sulking in her miniyukata. "More importantly, do we have an actual shot at winning if we hole up here? That's generally just a way to buy time. Hiding almost never solves the problem by itself. How will buying time give us a chance to win this?"

"...Accelerator," Hamazura said, sounding like he was forcing the word out. "We may not be able to do much, but that monster can take down however many powered suits they throw at us. That makes stalling worth it. It'll save Fremea's life. I don't know where he is, but if we can just get in contact with him; he'll come. He's got a reason to save her life, even if he doesn't have one for the rest of us."

"Hamazura!!" shouted Hanzou seemingly out of reflex. "But he's... That monster, he...!!"

Hamazura shook his head before Hanzou could say any more.

There was a good reason that Skill-Out's band of delinquents didn't like Number One's company. Something had happened between him and Komaba, and they couldn't let Fremea know about it.

"Fremea's life is more important right now," he said.

"....." Hanzou fell silent but didn't seem convinced.

Fremea shifted her gaze anxiously between the other three.

Kuruwa took over for Hanzou, keeping the conversation going. "Sir Hamazura, do you have a way to contact Number One?"

"Do we look like friends? Nah, I don't have his number," said Hamazura, forcing levity into his tone. "But it seemed like he had his own information network. And his initial reason for intervening in this is still unknown. I'd guess if there was a big fight somewhere in the city, it would have to reach his ears. We

just have to do something to make this abandoned building stand out."

"Like lighting a bonfire on the roof?" asked Kuruwa.

"We need to go further than that. Best to use a sign only he'd understand."

Hamazura thought for a moment, then took off the slim powered suit helmet he was wearing and handed it to Kuruwa.

"Put this next to the bonfire," he said. "If Accelerator can access satellite images or tap into reports and communications, it'll let him know it's us—this thing is technically a prototype for a cutting-edge machine."

"All right," said Kuruwa, stroking the helmet in her hands with some interest. "There's a full set of weapons in the third-floor coin lockers. The insides of the locks have all been replaced, but I'm sure you won't need a master key, Sir Hamazura."

"Thanks a bunch. And sorry for dragging you into this."

"Actually, this is really getting me fired up. We're standing up to a massive, unknown authority—not for money or fame, but to save a kid's life. It's like I'm really a ninja in a period film! I feel so alive!"

"Hanzou?"

"Fine, I get it!! None of this means we won't need to move. I'm not about to lie down and let them kill me."

Kuruwa headed to the roof to send the signal to Accelerator while Hamazura and Hanzou went to the third floor's coin lockers to pick up some weapons. Fremea didn't have much to do, but she evidently couldn't stand to be alone, so she restlessly followed Hamazura.

The smaller coin lockers were maybe the size of two mailboxes, while bigger ones took up entire columns like the storage cabinets for cleaning supplies. And Kuruwa was right—the locks were more complicated than they appeared. But that just meant the situation called for several lockpicks instead of a single type.

One by one, he opened them, guns falling out.

"...Not very ninja-esque," griped Hanzou.

"I thought they used pistols more than samurai, at least." But Hamazura was pretty sure none of these firearms would be able to destroy powered suits through their thick protective armor. "What about something like this?" he asked; the biggest locker had giant rifles as tall as him in it.

Hanzou read the seal imprinted on the barrel with a groan. "A Metal-eater M5—a fully automatic rifle meant to be used against tanks. It has major improvements in the stock and grip over the previous model, the MX, plus it's got liquid cooling on it. They officially adopted these for the war."

The thing came off as less of a gun and more like a vicious hunk of metal that just so happened to shoot bullets.

"It might damage those powered suits," Hanzou continued, "but the recoil is crazy. An amateur would break their shoulders using it, even if they went prone to fire."

"Better than nothing," said Hamazura, grabbing a few magazines that were as thick as modest dictionaries. "I'd rather beat myself up than lie down and let them beat me up."

"Good point." Hanzou laughed.

Hamazura tucked his gun into his pants belt, hung a submachine gun from a sling belt, then hoisted his Metal-eater onto his shoulder. That was about as many weapons as he could realistically carry.

"What about defense?" he asked Hanzou. "Should we make a barricade or something?"

"No, there's too many entrances. And they've got enough power to plow through walls anyway. Piling up a bunch of garbage would be a waste of time at this point." Hanzou unfolded a layout of the department store; Kuruwa had given it to him. "Instead, we should look for critical points along their route. If we can figure out where they'll have to pass through as they navigate the interior, we can gun them down—and thankfully, we have Metal-eaters for that."

"But they can come through walls, can't they?"

"Only when going horizontally. If they want to move vertically, they'll have to

rely on the floor plan. There aren't many major points of vertical movement—stairwells, the escalators, and an elevator shaft—and only so many powered suits will be able to go through each at a time. If we wait for them and then hit 'em from far away, we might be able to thin their numbers a bit."

As they cut across the floor to meet back up with Kuruwa, they spotted an old bank area. At most, it was just a sofa and counter at this point. No stacks of bills, of course, and any ATMs that had been there were long gone.

But there was something they couldn't remove: a huge vault made of very thick walls.

Hanzou and Hamazura exchanged glances.

"...What do you think?" asked Hamazura.

"Kuruwa already secured the electrical system, and any emergency power source will be inside the box. Once it's locked, the vault can't be opened, even if they cut the cables. As long as they don't figure out our passcode anyway..." Hanzou trailed off a little before continuing, "But if they had the time, they might be able to pry it open with brute force. And it's a dead end inside. If we shelter in there, we won't have anywhere to run... At most, it can buy us time. It won't solve the problem."

Then the two of them looked over at Fremea. Everyone locking themselves inside wouldn't solve the issue—but they couldn't keep a young girl in the middle of a firefight. The enemy would go straight for her.

And in the worst case... Hamazura fell silent for a moment, thinking. In the worst case, where the rest of us get killed, as long as that vault is still here, and Number One arrives before they drag Fremea out...

His fingers trembled at the awful idea. Bile rose in his throat. But he couldn't let himself show it. Not in front of Fremea. He needed to hide emotions like those.

"Fremea, listen," he said instead. "You're going to hide in that vault. It's got a really thick door and walls, so it'll be very hard for anyone to get inside. If you can get in there, you'll be safe. Understand?"

"Then what will you do?"

"We're gonna go pick a fight. A dramatic one—but we'll be fine. You just have to wait inside. By the time that door opens again, the fight will be over. So don't worry—we'll keep you safe. No matter what."

"...But I don't want to," said Fremea. She quivered, then grabbed Hamazura's hands. "I don't want to! I can tell that you're lying anyway! Liar! You have that look in your eyes! I know exactly what happens when people have that look in their eyes!!"

She screamed like she was throwing a temper tantrum. But there was weight behind it. And Hamazura knew exactly what had caused those thorns to grow in her heart.

"Koma never came back, either!! I can't even call my sister, Frenda, anymore!! And they all had the same look in their eyes as you do!! They all hid something from me, then walked away and never came back!!"

The ones who had gone away. The people who had treated Fremea with compassion and kindness in the past. She wasn't in a position to know the truth, so she'd been carrying their shadows with her the whole time. And that had to have been every bit as scary as this was. She never knew when someone else important to her might disappear. It was unfair and illogical—one day, they were there, and the next, they weren't.

"So I don't want to."

Her greatest fear.

The thorns in her heart were hypersensitive to the disquieting mood that surrounded them. Hamazura would never be able to act his way out of this. The weight Fremea carried was too heavy for that.

"I don't want anyone else to go away ever!! I don't even care anymore!! I don't care what happens to me anyway!! So please stop. Don't leave me again!!"

Hamazura was silent for a few moments.

He was remembering those who had departed. Ritoku Komaba. Frenda Seivelun.

At the same time, he realized something. Maybe there had been a future where she wouldn't have had to cry. Why hadn't that gentle future come? Why did a little girl have to bawl like this?

He knew the answer.

It was all because he was weak.

In the past, he'd been... No, even now, he was still the lowest of the low. He wasn't strong enough to solve the problems he saw on his own.

And the incidents Komaba and Frenda had confronted all connected back to the deep darkness in Academy City. Honestly, those had been way beyond what any one person could do something about. So maybe, even if the same incident happened ten thousand times, things never would have ended happily.

But Shiage Hamazura had been there.

When Komaba and Frenda had disappeared, he'd been there. He'd been present.

Unlike Fremea, who had never been able to help anyone, since she hadn't learned what transpired until it was all over, Hamazura could have changed something. Maybe he was weak, and miserable, and pathetic, but perhaps the people who'd died could have lived if he'd chosen differently just once.

He clenched his teeth.

Silvercross's group wasn't what was *really* hurting Fremea, what was making her scared. But there was no doubt that Shiage Hamazura himself was.

And yet he had been unable to help heal the scars in Fremea's heart. Not really anyway. He knew how this would end. He knew they weren't going to be saved by some miracle.

It wasn't the best. It wasn't the finest. It wasn't the most ideal.

But he wasn't calm enough to see rationally—to see he couldn't do anything.

...Komaba's not around anymore. Frenda's never coming back, either. All the people this girl cares about have been vanishing before my eyes. I can't change the fact that they're already gone. I can't take back what's already been done.

Instead, he would search.

Search for something he *could* do—right now.

Something he could still do even though everything was already over.

...So I won't let her lose anything else. I'll never let her lose anyone who's important to her. I don't care whether it's this damn city's darkness or the people running it—nobody who makes this kid cry is gonna get away with it. No matter who I have to fight. No matter what comes of it.

The shaking stopped.

It didn't matter if it was powered suits or shadowy organizations coming after them. None of them would scare him anymore. He wouldn't bother trying to figure out *if* he could win. Because if he couldn't, he just had to create a situation where he *could*. If something was a problem, then it had to have a solution. He didn't need any of the test-giver's sample answers. His solution could be far-fetched if it needed to be. After all, this was one question the test-givers didn't think would be answerable to begin with—so he didn't need to stick to a by-the-book set of steps to come up with a solution, either.

"Right."

Hamazura leaned the enormous Metal-eater M5 against the wall, then got down and met Fremea's gaze.

"Listen, Fremea. Those people you care about? Komaba and Frenda? They were amazing people. They did so much that I could never do. I doubt I'll ever be able to come close to them."

"That's not true." Fremea shook her head. "You didn't abandon me. Even when I got kidnapped, you still came to rescue me."

"Even so," said Hamazura, taken aback for a moment before setting her evaluation of him aside, "I'm just a supporting actor. I don't deserve to take center stage and stand beneath the spotlight like them. I bet neither of them would waste time in this situation. They'd have already figured out what they needed to do. At the very least, they would never dawdle over choosing what to accomplish and what to abandon. That's why they were so incredible."

Maybe he was glorifying them. Maybe neither of them really looked at things so rationally. When all was said and done, Komaba was just a street punk, and Frenda had sold out her Item comrades. But he was still pretty sure they wouldn't have hesitated. They'd held true to themselves because there was something they needed to achieve, even if it meant risking death.

That wasn't something Hamazura could do.

No matter how much determination he had, if someone put a gun to his head, he'd crack. Every time he had to choose something, he did so with uncertainty and hesitation. And obviously, he fretted over his choice afterward, wondering if it was really the right thing to do.

That was all he'd amounted to.

He wasn't good enough to ever be a hero.

However...

...despite that...

"But I'm still here."

It looked like this time he had caught Fremea by surprise.

There was something everyone possessed that most took for granted—something everyone *needed* to possess. In order to mourn those who were not allowed to have that, Hamazura started to put this obvious truth into his own words.

And this time, it wasn't an act.

This time, he smiled from the heart.

"...I'm not gonna disappear so easily, all right? The only thing supporting actors are good for is not knowing when to accept defeat. No matter how many times we get knocked down, we keep coming back, like a bad rash."

"Really?" asked Fremea nervously, as if about to reach out to him with a finger. "You promise you won't go away?"

"I won't."

"Promise," she said, actually sticking out her pinky.

Until that very moment, Hamazura had forgotten all about pinky swears.

"...Right." A little embarrassed, he stuck out his own little finger.

Their fingers intertwined.

"I promise."

They parted their pinkies, and Hamazura gently nudged Fremea by the shoulder to get her inside the vault. She stared at him the entire time, right up until the moment he shut the giant door.

With it closed all the way, he turned the handle to lock it.

"Twenty tungsten alloy bolts," said Hanzou. "And it can create a vacuum around the door using magnetic force. The door's on a time system—it won't respond at all for twelve hours. We won't be able to put in the passcode we came up with until then, either."

"…"

"Once the shooting starts, things are gonna get crazy. Even if that Number One monster doesn't come, Anti-Skill might. They're supposed to protect the city's peace, after all. The longer this drags on, the harder it'll be for the conspirators to cover this up. So we'll stick to the plan: buy as much time in here as possible... Hey, Hamazura, what's up with you?"

"It's not enough," said Hamazura flat out. "If our only ideas are waiting for help or stalling for time, it'll just wear us out. We might protect who's most important here; Fremea might get out alive. But once that door opens back up, she'll see our dead bodies and start crying again. Her face will be a mess of tears. We can't do that. We can't win like that."

"...Okay, then what do we do?"

"Win. At all costs," responded the delinquent without skipping a beat, hoisting the Metal-eater M5 onto his shoulder. "And we have to make it through together. You, me, and Kuruwa. We'll destroy every powered suits that comes at us, then crush whoever's behind everything that's happening. Fremea doesn't need to be part of the darkness anymore. She never had a good reason to be there anyway. We're bringing her back to where she belongs,

understand? To a world where her life isn't under constant threat. Where she can smile."

"You've gotta be kidding me..." Hanzou groaned.

Hamazura didn't criticize his friend for faltering. "I won't force you to stay. I'm pretty sure they're only after Fremea and me. They won't give chase if you and Kuruwa run away. And as long as you're alive, Fremea will still be smiling. A win is a win."

"You're okay with us running away?! If you're serious, then you shouldn't have done what you just did in front of us!! Her crying? The pinky promise? Those were outright threats to make us stay!"

"And they're doing their job, aren't they? You're like Komaba after all—more than a simple supporting actor."

Stopping Fremea Seivelun from crying anymore.

The two delinquents, their objective firmly in mind, would be there to meet the enemy, antitank rifle in hand.

Even if he couldn't be a hero...

...Shiage Hamazura would protect Fremea's smile. No matter what.

3

Their last line of defense would be the vault in the third-floor bank area. They set up traps on the route leading there, preparing for a guerilla defensive operation.

"All finished!" said Kuruwa, walking over to Hamazura, who was getting the Metal-eater M5 set up in the big atrium-like corridor. "Everything's wired, so they can try to jam them all they want."

"But we're on the third floor. Maybe they can't destroy the vault, but if they collapse the floor, it'll fall, too. It's just a box, you know."

"Safe-deposit boxes are made to hold data disks and antiques. Delicate stuff. I bet even if the third floor gave way, it would actually its own alloy pillars would hold it in place." "Here they come!" interrupted Hanzou.

Wha-bummm!! With a roar, clouds of dust flooded into the first floor underneath the atrium.

"They didn't waste any time knocking down a wall!!" Hamazura exclaimed.

"Get ready, Hamazura. You're the one who wanted to fight 'em!!" retorted Hanzou.

There wasn't enough time to carefully take aim. An enormous shadow appeared from the dust cloud—a bipedal powered suit. Its right arm connected directly to a shield that was larger than its entire body. It was so thick and heavy that even the powered suit didn't seem to be able to lift the shield on its own; Hamazura saw wheels on its underside. A large hole was in the middle of the shield, through which a gun barrel protruded, about as thick as a human arm. And it was already angled up at the landing where Hamazura and the others were waiting.

Drumfire pounded. The machine gun shot through the floor right next to Hamazura, then began swinging sideways toward him.

"Sir Hamazura!!"

Kuruwa grabbed him by the nape of his neck and dragged him out of the way. A moment later came the quick spray of bullets, which seemed more to be for destroying the entire walkway floor than getting rid of a single person. Urged on by the collapsing reinforced concrete, Hamazura, Kuruwa, and Hanzou ran down the corridor.

That thing's a demon!! Why does it have that kind of firepower?!

Hamazura glanced down as they ran, then spotted a smaller powered suit using an escalator to try and come up to them.

"Kuruwa!!" he cried. "Escalator three!!"

"Roger that!"

In response, Kuruwa pressed a button attached to a drum by cable.

Then each of the sections of the winding, twisting escalator attaching it to the floors of the department store blew up in sequence, turning it into a waterfall of wreckage. Though the powered suit was about to jump from the second floor to the third, the waterfall swept it away, slamming it back down onto ground level.

But that didn't destroy it. It was too durable for that.

As he ran, Hamazura swung the long antitank rifle around. He pointed down and took aim right at the center of the suit currently struggling amid the wreckage. Then he pulled the trigger.

Whhhhhhhhhhhbmmmmmm!!!!!!

An extreme impact rattled through his right shoulder, and the barrel of the gigantic Metal-eater M5 bounced straight into the air. Or so it seemed, but then Hamazura realized that he was currently in the air, too, traveling straight backward. He'd been been flung over two meters away from Kuruwa, who'd had her hand on his neck.

"Guh... Gah, agh...?!"

Hamazura was wracked by an intense, almost unbelievable pain. Not just in his shoulder, but in his neck and waist, too. The agony shot vertically through his entire body. Hamazura had once used an assault rifle back in Russia, but this was completely different. Firing a massive rifle in your hands was a far cry from propping it up with a tripod on the ground to line up a shot.

He wasn't confident he'd even hit the target. Unfortunately, he didn't have the time to writhe in agony *or* leisurely check downstairs. The huge shield model was continuing to fire at them even now.

Unable to get up, Hamazura rolled himself away from the bullets and the collapsing sections of corridor.

The three of them dove behind a cylindrical pillar. It was able to withstand the shots, perhaps due to the thick intersection of beams inside it.

"What the hell *is* that?!" asked Hamazura as he peeked at the scene downstairs from behind the pillar.

The enormous bullet he'd fired had indeed struck the small powered suit. But something wasn't right. The impact had destroyed the metal fittings on its thick

cockpit hatch, which was now open—but there was nobody inside. The chair where the pilot should have been was empty.

Another explosion interrupted Hamazura's next thought. Beside him, Hanzou was following up on the attack, one leg folded underneath him. He wasn't on full-auto mode, but he was properly turning aside each of the impacts of his shots.

The bullets ripped through the open hatch, obliterating the cockpit. This time, the unmanned suit stopped dead.

"They're preprogrammed," he said. "They must be using all of that Silvercross guy's hand-me-downs."

Grrrkkk-grrrkkk came several sounds of metal hitting the floor.

Then five more powered suits showed up underneath them in the atrium.

Hanzou hastily got himself back behind cover. "This pillar won't hold."

"They'll have to go around. The escalator's collapsed. They need a different route to get up here. Maybe a stairwell, or the elev—"

Hamazura broke off. He'd sensed something was out of place.

Right behind him.

Through the glass window. In the empty space outside the building floated a huge figure. It looked almost like a five-meter-tall praying mantis. But instead of having four legs on the ground and two arms to use as scythes, this one had two scythe arms *and* two regular ones, along with two legs for standing. Translucent wings protruded from open parts in its armor, flapping so fast that Hamazura couldn't keep track of them—they were even leaving afterimages.

It wasn't flapping its wings like a bird was. Those little wings wouldn't be able to lift something so gargantuan.

...Ultrasonic waves? Hamazura wondered. Is it churning all the air around the wings?

It wasn't fanning the air like a butterfly or moth—instead, it was creating a whirling flow of air with the motion of its wings. That gave it more lift than what it could achieve by flapping its wings alone. That mantis had gone beyond

typical animal motions.

Hamazura immediately swung the Metal-eater M5 around. But that was all he could do.

Before he could pull the trigger, the giant powered suit crashed through the window and onto the floor they were on. Hamazura rolled to one side, while Hanzou and Kuruwa rolled to the other.

The mantis had what looked like a big oil drum attached to its back. It was for storing a large number of bullets. And instead of scythes, the ends of its folded-up front legs had protective covers on them, which had opened to reveal the man-made weapons attached inside them.

It was made to command and rotate three gun barrels at once.

It was not made, however, to shoot at them using the force of gunpowder.

It was instead designed to fire metallic bullets using the principles of electromagnetic energy.

On the front surface of each of the front legs' coverings, the following was written:

GATLING_RAILGUN
"!!"

Hamazura felt terror well up inside him.

Then he pulled the trigger of the antitank rifle without bothering to take more careful aim. Not to destroy the mantis, but to use the gun's immense recoil to launch himself to the side.

The act was liable to crush his own arms. But that would still be better than the alternative.

A moment later, the storm of steel whipped through where he had been standing.

!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

Even sound vanished.

The resulting destruction made the gunfight earlier look like it had been a

peashooter contest.

The spot where he had been was completely gone, blown away along with the passage around it. Each of the destroyed areas was a circle about a meter across. And those holes were increasing in number *very* quickly—more than four thousand per minute—not only obliterating that portion of the third floor, but also piercing straight down to the ground, causing the very building to tilt.



While the bore size would classify the mech's weapons as small arms rather than cannons, the annihilation was well beyond anything from a mere gunfight.

The attack reduced several of the powered suits on the ground floor, waiting for an opportunity to charge in, to scrap metal within seconds.

This was so far beyond any of that.

It crossed a line.

Hamazura heard something rattling around. It took him a few moments to finally realize it was the sound of the roots of his teeth not matching up. His eyes were wide, glued to the English words on the side of the mantis's structure where the wings folded into.

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Five_Over

Modelcase_"Railgun"
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The city only had seven Level Five espers. The third of those was known as Railgun. This powered suit had likely been made to mechanically replicate their abilities—and as a model envisioned to *surpass* the very natural genius using pure technology.

Scientific progress always marched on. The previous day's cutting-edge technology was never guaranteed to retain relevancy.

And this monster could fire *thousands* of these projectiles, which were horrifying enough on their own. If anything showed how terrifying science had become, it was this thing.

...Number Three, he thought. They'd be even better than Shizuri Mugino, who was ranked fourth.

The new model's head section shook slightly, and it swung its murderous weapons, one to the left and one to the right.

Hamazura cowered. His whole body trembled. Everything was stiff. He could tell his vision was constricting.

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"Hamazura, run!!"
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He heard Hanzou shouting. Hamazura and the other two had fled in opposite

directions. He glanced around, desperately forcing his nearly panicked mind to think.

And then he locked eyes with an entire package of gun barrels.

Without wasting another moment, he tossed the Metal-eater M5 to the side—it was too heavy—and jumped over the third-story corridor railing.

The burst of noise cracked in his ears, and Gatling Railgun's bullets, having missed their target, ripped apart all the floors and walls on the opposite corridor.

Hamazura had caught onto a second-floor railing and was now hanging from it. He quickly pulled himself up.

Destruction rained down from above.

The blast smashed through both the third-story corridor overhead and the second-story corridor he now stood on. He rolled forward and burst into the remnants of a CD store at about the same time the entire corridor buckled and crashed down to the first floor.

...It can pierce something awful, but it's not that precise. Is it using suspension to try and hold the barrel rigid, so that the blast wind the railgun bullets create doesn't knock it out of whack? If he kept paying attention to the mech's movements, it was possible he could throw off its aim.

But that naive hope of his was destroyed a moment later.

Behind him.

He looked back in terror. There stood Five Over. Even though its barrage of bullets had caused the corridors to collapse, it just floated there in midair, motionless, on the power of those translucent wings using ultrasonic vibrations to whip up swirls of air.

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"...Bbb...ggg..."
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Then he heard some kind of voice. No words with meaning—but it sent a chill up his spine all the same.

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"...Gggbbb...ghhh...zazazazaj..."
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Silvercross...?! he thought for a moment. But he shouldn't even be able to stand. He was so badly wounded that he ought to have been rushed to the hospital. Is he still up and moving?!

His powered suit could externally strengthen a wounded body. Did that explain how he'd gotten here? Or had someone else decided he was still useful and forced him inside there against his will? Hamazura observed closely; unlike before, however, he couldn't sense any of Silvercross's own volition in the voice.

He didn't have time to think much about it. *Greeeshhhh!!* came the mechanical noise as the bundle of gun barrels split apart, each beginning to move individually.

"Wha-?"

They were still railguns. In exchange for losing the rapid-fire capabilities that gave it enough force to pierce three or four tanks stacked on top of one another, it now exerted its domination over the second floor in a panoramic fashion.

Shit! How is it even reloading?!

Normally, Gatling guns worked by spinning multiple barrels; that way, it could load one bullet at a time. But this railgun seemed different—it could switch between different modes of fire.

Desperate, Hamazura immediately tried to twist and avoid the mad dance of bullets, but the floor gave way before anything could happen. The pitfall was several dozen meters wide. This time, he plummeted to the ground floor and crashed with a roar.

Intense pain shot through his body as the impact of the fall knocked the wind out of his lungs.

"Gah...hah...?!"

He couldn't even scream—he didn't have the air for it. But it was still better than the alternative. If he hadn't been wearing the Dragon Rider's riding suit, he wouldn't have survived that with all his limbs intact.

There was too much dust and debris in the air to see anything. Hamazura scrambled up the destroyed rubble.

Now what? He could taste blood in the back of his mouth. We won't have time for the other powered suits if we don't do something about that one. But what? I can't waste time taking aim with that stupidly huge Metal-eater. Not that I even have it anymore.

The only things he had on him were those two metallic dictionary-sized magazines. It didn't matter how strong the bullets were if he couldn't fire them. And given the sheer power he'd be working with, scraping one together on the spot wouldn't work. If he tried to scrape together jerry rig a poorly made substitute, he could be blown to bits. And his regular gun and submachine gun were out of the question.

Five Over is scanning the battlefield with a bunch of different sensors. It would know exactly where everything that could be used as a weapon to attack it is, even if it's behind something.

Was it even possible to turn the tables in this situation? As Hamazura desperately tried to keep his mind going, his enemy decided not to wait for him.

"...?" Finally able to take shallow breaths, Hamazura frowned.

Five Over wasn't coming to finish him off—even though he couldn't walk. Even though he was the perfect prey.

Why? After thinking about it for a moment, he figured it out.

The enemy's top objective wasn't him. It was Fremea. That hunk of metal could easily scan for a person's position in the building. Maybe it couldn't penetrate a thick vault, but if its AI could realize that something was wrong about Fremea not being here, it was pretty clear what it would try to do.

Any more of this punishment and even the door to the vault would be shot to pieces.

"Shit!!"

Forcing himself to his feet through the pain, Hamazura dragged himself away. Though there was a chance someone was listening, he took out his cell phone

and called Hanzou.

"Hanzou!! Can you still use the Metal-eater? Five Over—Gatling Railgun is only after Fremea!! Do whatever you can to slow it down!!"

"The antitank rifle? I can manage. But I don't think it'll punch through that thing," replied Hanzou, voice bitter.

"Not even that stupidly huge rifle?!"

"If I was close enough, maybe. This gun's power depends on its bullet velocity, which is fastest right after firing. So it gets stronger the closer you are. But how am I supposed to get anywhere near that powered suit? If it shoots more of those hurricanes at us, we won't even be able to leave cover."

Hamazura wanted to pound the wall with a fist. They *needed* to destroy Five Over to protect everyone. But to do that, they'd all have to risk their lives.

Dictionary-sized magazines still in his hands, he lapsed into thought.

Then he looked up. A power cable hung from the ruined ceiling.

"...Hanzou, we don't need to completely destroy it. Stick to slowing it down. Can you do that?"

"We're up against an unmanned AI. It's not programmed to be scared of breaking down."

"How much time can you buy?"

"Shit. If it's scripted to preserve its ability to carry out its mission, ten minutes. But if someone remotely switches it to prioritize killing us, it's all over."

"That's fine. Do it. But only what you can. If it gets really bad, you choose when to get the hell out of here."

"What will slowing it down do?! The way things are, the Metal-eater M5 won't take down that mecha mantis. And we don't have any weapons that pack more of a punch!"

"...Then we'll just have to make do with the punch we have."

Hamazura finally had a destination. He tore his gaze away from the ceiling and looked straight ahead.

"I'll send a bullet through that Five Over's head right now."

"What?! How?!"

"This is a hideout, right? So there must be stuff here besides weapons. Like beds and food. But I want to make sure with Kuruwa. If the electricity is working, does that mean there's a refrigerator? Or some sort of appliance like that?"

"What if there were?"

"What about lights? If there's a fridge and an electromagnetic cooker, then you've gotta have more than just a flashlight."

"There's a full set of LEDs on the main floor! So?! You trying to distract the thing or what?!"

"That's right," responded Hamazura seriously to the joke, causing Hanzou to be taken aback. But he continued, "...I'll crush the thing with a good friend of household finances."

4

Five Over.

Modelcase Railgun.

The powered suit that had been given those code names jumped off the destroyed corridor and gently landed on the third floor. It had been designed to fly on account of the power of its railgun; since the weapon destroyed too much of the area around it when wielded, the suit needed to be able to pass through the off-road environments it produced. Whether in a complicated network of indoor passages or outside in hurricane-force winds, Five Over could remain perfectly still in midair, almost as if it were standing on an invisible floor.

Its AI had already scanned the whole building five times with its sensors, picking up no signs of its target, Fremea Seivelun.

There were few locations its sensor scans couldn't reach completely, and fewer still where its target could hide. The location Five Over most needed to check was the large vault in the remains of the third-floor bank. It didn't care if

Fremea was there or not. If she wasn't, that would simply rule out one candidate. A thorough examination of each suspicious location would eventually lead it to her. Even if the target gave it the slip and attempted to flee to a different location, she would be caught in the suit's regular full-building scans.

So if it continued to look around these locations, keeping up this same level of deliberation, it would eventually arrive at the target, as opposed to wandering randomly.

This was very deterministic way of doing things, of eliminating every single possibility from A to Z. It wasn't well suited to handling more complex conditions, but in a simple battle of annihilation, it was very helpful.

Five Over proceeded through the third floor through a passage. The only cause for concern it had identified was using too many bullets, so the Al's current mode made it stick to preexisting routes as much as possible. Without this guidance, it would have already destroyed all the walls and obstacles present to take the shortest routes to its targets.

But then it was obstructed.

More precisely, its regular full-building scans—performed every few minutes—detected silhouettes hiding behind a passage corner.

Two of them. One holding a long-range antitank rifle.

The Al's risk-assessment process determined that they should be destroyed just as Hanzou and Kuruwa, hidden behind the wall, launched their attack.

Nevertheless, Hanzou didn't go out with guns blazing.

He extended the barrel around the passage corner, fired as little as possible, then hid behind the corner again. He was very close to the wall, so its was possible that he would bump into it and have his ability to move restricted, but he gave no impression that he would make a mistake of that nature. And despite the unnatural stance with which he fired, he was managing to avoid being harmed by the Metal-eater M5's prodigious recoil.

His skills would have shocked anyone who saw him, but the AI was not equipped with such advanced features.

It simply judged the situation.

Based on its conditions, including conservation of ammunition and using existing paths as much as possible, it came up with a single solution.

Brutally blast through the wall, and the people along with it.

When the powered suits aimed its mantis scythes in an odd direction, the targets seemed to notice. The silhouettes behind the wall quickly got down on the ground just as the railgun started unloading its shots...!!!!! came the shock waves that transcended the realm of sound, smashing through the frail obstacle.

That didn't disable its targets, but the AI simply continued its work. Stripped of their cover, the two people would be easier to hit. The task did not need changing.

The AI reemphasized its decision that simple movements would eventually lead it to the targets. And so Five Over simply advanced forward. At this moment, it seemed more like a missile with a few extra features than a cutting-edge weapon that could think for itself like a human.

Optimization created ruthlessness.

This specialized thought pattern, which flew in the face of adaptability, spoke well to the ideals of those who were using Five Over.

As the pair of people resumed their attempt to flee, Five Over responded with its Gatling railgun.

But it didn't aim straight at them.

Instead, it ran a search on routes the targets might use to escape, then blasted away the floors of those passages and the walls between altogether. The passages collapsed, blocking the pair's escape route. It was impossible for pure flesh and blood to avoid a Gatling railgun.

In other words, this next volley of fire would be the last.

The AI had arrived at the conclusion of the idea that simple movements would bring it to its targets. The powered suit aimed the right mantis sickle, its accuracy unmatched.

And then it happened.

The Al's periodic full-building scan detected something directly behind it. Someone was there, a few dozen meters away. They pushed a wheelbarrow as hard as they could with both hands, then let go and allowed it to roll toward the powered suit. It traveled at about the speed of a bicycle, and there were two cardboard boxes just big enough for an adult to put their arms around stacked on top of each other inside it.

It was possible that they were explosives.

Deeming this a risk, the AI quickly swung Five Over around to face the other way. Before the wheelbarrow could get close, it let loose with its railgun, easily blowing the objects away. Despite being simple metal bullets, *blowing away* was apt—it was an explosion.

There had been fruit inside the boxes. Round ones—apples, oranges—about half of which nearly disintegrated, and the other half shot every which way. The AI had purposely avoided a direct hit in case the boxes were explosives, opting to instead reveal their contents first.

Five Over always calculated the risks.

Perhaps fruits rolling out of a box that were each cut precisely in half through the middle would have looked a little suspicious to a human. But as a program, it evaluated the risk and then proceeded to ignore the fruit. There were other strange things afoot, but its risk evaluation put them down as "of unknown use."

Five Over turned its guns away from the wreckage of the wheelbarrow and toward the person who had pushed it.

Shiage Hamazura.

And at that moment, he was grinning. The Al's straightforward thought patterns hadn't been able to evaluate that. But it *did* learn something else. He was holding something in both hands, and the Al knew without a doubt that it was connected to an AC hundred-volt home-electronic power-supply cable.

It was a hunk of metal. A single object, its surface wrapped with layers of tens of thousands of LEDs. More specifically, it was a group of objects scraped

together from the lighting on the main floor.

An electromagnetic wave irradiator.

The AI could even simulate what the device, covered with metal plates like wrapping, would do: deliver strong directionality in front of it.

As a result...

...the risk evaluation said this: Powerful electromagnetic waves would negatively affect electronic components. But with just tens of thousands of LEDs on it, there was no need to fear this countermeasure dealing fatal damage to any of Five Over's mission critical components. This was because Five Over, which used a powerful railgun as a weapon, was itself a model that scattered a large amount of magnetism and electromagnetic waves to begin with.

Eliminate them one by one.

The Al's evaluation, as always, was that if it continued to conduct simple actions, it would eventually reach its target. Sticking to that thought process was what gave Five Over its uniqueness as a weapon.

And that was exactly why...

... Five Over's AI couldn't evaluate this.

To begin with...

...it had no way of knowing why an unarmed human who possessed both fear and logic would ever stand up to an absurdly powerful weapon while unarmed. It couldn't begin to know what was running through *their* mind.

In other words, it had complete confidence in its victory.

Because no human would stand up to a monster like it.

Five Over had destroyed the cardboard boxes a moment ago. A large amount of cleanly halved fruits spilled out of the box. But there was something strange—the giant bullets used for an antitank rifle, a Metal-eater M5, were stuck in each of the fruits.

Its programmed risk evaluation had ignored them because the bullets weren't connected to anything that could fire.

Over half of the fruits had been destroyed, but the remainder had scattered around and now lay on the floor.

Some of those were, of course, right up next to Five Over, even beneath its torso.

And the reason the bullets were stuck into the fruits like that was because, on a stable, flat surface, they would always point upward.

Hanzou had mentioned something.

In order for a Metal-eater M5 to pierce Five Over's armor, you needed to fire at point-blank range.

But the distance between the bullets and their target wouldn't matter if there was no gun to fire them.

However...

...the first way of lighting gunpowder that usually came to mind was ignition.

But that wasn't the only way to set it off.

For example...

...more sensitive types of gunpowder *could* be ignited by powerful electromagnetic waves.

It happened faster than Five Over could move its sickle. Faster than its railgun could blow Hamazura and the building around him to smithereens.

There was a huge burst of sound.

Gaaa-gam-gam-gam-gam-gam-gam!!!!!! A symphony of noise rattled the air, reaching through Hamazura's ears and traveling into his stomach.

He'd sliced the fruits in half, then mashed a bullet into each half so that they stuck out of the vertex of the half sphere. Naturally, that meant a lot of the bullets faced upward.

But since the railgun had blown up half of the fruits, the gunshots scattered in other directions, too.

From all angles, directly under Five Over.

It was like one giant explosion, flinging destruction everywhere in sight.

"Shit!!"

The person who had been wielding the electromagnetic wave irradiator panicked and dropped to the floor.

But Five Over didn't have a chance to go after him. Orange sparks leaped from its armor. The risk evaluation ended before finishing its work, leading to corruptions in its data.

Because the gunpowder hadn't been sent through a barrel first, the bullets lacked the force they normally would have. But they were close—almost at point-blank range. They still packed a punch.

A huge crack appeared in the powered suit's armor. It struggled, trying to jerk its legs away, before a hail of building materials fell from the ceiling. The bullets that *hadn't* struck Five Over had done massive damage to the ceiling.

And this time...

... Five Over stopped moving.

The powered suit with specs said to exceed even Number Three.

A moment before it happened, the Al's overly-straightforward thoughts detected a voice it would never be able to evaluate.

That was to say...

...a human's voice, filled with human emotion.

"...The Number Four I know is a lot scarier than you."

5

Saiai Kinuhata hung upside down on the roof of an office building.

Because of how the steel water tank had ruptured, the whole roof was now a lake. Part of her knit dress had caught on a sharp edge of the tank's wreckage.

Even her Nitrogen Armor couldn't completely nullify damage. The impact had shaken her to the core, as though someone had landed a series of body blows, sapping her stamina. But this was still the better situation to be in—she would

have been torn to shreds without the protection her ability afforded.

...Super lucky nobody in the building has come up here. The higher-ups are definitely involved with all this, though.

But reality almost immediately ran contrary to her expectations. The door to the elevator leading down into the building opened. Someone appeared from it—but not one of the office workers, nor one of the maintenance crew.

No, he was too young for that. Most importantly, he looked like pure evil.

"...Number One, was it...?"

He was a Level Five sporting white hair and red eyes using a crutch with a modern design. Accelerator looked up at Kinuhata in annoyance as she hung from the wreckage of the water tank,

"My companion intercepted some news that these Freshmen, or whatever they're calling themselves, are desperately trying to block Anti-Skill from butting in," he said. "Umidori Kuroyoru and Silvercross Alpha. One of them is involved."

"Mind getting to the point?"

"The *point* is what these Freshmen people are after—a kid named Fremea Seivelun. I want to wrap this up before she winds up dead."

"Seivelun...? Ugh. No wonder that crybaby is doing something super out of character."

"Any idea where they were headed?"

"Shouldn't you, like, already know? You tapped into their comms, didn't you?"

"No. They've obviously got confidentiality levels set up for the operation. Doing anything costs money. They let everyone in the organization know top-security stuff, they might as well be wasting it all—more than anything, these Freshmen don't seem to have the full backing of the city."

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"Right, like, I see."
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[&]quot;So? Any ideas?"

"I've got one," she said, shrugging as she hung there. "Not too far away, in fact."

6

"Hamazura!!"

Hanzou poked his face out from the passage.

"You actually did it?! You took down Five Over!! ... Hey, can I get near it? That stuff isn't gonna blow up again, is it?"

"You're fine. I shot everything I had." Hamazura tossed aside the electromagnetic wave irradiator, which he'd scraped together from a ton of LEDs, and ran over to where Hanzou and Kuruwa were. "Hurry! How many shots you got left for the Metal-eater?!"

"Wait, what are you talking about? That electric mantis is already—"

"Are you forgetting something?" Hamazura took Hanzou by the shoulders and shook him. "That's not the only powered suit here. A few of them got knocked out by its barrage earlier, but there's still a bunch left!!"

And every one of them was too tough for any weapon aside from the Metaleater M5 to handle. While Five Over outclassed each individual suit, they could still all attack at once—or use something even more powerful than it.

And besides...

...no matter what type or model it was, even a single powered suit needed to be met with every last ounce of strength you could muster.

Frantic, Hanzou checked his ammunition. "...Seven shots. No guarantee they'll all hit. And if they've got good armor, we'll need more than one shot. This won't be enough to take them all down!!"

"But there are no other weapons here that could disable unmanned powered suits," said Kuruwa. She was the hideout's owner; she'd know what they had here. "Submachine guns and assault rifles will just bounce off them."

"What now, Hamazura?! Think we can scrape by with just seven shots and the traps from before?!"

"I've got an idea."

The clanking and creaking of suspension systems could be heard from multiple directions.

They were trying to surround them.

There was no time left.

Their sole salvation was the "specifications" of what Hamazura just so happened to be wearing.

7

Blam-blam-blam-blam-blam!!!!!!

Umidori Kuroyoru listened to the series of bursts. Even now, dust exploded from a bunch of the abandoned building's windows as cracks ran through its outer walls and the entire building began to tilt over ever so slightly.

Fooling around with Saiai Kinuhata had cost some time, but as far as she could see, Silvercross's collection was proving its effectiveness. Twenty or thirty minutes had passed since they'd entered; the interior was probably mostly rubble by this point.

"...I'm sensing now might be a good time, hmm?" she said to herself.

She was imagining giant farming machines meant for tilling human flesh. The machines would do every last bit of annoying manual labor for her. The only real bottleneck was that she'd have a hard time confirming the targets' deaths if the machines decided to mangle their bodies *really* badly in pursuit of making sure they were all dead.

...We already have unmanned machines doing all the cleaning. We should just leave every bit of dirty work to robots.

The lines between "human" and "machine" were a bit blurred when it came to her and Silvercross, though, and that was one nugget of irony she hadn't caught on to.

Still, if she left them to do their work, they might grind whatever flesh they had into a fine paste. Maybe it was best if she went in to check while their

bodies were still recognizable.

By setting foot into an unmanned operation like this, she was certainly running the risks of taking stray shots or making mistakes, but...

"But I'll cross that bridge when I come to it." She gently stroked her newly stuffed spare inflatable dolphin. "...They're just mechanical toys anyway. I could reduce them to scrap in ten seconds if I wanted."

Zsh-zsh-zsh-zsh-zsh-zsh-zsh-zsh came a strange sound from behind Kuroyoru as she slowly walked.

They made her stronger.

Her cybernetics.

Hundreds of baby hands followed in her wake like a giant cape fluttering behind her, like locusts becoming more intimidating by swarming.

Each one of them was a gun turret for firing Kuroyoru's ability.

But the thousands of "firing points" weren't only a means to launch her Bomber Lances—they also functioned as a single unit, applying interference to the airflow within a certain range. They could produce a single gargantuan nitrogen spear or conversely drain all the nitrogen from the air around her, thus freely producing explosions as the rest of the oxygen and hydrogen rushed in to fill the space.

Her powers no longer fit inside the category of Level Four—but she wasn't really interested in trite numbered classifications like those anyway.

"...I am well-known for indiscriminate destruction, after all. In this case, we're probably draining money instead of human lives. But I wonder—to which side will the anger come?"

The young queen approached the abandoned building, planning to throw the battle into further chaos.

And then suddenly, she stopped. A scornful grin appeared on her face.

"Well, if you were going to show up somewhere, this was the best place."

A white figure stood before her, using a crutch with a modern design.

Accelerator.

Number one in Academy City. Going by the official numbering, he was the very pinnacle of the Level Fives, of which only seven existed.

Kuroyoru grinned. "I have to say, though, you're more careful than I took you for. Or did the war change you? Seems a little strange to me that you'd stop to conserve your battery and stick to gathering intel for a while. It's not like you. I thought for sure you'd jump right in and waste all your power for nothing—though it looks like you didn't make it in time anyway."

There couldn't have been a clearer provocation.

"Was it Fremea you wanted to protect?" she continued. "Or Hamazura? Either way, they're already dead in there, so the link is set in stone. You idiots might as well be single group of rebels now, including the dead delinquent. The higher-ups won't be mad if I kill you all at once."

Accelerator, though, wasn't paying attention to her words. He was paying attention to her.

"...So you're what happens when you try to compensate for a lack of strength for so long," he spat.

Kuroyoru showed no indication that she'd even listened. "We've been meeting at all the wrong times, you and I. But everything's perfect now, wouldn't you say?"

Two people, each with immense power. If he let Kuroyoru advance, the Level Zeroes were sure to die. If he held her here, they had a chance to live.

"Anyway, I'm sure they're squashed like bugs in there by now. Ha-ha! Or are you drawing the line at whether they're still whole or not? Doesn't really matter once they're buried, you know!"

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"...Is this fun for you?"

"Eh?"

"Is it fun for you, never moving from that spot of yours?"

That spot.
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The realm of a villain.

That Level Zero probably looked at me the same way I'm looking at her now, thought Accelerator.

Naturally, Kuroyoru didn't know what he was thinking. Her reaction to his question was simple.

Her tone shifted.

"Uh, duh. Yeah, it's fun. Fun as all hell!! I'm on the top of the world. I've mastered evil. I have everything I need right here!! I'd pay anything if it meant I got to kill. And I have so many people I can order around. Plus, these cybernetics! My body, my life—they're better than anyone else's in the whole city!! So yeah, I'm having a blast!!"

"…"

Kuroyoru had been implanted with some of Accelerator's thoughts—the aggressive ones. When she spoke, it was like he was talking to himself—a distasteful setup courtesy of the city's higher-ups.

Thus, his loathing of her came right back to himself.

"Oh, don't tell me. Since you're the number one Level Five, you think you'd never lose in a pure battle of abilities, right?"

She continued to mock him. Her inflatable dolphin began to distort from the inside out.

"Well, that's not the case. It's not the case at all!! What these guys behind me are really for isn't numbers or destructive force. It's the fact that they're cybernetic!!"

The vinyl doll split open, and from it sprouted dozens of arms, all connecting themselves to the right side of her body.

A bundle of weapons more advanced than just an artificial reinforcement of human movement. Not only did it ignore a person's body shape, but it also turned them into a creature whose very contours and boundaries were vague, undefined.

"They call you the top dog in Academy City, but you've been defeated a

number of times. By Amata Kihara, for example. He used your ability to reflect attacks against you, pulling back his fist just before contact so that you'd reflect it right back into yourself."

Accelerator knew what she was getting at.

Behind Kuroyoru, arms billowed like waves. "But my arms are cybernetic. Machines. Objects I can fully control with digital numbers!! If I input Amata Kihara's parameters—well, I don't have to tell you I'd suddenly have a way to beat you!!"

She would have him confront a threat from his past.

Her tone of voice and her thoughts themselves were blurred and hazy; she was the perfect opponent to whittle Accelerator down.

"So? What now, Number One? Kihara only had his fists to use. But with my spears, you'd be dead in one hit. I suggest you come at me with everything you have—unless you want to die. And then I'll tear you to shreds anyway!"

Grsssh-grrrsh-hrrrshhh!!!!!! Thousands of arms all readied themselves at once.

Every one of them could produce Bomber Lances at any time and completely control the area's airflows as a single system.

They had hundreds of thousands of attack patterns. By inputting Kihara's vectors in every single one—the vectors that gave Accelerator trouble—they could get past his impregnable reflection and deal real damage to him.

A mad flurry of stabs would come at him from every angle.

Even if he wanted to flee, going in the air wouldn't make him any safer. Even if the simple Bomber Lances couldn't reach him, their singular airflow control would reach up into the sky.

He couldn't defend against it. He couldn't evade it.

Which meant Accelerator only had one option.

The highest-ranked monster in Academy City...

"...Hmph."

...grunted. Then as if to yield the way, he took a step to the side.

In that moment, Kuroyoru couldn't figure out why he'd done that. It was so strange to her, particularly since she had a piece of his thought patterns in her. In a situation like this—no, in *any* situation—that monster would never just get out of the way. He had to be planning something by doing that. But she couldn't even come up with any guesses as to what could lead to this.

Or maybe...

...maybe that was the difference between Kuroyoru, who'd stuck to her path of evil, and Accelerator, who had abandoned it.

"What is this? What are you ...?"

And that was why Kuroyoru had to ask.

In response, Accelerator, face stoic, said, "You're misunderstanding something."

"...?"

"The most important trait of mechanical weapons isn't that you can fully control them with numbers. It's that simple weapons don't have any will of their own, no creeds to bother considering. They only do what their user tells them to. If a shitty person gives them orders, they'll only give shitty results. If a sane person does, they might get something better out of it—though just the fact that the person is using a weapon means they're no saint to begin with."

"You saying I can't completely control cybernetics of this size?"

"Which is why I decided to yield."

Instead of answering the question, Number One continued, sounding fed up with the whole thing.

"Don't get me wrong. I'm not yielding to you."

That was when she heard a ga-chak.

Something came flying out of one of the abandoned building's third-story windows. It fell to the ground, bounced a few times, then rolled over to Kuroyoru's feet: a completely destroyed, twisted member of Silvercross's

collection. A powered suit.

The sounds of gunfire ceased.

And then she saw probably the most expensive piece of the collection appear in the window.

Five Over...?

If the gunfire had stopped, did that mean they'd finished taking over the inside?

She thought as much for a moment, but then she realized she was wrong. There was a huge crack in the suit's armor. The front hatch protecting the cockpit was twisted, leaving an open gap in one area.

Almost as though it had been wrenched open.

And just before they'd gone into the building, Shiage Hamazura had been wearing the Dragon Rider suit, made by Academy City. In other words, its control system was built to the same specifications as Five Over's.

Which meant...

No way...!!

By the time she felt the chill, it was too late.

Suddenly, she was forced to realize why Accelerator had pulled away.

An insane barrage of bullets flew toward Kuroyoru.

Even one of those railgun shots surpassed those belonging to Number Three. And they were coming at her at four thousand shots per second.

First, the electric mantis's left and right railguns mowed down all the arms behind her like scythes wielded by Death himself. One swing, and even her swarm of supernatural ability–loaded weapons were cut down like so much wheat.

Then the streams of gunfire swung in toward her from either side, closing the distance like twin blades of a guillotine.

hhh!!!!!!"

At full power, brute force would have won Kuroyoru a battle with Five Over. But she was too late. And those few seconds had cost her most of her precious arms.

Still, she immediately reacted to the two approaching scythe-like fusillade.

Mobilizing her hundreds of remaining arms, she created as many Bomber Lances as she could. She also used the gusts of wind produced by their atmosphere control to divert the bullets' trajectories. Several giant spears collided with the mind-bendingly destructive force of the railgun bullets, creating explosion after explosion. And knowing she couldn't deal with everything solely through air control, she deployed all her arms in front of her to use as shields.

I can do this.

As she kept on the defensive, she nevertheless tried to come up with a plan to counterattack—one purely of offense.

The railguns use a ton of electricity and generate a ton of heat. They can't keep firing forever. The safeties will kick in to cool things down. If I attack at that moment, I should be able to take Five Ove—

"That was the wrong card to play," said Accelerator in a bored tone, interrupting her train of thought.

The source of the thought patterns embedded in her.

The voice of the person who would naturally be most skilled at putting his abilities to use.

"Defensive battles begin with reflection. Controlling vectors to focus your power on a single point doesn't work for continuous, wide-area strikes. It's like throwing away your shield to parry all the bullets with your spear. A pointless stunt."

"...?!"

Not offense, but defense.

Not Kuroyoru, but Kinuhata.

"If you're gonna fully commit to attacking, you should've just gone for obliteration. You're so proud of your power, after all. Would've been quicker to immediately pierce through and stop the bullets from firing in the first place."

She hadn't pierced through, and it had worked against her.

She'd wavered in her philosophy, and this was the result.

The Gatling railguns were destruction incarnate, and her biological instincts had led her to choose a defensive action right away.

Accelerator finished his appraisal of her decisions with an annoyed, fed up tone.

"Those cybernetics are wasted on you."

All those arms broke apart, and their mechanical components exploded.

The hail of shattered fragments pelted her, knocking her to the road.

The match had been decided.

8

Still inside Five Over, Hamazura exited the abandoned building. The thing had seemed capable of midair movement before, but he wasn't about to use unfamiliar tech. He went down to the ground floor of the building, then simply left through the front door.

The powered suit approached Accelerator, and then its front hatch popped open, revealing his face.

"Is it over?" he asked.

"The one with the evil face is cleaning up the remnants," Accelerator said. "Though since you took care of the two main actors, it's just a matter of time. If you're using that thing, you must have dragged the old pilot out."

"Yeah, basically. Kuruwa—er, the girl with a ninja obsession—is patching him up right now."

Accelerator glanced inside the powered suit. Several cables connected the cockpit to Hamazura's special suit. He assumed that Five Over's systems had

been destroyed, so he'd hooked the cables into his own suit's controllers to get the computation back online. That would allow him to use it however he wanted.

It was an emergency reboot—and he could only do it because of the standard their suits shared.

"Didn't realize you had information-processing skills like that," Accelerator commented.

"Which do you think is smarter—the idea to do something, or the concrete steps to get there? The machine took care of the second for me."

"...Wonder what would happen if a certain rice cooker—obsessed woman put it on. Maybe she'd actually learn how to cook for a family."

Ignoring Accelerator's offhanded comment, Hamazura lowered his gaze.

Umidori Kuroyoru was on the ground. She'd been showered by a ton of shrapnel and was losing no small amount of blood because of it. But she still had all her limbs. That meant not a single one of the bullets had actually struck her directly. She was certainly a high-level Academy City esper—not the kind that common sense applied to.

"I guess this means the Freshmen incident is settled," he said.

"What about that Fremea kid?" asked Accelerator.

"She's in the vault. It's on a timer, so we won't be able to open it for twelve hours."

"...What a pain. I'll just force it open."

"Guess I'll keep myself busy, too. If we don't move these weapons before Anti-Skill gets here, Kuruwa might get in big trouble."

After that exchange, both of them turned their attention away from Umidori Kuroyoru for a single instant.

And that was a mistake.

They hadn't fully grasped the nature of the enemy they'd been fighting.

Cybernetics.

Machines.

Most of them had been vaporized by the railgun fire. And machines tended to stop moving entirely if even one of their necessary components, say A, B, and C, was removed. But in that case, Arms One, Two, and Three could hook up their A, B, and C parts to form Arm Four.

In other words, just because those machines were beat up didn't mean they'd completely lost their functionality as arms.

"...Hah!"

They heard someone exhale.

And then Hamazura saw Kuroyoru reach her little right arm out in front of her.

At that moment, a mass of about a hundred arms, having jammed themselves together to compensate for missing pieces, all moved at once.

Their target, however, was neither Hamazura nor Accelerator...

...but Fremea.

Whooom! came the explosion of gases.

Several nitrogen torrents swirled into one another, creating one enormous spear several hundred meters long. It wasn't aiming anywhere at its target; Fremea's vault was on the third floor, but Kuroyoru's spear was heading for the ground floor at most, as though its angle had been thrown off.

But that would be enough.

A mere flick of this new lance from right to left would cleave the abandoned building in half. There was no guarantee the vault would survive a full structural collapse, and if she swung it again, she'd easily rip through the vault's walls.

And all from Academy City—made tech. Tech that was at once inside the realm of science and outside the realm of common sense.

An explosion tore through the air.

The spear swung.

And in that moment...

...Hamazura was filled with regret. At how he'd gotten out of Five Over, thinking their battle was finished. At how he'd hesitated to deliver the finishing blow to someone who truly seemed like just a young girl. At how there were plenty of other ways to end this without killing her, and he'd picked the most half-assed one possible. At how it hadn't put his own life in danger, but Fremea's, who had trusted him.

Accelerator was filled with rage. At how he'd scorned Kuroyoru's philosophy just before settling the score. At how his meaningless conversation with her had brought her true nature back. He was so angry—at himself, for giving her the chance to choose offense again, in this situation where everything should have been over.

Neither of them.

At the very end, neither of them had followed through.

...Damn it...

Hamazura clenched his teeth and tried to stop her, but he was too late. Even with his special suit on, he had no protection without Five Over.

...I knew it. I'm just a supporting actor. I can't even pretend to finish things like a real hero!!

The spear moved, about to destroy everything in its path. Hamazura was powerless. He simply glanced in that direction.

The winds whipped and churned. Even that final form of resistance, to watch it happen, was taken from him. The sheer force of the violent gales passing him by forced him to shut his eyes.

His world filled with the color of despair. He felt everything he'd done thus far

was being denied by a single, simple attack.

There was no saving Fremea anymore. He'd made the wrong choice, and it had cost him the entire war.

Taking down Silvercross or Kuroyoru wasn't the real victory. The real victory was protecting both Fremea's life and smile—and he'd lost sight of that. The most important thing. He had to admit that he'd been giddy at his victory over Five Over and Kuroyoru.

He'd thought he could protect her.

He'd thought that he'd achieved safety for her by taking down those powerful opponents.

And as a result...

He screamed. He despaired. But then he noticed something.

He'd heard the spear swing. But no more than that.

He hadn't heard the abandoned building collapse.

What...?

Scared out of his mind, he opened his eyes.

A strange sight was there to greet him.

The spear was certainly there. Hundreds of meters long, an object of pure violence, born of unnatural twists and turns in the air. It must have had enough destructive potential to decimate the entire building.

However...

...in reality, the abandoned building sheltering Fremea hadn't been damaged at all. It was still standing.

Something had interfered. Something had stopped Kuroyoru's vengeful attack, launched with the very last of her energy.

A young man.

Or to be more precise, his right hand.

Touma Kamijou.

The boy with the Imagine Breaker in his hand had stopped the Bomber Lance.

The outcome was obvious.

First, the gigantic spear of nitrogen was wholly vaporized. Kuroyoru, seeing that her last awful hope had been crushed, actually passed out this time.

Total silence followed.

A world where the danger had been removed.

Waving that right hand, the most inexplicable thing in this world, he casually addressed Hamazura and Accelerator:

"Been a while."

EPILOGUE

A Little Banquet, and Dark Clouds Invited Forth Witch.

And so the three came together.

Judging that the danger still wasn't fully gone, their group decided to bring Fremea's vault out of the building. More specifically, Accelerator used his ability to break down the vault's door.

Fremea nearly panicked at someone ripping the door off, but after seeing Hamazura, relief flooded out instead. As all the pent up tension drained from her at once, she started falling. Hamazura moved to catch her, but she let out a cry and then jumped into him for an embrace instead.

"I know I came in partway through, but what's the situation?"

That question came from Kamijou.

Accelerator, supported by his modern-design crutch, scowled bitterly. "You're not here because you intercepted the news of this?"

"Nah, it's just been a while since I was in Academy City. I saw something going on, so I decided to be a busybody."

Number One clicked his tongue. That had reaffirmed the fundamental difference in their positions, including that bad luck of his, but Kamijou had no way of knowing that was what was on Accelerator's mind. Instead, Hamazura answered for him.

As he explained, Kamijou's face clouded over. In contrast, though, Hamazura looked at his right hand with some interest. "That right hand of yours—it can erase other people's abilities?"

"Oh, right. We've always been Level Zeroes having street fights, so I guess you

wouldn't have known."

"None of that matters," interrupted Accelerator. "In this situation, you showed up. You—someone even deeper in this world than the two of us, who knows the dark side of science like a good friend. What's going on here? Why did you come back to Academy City at precisely this moment? Does it have something to do with this whole incident?"

"...Well, I think these Freshmen guys who attacked you were really just part of a big preparation phase."

"Preparation?"

"Yeah, to fight new enemies...though I'd guess they're still doing some research. On whether World War III is really over. About whether it's going to keep going or if this is something new."

Accelerator's and Hamazura's faces darkened at those words. They'd been on the front lines in that war just like Kamijou.

"Academy City is preparing to fight against them. Obviously, they're strengthening their military power, but they're also tightening up various things around the city to make it easier to fight. That's how much the city feels threatened by them—they're not the kind of people they can deal with in their spare time, if you know what I mean."

"Who are they?" asked Hamazura. "If they're an enemy of the city, then is it Russia? Since we attacked them and all. But I didn't think they were willing to fight anymore."

"...It's gonna sound really fishy. And unbelievable." Kamijou was silent for a moment to think about what to say, then opened his mouth again. "For example, there's a set of rules and laws that can create supernatural phenomena that's totally separate from the scientifically developed supernatural powers we have here."

"What?"

"…."

Hamazura's question and Accelerator's reaction contrasted each other.

Kamijou continued, "People who can use that other set of rules form their own groups, move in the shadows of world politics, and fight against Academy City—can you believe it? That Academy City isn't the only place in the world dealing in weird, unnatural stuff?"

"Sorcery, then," murmured Accelerator.

Kamijou was surprised he knew about it, but he went on anyway. "I honestly don't know much about it, either. What I mean is, I'm part of Academy City, so even though I know about these people on the outside, I don't belong to any of their—"

Suddenly, he cut off—for a simple reason.

From behind him, a small leg bounced up, then whump!! It forcefully buried itself between Kamijou's legs.

To put it more precisely, right in the most representative of a human's vital points.

"Bah...bagh...?!"

"Would you quit your yammering already? Get off your high horse. Didn't you have a really important job? Remember? Apologizing to all those people? You know, all the ones you made cry?"

Hamazura and Accelerator peered behind Kamijou.

A short, blond girl was there with a crowd of men in black suits behind her, looking no more than twelve. The colors of her chic blouse, skirt, and stockings made her seem like an old piano.

She continued talking down to Kamijou, who was now in the middle of a pretty intense squat. "I'll explain the rest. You should be thinking about what excuse you're gonna tell the girl you made cry."

"Th-they're... Urgh. They pulled me out of the Arctic Ocean... Well, not the cocky short one in the middle, the ones around her. They had infiltrated Russia."

The girl was trying to poke Fremea, murmuring that she was giving off the same kind of vibes as her own little sister, before she heard Kamijou and looked

over at the other two.

"I'm Birdway," she said. "Leivinia Birdway of the Dawn-Colored Sunlight. As you can see, I'm the boss of a sorcerer's society." Then she paused.

"Welcome to the new world, ignorant children of science."

AFTERWORD

To those for whom this book is their first, as well as to those who have experienced titles in the past, it's a pleasure to meet you.

I'm Kazuma Kamachi.

The numbering got reset for this series, so we're at Volume 1 again. And this volume was science-only, with Index nowhere in sight, but I hope you don't mind at this point. I'll be ignoring my established tendencies plenty of times in the future, and what better time to familiarize everyone with that idea than the first volume?

This volume's theme was technology that crosses scientific lines—in this case, powered suits and cyborgs running rampant. There's always been a line between science and sorcery in this world, but the reasons Academy City crossed the line of "what defines a human being" are twofold: The scale of its new problems is *very* large, and the city is steadily ruining the balance of the world after its victory in the war.

Five Over was something pretty far removed from how traditional battle stories usually go, I think. But like the book mentioned, science and technology are always evolving, and what's brand-new today might not be tomorrow. I purposely put it in there as a way to express that concept.

For now, the setting I'm going with is that, while Five Over can fire bullets more powerful than Number Three, Number Three would still win in a fight based on her adaptability.

But even that isn't absolute—because science and technology are always evolving.

Meanwhile, when it comes to Number Three, well, the Parameter List exists.

To put it bluntly, it's becoming harder in this world to say that mechanical capabilities are stronger than human ingenuity or vice versa and have that always apply... I wonder how long Number Three will reign supreme in that sense?

The cyborgs may have been a little different than what a lot of readers might have expected, but this was my thought process: Cybernetics entail designing body parts in whatever way a person wishes. And they could freely integrate anything into a human body, including bird wings or fish gills. So what would Academy City most want to bolster or reinforce?

In simple terms, Kuroyoru's tactics beg the question of which is stronger: one Level Five or thousands of Level Fours?

But since the ability itself is still only coming from one person, it seems to be extremely draining.

Incidentally, the first time clear-cut cyborgs appeared in the world of this story—rather than just prosthetic hands or crutches—was probably in Ryohgo Narita's short story that appeared as bonus content in the manga version of the side story, *A Certain Scientific Railgun*.

Though I've always wanted to fit cyborgs into the main story, I was worried that I would upset the balance of power if they started strutting around Academy City. But thanks to *A Certain Scientific Railgun*, I made a decision—I figured it was okay for an incident with cyborgs to happen in the same city where Nayuta is. So I went with a big rampage of cyborgs using a different system, made for war, with a slightly different production objective.

So thank you, Ryohgo Narita.

On one hand, we have cybernetics, which can alter an external silhouette or the origin point of an ability's output, as well as rearrange the internal parts of someone's body. On the other hand, we have powered suits, which can perform optimizations internally—even on the mind—as well as rearrange the external parts of someone's body. Just like in the story, it's hard to draw a real line between the two when things evolve this far. Readers, which did you feel like was the harder one to accept?

I'd like to thank my illustrator, Haimura, and my editor, Miki. I'm sure they both balked at how troubling the settings were—a girl bringing thousands of arms with her, or a philanderer drifting from one suit to the next based on the time and place. Thank you for going along with my silly requests regardless.

I'd also like to thank Ryohgo Narita, who first put cyborgs into the world of this story, as well as Mika Akitaka, who designed the powered suits.

And a huge thanks goes out to all my readers. We're starting over from Volume 1 again, and it immediately veered into side-story territory, but I believe it's all because you support me and allow me to do things like that. I'll keep on doing the things I like, so please continue to support me in the future.

Now then, as you close the pages, and as I pray you will open the pages again next time, here and now, I lay down my pen.

Finally! Finally, Birdway has made it into the main storyline...!!

Kazuma Kamachi

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